

Sparring Partners?

One of the most interesting dynamics in American politics in the coming years will almost certainly be the relationship between President-elect Donald J. Trump and Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain, who are certain to spar on high-profile defense and national security issues.

The incoming Commander in Chief has no military experience and has painted his defense and foreign policies mostly in broad strokes, sharply criticizing everyone from the country's general officers to an Obama administration official's handling of hotspots around the globe. At the time of the election, Trump had done this without providing a clear blueprint for his path forward.

McCain, a storied veteran and still the most influential hawk in the Republican Party, would, under normal circumstances, serve as a key advisor to an incoming administration of his own party, capitalizing on Trump's inexperience in this area to influence decision-making on his own priorities, ranging from US involvement in the intractable Syrian war to the level of defense spending.

Indeed, that kind of role would be a welcome relief for the Arizona Republican, who lost to President Barack Obama in 2008 and has spent the last eight years battling the administration on its policies overseas.

But the circumstances are anything but normal. McCain withdrew his support for Trump in the last weeks of the campaign, setting up what will likely be a tense relationship between the two men as the next Congress and the next administration get underway.

McCain, who won re-election in November and has a reputation for reaching across the aisle, stands in stark contrast to the President-elect. He is in a position to steer his fellow hawks through what could be a tumultuous rela-

tionship with a president of their own party. Indeed, McCain may have found more agreement with Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential nominee and a fellow hawk who once served on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Among the topics the two could battle over are Trump's interest in Russia and the country's President, Vladimir Putin. McCain has long been suspicious of Russia's increasing aggression in the region, particularly Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea and its involvement in Syria.

Meanwhile, Trump's stated stances on the military's controversial detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba—his desire to “fill it up” with new prisoners and his openness to trying US citizens there—will probably be met with some opposition from McCain, who has long supported Guantanamo's closure, if there is a viable alternative to house the terrorist suspects still there. McCain will also undoubtedly battle Trump on any move to allow torture as an interrogation technique, a policy the former prisoner of war has opposed dating back to the George W. Bush administration.

But the two men may find agreement on at least one matter: defense spending. Trump has said he would call on Congress to eliminate caps on the Pentagon's budget, a move that will be welcomed by many Republicans, who maintain control of the House and Senate going into the 115th Congress.

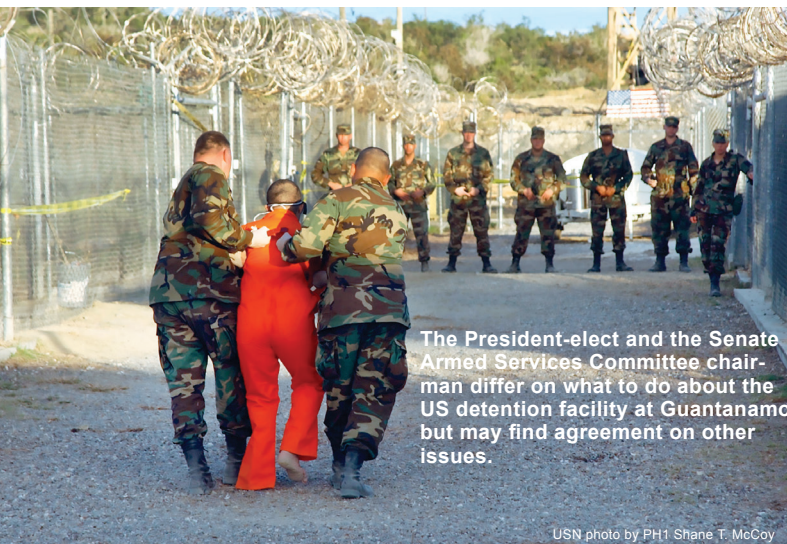
Democrats, led by Obama, for years have resisted lifting the defense caps without providing similar relief for domestic spending. The limits on the Pentagon's budget have served as a forcing function for patchwork compromises over the years, which have increased both defense and nondefense spending above the caps in the 2011 Budget Control Act.

But with Republicans in control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, it will be easier for GOP lawmakers to boost defense dollars without any resulting increase in domestic spending. That could make it an easier sell for fiscal conservatives, who have balked at proposed spending increases in the past.

That could pave the way for billions more for weapons systems like the F-35, and allow the military to preserve equipment like the A-10 Warthog, which the Air Force has sought to retire as a cost-saving measure. But it is unclear what Trump's specific defense spending priorities would be and how that would mesh with those of McCain and other defense hawks on Capitol Hill.

Debate on the Fiscal 2019 Pentagon spending proposal (which has already been drafted by the outgoing administration) early next year will likely be the first indicator of where a Trump administration is headed, in that regard. ★

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The President-elect and the Senate Armed Services Committee chairman differ on what to do about the US detention facility at Guantanamo but may find agreement on other issues.

USN photo by PH1 Shane T. McCoy