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[Column] America: The biggest danger to the security of the world?

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With experts seeing risks in America's domestic politics, is it wise for Korea to bet the house on the US?



A supporter of Donald Trump waves the American flag after breaking into the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. (Yonhap)



By Moon Chung-in, Yonsei University professor emeritus

“You can always count on Americans to do the right thing — after they’ve tried everything else,” Winston Churchill once said.

Since establishing itself as the “benevolent hegemon” of the free world after World War II, the US has enjoyed the wholehearted support and devotion of its friends and allies. But more recently, the US’ position and policy have been coming under fire, including from members of the American mainstream. Such criticism is posing a strong challenge to the idea of American infallibility.

On July 1, the New York Times ran an interview with Richard Haass, who had stepped down after 20 years as president of the Council on Foreign Relations, the leading US think tank on foreign policy and national security.

The most striking part of the interview Haass’ response to a question about “the most serious danger to the security of the world,” the thing that keeps him up at night.

“It’s us,” Haass said, referring to the United States itself.

Haass said that chaos inside the US was more severe than external threats such as Russia, China, Iran, North Korea or climate change. His fear is that democratic backsliding in the US is undermining the foundations of its foreign policy.

Trump's refusal to concede the 2020 election, the attack on the US Capitol, the domination of radical elements in both the Democratic and Republican parties, the departure of moderates who could have kept them in check, and a political climate that prioritizes individual and partisan interests over the national interest or the common good — they all serve to back up Haass' pessimism.

As Haass sees it, these trends in domestic politics erode the credibility and predictability of US foreign policy, making it more and more difficult for friends and allies to trust the US or follow its lead. That's sure to weaken America's leadership in the international community at a time when its power is already declining, at least in relative terms.

Haass' remarks were taken very seriously because of the prestige of the Council on Foreign Relations. The council has been in operation for more than a century now since its establishment in 1921. It's a bipartisan think tank with more than 5,000 members that has represented the viewpoint of elite members of mainstream American society. The council has shaped major trends in US foreign policy through Foreign Affairs, its international relations and current events journal.

Haass was the longest-serving president of the Council on Foreign Relations and has served in senior foreign policy positions for both Republican and Democratic administrations over the past 40 years.

Given his reputation as a balanced and cautious writer, his remarks in the interview came as a major shock to readers both in the US and abroad.

Notably, a similar warning was made by Leslie Gelb in his book "Power Rules" in 2009. Gelb, also a former president of the Council of Foreign Relations, became the council's president emeritus in 2003 and handed the reins over to Haass.

Gelb, who had served as assistant secretary of state, editor of the op-ed page at the New York Times and president of the Council on Foreign Relations for 10 years, dedicated his book to Barack Obama, who had just been inaugurated at the time of its publication. According to Gelb, US foreign policy and national security were compromised not so much by external threats as by internal ones.

In contrast with Haass, Gelb didn't level any criticism at American democracy itself — presumably because the explosive emergence of Trump was yet to occur.

Instead, Gelb said there were "three demons" in domestic politics in the US that had wrecked foreign policy.

The first demon was an overemphasis on values and principles that led to the kind of ideological rigidity that divides the world into good and evil. Second was the disorderly nature of domestic politics that was manifested in the pursuit of partisan interests, the polarization of political groups, and the absence of political compromise. Third and last was the American hubris that goes far beyond confidence and is expressed in exceptionalism, unilateralism and chauvinism.

Classic blunders in American foreign policy — including the disastrous invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 — could be blamed on those three demons, Gelb asserted.

That raises a question. Were those just detours on the path to the US "doing the right thing," as Churchill said? And if so, why has the US continued to make similar policy failures since then? Why haven't American policymakers taken heed of the heartfelt warnings and counsel of people like Gelb and Haass, with their sterling backgrounds and wealth of experience?

Gelb calls for the restoration of common sense, modesty, and prudence, while Haass speaks about vigilance and participation by alert citizens, the virtue of compromise, and the pursuit of the common good.

But I'm skeptical about the viability of such prescriptions because I see few signs of any effort or desire to avoid a repeat of America's past mistakes. That impression was only reinforced by what Republican Party candidates said during their presidential debate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on Aug. 26.

A greater concern for Koreans is the fact that our current administration is betting the house on the US. Is it really wise to place our fate in the hands of the US in its present or future state? That's what occurs to me when I see Trump staying even with Biden in the polls even after multiple indictments.

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