

A brave new US Congress or same old hypocrisy?



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Incoming members of the US House of Representatives, Capitol Hill, Washington, US, November 14, 2018 © Reuters / Carlos Barria

The 'Saudi Arabia Accountability and Yemen Act' bipartisan bill in the US Senate suggests that long-missing congressional activism in American foreign policy might be on the horizon, but likely would be on a selective basis.

Since the mid-1990s, the US Congress has [abdicated](#) its oversight of the executive's foreign and national security policies owing to increased partisan polarization, decreased legislative expertise on foreign affairs, and greater deference to the presidency on war, counter-terrorism and trade issues. This default congressional tendency of leaving the

White House unconstrained on foreign policy may, however, shift in response to changing international circumstances.

The Senate bill challenges the Trump administration's core strategy of continuing a no-questions-asked, all-weather alliance with Saudi Arabia in spite of the CIA's [conclusion](#) with 'high confidence' that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered Khashoggi's premeditated murder inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.

Many US congresspersons are taking a holistic view of Khashoggi's assassination as part of a broader pattern of reckless violence by the Crown Prince, who has pursued a relentless war of impunity in Yemen and unleashed a mass humanitarian disaster there.

The Senate bill demands suspension of US weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, a ban on US refueling of Saudi aircraft bombarding Yemen, and inquiries into human rights violations in Saudi Arabia and of war crimes committed in Yemen.

In the [words](#) of one of the sponsors of the bill, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), it is high time to address Saudi Arabia's "*despicable behavior on several fronts*" and "*to make sure people in the region and the rest of the world know the extent of Saudi Arabia's malign behavior.*"

Such a sharp tone is directly aimed at Trump, who has [stressed](#) Saudi Arabia's priceless value as a manager of the global oil market, a buyer of American weapons, a creator of American jobs, and an indispensable ally to counter Iranian influence in the Middle East. The senators are not impressed by realpolitik reasoning and are insisting that the US must uphold human rights and humanitarian norms which have taken a backseat in American foreign policy.

Even as dissatisfaction with Trump's coddling of Saudi Arabia is mounting in Congress, American legislators are also taking aim at China. On November 14, bipartisan companion bills were introduced in the Senate and the House of Representatives threatening to impose economic sanctions on the Chinese Communist Party.

Given the victory of the Democratic Party in the House in the recent midterm elections, more moral and human rights-heavy legislation and proceedings from January 2019 are likely to emerge with the intention of checking Trump's executive authority to conduct his narrow 'America First' foreign policy.

Representative Eliot Engel (D-New York), currently the ranking member and presumptive next chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, has [promised](#) a "*whole new ballgame*" from January. Motivated by a liberal vision that the US "*must continue to be the leader of the free world,*" he is signaling legislative pushback against Trump's "*foolish*" alienation of traditional American allies, his unilateral withdrawal from treaties, and his hardline anti-immigration policies.

Engel is a seasoned Russophobe who has repeatedly [admonished](#) Trump to “*get much smarter and much tougher in dealing with Russia.*” He has frequently backed onerous sanctions on Russia for its alleged meddling in US elections, its role in Syria and Ukraine, and also demanded that Trump should not conduct summit meetings with President Vladimir Putin.

Convinced that “*basic freedoms are under attack*” in Russia, Engel is a quintessential establishment Democrat who is gearing up to further the investigations about alleged collusion of Trump’s election campaign with the Russian government.

Engel will also be egging on fellow Democrat Representative Adam Schiff (California), the incoming House Intelligence Committee Chair. Schiff is a backer of the Special Counsel Robert Mueller, and is obsessed with expanding investigation of what he believes is Russia’s covert ‘meddling’ in American politics.

Like most Democrats, Schiff also has an automatic allergy for China because of its one-party political system and has been a proponent for [hearings](#) on China’s threat to Western values and the security of US communications systems.

Notwithstanding congressional venting against target countries, the return of a liberal Democrat-led House after eight years cannot fully stymie Trump’s foreign policy. The still Republican-held US Senate has relatively greater foreign policy-related powers than the House.

Moreover, there are serious inconsistencies and contradictions in the foreign policy preferences of the Democrats themselves. The same Eliot Engel who frequently rants about “*Russia’s contempt for democratic values and processes*” and advocates NATO’s eastward expansion into Georgia and Ukraine, has a permanent soft spot for Israel. He is one of the staunchest defenders of Israel’s harsh military crackdowns and use of disproportionate force against Palestinians.

Engel has [championed](#) Trump’s controversial shift of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and equated criticism of Israeli policies with anti-Semitism. Engel is one of the few Democrats who opposed his own President Barack Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran, in line with Israeli interests.

In [2017](#), Engel killed a resolution in the House which would have forced Trump to curtail US support for the Saudi aerial bombing of Yemen then itself, long before the Khashoggi scandal erupted. He shares the Trump administration’s fundamental vision that Saudi Arabia is a necessary counterweight against Iran. Had it not been for the global outcry over Khashoggi’s murder, he would not be posing too many quandaries to Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner’s agenda of using Saudi Arabia as a lynchpin to roll back Iran’s power.

Thus, if the US Congress becomes more progressive and activist in foreign policy from January, it will be on a selective and subjective basis. The moral outrage is going to be

aimed at specific countries but not at other nations which have powerful lobbies in Washington and have manufactured positive consensuses in their favor.

The general double standards which inform the foreign policy of the American executive branch, wherein allies get a pass on human rights and democracy while antagonists are pilloried, also operate in the US Congress.

The discrepancy is already on clear display with regard to Bahrain, a crucial American ally that hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. Around the same time as the bill to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for Khashoggi's killing and war crimes in Yemen was put up, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to [defeat](#) a motion banning US weapons sales to Bahrain. This is despite the fact that the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain has repressed its majority Shia population with brutal force and has also partaken in the Saudi-led destruction of Yemen.

American foreign policy is not going to undergo a major course correction or moral infusion as a result of one midterm election or improved congressional oversight and scrutiny over the White House. A Democrat-controlled House will at best look to embarrass Trump on some foreign policy aspects for domestic score-settling. The laser-focus on Russia, for example, is a partisan political hobby horse and will go on as long as Trump remains in office.

As to rendering the US' role in the world more humane and less oppressive, hoping that Congress will deliver is as vain as 'waiting for Godot'.