

## **Prospects unclear as U.S. hobbles away from 2 wars**

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 13 (Xinhua) -- The United States is shifting its focus to the Asia-Pacific region as it pulls out of Iraq and Afghanistan, ending the chronic wars that have sapped the country's political strength and international influence.

The two costly, bloody wars reflect America's contradicting "must win" but "cannot stand the loss" mentality, exposing the vulnerability of the strongest military force in the world.

They also underscored the country's persistent effort to maintain its global hegemonic position, a foreign policy that has not changed for decades.

If it continues to seek global predominance at the expense of other countries' interests, the United States perhaps will face a more humiliating collapse of its power and prestige.

### **LOSING MORE THAN IT GAINS IN TWO WARS**

Launched in 2001 and 2003, respectively, to topple down the Taliban and Saddam regimes, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been painfully expensive in money and lives. More than 6,300 U.S. troops have been killed, with another almost 40,000 severely injured.

Meanwhile, 1.3 trillion U.S. dollars has been spent in the two wars, with the number still increasing, according to a recent estimate by the Congressional Research Service.

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the U.S. defense budget climbed from 304 billion dollars to 616 billion in 2008, with another 75 billion dollars spent annually on domestic anti-terror measures.

Aggravated by the recent global financial crisis, the country is now mired in debt. Federal debt soared from 5.6 trillion dollars in 2001 to the current 15 trillion dollars-plus.

Some people say the two wars have dealt a blow to al-Qaida and other terrorist groups and spared the United States from another major terrorist strike.

But as Melvyn Leffler, history professor of U.S. foreign policy at the University of Virginia, told Xinhua, the United States "has suffered more than it has gained" at least in the short to intermediate terms.

The U.S. inability to execute its goals in Iraq and Afghanistan has put the two wars into question and damaged the country's prestige.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that both wars are kind of humiliation for the world's biggest power.

"They are not as bad as the one from Vietnam in the 1970s, but it is bad enough in terms of a blow to U.S. prestige," Ted Carpenter, a senior fellow with the Washington-based Cato Institute, told Xinhua.

Meanwhile, the two wars also upset the regional strategic balance. Anti-American sentiment among Muslims has been inflamed, while Iran's influence has expanded in the Middle East. The number of terrorist attacks has not decreased in a measurable way globally, and the world's security situation has not improved significantly.

Americans seem to have a conflicting view of war. With the world's most powerful military, the country is ready to defeat any rival, but as losses grow heavy, citizens and political elites alike become increasingly impatient with what they see as military "black holes."

## **WITHDRAWALS INEVITABLE**

As more and more policymakers see the two wars as a heavy burden to U.S. strength and international status, the public's anti-war sentiment grows and, amid economic recession and high unemployment, more and more Americans demand a speedy end to the wars.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said in a speech in Washington D.C. last month: "We selected objectives beyond the capacity of the American domestic consensus to support over the period required to implement them," citing the U.S. military interventions on the Korean peninsula, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The two "unwinnable" wars, plus economic difficulties, made troop withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan inevitable, analysts say.

On June 22, President Barack Obama announced that 10,000 U.S. troops would leave Afghanistan by the end of this year and another 23,000 would head home by September 2012. The ultimate goal is to transfer leading security responsibility to Afghan forces by 2014.

On Oct. 21, Obama said the U.S. troop pull-out from Iraq would be completed by the end of the year, ending the almost nine-year war.

Despite substantial troop cutbacks and the end of U.S. involvement now in sight, troubles in the two countries continue.

Iraq is now a weak country with fragile stability and unity. This does not fulfill the U.S. goal of turning it into a stable and pro-West democracy. Recently, America could not even strike an agreement with Iraq to allow its military trainers to stay.

The endgame in Afghanistan may be worse. After 10 years of fighting, there are few lasting benefits apparent. Increasing signals suggest Afghanistan could return to its fractious nature.

The two countries are likely to remain America's headaches.

## **CLOSER EYE ON ASIA**

While drawing troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is in the meantime looking to expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region, as Obama's recent Asia trip suggested. Analysts say U.S. foreign policy is moving its focus toward Asia Pacific in a strategic adjustment.

The history of U.S. foreign policy reveals a consistent pattern of the country making significant policy changes after setbacks from wars and economic difficulties, as it seeks to pull itself out of the mire and regain global dominance.

Professor Leffler cited the example of the 1970s, when the U.S. suffered defeats in Vietnam, and experienced high inflation, soaring unemployment, and an oil crisis.

He said America then "recalibrated its capabilities," including improving relations with China and re-configuring its military posture.

"Ultimately, in the 1980s, it emerged as a hegemonic power in the international system," he said.

Similarly, after taking office in 2009, Obama indicated he would end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while unveiling his "Back to Asia" policy.

"When President Obama came into office, he came in with the idea that the U.S. has diverted too many resources and too much attention to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," Kenneth Lieberthal, former White House senior director on Asian affairs and current director of the John Thornton China Center at Brookings Institution, told Xinhua.

Indeed, Asia has become the world's most dynamic region in the past 10 years, with roughly 50 percent of the world's economic output. Just as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out in her recent speech at the APEC summit, "It is becoming increasingly clear that in the 21st century, the world's strategic and economic center of gravity will be the Asia Pacific."

America's Back-to-Asia policy reflects a changing global geopolitical and economic reality. As Asia has become more and more important in the global economy, the United States, of course, does not want to miss this "grand banquet."

But more than that, another obvious reason behind this back-to-Asia effort is America's concerns about the rapid growth of China.

Undoubtedly, there is a sense of uneasiness among Washington's political elites about a rising China. Carpenter says these concerns will remain because "part of that is simply the dynamic that exists between an incumbent hegemony and a rising great power."

Nevertheless, the United States should draw lessons from its successive foreign policy failures of the past. Amid a changing global strategic and economic landscape, if it continues to care only about its own interests and tries to get its way on everything, while ignoring or

even clamping down upon other countries' legitimate interests, it will only face more failures or humiliation in the future.

U.S. leaders must accept the realities that China will play a more active role in Asia as its power grows, Carpenter said.