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## U.S. Politics and Foreign Policy after the Midterm Elections

Andrzej Dąbrowski

*The Democratic Party won a majority in the House of Representatives in the U.S. “midterm” elections, although the Republican Party retained its majority in the Senate. The Republicans’ defeat will weaken President Donald Trump, who will have to seek common ground with the Democrats, for example, on the budget. The Democrats will try to undermine Trump administration policy using the powers of Congressional oversight and by obstructing legislation sent to the House by the Republican majority in the Senate.*

In January 2019, the Democrats will take over the House of Representatives for the first time since 2010. With the majority, the Democrats also gain control over House committees and subpoena powers, which give the legal force to require administration officials to testify before the panels. The Democrats now have the power to control the budget process, which will lead to disputes with the Republican-controlled Senate. However, the election results with a split Congress mean the president’s ability to implement foreign policy will remain largely intact. By taking advantage of constitutional prerogatives, the president will still be able to control many matters in foreign trade policy, including tariffs, participation in agreements to which the U.S. is a party (such as the Paris Agreement), and conducting foreign security policy as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

**Democrats Moving Left.** The Democrats’ defeat for the presidency and in other national races in 2016 intensified changes inside the party. Democratic voters began to expect bolder actions from their representatives in Congress, including taking on issues like social policy, healthcare reform, and restrictions on campaign financing. The view of the role of the U.S. as a globally committed power also increased expectations on the party’s leaders. Among those who seek this are “progressive” Democrats, many of whom gained seats in the House as result of the midterms. Organised around independent Senator Bernie Sanders, the progressive politician who ran against Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary in 2016, this wing is pushing for reform of the party for it to take on a more pro-social and left-leaning direction. The success of the movement and its influence on the Democratic agenda before the 2020 elections will depend on their activity in the House and effectiveness in promoting progressive projects (healthcare reform and development of social policy).

Among the Democrats who won seats in the House are those with an ethnic and religious minority background and women, all of whom have been underrepresented in Congress. These politicians in general promote raising the federal minimum wage, reforming higher education and healthcare insurance financing, and gained support from a young electorate in large cities (Detroit, New York, Boston). Many of the newly elected representatives, who are mostly inexperienced at the federal level, are likely to join the Congressional Progressive Caucus, which in the current term consists of about 80 members of Congress.

**Republicans in a New Political Reality.** Despite the positive economic climate, including record-low unemployment, and passing a massive tax cut, the Republican Party failed to maintain its majority in the House. Blame for the election defeat lies partly with President Trump, whose rhetoric and divisive way of

conducting policy contributed to losing support among moderate Republicans. During the campaign, the Republican candidates avoided direct confrontations with their opponents. Moreover, the Republican members of Congress could not pass a bill repealing the Affordable Care Act, or “Obamacare” as it is widely known, thus not fulfilling one of the party’s most prominent promises since the introduction of the healthcare reform in 2010. With its majority in the Senate, however, the Republicans will continue to support the Trump administration by confirming administration officials and federal judges and, if a third vacancy occurs, another Supreme Court justice. The Republicans are likely to seek to stay united with Trump, who remains popular among the party’s loyal electorate, especially since he will be blaming the Democrats in the House for every legislative failure.

**Foreign Policy after the Midterms.** The range of instruments the Democrats will have at their disposal in the House will be limited but used to attack the president and his policies. Without a majority in the Senate, the Democrats will not be able to fully remove the president from office without any Republican votes but they can effectively undermine his positions. In particular, the new House majority can take advantage of the right to re-start the Congressional investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 U.S. election and Trump and his team’s relations with Russian authorities. Trump’s foreign interests may also become part of the inquiry.

Controversial issues in U.S. foreign policy will serve the Democrats primarily as a political tool in the struggle with the president. The House will likely subpoena numerous administration officials to submit public testimony on a range of issues, including the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the nuclear deal with Iran, trade policy, and relations with Russia and U.S. NATO Allies.

The Democrats will actively weaken attempts at closer U.S.–Russia ties, which still seems to be Trump’s goal. For the last two years, the Democrats have consistently stressed that Russia is a strategic threat to American interests. From the House in the new Congress, [the Democrats will keep watch over the sanctions imposed on Russia](#), especially those set in response to the Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

Democrats have traditionally favoured stronger U.S. involvement in NATO and supporting American allies in Europe. They criticise Trump for his approach to NATO, especially how he describes the low defence spending among European allies in comparison with the U.S. At the same time, they support the president’s proposal to increase the 2019 budget of the [European Deterrence Initiative](#), which finances the rotational presence of U.S. forces on NATO’s Eastern Flank (which includes Poland). In relations with the EU, most Democratic politicians are opposed to imposing tariffs on European goods. However, there are some who support Trump’s tough trade policy to [communicate to the EU](#) the need for more favourable rules for the U.S. As a result, the pressure on Trump to back down from the intensifying trade dispute with the EU will be relatively small. Democrats are positive about rapprochement between the U.S. and Central and Eastern European countries, primarily from the perspective of expanding markets for U.S. goods, including LNG.

One of the few areas of understanding between Democrats and Republicans is Trump’s policy towards China. This country is perceived by both parties as a strategic rival to U.S. economic and security interests.

**Conclusions.** In the short term, the political changes in Congress will not significantly affect Trump’s foreign policy, including, in particular, transatlantic relations. However, in the midterm, considering that the Democrats see their House victory as the first step in taking over Congress and winning the presidential election in 2020, one cannot rule out changes in the party’s foreign policy programme, such as in trade policy or U.S. military presence in the world.

This programme depends on internal party debates connected with the progressive movement. Democrats may, over time, move towards a position, so far rare in the party, of limiting the financing of U.S. military forces abroad, including foreign bases, in favour of financing social policy programmes. While Democrats favour maintaining American forces on NATO’s Eastern Flank, the implementation of a possible U.S. decision about establishing a permanent presence, e.g., a base, may be made at the earliest in mid-2019, and it will be the responsibility of the next administration and future Congresses to take further action. Therefore, in its policy towards strategic cooperation with the U.S., Poland should consider the possibility of long-term changes in the Democratic Party and changes in the foreign policy stance of its members as well as its efforts to build strong relations with the Republicans. Poland may consider creating additional lobbying tools (e.g., a U.S. “Political Action Committee”) to increase the effectiveness of its attempts to influence the politicians of both parties sitting in Congress.

To deepen relations between U.S. and Central and Eastern Europe, and as a complementary tool directed at involving the American administration, the countries of the Three Seas Initiative should facilitate establishing a Congressional caucus of representatives interested and supportive of this partnership.