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COMMENT

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The Republicans gain the upper hand > The US Congress and President Obama may find some common ground in foreign policy issues

With a Republican victory in the midterm elections, it seems likely that the party's policy formulations will increasingly influence US foreign policy. Instead of simply opposing Barack Obama's policies, the Republicans have achieved a stronger position whereby they can more actively pursue compromises with the president.

Six years after the financial crisis of 2008, the economy is still the top concern for voters in the United States. The sense that the US is not on the right economic track feeds the frustration with Washington, D.C. over political polarization and the decision-making impasse. Immigration reform and sensitivities over the healthcare law reinforce the sense of paralysis. Typically, the party of the incumbent president tends to lose the midterm elections.

The overall sense of mismanagement is heightened by the foreign policy complexities and difficulties. Before the elections, the question arose as to whether the low approval ratings for President Barack Obama would actually have any effect on the Democratic candidates in the election. The president was not on the ballot but, as he himself noticed before the elections, his policies were.

The long tradition of checks and balances binds the president and Congress together. The power of the president to act independently even in foreign and defence issues is constrained by congressional powers. The president can rely on his executive powers to proceed with issues, but even these powers have their limitations. Hence, in order to advance the core political

questions, the president should be able to compromise or find support in Congress.

Although US foreign policy is relatively stable irrespective of the party in power, the Republican strength in Congress is likely to influence some specific issues. Any progress in the major foreign policy issues from ISIS to Iran and from Ukraine to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) requires a high level of congressional approval. The question, of course, is how united the Republican Party in Congress will be on these issues.

There are strong indications that the Republicans favour the relative rebalancing of US power towards Asia. Indeed, there is more support among the Republicans for the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP) than among the Democrats. At the same time, the transatlantic connection may gain prominence as the opposition to granting the president fast track authority in the TTIP negotiations is mainly voiced by the Democrats.

In addition to trying to gain the tactical upper hand through specific foreign policy issues, the Republican Party has an underlying strategic foreign policy line. The Republicans have been advocates of a stronger foreign and defence posture. Even

the Libertarian and Tea Party figures seem to be moderating their isolationist positions. What is more, the strengthened position of the Republicans in Congress puts pressure on them to advance their own agenda rather than oppose every move by Obama.

With regard to other foreign policy issues, the Republicans are likely to advocate robust action against ISIS. The fight is not only being fought on the ground but also in the face of public opinion, and in Congress. Succeeding in Iraq and Syria will constitute a complex task that ultimately has to meet the expectations and resolve the doubts created by key Republican figures.

Further, US foreign policy can be influenced by outside actors beyond the formal negotiating tables. This creates complexities in the negotiations and also points to attempts to use 'backdoor' influence to gain an advantage. Iran has to take into account the relatively compromised position of the US administration. The Obama administration is negotiating with its hands tied more tightly now that the Republican voice is stronger.

Moreover, other states like Israel and Saudi Arabia can use their softer power to add to the constraints of the administration or to make

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it more difficult to fully realize any agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. Similarly, for Ukraine, it makes sense to appeal directly to Congress and to the Republican leadership. The lobbying efforts in Congress are likely to intensify as a result.

The US political system is based on checks and balances. At present, the administration's power is even more moderated by the vocal opposition. In order to prevent himself from becoming a lame duck president, Obama is likely to try to repair the strained relationship with the Republicans. If he is unsuccessful and if many Republicans continue with their default opposition to Obama's policy initiatives, it is likely that US foreign policy will remain weak and reactive. This outcome is likely to push one key foreign policy issue to the fore in the next presidential election: The restoration of a stronger US position.

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