



US defence after the mid-term elections

by Jan Joel Andersson

Elections have consequences – not least on defence matters. On 24 November, US President Barack Obama announced the resignation of Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel, the first major change to US defence policy after the mid-term elections held on 4 November 2014.

The elections increased the Republican majority in the US House of Representatives and shifted the balance of power in the Senate from the Democratic Party to the Grand Old Party (GOP). In a major electoral victory, the Republican Party netted 12 more seats in the House of Representatives. In the Senate, the GOP won eight seats from the Democrats, giving the Republicans 53 seats and a majority in the 100-strong upper house. One Senate race, in Louisiana, will be decided in a run-off poll in December but is expected to go to the Republicans, potentially further increasing their majority. For the first time since 2006, the Republican Party will thus have full control of Congress.

While President Barack Obama was not on the ballot and remains head of the executive branch and commander-in-chief, Congress plays important key roles in the shaping of debates on and funding of US defence. It must approve the annual budget and both the House of Representatives and the Senate have wide-ranging investigative powers to hold hearings and collect evidence on any issue deemed necessary. Moreover, all appointments of high-ranking federal civil servants, ambassadors,

and military officers must be confirmed by the Senate.

Attack on defence

Despite the resignation of Defence Secretary Hagel, Republican opposition to President Obama's security and defence policy will undoubtedly increase. The GOP's criticism over the past several years is centred on what is perceived as weak US leadership in world affairs, from 'leading from behind' in Libya to failing to punish Syria after the Assad regime crossed the president's 'red line' by using chemical weapons against its own people. Other areas under fire include the US response to the crisis in Ukraine, the handling of the war against IS, and the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme.

Several of the administration's most outspoken critics are set to assume leadership positions in key committees such as foreign relations, intelligence and armed services. The most prominent Republican leader on defence is former presidential candidate Senator John McCain of Arizona, who is expected to take up the chairmanship of the powerful Armed Services Committee. A long-standing senior member of the Committee, McCain will have a central role, as chairman, in writing its annual defence authorisation bill which sets policies on a range of issues – from defence spending and new weapons programmes to base closures. While

the Armed Services Committee does not decide how much money the Pentagon gets, it can control how funds are spent. McCain will also have extensive powers to call hearings and request testimony and evidence from Pentagon officials and the White House to explain US strategy.

Money money money

At the top of the Republican defence agenda is the repeal of the across-the-board budget cuts for the Pentagon, the so-called ‘sequestration’ – automatic spending cuts imposed by the US government as a result of the Budget Control Act of 2011. However, thanks to various bipartisan agreements and additional funding added by Congress, the Pentagon has not yet experienced the full effects of the budgetary slashes. There is also general agreement on the defence budget for fiscal year 2015, but a major fight regarding the defence budget for fiscal year 2016 is likely as the bipartisan Budget Control Act agreement comes to an end in 2015 and sequester-level reductions return in full.

However, not all Republicans are as hawkish on defence as McCain – and some prefer to focus on cutting the federal deficit. This fact, combined with the continued economic difficulties facing the US, means that there is no guarantee that there will be any new military spending spree in the short term. Nevertheless, in a longer-term perspective, a Republican controlled Congress is far more likely to increase defence spending than a Democratic controlled – or split – Congress. In addition to their generally strong posture on defence, most Republicans are ideologically opposed to expanding the social entitlement programmes that directly compete with defence spending in the federal budget.

Within months of taking office, the Obama administration cut or cancelled numerous weapons programmes. Although Senator McCain is a well-known critic of cost overruns and delays in major programmes (such as the JSF/F-35 and the Littoral Combat Ships) and has vowed to reform how the Pentagon buys its weapons, a Republican-led Congress is very likely to increase spending on armaments. Not only does the Republican Party believe in ‘peace through strength’ but many of the big defence industry firms produce their ware in states which vote Republican.

The power of the force

Given the new political landscape, the US will be more likely to send troops abroad. A major bone of contention between the administration and the Republicans

is the role of ground troops in fighting IS. Senator McCain and other leading Senate Republicans – like Lindsey Graham of South Carolina – have labelled the current US strategy, relying primarily only on air strikes, “a disaster”, and they have insisted that US troops must be dispatched to fight IS on the ground. While the president, as commander-in-chief, has the final say in troop deployments, Congress can drive debates, as well as allocate funding and authorise or cut programmes to shape and promote policies.

An important area in which a Republican-led Congress will make an immediate difference is arms control. Leading Republicans have been highly critical of President Obama’s repeated calls for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Since further nuclear reductions with, for example, Russia would most likely require a new treaty, Senate consent would be needed.

This will, however, be difficult to achieve. The expected incoming chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for example, is Republican Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, who in the past has declared any reduction of America’s nuclear arsenal without modernising existing weapons to be tantamount to “unilateral disarmament”.

Last but certainly not least, the newly-formed Congress will also complicate discussions with Iran over its nuclear programme. Unable to reach an agreement by a 24 November deadline, Iran and six powers – the US, the UK, France, Germany, China and Russia – together with the EU decided to extend negotiations for another seven months.

However, Republican lawmakers in the US Congress have challenged the Obama administration’s handling of the issue. Senator Corker has been one of the leading voices against the administration’s approach, deriding it as being too soft and over-generous. Several other Republican Senators, like Senator Mark Kirk of Illinois, have also called for imposing new economic sanctions on Iran, citing the lack of progress despite more than a year of talks. Concerned that it has been being sidelined by the White House, a Republican-led Congress will push to make any final deal with Iran dependent on a vote in the Senate. And even without a vote, Congress could complicate any agreement with Iran it does not like by denying funding to the administration.

Jan Joel Andersson is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

