

**"The 2022 US Midterm Election Series③"****The Impact of the 2022 Midterm Elections on US Foreign Policy**

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American voters do not usually go to the polling place for their choices of foreign policies, but the political consequences of elections affects how the White House and ruling party will go on with their policies on national security and foreign affairs. Since the world as we know has been changed due to the US-China strategic rivalry, Russia-Ukraine War, rearranging global supply chains, climate change, and still ongoing pandemic, we need to know how the 2022 US Midterm election would influence the subsequent array of the Biden Administration's foreign policy. Professor Ellen Laipson at George Mason University will explain the political ramification of this year's election from the perspectives of American foreign policy. [Project Designer: Haeyong Lim, Research Director, haeyonglim@jpi.or.kr]

\* This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Jeju Peace Institute

**OVERVIEW**

The recent midterm elections produced some notable surprises, and should provide some reassurance to the president's party that they will not face an overwhelmingly hostile Congress for the second half of President Biden's first term. In general, national security and foreign policy were not key determinants of who turned out to vote, or how they voted. Domestic issues of inflation and abortion rights seemed important factors, more than others. Nonetheless, the outcome of the midterm and the slim margin held by the Republicans in the House of Representatives will have some consequences for the President and his margin of maneuver on key foreign policy issues.

Some view the outcome of the elections as a validation of US citizens' commitment to their democratic practice and institutions. There was no violence at the polls, and no immediate signs of demands for recounts or refusals to accept election results. There were no signs of foreign interference, as occurred in 2016, and DHS' head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Jan Easterly, offered an early assessment of a free and fair election process on November 9, 2022. (<https://www.cisa.gov/news/2022/11/09/statement-cisa-director-easterly-security-2022-elections>)

Candidates favored by former President Trump for the most part fared poorly, although some of his preferred candidates won in House and governor races. Some believe that establishment Republicans were relieved to see Trump-backed candidates fumble, and see

an opportunity to regain control of the party, despite Trump's continued influence over a large cohort of Republican voters.

For President Biden, the outcome was a surprise and relief, at least for the short run. The outcome will make it somewhat easier for President Biden to try to build bipartisan consensus on some of his agenda, since he is a true believer in building cooperation across party lines, and has spoken frequently since the November polls of his desire to find bipartisan solutions on major national challenges. Pollsters had predicted that Biden would be held accountable for inflation among other sources of disaffection among voters. In fact, the usual pattern of a party in power losing as many as dozens of seats in the House did not materialize. But the results still show a divided society, and deep polarization over many public policy issues. Many of the races were very close, and in Georgia, a new election will be needed to break the virtual tie between the two Senate candidates, Democrat Raphael Warnock and Republican Herschel Walker.

Foreign policy and national security issues were not prominent during the campaign this fall. The US response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine enjoys some bipartisan support, and Biden's large assistance packages to Ukraine have passed with support from both parties. More broadly, Biden's embrace of alliance relationships and multilateralism did not appear to be a major issue for Republican voters. Recent polls by the Chicago Council for Global Affairs indicate strongest consensus across party lines for the growing challenge of dealing with Russia, and enduring support for NATO and security cooperation with European allies and partners. ([https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20Chicago%20Council%20Survey%20Report%20PDF\\_0.pdf](https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20Chicago%20Council%20Survey%20Report%20PDF_0.pdf)). But American citizens divide along party lines on the relative importance of American engagement, and on spending priorities.

Differences over the conduct of US foreign policy in the 2023-2024 period are inevitable, as the parties jockey for position in advance of the 2024 presidential elections. There are both structural reasons regarding the relative powers and the protocols of the two houses of Congress, and substantive disagreements over policy that will sharpen when the two chambers are led by different parties. Some experts predict that President Biden will try to advance his spending priorities for national security during December, before the new Congress is sworn in early January.

## **BACK TO BUSINESS IN 2023...**

In theory, Democratic control of the Senate, or more generically, control of the Senate and White

House by the same party, should give the president some advantages. The process of advise and consent for ambassadorial nominations or for vetting and voting on proposed treaties or other international agreements, is easier when the president's party manages the calendar and sets the rules for Senate debate.

But an equally entrenched Senate cultural norm is to provide individual Senators considerable latitude in expressing their personal positions on foreign policy, up to and including using the power to block presidential initiatives. In the first two years of Biden's presidency, members of the minority party have blocked nominees over policy disputes. Senator Ted Cruz has blocked dozens of nominees for State Department positions over opposition to Biden's past sanctions efforts against Russia and the Nordstream 2 Gas pipeline, and Senator Joshua Hawley continues to block several Defense Department nominees over his position that the Biden Administration has not made individuals accountable for the August 2021 hasty departure of Americans and Afghans from Kabul as the Taliban took over. According to the Washington Post's Political Appointee Tracker, 27% of US Embassies are still awaiting ambassadors who have been nominated, but awaiting Senate approval. (<https://ourpublicservice.org/performance-measures/political-appointee-tracker/>)

It is worth noting that the Senate has less recent practice with their core responsibility to "advise and consent" with at least a two-thirds vote on treaties negotiated by the Executive Branch. In the past, arms control treaties would engage the Senate for months of debate; recent treaty experience has been simpler and more straightforward. In the current Congress, the US Senate has approved three treaties presented by the Biden Administration: an amendment to the Montreal Protocol on the Ozone Layer (approved 69-27), an extradition treaty with Croatia (approved by voice vote), and a treaty to approve NATO membership for Sweden and Finland (vote 95-1). Should additional treaties come to the Senate for approval, the Biden Administration should be in a comfortable position.

On the House side, Republican control is likely to mean struggles over spending priorities. The majority party may push for additional funding for defense, over the president's desire to rebalance national security spending and to be more selective in funding major new weapons systems. The House may also take rhetorical positions on various Biden initiatives, from climate change to the state of bilateral relations in various places. But with the narrow Republican majority, they may not be able to take dramatic action to shift existing policies. They could, nonetheless, block the administration should it make major new spending proposals on topics where there is an ideological divide between the two parties.

More indirectly, many expect the Republican controlled House to launch investigations against Biden Cabinet officials and even Biden family members. While these tactics to weaken the president will be seen as primarily motivated to affect the 2024 presidential election, it could prove a distraction as the president's team tries to fulfill more of its campaign promises. In addition, allies and adversaries around the world could well interpret such events as evidence that the continued polarization in US politics diminishes the president's credibility and effectiveness. Those allies have a stake in a US system that is able to sustain its security commitments. Many have been reassured by Biden's overall foreign policy and his "We're Back!" message, but that reassurance will erode if the next two years reveal unrelenting partisanship.

## THE FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA

Trying to anticipate how the Republican-controlled House will position itself on important national security issues is tricky. The midterms suggested some fatigue in conservative ranks with the tumultuous Trump era, and many Republicans voted against candidates that had extremist views on divisive issues. The America First sentiment that Trump embraced had isolationist tendencies, despite his sporadic and erratic assertions of American power and leadership in the world. More moderate Republicans share some internationalist perspectives with many Democrats, and those Republicans could find common ground with the administration on several key national security issues.

First is the focus on Russia, the war in Ukraine, and the revalidation and strengthening of the NATO alliance. Many mainstream Republicans would support overall the administration's approach to Russia's war on Ukraine. They support arms to Ukraine, expanding NATO to include Sweden and Finland, and the centrality of European security to US interests.

Yet friction could surface over additional large scale arms packages to Ukraine. Some prominent Republicans (and progressive Democrats) are growing weary of the cost of arming Ukraine, and could put limits on the president's funding requests. Others will criticize the president from the other end of the spectrum, arguing that his Ukraine policy is not tough enough, and that the US needs to be more aggressive in containing Russian expansionism.

In general, Asia may not present any serious new problems for the White House. To the extent that Biden has sustained Trump's tough approach to China, Republicans cannot complain. In the 2022 National Security Strategy, the White House has underlined the challenge that China presents, even as it holds out some hope for areas of cooperation, and for avoiding open conflict. In recent days, the Biden Administration has placed further restrictions on trade with

Chinese high tech companies, and this approach seems to enjoy bipartisan support.

Relations with South Korea, Japan and other East Asian states are also not likely to be controversial for the new House, although some tactical disagreements over security and trade may develop.

But on other topics, one can anticipate some dramatic disagreements. Here are four:

Climate Change – the outcome of COP27 in Egypt has not been fully digested. It is possible that Republicans will find fault with the “Loss and Damage” fund that the US reluctantly agreed to in the final days of the meeting. They could block or try to reduce Administration proposals for the US contribution to that new fund. More generally, climate skepticism has dimmed, but protections for the fossil fuel industry and for energy independence at any cost remains strong among conservatives. Republican leaders will also take advantage politically from Biden’s likely struggles to keep Democratic progressives minimally satisfied with his efforts to improve US performance on climate change.

Iran and the Iran nuclear deal – Republicans would be expected to oppose vehemently any Biden submission for a restoration of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). The Senate would have the action on that, and Senate Republicans would likely be joined by some Democrats in shooting down any diplomatic achievement to restore the 2015 agreement. At this juncture, diplomacy with Iran has been suspended, and the focus of US Iran policy has been on helping the brave Iranians who are protesting over women’s rights. Republicans may think the US is not doing enough, and some would favor a regime change strategy, but overall, there is more agreement than disagreement at present over Iran.

US-Saudi Relations – The Republican led House can be expected to thwart Biden attempts to downgrade US-Saudi relations, and to restrict Saudi access to weaponry that can be used in the war in Yemen. Democrats in Congress and Biden personally seek a major recalibration in this relationship, over human rights, OPEC decisions, the war in Yemen, and other divisive issues. Republicans will see those issues differently.

US-Israel relations – The reelection of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel is a genuine headache for the United States. With his likely extremist governing partners, Bibi will push Biden hard on Iran, on support for Israel’s new friends in the Gulf, and on how to manage the Palestinians. Violence is on the rise in Israel and the occupied territories, and Biden will need to try to avoid a major escalation without jeopardizing the principle of support for Israel’s security. Mainstream Republicans will demonstrate that they are more pro-Israeli than the administration, despite the fact that the Republican pro-Trump base and white supremacists have caused a rise in

anti-Semitic hate crimes in the US. It will be interesting to see how the Republican Party navigates the likely tension in the US-Israeli relationship. In general, Biden has a stronger track record on managing relations with Bibi Netanyahu than President Obama had, but Bibi's likely support for a Republican victory in 2024 will make this a real challenge.

#### Author Bio

Ellen Laipson is the Director of the International Security program at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University and directs the Center for Security Policy Studies. She joined GMU in 2017 after a distinguished 25 -year career in government and as President and CEO of the Stimson Center (2002-2015). She serves on a number of non-governmental boards related to international security and diplomacy. Her last post in government was Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council (1997-2002). She also served on the State Department's policy planning staff, the National Security Council staff, and worked at the Congressional Research Service for more than a decade. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Academy of Diplomacy, she serves on the Advisory Councils of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, and Notre Dame's International Security Center. She was a member of the CIA External Advisory Panel from 2006-2009, President Obama's Intelligence Advisory Board from 2009-2013, and on the Secretary of State's Foreign Affairs Policy Board 2011-2014. Laipson has an M.A. from the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University and an AB from Cornell University.

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