

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



OVERVIEW. 2018 will no doubt prove to be a complicated year when it comes to the foreign policy agenda of the United States. President Trump’s approach to decision-making in the foreign policy arena since taking office has already proven to be significantly different than the approach of many Presidents before him, as well as different from the approach of many Members of Congress with responsibility over the foreign policy arena.

The President’s “tough talking, take no prisoners, America-first” approach is unlikely to change in the near-term. Therefore, we can expect Congress, in the year ahead, to continue looking for strategic ways to mesh the policy goals and priorities of its diverse membership, while being careful to take the President’s agenda and priorities into consideration as well. Protecting the national security interests and goals of the U.S., and preserving its relationships with partners around the globe, will continue to be of paramount concern to policymakers on both sides of the aisle.

A number of issues that can be expected to dominate the Congressional foreign policy agenda in 2018 include the crisis in Yemen, the ongoing dangers posed by North Korea, the delicate status of the Iran Nuclear deal, the ongoing war in Syria, the move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, Hezbollah’s destabilizing influence throughout the Middle East and beyond, counter-terrorism in Africa, the human rights situation in Myanmar, State Department re-organization efforts and, of course, Russia and China’s difficult relationships with the United States.

YEMEN. Attention on the crisis in Yemen will continue to be a huge concern for Congress, particularly as the scale of the humanitarian disaster there continues to grow. Expect Senate Foreign Relations leadership to continue calling upon Saudi Arabia to end the blockade of Yemen’s ports and to allow critical food, fuel, and medical supplies to reach Yemeni civilians. This may be accompanied by additional calls and legislative initiatives to curtail U.S. weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, although these are unlikely to succeed. Also expect the House and Senate to continue their calls for all parties to come together to bring about a negotiated end to this crisis, as well as their calls for greater attention and leadership from the Administration on these issues.

IRAN. The future of the Iran Nuclear deal can also be expected to be a hot topic for Congress in the new Congressional session. By mid-January, President Trump has some tough decisions to make regarding Tehran’s compliance under the deal. The President did not certify Iran’s compliance with the deal in mid-October 2017 and threatened to terminate it unless actions were taken to address the deals perceived weaknesses. Congress took no action by the end of the year, given its then, laser focus on the tax debate. Early this year, expect dialogue on this issue to continue, as the Senate ponders legislation that would aim to ameliorate the President’s concerns and strive to keep the overall deal intact. In coordination with National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Senators Corker and Cardin are currently working to draft legislation, and while some progress has been made, they have yet to reach an agreement on a draft text. Cardin continues to maintain that he will not support any bill that would undermine the Iran nuclear deal, which effectively means that the new legislation would focus on non-nuclear issues, remove the need for

President Trump to certify or decertify Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal every 90 days, and attempt to generate a forcing mechanism to bring Iran back to the negotiating table.

NORTH KOREA. The dangers posed by the increasingly irrational moves of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un will continue to weigh heavily on the minds of both the Administration and Congress. Many in Congress fear that the President may be too eager to flex his muscles and take the U.S. into war with North Korea. The Senate held several hearings late last year to re-examine (and potentially limit) the President's authority to use military force in North Korea and elsewhere. Lawmakers have tried for years to pass a new AUMF, but concerns about how long any authorization should last and how to deal with ground troops remain. Expect dialogue on this topic to continue and grow even more heated in the days ahead. Congress may pursue additional sanctions aimed at Chinese banks and other institutions if North Korea continues its ballistic missile and nuclear tests, which is likely.

SYRIA. The recent decision of the U.N. Security Council to renew UNSC Resolution 2165 to authorize cross border humanitarian assistance in Syria has already been met with applause by Senate Foreign Relations Ranking Member Ben Cardin (D-MD). As the Congressional session opens in January, expect Congress to continue criticizing the ongoing, negative roles that Iran and Russia have played (and continue to play) in propping up the Assad regime and prolonging the crisis in the country. We can expect Congress to continue their focus on this issue and to increase their calls for Ambassador Haley and the Trump Administration to play stronger roles in supporting UN efforts to bring about an end to this crisis. Congress will be watching closely to see how the Trump administration implements new sanctions against Russia related to its actions in Syria. These sanctions were passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump in August and the January 29 implementation deadline is quickly approaching.

STATE DEPARTMENT REORGANIZATION. The House and Senate can also be expected to continue their focus on how the Trump Administration is going about the process of re-organizing the State Department. In early November, Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee wrote to Secretary Tillerson to say they were deeply concerned about the large numbers of people leaving the Department's ranks since January 2016 and about efforts to drastically reduce State's budget. Republican lawmakers, including Senator Bob Corker (R-TN), the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and John McCain (R-AZ), Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, have echoed the same concerns. This topic can be expected to garner additional, heated debate in the weeks and months ahead, although for some this will depend on Secretary Tillerson's future. The consensus thinking is that Tillerson will leave the State Department this spring or early summer. State Department reorganization has been a focus for Tillerson but it is unknown whether the next Secretary will devote as much attention to the issue or advocate for radical change.

AFRICA. Fighting terrorism in Africa will continue to be a subject of focus and concern for Congress in the year ahead as well, especially for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and its Chairman Royce, R-CA, who recently announced his retirement. At the end of the year, Chairman Royce held hearings to focus policymaker's attention on the brutal war that radical Islamist terrorists continue waging across the continent, and to focus on the deaths earlier this year of American soldiers in Niger. His emphasis has been on drawing more attention to al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, al-Qaeda and ISIS in Libya and their affiliates across the Sahel. In 2018, expect continued Congressional focus on these issues, and calls for the Administration, the State Department and the Department of Defense (especially AFRICOM) to increase their efforts to work together with Congress to ensure progress in this area.

MYANMAR. In early December 2017, the House condemned the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar by passing a resolution by a two-thirds voice vote calling for an end to the attacks against this minority. Many see this resolution as a first step in further Congressional action that could eventually include movement on a stand-alone sanctions bill (one has already been introduced by Eliot Engel (D-NY) and Steve Chabot (R-OH) that would seek to end U.S. military ties with Myanmar and potentially impose sanctions on industries that fund the Burmese military. If passed, the bill also would re-impose sanctions on the Burmese gem trade, previously lifted by President Obama. A bipartisan companion bill has also been sponsored in the Senate. The prospects of the Senate bill, however, are less positive. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has a strong personal relationship with Myanmar's Prime Minister Aung San Suu Kyi and has previously downplayed the need for sanctions. Expect renewed action and focus on this topic in the year ahead.

RUSSIA. Russia's actions (and the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin) will also continue to weigh heavily on the minds of Congress and the Administration. While President Trump has emphatically stated that his campaign did not collude with the Putin regime, there are a number of ongoing Congressional investigations into such action. While Senators McCain and Cardin have applauded Administration actions in recent days to approve the sale of lethal weapons to Ukraine and sanction additional Russian individuals under the Global Magnitsky Act, this in no way means that the "gloves are off" when it comes to Congress continuing to keep a watchful eye on the actions that Russia is taking around the globe in the year ahead, particularly its role in the Syrian conflict. The Administration is facing a January 29 deadline to implement sanctions that were passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump in August.

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