

Defiant Trump will seek more foreign policy battles

Best approach for likely targets, including China, may be to ride out the assaults

Ian Bremmer

The votes have now been counted in the first U.S. national election of the Donald Trump era and, as expected, the Democrats have seized majority control of the House of Representatives, significantly shifting the political balance of power away from Mr. Trump's party.

The president's Republican Party expanded its majority control of the U.S. Senate, but the Democrats now have real power for the first time in two years.

This result was not as clear a repudiation of the president and his party as voters delivered against Barack Obama's Democrats in 2010, but it is significant nonetheless. Much more than Obama and other presidents of the past, Trump invited voters and the media to treat this election as a referendum on his performance in the White House. Angry Democrats, and a good number of voters unaffiliated with either party, turned out to vote against him in large numbers.

Where does President Trump go from here? How will the new reality in Washington influence his foreign policy, not least in Asia? First, Trump will face a heightened level of political pressure from the opposition party. With their House majority, Democrats have new powers to investigate the president, win access to White House and personal Trump documents that may deeply embarrass him, and force members of his administration, perhaps even his family, to testify under oath before Congress on a wide variety of questions.

There will also be pressure on the Democratic House majority to impeach the president. That's especially true given the sheer number of Democratic Party officials who are about to announce their candidacy for president in 2020 and their desire to distinguish themselves with Democratic voters with especially tough criticism of a divisive president. Democrats will likely wait until Special Counsel Robert Mueller delivers a report on possible criminal conspiracy between the 2016 Trump presidential campaign and the Russian government, and the possibility that Trump has obstructed justice during the investigation. But depending on what Mueller finds, Democrats will have a hard time ignoring pressure to move toward impeaching the president.

Trump will respond to this pressure and criticism with signature defiance, and his drive to demonstrate continuing political virility may lead him to search for foreign (as well as domestic

policy) villains. The likeliest candidates for this role are Iran, Mexico, and China, but he'll remain combative even with traditional U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, such as Japan.

Iran has proved a popular target for Trump's aggressive approach to foreign policy. Trump's desire to distinguish himself from Obama, who counted the nuclear deal with Iran among his signature achievements, will be a recurring theme as the 2020 election approaches.

Mexico is another country that Trump appears ever ready to criticize. Replacement of the North American Free Trade Agreement with the new USMCA deal with Canada and Mexico removes one obvious point of contention. But the president's confidence that illegal immigration provides a reliable boost with his support base will keep the government of incoming President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on edge.

North Korea is more likely to escape Trump's pressure. The president may issue warnings to force Kim Jong Un to offer concessions that advance negotiations over denuclearization, but just as Trump believes Obama owns the U.S. relationship with Iran, he knows that he owns the effort to disarm North Korea. Admission of failure is unlikely as Trump works to build a list of accomplishments he can carry into the next election.

Finally, there are many reasons why the Trump administration's trade dispute with China will likely continue well into next year, whatever tentative agreements Trump and China's President Xi Jinping announce in the meantime. Trump's desire to persuade voters in politically crucial manufacturing states that he can force major trade concessions from China will be an important one. And there's close to a Washington consensus that a harder line is needed against Beijing on a host of issues.

China may well decide to wait Trump out. Kim Jong Un has already provided other governments the best model for how to deflect Trump's pressure over the next two years: By smiling, offering agreements in principle, stalling negotiations with the U.S., and trying to wait until Trump is defeated in 2020. But Trump's political talents should not be underestimated, and many presidents, including Obama, have recovered from midterm defeats to win re-election, sometimes easily.

It's a risky move. But for any government in Trump's target sites, there may not be a more effective defensive strategy.

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