The 110th Congress Creates New Dynamics On Politics, Economics, And Security
USAPC Interview with Senator J. Bennett Johnston

“...A new sheriff has come to town, taking the reins with a purpose,” Congressman Tom Lantos (D., California) said on January 5, the day he assumed leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from his Republican predecessor, retired Congressman Henry Hyde (R., Illinois). Not a few congressional observers have wondered how the arrival of Congressman Lantos and other Democratic “sheriffs” who have been elevated to important leadership positions in the 110th Congress will affect the course of U.S. foreign policy, in general, and particularly with respect to the Asia Pacific.

Senator J. Bennett Johnston discusses what we might expect from Capitol Hill in the coming two years, drawing on his in-depth, hands-on understanding of key congressional players and procedures.

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...
In each issue, Washington Report will provide the names and contact information for selected executive branch officials with jurisdiction over economic, political, and security issues important to U.S.-Asia Pacific relations. This issue will focus on pertinent personnel from the Department of State.

Mailing Address (unless otherwise indicated):
Department of State
Harry S. Truman Building (HST)
2201 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20530

Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs:
Christopher R. Hill – Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs – HST 6205, 202.647.9596
Kathleen Stephens – Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs – HST 6205, 202.736.4393
Glyn Davies – Deputy Assistant Secretary (Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Islands) – HST 6205, 202.647.8929
Eric G. John – Deputy Assistant Secretary (Southeast Asia) – HST 6205, 202.647.6904
Thomas J. Christensen – Deputy Assistant Secretary (China, Taiwan, and Mongolia) – HST 6205, 202.647.6910
James Zumwalt – Director, Office of Japanese Affairs – HST 4206, 202.736.7233
Sung Y. Kim – Director, Office of Korean Affairs – HST 5313, 202.647.7719
C. Steven McCann – Director, Office of Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island Affairs – HST 4312, 202.736.4659
Chris Marut – Director, Office of Regional and Security Policy Affairs – HST 4312, 202.647.2278
Clifford A. Hart, Jr. – Director, Office of Taiwan Coordination – HST 4208, 202.647.7712
Scot Marciel – Director, Office of Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia – HST 5210, 202.647.2143

Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs:
Karen P. Hughes – Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs – HST 7261, 202.647.9199
Dina Habib Powell – Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs – SA-44, 301 4th Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20547, 202.203.5118

I fear the new Congress will become more protectionist

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, which is, that the United States should negotiate directly with North Korea to secure an end to its nuclear program.

USAPC: What could Congress do legislatively to affect changes in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy? Could lawmakers use their budgetary authority?
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Michael K. Simpson (R., Idaho)
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John R. Carter (R., Texas)
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Committee Assignments: 110th Congress*

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Instead, Baucus, Levin and others are expected to promote creation of sharper tools to enforce the perceived failure of certain trading partners to live up to trade and investment commitments.

China. In particular, insiders anticipate reintroduction of legislation that enjoyed bipartisan support in the last Congress, the “Fair Trade with China Act.” The bill would amend the Tariff Act of 1930 to apply its countervailing duty (CVD) requirements to nonmarket economy countries (such as China and Vietnam). It also would (1) require the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) to investigate China’s currency practices and (2) amend Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 to enable USTR to pursue an unfair trade practices case against countries that engage in currency manipulation. Perhaps providing additional impetus to a 2007 version of this bill, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission included its provisions among its 44 recommendations to Congress about China-related economic and security policies that it sent to Capitol Hill on October 30, 2006.

Standards. Baucus and Levin, like the chairmen of the foreign policy committees (see page 9), will place greater emphasis on Congressional oversight of trade negotiations. They want to ensure that bilateral, regional,
and multilateral trade accords include tougher enforce-
ment capabilities and certain minimum standards to pro-
tect the environment and worker rights. Free trade agree-
ments (FTAs) currently being negotiated with Malaysia
and South Korea likely will not secure Congressional
approval without meeting these requirements, Levin and
others have suggested.

**TPA.** Baucus also has urged prompt renewal of the
President’s trade promotion authority (TPA), which
expires in June. TPA gives USTR authority to negotiate
trade accords and provides for expedited congressional
approval of such pacts. Quick action is imperative,

Baucus has argued, so that Washington can affect a favor-
able outcome in the World Trade Organization (WTO)
negotiations as well as lay the groundwork for potential
FTAs with the European Union and Japan.

But TPA “should be improved as it is renewed,”
Baucus says, with stronger enforcement mechanisms and
labor and environmental standards. Levin concurs that
this is how Congress should endeavor to “shape” trade
policy so that U.S. workers and farmers will realize more
benefits. The Bush administration likely will oppose
tough standards in trade pacts, so observers are skeptical
that TPA will be extended. That may jeopardize approval
of the pending FTAs with South Korea and Malaysia.

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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. 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 that 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 this may be difficult initially. It would be very hard financially for many Senators and Congressmen who live back home to...
move their families to the Washington, D.C. area. The salaries of Members of the House and Senate simply have not kept up with the price of real estate here. So I imagine Majority Leader Hoyer may have to implement this schedule gradually in the coming two years.

USAPC: 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.¹

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 far 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

¹On January 4, 2007, Senators Max Baucus (D., Montana) and Norm Coleman (R., Minnesota) introduced a bill to reauthorize and improve the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program. It would extend TAA benefits to U.S. workers in the services sector if it can be determined that trade negatively affects their jobs. The bill also would (1) help workers who take lower-paying jobs to recoup a portion of lost wages by allowing them to apply for wage insurance; (2) help companies to retool trade affected businesses to avoid laying off workers altogether; and (3) allow workers in an entire U.S. industry to receive TAA benefits if it can be determined that trade affected a sector nation-wide.

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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. However, as soon as we leave the sectarian violence likely will intensify again. Who knows—by training the Iraqi army we may find that we just have 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.

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. An expanded version of this interview is available at www.usapc.org/ResourceBlog/johnston.pdf.

past 12 years of Republican leadership, it was called the House International Relations Committee.

In addition to reinvigorating U.S. foreign policy oversight, Lantos said he will focus on reversing the “severe loss of America’s prestige in recent years, improving international cooperation, and reinstating the United States’ role as the lodestar of democratic values and human rights.” This undoubtedly will translate into hearings and possibly legislation aimed at cracking down on human rights abuses in Burma, China, and North Korea.

Lantos expressed interest in expanding his committee’s agenda in an unconventional direction to include energy security. This is an important foreign policy matter, he said, “as our actions with respect to other countries can be distorted by our dependence upon oil from overseas.” Lantos wants to use his new platform to encourage more widespread use of alternative fuels. Biden also supports the move to alternative fuels and agrees that “domestic energy policy is at the center of our foreign policy.” But it is unclear whether Biden will broaden his panel’s agenda to include energy matters.
Iraq, North Korea Policies Will Face Tough Scrutiny On Capitol Hill

The Democratic Party leaders who assumed control of the House and Senate on January 4 said that while they will seek bipartisan cooperation, they also plan to subject the Bush administration’s foreign policies to more rigorous oversight. To underscore their intent, Senator Joseph Biden (D., Delaware) and Congressman Tom Lantos (D., California), the chairmen of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee, respectively, called Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to testify on January 11 about the deteriorating situation in Iraq.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee will follow this up with a full month’s worth of hearings, featuring commentators from both the right and left of the political spectrum, former high-ranking military and diplomatic officials, and former National Security Advisors and secretaries of State and Defense. “Our purpose is not to revisit the past, but to help build a consensus behind a new course for America in Iraq,” Biden said.

Frustrated by the deadlock in the so-called Six Party Talks aimed at ending North Korea’s nuclear program, Lantos said he also will hold hearings to consider a new approach that may entail direct U.S.-North Korea negotiations. “Americans have demanded change in the way our country conducts itself in the world, [so] count on Congress to see to it,” he said.

Further signifying that he will do things differently, Lantos, in one of his first acts as chairman, restored the name of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. For the

China Eludes Designation As Currency Manipulator But Gets Weak Marks For WTO Compliance

Two executive branch reports on China’s economic policies issued in December 2006 may fuel congressional activity this year that could complicate the already challenging course ahead for bilateral relations.

**Treasury Report** – The December 19 release of the Treasury Department's Semiannual Report on International Economic and Exchange Rate Policies greatly disappointed critics on Capitol Hill and in business who have charged that Beijing deliberately undervalues the *yuan* to promote exports. The report acknowledged that China’s “cautious approach to exchange rate reform continues to exacerbate distortions in the domestic economy and impede adjustment of international imbalances.” But Treasury concluded that “no major trading partner” met the technical requirements for designation as a currency manipulator. Such a designation would have obligated Treasury to promptly initiate formal negotiations to liberalize China’s currency regime.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D., Montana) said the report has “seen its day.” He pledged in 2007 to develop a “new approach and new tools” to realize market-based reforms to the currency policies of China and other nations.

**WTO Compliance** – The U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) was not as charitable as Treasury in its annual report to Congress on China’s compliance with its obligations as a World Trade Organization (WTO) member issued on December 11. It described broad progress made to date by China in implementing reforms, but highlighted continued problems in China’s enforcement of intellectual property rights and “ worrisome signs” that China’s market opening efforts have slowed.

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Dr. Vishakha N. Desai
Director, Center for Global Business Excellence
Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California

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Executive Vice President, Inter’l. & Express Freight Service

Amb. Richard Fairbanks
Counselor
Center for Strategic and International Studies

Prof. Richard E. Feinberg
Graduate School of International Studies
University of California, San Diego

Amb. Tom S. Foley
Partner, Akin, Gump, Strauss Hauer & Feld

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Mark Borthwick
Director

Barbara Wanner
Project Coordinator

Liz Dorn
Program Associate