

FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN THE 116TH CONGRESS

By: [Congressman John Tanner](#), [Lisa Cotter Colangelo](#), and [Sam Lane](#)

The 116th Congress could see a significant shift in the priorities of both the House and Senate Committees with jurisdiction over foreign affairs. With the retirement of Sen. Bob Corker (TN), who helmed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Jim Risch (ID) is next in line to helm the panel. Risch, who is likely to have a less confrontational relationship with President Trump than Sen. Corker has, most recently voted against the resolution to pull the U.S. out of the conflict in Yemen, citing the necessity to “protect our national security interests.” On the House side, with the Democratic takeover, Rep. Eliot Engel (NY) will become Chairman, and with the retirement of Rep. Ed Royce (CA), Rep. Michael McCaul (TX) was elected to becoming the ranking Republican, after being term-limited at his previous position as Chair of the Homeland Security Committee. These leadership changes are likely to significantly impact the issues that each committee chooses to devote time and resources into.

NAMES TO KNOW IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

House



Eliot Engel

*Chairman,
Foreign
Affairs
Committee*



**Michael
McCaul**

*Ranking
Member,
Foreign Affairs
Committee*

Oversight

Upon their inauguration, the newly-elected Democratic House majority will use their control of Congressional committees to conduct aggressive oversight of the Trump Administration after two years of being locked out from issuing subpoenas due to Republican control of Congress. They will, no doubt, hit the ground running in January, with a number of hearings that will closely examine President Trump’s past and current business dealings in foreign countries and in his Washington

hotel; his conduct in office; and the relationship between the two. Look for House Democrats to hold dozens of hearings, hear hundreds of hours of testimony, interview numerous witnesses, and be as aggressive as they possibly can in examining President Trump’s alleged ties to Russia and other foreign countries.

Democrats have a multitude of options to choose from in this regard, as there are a several House committees that oversee different aspects of national security, including committees such as: the Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, Intelligence, Homeland Security, and Appropriations Committees.

Look for the incoming chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Eliot Engel, to hold oversight hearings with senior administration officials early next year on Russia, North Korea, and Iran. Engel has already suggested that he will compel Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to testify in front of his committee as early as possible on these topics, especially those involving bilateral talks with North Korea and their nuclear arsenal.

Russia

The 116th Congress will also be quickly forced to address the Russian Navy’s recent aggressions in the Sea of Azov, after Russian border patrol vessels blocked three Ukrainian ships from using the Kerch Strait to reach the Black Sea, then subsequently fired at them and took twenty-four Ukrainian crew members

prisoner. The two countries have been party to an agreement to share the sea since 2003, and any short or long-term closure of the straight would wreak havoc on the Ukrainian economy, particularly the Eastern portion of the country that is already in conflict with Russia. With Russia currently massing troops and equipment along the Russia-Ukrainian border, this will remain a situation to watch closely.

A Democrat-led House will also give top priority to investigating and addressing Russian election interference in the 2018 midterms, particularly after Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis suggested late last week that Russia, once again, attempted to interfere in American elections. If new evidence of Russian interference exists, and is made public, Congress will likely use the bipartisan sanctions passed in 2017 as a model for a new round of sanctions targeting those involved. Incoming House Foreign Affairs Chairman Engel will also no doubt come back to the question of what was discussed between Putin and Trump in Helsinki – sufficient answers have not yet been forthcoming in this area and he has vowed that this question must not go unanswered.

NAMES TO KNOW IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Senate



Jim Risch

*Chairman,
Foreign
Relations
Committee*



**Bob
Menendez**

*Ranking
Member,
Foreign
Relations
Committee*

Saudi Arabia

Ever since the highly-publicized murder of Washington Post columnist and Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, Congress has been much more critical of the actions of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, and a thorough review of the United States' relationship with the Kingdom is underway. Members of Congress have been vocal in calling for an end of U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. Just last week, the Senate voted to advance a bill that, if passed, would require President Trump to remove all troops in or affecting Yemen within 30 days. This resolution, which came just five votes short of passing in March, earned the support of 63 Senators this time, resulting in the bill being discharged from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the Senate floor. Its passage would be indicative of a significant shift in U.S. policy. Next, Congress may choose to use the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction any Saudi national proven to be involved in Jamal Khashoggi's murder.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee Under Incoming Chairman Engel

Historically, the outgoing and incoming chairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee have maintained solid working relationships and have been aligned on most critical areas. Under Mr. Engel's leadership, this trend should continue in the months ahead.

With regard to Europe, expect a greater show of support for the European Union and NATO, and a greater focus on fighting corruption and authoritarianism on the European continent – likely, by focusing on countries such as Hungary. The U.S. relationship with Britain will also remain on Engel's radar, as BREXIT negotiations continue.

Upon his arrival, the new chairman will start to hold the Administration's feet to the fire when it comes to cybersecurity. In the past, Engel has signaled his disappointment in the lack of progress being made by the State Department and the Administration. Under his leadership, the committee will continue to look for ways to ensure that the U.S. better respond to cyber threats, especially ones originating from Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran.

Under Democratic control of the committee, there will be a larger focus on human rights across the globe – something that the Trump Administration has been silent on – Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Myanmar will no doubt be a focus in this area. In Africa, they will take great interest in the coming elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and, if coming elections are proven to not be credible, President Kabila and his inner circle could be the target of an additional, tougher round of sanctions.

Latin America – U.S. relations will also get a boost under incoming Chairman Engel. Expect strong efforts to rebuild ties to Mexico, after the bitter back and forth on the border wall and on other drug and security-related issues between leaders in the region and President Trump. In recent interviews, incoming Chairman Engel has suggested that he may seek to propose legislation asking for Temporary Protected Status or TPS for Venezuelan, Honduran, Salvadoran and Haitian refugees who have been denied residency by the Trump Administration. Efforts to restore aid to and stronger ties with Central and South American countries will likely be on the agenda as well.

Finally, incoming Chairman Engel can also be expected to keep a close eye on China and the U.S.-China trade relationship. Engel has been unmistakably critical of China's trade practices in the past, particularly its economic espionage and illicit capture of American technology. Like the Trump Administration, the committee will continue to keep a watchful eye on China's trade violations moving forward, and force China to abide by international norms and rules.

