

Foreign Affairs in the 115th Congress

[Gardner Peckham](#)

Before turning to the 115th Congress, it is useful to recap what these committees accomplished in the closing days of 2016. First, the Iran Sanctions Act was renewed for another ten years. The President chose not to sign the bill but instead allowed it to become law without his signature. Second, a mini-State Department authorization bill covering embassy security and reforming contracting authorities was signed by the President. Third, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act, the first of a wave of reform of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) was enacted.

In the next Congress, expect further BBG reforms and a new State Department authorization bill. Also expect action on

North Korea as the hermit kingdom continues to develop longer range nuclear tipped missiles capable of striking the continental United States – among the most vexing foreign policy challenges the Trump Administration will face. Additional sanctions are expected from both House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC).

Do NOT expect early action on this agenda as the SFRC will be completely occupied at least until summer and probably fall with nomination hearings and votes as the new Administration seeks to populate its ranks. Expect Democrats to continue to build their narrative that both Trump and his Secretary of State nominee are too close for comfort with Vladimir Putin and the Russian government and that Russian cyber-attacks determined the outcome of the election. The Tillerson nomination hearings will take place early in the year as the first test.

With the appointment of a new hardline U.S. ambassador to Israel, supporters will seek to again elevate the proposed US embassy relocation to Jerusalem but it is not clear whether the Trump Administration or outside groups will push this sensitive and thorny issue which the Republican Congress has traditionally supported.

It remains unclear how much, if any, real effort will be made to re-spool Iran and Cuba sanctions which to varying degrees were unraveled by the Obama Administration. A good case could be made that looking backward would be destructive, time consuming, and at the end of the day, unsuccessful. Our best guess is that the focus will be more on looking forward and seeking to curb Iran's meddling and slowing the pace of liberalization with Cuba pending democratic reform there. One should not hold their breath on either outcome.

Key Players

Administration: Rex Tillerson, *Secretary of State*

Senate

Committee on
Foreign Relations

Bob Corker (R-TN)
Chairman

Ben Cardin (D-MD)
Ranking Member

House

Committee on
Foreign Affairs

Ed Royce (R-CA)
Chairman

Eliot Engel (D-NY)
Ranking Member

As with other issues, the two committees will likely pursue an Administration-driven agenda and if history is any guide, they will also be driven by the crisis-du-jour that none of us can now predict with any certainty.