

USAPC Washington Report
Interview with Senator Bennett Johnston
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USAPC: How will Democratic control of Congress affect U.S. policy toward the Asia Pacific?

Johnston: The mantra of this election was that it was about change. But it is important to bear in mind that “change” is not a policy and it certainly does not define one.

Among Democrats who will be leading the new Congress, however, there are some differences that could affect U.S. policy toward Asia. Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D., California), the new Speaker of the House, has been a strong proponent of human rights in China. But my guess is that she will not use her position as Speaker or, indeed, even have time to use her position to pursue that issue.

With respect to other House and Senate players active on foreign policy, there are not discernible differences between Republicans or Democrats on Asia-related issues. Senator Joe Biden (D., Delaware), who will assume the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair, has worked closely over the years with the outgoing chair, Senator Richard Lugar (R., Indiana).

Similarly, Senator Patrick Leahy, the new Senate Appropriations Committee chairman, is not that different on Asia-related issues from Senator Mitch McConnell (R., Kentucky), the outgoing chairman. And Congressman Tom Lantos (D., California), who will assume leadership of the House International Relations Committee, likely will approach Asia policy issues in much the same way as Congressman Henry Hyde (R., Illinois), the former chairman.

Differences will emerge, however, on trade policy. The vote on legislation to extend the President’s Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) has always been close in the House. TPA expires on June 30, 2007, and from what I’ve heard, it probably will not garner enough votes to be extended.

I fear that new Members of Congress—both Democrats and Republicans—will try to move U.S. trade policy in a protectionist direction. However, it also is a phenomenon that many new lawmakers enter Congress thinking and talking protectionist only to become more supportive of free trade after they have been exposed to more points of view about world trade. So we’ll see what happens, but I do fear that the new Congress will become more protectionist.

Another important message of the November elections was “talk to your enemies.” The electorate largely disapproved of the Bush Administration’s unilateral conduct of the Iraq War. The Iraq Study Group’s subsequent report emphasized the importance of engaging Iran and Syria in negotiations aimed at stabilizing the situation in Iraq. The Democratic-controlled Congress likely will argue that the same recommendation applies to North Korea, that is, that the United States should negotiate directly with North Korea to secure an end to its nuclear program. That said, the President continues to be in charge of foreign relations.

USAPC: What could Congress do legislatively to affect changes in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy? Use its budgetary authority?

Johnston: Yes, Congress has the power of the purse and could use this to radically change U.S. policy toward Iraq, for example. If you recall the Vietnam War, Congress passed

legislation stipulating that the United States could not spend money in, on, around, or about Vietnam. That measure effectively ended U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Lawmakers could do the same thing with respect to Iraq. I don't know whether they will, in fact, use their budgetary power to that extreme, but clearly the Defense Department's \$600 billion budget request will be hotly debated.

I don't believe there is similar legislative device that could be used with respect to North Korea. Congress cannot mandate that the President negotiate directly with the North Koreans. They only can urge him to do so.

USAPC: Overall, what is your view of the new Democratic leadership?

Johnston: Speaker Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D., Nevada) both have indicated that they want to govern from the center. They want to approach lawmaking in a bipartisan manner and accomplish a targeted set of goals, such as raising the minimum wage, improving congressional ethics, eliminating tax breaks for big oil companies, reforming immigration policy, and employing the so-called pay-as-you-go approach to federal budgeting. This is a realistic agenda.

You will recall that Speaker Pelosi backed Congressman John Murtha (D., Pennsylvania) in the race for House Majority Leader over the clear favorite, Congressman Steny Hoyer (D., Maryland). Hoyer ultimately won. This outcome effectively has weakened Speaker Pelosi's position. This means we likely will see her lead more by consensus than by the top-down management style of recent Republican Speakers. Speaker Pelosi probably will have to consult more actively with her leadership team and committee chairmen—a potential development that some people regard favorably.

USAPC: Do you think governing from the center and leading by consensus will help to de-polarize politics in Congress?

Johnston: Yes, I think this will help to de-polarize politics. Many of the newly elected House members and the so-called "Blue Dog" members of the Democratic Party supported Congressman Hoyer. Those two groups of Democrats tend to be more centrist in their policy views, so Hoyer will have to consult them actively in forming policy positions.

I think one of the reasons the Republicans got into so much trouble in the November elections was that policy was totally under the control of the Speaker and the Majority Leader. Committee chairmen were not selected on the basis of seniority; they were selected and controlled by the Speaker.

I recall approaching one subcommittee chairman with a legislative proposal that was decidedly in the interest of his district. He told me he could not support what his district favored because the Speaker opposed the measure. That was the case across the board in the Republican-controlled House.

USAPC: Speaking of Majority Leader Hoyer, in early December 2006 he declared that the 110th Congress would work five days a week. This would be a far more ambitious work schedule than the previous Congress, which was in session only about two and a half days a week.

Do you think this represents an attempt by Congressman Hoyer to ensure that the new Congress is not another “no-nothing Congress?” Is it fair to say that the 109th Congress “did nothing?”

Johnston: Yes, the 109th Congress clearly was a “do-nothing” Congress. And this was by design. The Republican leadership wanted to avoid scheduling politically tough votes. Some Congresses have been “do-nothing” simply because lawmakers could not reach a mutually acceptable compromise on certain issues in a timely fashion. But the last Congress was “do-nothing” by design.

The practice of meeting Tuesday through Thursday began when former Congressman Newt Gingrich (R., Georgia) was Speaker of the House. He said at the time that Members of Congress should live at home where they can be in touch with “what’s really going on.” It is an evil thing for Members to be in Washington, Gingrich and others suggested.

Well, I disagree. I think that’s a terrible approach. We live in a very complicated country that has many difficult issues that must be addressed via legislation and congressional oversight. You cannot do your job as a Congressman or Senator, study the issues, and vote responsibly if you’re going to backyard barbecues back home.

I think it’s great for Majority Leader Hoyer to institute a five-day-a-week work schedule, but I can also see that it will be very tough on the huge numbers of Senators and Congressmen who live back home with their families. It would be very hard financially for many of them to move their families to the Washington, D.C. area because the salaries of Members of the House and Senate have not kept up with the price of real estate here. So it may be hard initially for Majority Leader Hoyer to implement a five-day-a-week schedule, but I imagine he will move in that direction in the coming two years.

USAPC: You mentioned earlier that the 110th Congress likely will have a more protectionist complexion. But I understand that some Democrats, led by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D., Montana), would like to help American workers adjust to globalization through any number of different initiatives, including an overhaul of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program, for example. Can we expect more worker-focused initiatives from the Democrats?

Johnston: As we speak, I don’t know whether Senator Baucus actually has developed a worker-adjustment strategy or simply discussed the need for one. But as someone who believes in world trade, I think that is a very good approach. A strong case can be made that global trade has helped the United States. Admittedly, some workers, particularly in the textile sector, have been disadvantaged. Trade adjustment assistance would be good for them and other workers in less competitive industries.

But at the end of the day, we don’t want to address trade-related worker dislocation through protectionist means. You could certainly impose protective tariffs against imports from China, but then companies would just move their purchasing and supply arrangements to Vietnam. There is a great deal of labor around the world that is much less expensive than in the United States. Much of U.S.-based manufacturing will never be able to compete with the cost of manufacturing in many Asia countries. It is a losing proposition to erect trade barriers in an effort to go back to the old days.

USAPC: How can we educate lawmakers and the American public about the importance of the Asia Pacific to U.S. economic and political interests when it appears that Iraq will continue to dominate the foreign policy agenda of Congress in 2007?

Johnston: I strongly agree with experts, such as Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy, who have warned that the United States risks finding itself excluded from important community-building initiatives underway in the Asia Pacific if it does not remain engaged in the region. But I fear that Iraq will continue to suck all of the oxygen out of the room. After all, we're spending \$200 billion a year in Iraq and Americans are getting killed there.

The United States cannot remain in Iraq forever, but as soon as we leave the sectarian violence likely will intensify again. Who knows—by training the Iraqi army we may find that we have just armed the Shiites and Sunnis for civil war. This issue will so dominate the time and attention of Congressmen and Senators that we will have to work even harder at getting them to focus on Asia.

USAPC: Just before former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan's term ended in early December, he blasted the United States for conducting diplomacy in a unilateral, overbearing manner. Was his criticism fair? Do you think Annan's remarks will further galvanize Democrats in Congress to pursue more rigorous oversight of U.S. foreign policy?

Johnston: Yes, I think Annan's critique of U.S. diplomacy was fair. It will add to the increasing chorus of voices in the United States and around the world which argue that we should be more globally-oriented. The problem is that the United States has lost many opportunities for successful cooperation with members of the international community.

In Iraq, for instance, if the United States had listened to the international community, we would have agreed to keep the inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) there much longer and may have avoided going to war. But if we then decided to go to war, we would have enjoyed far more support from allies such as France and Germany. Unfortunately, the damage is done and we can't easily un-do it. Hopefully, through proper congressional oversight we'll avoid making those kinds of mistakes in the future.

Senator J. Bennett Johnston's (D., Louisiana) political career spanned 32 years, including eight years in the Louisiana Legislature and 24 years in the United States Senate. He currently is the chief executive officer of Johnston & Associates, a governmental and business consulting firm in Washington, D.C.