



U.S. MIDTERM ELECTIONS: SO, WHAT'S NEW?

Roger Svensson

The November 2 midterm elections were in many respects typical. The party holding the Presidency was held responsible for the dismal economy and a very weak job market. The anger and frustration of voters may have led the Democrats to lose their majority in the House of Representatives, but in foreign and security policy it could well give rise to a situation in which the President will have greater support for a more assertive policy, particularly when it comes to countering the rise of China and dealing with a nuclear Iran.

It's the Economy Stupid! - All Over Again

The U.S. midterm elections on Tuesday, November 2, 2010 turned out more or less the way pollsters had indicated. In one sense it was a normal midterm election, in that the party holding the Presidency lost. This has been the case in all but a few midterm elections held under special circumstances: for example, in 2002 following the terrorist attacks in New York; in 1934 during the recession, and during Franklin Roosevelt's first term. What makes the election this year special, if not unique, is the magnitude of the loss. The Democratic Party lost more than 60 seats in the House of Representatives and just barely hung on to power in the Senate, losing six seats. The same pattern could be seen all over the nation in state and local elections.

The Tea Party movement was the focus of much media attention before the elections. As Kate Zernike in the *New York Times* puts it: "For many voters the Tea Party has been a blank screen on which they have projected all kinds of hopes and frustrations." However, it turns out that most of the candidates supported by the Tea Party did *not* win. There were candidates from the Tea Party in 138 races, most of them for seats in the House of Representatives. About a third won. In some races, picking a Tea Party candidate meant that an easy win for the Republican Party ended up in a loss, as was the case in Nevada, where Senate majority leader Harry Reid narrowly held on to his seat. An exit poll reported by the *Washington Post* showed 18 percent against the Tea Party, 22 percent in favor and 56 percent discounting it as a factor altogether.

The point is that one should not see the new Con-

gress as fundamentally different from earlier Congresses in which the party holding the presidency has lost one or both chambers. The political *climate* is different, with anger and disillusionment among many voters. Strong anti-Washington sentiment is reflected in the fact that some polls show that the Republicans are just as unpopular as the Democratic Party. President Barack Obama's approval rating is low, with 45 percent approving and 50 percent disapproving – a low figure, but certainly not unprecedented.

Furthermore, many of the Republicans now coming into Congress are returning, experienced politicians who have served before. Midterm elections can often be described as returning waves, but this time the wave was stronger than ever before. As one voter puts it, "The new Congress is on probation." The U.S. is in a sense today a three party nation, in which Independents, Democrats and Republicans are equally strong. It is not unrealistic to think that voters might turn on the Republicans in two years' time, as they did during President Clinton's second term.

It had been obvious all along that the election would be all about the economy and unemployment, Main Street against Wall Street, a by now unpopular health reform but not particularly, if at all, concerned with foreign policy, in spite of the fact that the United States is currently involved in "1.5" wars.

A New Team in the White House?

In recent months there have been changes in the White House, which critics had previously called a "closed shop." President Obama's inner circle of advisors is in the process



of change. His Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, and David Axelrod, his top political advisor, have both left for Chicago. Emanuel is expected to run for Mayor of Chicago and Axelrod will prepare for the President's re-election campaign. In early October, Thomas Donilon was appointed National Security Advisor, replacing Marine Corps General Jim Jones. The gossip in Washington has it that General Jones' replacement was precipitated by revelations about his critique of foreign policy decision making in Bob Woodward's recent book *Obama's Wars*. Furthermore, there is speculation as to whether – or rather, when – Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates will step down. All in all, these changes could lead to stronger civilian influence over foreign and security policy making. This could be important when the U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan is reviewed in the middle of next year.

A Freer Hand in Foreign Policy for President Obama

As already stated, foreign policy did not play a significant role in the midterm elections. President Obama has had some problems so far with his Democratic left wing, particularly on Iraq and Afghanistan, including on military spending, but also on issues such as free trade – in spite of the fact that the Bush administration negotiated and signed free trade agreements with, among other nations, South Korea (the agreements have as yet not been confirmed by Congress). But a number of left leaning Democrats in the House have now lost their seats.

President Obama's first encounters with China were generally seen as failures, if not humiliations. This goes for his visit there, as well as for the climate meeting in Copenhagen. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, in an effort to coin a phrase, called for "strategic reassurance" with China. However, the rapid rise of China, economically as well as militarily, has gradually led to some rethinking. Events over the past year have had the same effect. It is fair to say that United States policy in South and East Asia is now much more assertive.

The North Korean sinking of the South Korean navy vessel in late March of this year actually strengthened the U.S. hand. Relations with the new leadership in Seoul have improved markedly, leading to joint naval exercises; the troublesome discussions with Japan regarding U.S. military

bases now appear in a different light, and from Washington, North Korea looks more like a Chinese than an American problem. For example, there seems to be no opening for another round of Six-Party Talks.

The United States has been rather active in Asia over the past six months. In July, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton entered into the dispute over a string of strategically significant islands in the South China Sea. Countering China's claim that the South China Sea constituted a "core interest," Mrs. Clinton said "The United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea." This pleased a number of nations present at the Asian security meeting in Hanoi, especially Vietnam, which has clashed with China in past decades over some of the islands.

Just the other day, President Obama came out in support of India in its efforts to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The irritated responses from China, as well as Pakistan, were much as expected. The United States and India have had extensive joint naval operations. Sales of jet fighters and other military hardware to India might take the defense partnership to new heights. The United States is playing off India as a counterweight to China.

While a number of South and East Asian countries are now more or less openly welcoming a U.S. "security umbrella," it goes without saying that China is very much concerned. As Charles Freeman, a China expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, put it: "The Chinese perceived the Hanoi meeting as a gang attack on them. There is no question that they have miscalculated their own standing in the region."

However, the elephant in the room in United States foreign and security policy is not so much any of the above, but rather Iran and its nuclear program. The intimate relations between the United States and Israel make this all the more important in U.S. domestic policy. Congress recently voted overwhelmingly for tighter economic sanctions on Iran that are, however, not very likely to work. In certain respects, Iran may be more important to U.S. foreign and security interests than the wars in which the U.S. is currently engaged. If the President were to decide on military action of some sort against Iran, Republicans in Congress would be more willing to go along with this than the outgoing Congress



would have been.

In this context it is highly unlikely that a sprinkling of Tea Party members of Congress will create problems or make much of a difference. Although their objective, like the rest of the Republican Party, is to make Barack Obama a one-term president, they are patriots first and supportive of the armed forces. Their views on foreign policy are uninformed, as well as unformed. With one possible exception – free trade – they will most likely support a U.S. foreign and security policy that aims at maintaining leadership in the world, including by taking military action when that is the ultimate recourse.

To conclude: President Obama will have serious problems with the new Congress on several domestic issues. However, the Democrats have a slim majority in the Senate, giving the President its “advice and consent.” The Republicans do not have the votes to overturn a Presidential veto should they try, for example, to revoke the health care legislation. And, as argued here, in foreign and security policy the new Congress may very well be more supportive of an assertive policy than was the outgoing one. One caveat, however: if the U.S. military comes to conclusions on the situation in Afghanistan with which the President is unwilling to go along, the Republicans will most likely attack him for not protecting U.S. core interests.

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