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Midterm elections in the United States: A boost or a setback for President Donald Trump

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Introduction

Eyes of America and of the entire international community are turning to the midterm elections in the United States due on 6 November 2018. The United States of America is a federal, both presidential and constitutional republic, and in the system of separation of powers the US President embodies the executive branch of the federal government. The President of the United States is often regarded as the most powerful person in the world, primarily as he is the Commander-in-Chief of the US Armed Forces, one of the largest military that consumes around 40% of the total military expenditures in the world. With growing tensions and uprising of new regional or global powers, the US is nonetheless the world's biggest economy by nominal GDP and has the dominating influence in international political relations.

The US President personifies American power and influence globally, and at the same time the President has big powers in domestic policy. These include appointing diplomatic, federal executive and judicial officers, concluding treaties with foreign countries, enforcement and execution of federal laws, vetoing bills before they become laws in legislative procedure, convening and adjourning houses of the United States Congress, either or both, albeit in extraordinary circumstances. Notwithstanding, the system of checks and balances incorporated by the US Constitution ensures that the President's powers do not expand out of control.

Importance of the midterm elections

In order to make the legislative and judicial

branch equal to the executive one, the US President can veto laws passed by the US Congress, and similarly the Congress can override vetoes of the President with a two-thirds vote of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. In the governmental power trio equally important is the Supreme Court that can nullify laws that have been passed by the Congress, while at the same time the Court's judges are appointed by the President.

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These are the reasons why the midterm elections are so important for the functioning of the federal government, in spite of the fact that the presidential election attract more attention in the media worldwide and entice a bigger voters' turnout in America. Relationship with the Congress is of crucial importance for the President, and having control through the political party that the President is affiliated to, in either or preferably in both houses of the Congress, can greatly impact President's tenure. Midterm elections are held once in four years in the middle of the President's term in the Oval Office, as both the midterms and the presidential election fall in November. On

November 6 this year, the Americans will elect all 435 members of the House of Representatives, 35 of the 100 members in the US Senate, as well as mayors and local public officers in many US cities and governors in 36 of the 50 states in the US.

Public opinion ahead of the midterm elections

Economic resurgence, tax cuts, consumer optimism and surging stock market during Trump's two years in office may boost the odds of the Republicans at the midterms. The national GDP growth was 4% in the second quarter of 2018, the highest growth rate in four years in the US, and the unemployment rate also hit 3.5%, near record low. Booming US economy under Donald Trump is the cornerstone to the Republican ambition to uphold power in both houses, the capital city and in the capitals of US states.

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However, Trump's efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA – also known as Obamacare), his ardent support for the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh for Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court and political scandals erupting after the revelation of nondisclosure agreements signed by Trump

and adult film actresses, could have a negative impact on the GOP endeavor to win the elections. Health care is again taking the top place among concerns of the American voters, and the Democrats point out ACA as one of the great achievements of the Trump's predecessor in the White House, Barack Obama. The Democrats also indicate that the economic upheaval has started long before Trump entered office, during the first tenure of Barack Obama who took over the Oval Office at the height of the global financial crisis. Referring to the tax reform announced by the Trump administration in December last year, the Democrats indicate that it will only be beneficial for wealthy Americans and big US corporations. During the hearing as a nominee for the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh had to respond to allegations of sexual assault, bringing a lot of the media and public attention just weeks before the midterms, and undoubtable the hearing and Trump's unwavering support to Brett Kavanaugh could impact the outcome of the elections immensely.

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Taking all this into account, it does not come as a surprise that, according to some opinion polls published in October, the Democrats hold around 5% advantage over Republicans ahead

of the congressional vote. Recent opinion polling also shows more optimism of winning both houses of the Congress among Democratic voters, as almost 70% of them feel more enthusiastic than usual about voting on midterms, while this figure is 10 percentage points lower for the Republican voters. Notwithstanding, the size of the advantage that the Democrats may have according to the opinion polls is still not clear with the midterms approaching. Some opinion polls actually show that squabbling between the Democrats and Republicans over Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court, with Kavanaugh eventually getting the better of his opponents, improved the position of the Republicans. Kavanaugh's case could eventually even help the Republicans in midterms as his hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee and subsequent nomination has mobilized the Republican voters in Republican-leaning areas, which is of significant importance as the battle for control of the Congress is often determined in these areas. Polarization of the American electorate along the line of the last presidential election could also mean that the Republicans will retain control over the seats in both houses of the Congress. Presumably, Kavanaugh's hearing could significantly impact the outcome of the midterms, as Trump's success to push his largely disputed candidate to the Supreme Courts will further boost the moral of the GOP voters, while at the same time this victory has enraged the Democratic voters and it will motivate them to get to the polls.

President Trump's two years in office

One of the characteristics of the Trump administration is a high turnover in his cabinet, especially within the White House staff where almost 50% of senior officials have been fired or reassigned, and the likes of this overhaul have not been even nearly recorded during the previous administrations. This uncertainty among the cabinet staffers was most evident with the publication of an anonymous article in September in The New York Times under the title 'I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration.' Just to mention the most notorious cases, Michael Flynn served as the US National Security Advisor for just three weeks, and Trump's closest associates during the 2016 election campaign, White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stayed in office for just 7 and 13 months respectively. Trump also dismissed the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) James Comey just months after his inauguration in 2017, even though Comey's investigation of the Hillary Clinton's e-mail controversy contributed significantly to Trump's 2016 election victory.

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All these cases show high level of exposure of Trump's administration to public pressure but

also to the investigation conducted by the Special Counsel Robert Mueller who was appointed to probe Russian interference during the 2016 presidential election. With mounting rivalry between the US and Russia, Muller's tenacious and widening investigation on Russian meddling in the US presidential election may boost the Democrats' stakes in the midterm election. With new cyber threats from Russia emerging in the US, the UK and other liberal democracies, and with the Trump-Putin summit in July sending puzzling messages to the US public, Trump's ties with Russia could prove as another burden for the GOP.

Trump's reluctance to impose sanctions on Russia, and his signing the sanctions bill into law only after having his veto been overridden by the Congress which is controlled by his own party, showcased a big rift between Trump and the majority of the Republicans on Russia. Still, the GOP's adamant position to curb growing Russia's influence in the world will not wash away an impression of the American public that Trump is trying to make some sort of a deal with Russia. There is already a wide spread notion in the US that the disinformation campaigns and hybrid warfare are being waged by foreign nations hostile toward America, primarily Russia, followed by China. There is also a common fear that the Russians will try to influence the outcome of the midterm elections in November, as they have been suspected of doing during the presidential election in 2016, and that the US needs to step up its electoral system protection. On the other hand, a prospect of a trade war and imposing new tariffs on imports from China, have not hurt

either the Trump's administration or the GOP, as manufacturing and jobs are growing domestically and that resonates positively with the American voters.

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Still, the opinion polls could be misleading as many voters do not support Trump's style and rhetoric, but still support his actions and his intentions to bring major changes in American and in the global order. Adding to this, the voters are less likely to throw either a President or his party out of the office while the economy is doing well. Midterm elections are dominated by the role and figure of the President and he doubtlessly became an issue number one of this year's midterms. As many voters will vote in favour or against Trump and his policies, the midterms are perceived as 'to make or break' for Donald Trump, and it could be stated that these elections are in a way a referendum on Trump's Presidency. In many ways Donald Trump has had a polarizing influence on American voters ahead of the midterms. President's personality has undoubtedly dominated the midterm's campaign and will to a large extent determine the outcome of the elections. Many American voters have been attracted to Trump's strong charisma, while others were

outraged by his behavior and measures which will in either case motivate many Americans to cast their vote.

Trump's foreign policy after the midterm elections

In case Republicans lose both or one of the houses of the US Congress, a new stew of investigation into the White House could follow, and much stronger pressure on President Trump could be mounting. The outcome of the midterm elections will largely determine the second half of Trump's term, and consequently the American foreign policy and the position of America in the world. If his party loses one or even both Houses of the Congress, Trump will have to focus for the rest of his tenure to fight back attacks from the Democrats controlling the Capitol Hill. So far, the Democrats have almost ceaselessly been trying to compromise Trump's presidency and to hamper many of his administrations initiatives. If they take control of the Houses, the Democrats will seek to bring on new investigations against President Trump, and their ambitions might go as far as to trying to impeach the President.

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However, if the Republicans do retain control of the Houses, Donald Trump and his administration will gain momentum. A Republican victory would mean that Trump's internal and foreign policies were shaped in a right way and that he should finish up the job that he has initiated, and start perusing his bid for another term in the Oval Office. The America of Donald Trump is trying to define its new-old enemy in the world. After 25 years of American full dominance that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world system, the US is trying to redefine its position in the world by defining its main global rival and consequently to mobilize its political, economic and military resources to curb its rival's power. With strong Trump's and Republican position after the midterm elections, American foreign policy will seek to identify China as America's first enemy, while Russian threat would be regarded as secondary, with openness to strike a new deal with Russia. This was made evident by American restraining of opposition to the German-Russian vast energy project Nord Stream 2, and attempts to make an agreement with Russia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the Russian Energy Forum in Moscow and St. Petersburg in October. In contrast to that, the Congress controlled by Democrats would seek to nominate Russia as the main American adversary, thus creating a rift between the executive and legislative power in the US.

Conclusion

The victory of Donald Trump in 2016 presidential election and the decision of the Britons to leave the EU on Brexit referendum just months before, came as a surprise to many and shook the foundations of the established world order. Internationally, the actions of Trump's administration are made unequivocally manifest. Trump is stepping up pressure on Iran, and he can demonstrate the agreement with North Korea after his summit with Kim Jong-un that will lead to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as one of the main political achievements of American diplomacy in recent decades. Trump's administration can also boast with the new free-trade agreement between the US, Mexico and Canada, the USMCA, which will replace NAFTA. Relations with Canada and Mexico have an immense importance for American businesses and citizens. Soaring economy and successful negotiations with North Korea and American neighbors, Canada and Mexico, will work in favor of Donald Trump and the Republicans on midterms. However, Trump's Presidency has also brought a certain instability and a dimension of unpredictability in the international arena, and to a certain extent disturbed the traditional Trans-Atlantic relations. In America, many of Trump's actions, mischiefs from his past, or reckless statements raised controversies in the American public, and the two camps, the Democratic and the Republican, seem even more divided than in 2016. This division seems to be strongly

present in the American society. Consequently, the midterm elections in November will be overwhelmingly a popular vote on President Donald Trump. It remains to be seen whether Trump's actions will motivate the Republicans and bring another big victory for the GOP. If not, November's election could usher in a new era of America ruled by the Democrats.

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