

Analysis

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Trump impeachment inquiry poses risks for 2020 Democrats

The crowded field of Democratic presidential candidates were nearly unanimous in praising House Democrats' decision to begin an impeachment inquiry into Republican President Donald Trump over accusations he sought foreign help to smear a political rival. Now comes the hard part. With impeachment set to overshadow the Democratic presidential primary race, how will candidates draw attention to their key policy issues, ranging from universal healthcare to income inequality?

After months of resisting pressure from fellow Democrats, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced the launch of a formal impeachment effort on Tuesday, accusing Trump of seeking foreign help to damage Democratic presidential front-runner Joe Biden ahead of the Nov 2020 election. Trump had pressured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a July 25 phone call to investigate Biden and his son Hunter, who had worked for a company drilling for gas in Ukraine.

The impeachment inquiry ensures a partisan fight in Congress and on the presidential campaign trail in the coming months. Kurt Meyer, Democratic party chairman for three rural Iowa counties north of Des Moines, the state's most populous city, said he expects the impeachment proceedings to energize the Democratic base. "If a highly motivated person drags her mother and her husband and her second cousin twice removed to the polls, then it makes a difference," Meyer said.

But in a sign the probe could energize Trump's base as well, his re-election campaign raised a quarter of a million dollars in just 15 minutes on Tuesday in the immediate aftermath of Pelosi's announcement about the probe. Trump was quick to portray himself as the victim of partisan Democratic attacks, while his campaign sent repeated fundraising appeals to his supporters on Tuesday pegged to the impeachment launch.

There is also a risk that any substantive policy discussions among the 19 Democrats running for the party's nomination to take on Trump in the 2020 election will be drowned out in the growing battle between allies and foes of Trump, several Democratic strategists and experts said. "Trump has been the elephant in the room, but the democratic debates so far have been really policy centered. I think impeachment now takes center stage," said Erin O'Brien, associate professor of political science at University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Doug Heye, a Republican strategist who worked with congressional leaders, said Republican messaging just got simpler, if less positive. "For Democrats running for president, breaking through on healthcare or the economy just got a lot tougher," he said. "Impeachment will be the dominant topic for a long time."

'Subject of Trump's affection'

Biden, who leads polls in the Democratic race to pick a challenger to Trump, said on Tuesday he would back impeachment if the Republican president fails to comply with congressional requests for information on Ukraine and other matters. Trump has raised unsubstantiated charges that Biden improperly tried to halt a Ukrainian probe of a company with ties to his son, without providing any evidence of wrongdoing by either.

Later on Tuesday as he called into a fundraiser in Baltimore, Maryland, Biden said he "can take these attacks." "And the reason I am being attacked is that most polls show me beating him by 10 to 15 points. I am not at all surprised I have become the object of his affection and attention," he said. Biden leads Trump by about 5 percentage points in a hypothetical general election match-up against Trump, according to the Sept 23-24 Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll released on Tuesday.

In a sign that Biden's supporters are largely standing by their candidate so far, 20 percent of Democrats and independents said they would vote for him in statewide nominating contests that begin next year according to the latest poll, up 1 percentage point from a similar poll that ran last week. But the same poll also showed that Americans overall are less supportive of impeaching Trump than they were months ago, highlighting a risk of the move backfiring on Democrats if they are seen overreaching.

"On one level, this whole issue helps Biden, because it makes the president look afraid of Biden," said Kyle Kondik, a political analyst at the University of Virginia. "But the president has a great ability to drag people into the mud with him, and you wonder if that might happen to Biden." Biden's Democratic rivals, including US Senators Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders and Kamala Harris, are set to benefit if the frontrunner falls off. But most have so far refused to be drawn into specific questions about Biden and his family, and are likely to stay that way for now. "On the one hand they want to see Biden struggle, but it might undermine the party overall in a general election," Kondik said. Warren, who edged past Sanders for the first time to rank second behind Biden in the latest Reuters/Ipsos poll with 14 percent support, said on Twitter the impeachment inquiry was "an overdue but important step." — Reuters

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In this photo taken on July 25, 2019, an aerial view shows logs and spruce trees in a forest suffering from drought stress in Hoexter, western Germany.

Germany's trees face 'catastrophe' as bugs attack

Germany's forests have long been treasured by its people, so the country has reacted with alarm and dismay as a beetle infestation has turned climate-stressed woodlands into brown ecological graveyards. After two unusually hot summers in a row, vast patches of the forests mythologized by medieval fairytales, Goethe's writings and Romantic painters have turned into tinder-dry dead zones. Given the scale of the threat to the one third of German territory covered by trees, Chancellor Angela Merkel's government convened a "national forest summit" yesterday.

There Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner pledged 800 million (about \$880 million) in federal and state funds over four years to restore the 180,000 hectares of forest destroyed by drought and pests as well as storms and fires - the equivalent of 250,000 football pitches. The chief culprit has been the tiny bark beetle, which has gone on a rampage as trees in water-starved habitats have lost their natural defenses.

Defoliated skeletons

In vast parts of Germany, like Welzow forest 100 km south of Berlin, once healthy trees have become defoliated skeletons, their trunks marked by tell-tale networks of tiny tunnels. "The insect eats the bark and lays eggs inside," said forest ranger Arne Barkhausen. "The larvae then start to eat the trunk and block the nutrient pathways of the tree, which dies in about four weeks." The die-off has been front-page news in Germany, where millions enjoy regular walks in the woods and forester Peter Wohlleben's book "The Hidden Life of Trees" became a runaway best-seller.

The worst forest crisis since the acid rain of the 1980s has come as climate change has shot to the top of the political agenda, highlighting the value of forests not just

as water filters and biodiversity hotspots but also as natural carbon sinks. Hectares of spruce and pine, beech and oak forest have fallen victim to the pest in Bavaria, Thuringia and other states. In Saxony, the German army was even called in this month to help overwhelmed foresters clear dead trees in what state authorities labelled an "unparalleled disaster".

'Catastrophe of century'

Germany boasts 90 billion trees, according to the latest survey from 2012. About 1.1 million people work in forestry and related sectors, more than in the automotive industry. But experts warn that there are no easy fixes to the bark beetles' onslaught, since the underlying cause is beyond the control of any single nation: global warming. "Beetles have always been there, they have been creating problems for 200 years," said Peter Biedermann of Wuerzburg University's Department of Animal Ecology and Tropical Biology.

He said the current crisis started with the severe winter storm Friederike in Jan 2018 and the prolonged droughts that followed. "Since 2018 the attacked trees have been under water stress and their roots are no longer deep enough," explained Biedermann. The beetles meanwhile benefit from global warming because more of them survive the milder winters and they emerge earlier in the year, breeding not one or two but up to four generations per year. Larissa Schulz-Trieglaff of the Forest Owners Association said all this had "caused the beetle population to explode" resulting in the "catastrophe of the century" for German forests.

End monocultures

Many drought-stressed trees, meanwhile, have been too weakened to produce enough of the sticky sap that



European spruce bark beetles (Ips typographus) dig into a spruce tree under water stress. — AFP photos

traps bugs or repels them with natural insecticidal compounds. And there are few effective ways to fight back, said Derk Ehlert, head of wildlife in the city-state of Berlin. "We have trouble coping with it, we can't use chemicals," he told AFP. "When the animal is already in the tree, it stays there," he said. "We therefore try to support the natural enemies of bark beetles, especially wasps, which like to eat their eggs and larvae." But Biedermann warned that the bigger problem was the vulnerability of Germany's vast forestry monocultures. Many forests resemble tree farms where a single species, planted in neat rows, covers hundreds of hectares, most commonly spruce planted since the lean post-war years. Environment Minister Svenja Schulze said the new funds should not be used to plant even more heat-susceptible spruce forests, but rather more resilient and natural mixed woodlands. — AFP

'Blue finance' hopes to put oceans on a sustainable path

The world's oceans are set to become an increasingly vital resource for helping the planet cope with soaring population growth, but officials are only beginning to craft regulatory frameworks that would ensure "blue financing" goes where it's needed most. From food production and marine biotechnology research to seabed mining and renewable energy production, investors are expecting a wave of initiatives in the waters that cover 70 percent of the Earth's surface.

But the ventures will also require stepped up efforts to keep oceans clean and viable - eight million tonnes of plastic are entering each year, according to the World Bank, and over-fishing has already severely depleted some stocks. "Much of what has to be done in the blue economy is regulation," said Sean Kidney, co-founder of the Climate Bonds Initiative. Without coordinated action among governments, he warned, "in 30 years' time we may not be catching fish but jellyfish." Kidney's nonprofit aims to steer the massive amounts of funds raised by debt issuance toward low-carbon and other climate-friendly projects. That could mobilize millions for off-

shore wave or wind energy ventures as pressure mounts on governments to tackle greenhouse gases and smog. The money could also finance coastal renewal projects that will become more urgent as cities grow, and as more retirees and as well as tourists flock to pristine beaches and resorts. "Because what we have done in the last 100 years is fundamentally destroy the coastal system," Kidney said.

Modernizing shipping fleets will also become a priority as trade surges with population growth - the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development expects an additional two billion people worldwide by 2050. A group of 11 multinational banks announced in June the "Poseidon Principles" which aim to help shipping firms cut their emissions in half within 30 years from the levels of 2008. "It's a massive effort that will muster a fourth of the global shipping finance portfolio, or some \$100 billion," said Alexandre Amedjian, head of maritime financing in Europe for French bank Societe Generale. Loan terms would be more advantageous for firms which show the most progress in cutting pollution, Amedjian said.

But as in other green investments, backers of "blue economy" projects will demand oversight to ensure the environmental claims are being met. "A growing number of investors want to be able to show the positive impact of their investments, and that feeds a virtuous circle," said Marine de Bazelaire, head of sustainable development for continental Europe at HSBC. She cited the example of using funds to create more protected marine

areas, "since oceans also capture and store 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions."

'Raising public awareness'

But "blue financing" will also encompass a range of smaller projects, such as fishery improvements or expansions that don't require the financial firepower offered by capital markets. "The blue economy is fragmented, and most of their requirements would be less than \$50 million," said Richard Mattison, chief executive of S&P Global's Trucost unit, which evaluates and advises on climate change risks. "If you are a supplier to a big food company or a supermarket, as a fisherman, you are unlikely to want a bond - you are more likely to want a loan," Mattison said. "There isn't a lack of capital," he added, but a set of common rules will have to be established to ensure the money goes where it's needed most. The European Commission has already made a start, laying out in Jan 2018 its "sustainable blue economy finance principles" after consulting with groups like the World Wildlife Fund and the European Investment Bank. However, experts say that to see the most productive blue financing boom, governments will have to step up and coordinate their ocean efforts as well. "Some challenges are really problems that can be solved with debt financing, like water management infrastructures," said Tanguy Clauquin, head of sustainable finance at the investment banking arm of Credit Agricole. "But others, like dealing with the proliferation of plastics, will depend more on public policies and raising public awareness worldwide," he said. — AFP

Tropical fish swim into Europe as common species head north

Cod, sole and plaice might be regulars on European dinner tables but as climate change heats the oceans common species are heading to cooler northern waters - with profound potential consequences for fish stocks and consumers. Experts say bluefin tuna, seahorse and the bright triggerfish from the tropics are swimming to Europe's warming seas while fish such as cod are migrating northwards. "We will see less of the fish we know, and we will see tropical fish arriving that we did not know (here) until now," said Clara Ulrich, a fisheries scientist and assistant director at the French Research Institute for Exploration of the Sea.

She said the bluefin tuna is returning to the North Sea and said seahorse and balistes, a tropical fish seen in hot areas, are arriving in European waters. Ulrich explained it

is not that species such as cod have disappeared from European waters but there will be less of them along the French and Spanish coasts and more of them in colder climates such as in Norway and Scotland. "It is not that fish migrate to the north as such, but it is that fish populations in the south are becoming less and less productive and therefore their density is decreasing," she said. "While fish from colder areas can benefit from an increase in temperature and become more productive themselves," she added.

"Fish resources are very dynamic. It's not physics, not everything happens as planned," said Manuel Barange, Director of Fisheries and Aquaculture Department at the FAO, the UN agency for agriculture and food. "There will be changes from year to year, but we do expect that there's (a) shift of species, of warmer water species towards the north," he added.

Fears over 'fish wars'

This may require adaptation on the part of consumers, who he said should make the most of the new species that become available. "Anchovies arrived in the UK and I've seen them in the UK markets, they are incredibly cheap, because nobody buys them, so we need to start educating

the public to start eating the fish that they have rather than just simply the fish that they used to have and they like to eat," Barange said. He said the same goes for red mullet, which is usually found in the Mediterranean but it is barely eaten in the UK even when it is sold cheaply.

Overfishing is also to blame for depleting fish numbers and the destruction of underwater habitat. In July, the European Commission announced a five month ban on fishing cod, the staple of Britain's fish and chips, in most of the Baltic sea in response to an impending stock collapse. "The main cause of the collapse of commercial populations is overfishing," said Francois Chartier who heads the Greenpeace oceans campaign in France.

He said it is urgent that ocean food chains are maintained so that their role as a "carbon pump" is not jeopardized. "Like forests, it absorbs CO2, it produces oxygen, it's photosynthesis, if you have a food chain in the ocean that is unstructured, you will have much more difficulty for the oceans to ensure that it functions in the climate system," he warned. The other issue for fisheries are quotas between countries as species migrate north. This was seen during the years-long "mackerel and herring wars" fought between the EU and Norway against Iceland and the Faroe Islands. — AFP