

Will the Election Change Obama's Foreign Policy

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The recent midterm elections were characterized by a striking absence of any discussion of foreign policy. This was particularly notable given that the U.S. remains mired in two wars, declarations of the end of combat in Iraq notwithstanding, neither of which can be said to be going particularly well. Perhaps this is because both parties, the Republicans who have sought to present themselves as the party of hawks and national security, and the Democrats because the war in Afghanistan has been escalated by President Obama, had few incentives to bring foreign policy into the campaign. It is more likely that foreign policy was rarely discussed during the campaign because, like most elections, the dominant issues in this campaign, and the most important to voters were jobs and the economy.

The election results, however, may have an effect on American foreign policy, but this will probably not be as significant as some might think. The new Republican members of congress will focus likely continue to focus their attention on domestic issues. Moreover, many of these people have very little experience on foreign policy and know very little about it. Of course, this is true regarding domestic policy as well, but lack of experience and knowledge tends to be more of a barrier in the making of foreign policy.

To the extent the newly elected members of congress pay attention to foreign policy, they will be more hawkish in the Middle East, take stronger positions against Russia and advocate for stronger Iran policy. This will likely lead to different rhetoric from Washington, but not different actions or outcomes. Congress will not push Israel to stop building settlements, but the Israeli government wasn't likely to listen to Washington on that issue anyway. Congress may make more noise on, for example, non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the Obama administration has never had any interest in recognizing those aspirations of statehood either.

Because of his party's drubbing on Tuesday, it is unlikely that Obama will pass any more major domestic legislation during his remaining two or six years. Instead, what time he has in office will probably be spent reacting to events and, if the recent past is any precedent, focusing more on foreign policy. President Bill Clinton, for example, after leading his party to a similarly bad defeat in 1994, spent much of his remaining time in office doing this, until scandal and impeachment processes began to consume most of his time.

Rebuilding America's economy will remain the top priority for this administration, but this may occur through a process that is not focused intensely on legislation. Moreover, an active role by Obama will make it more difficult to pass legislation because Republicans who want to pass legislation will be hurt politically by being seen as close to the president, so Obama will need to focus his time elsewhere.

Foreign policy, because of the relative lack of knowledge, and perhaps interest, on the part of many new Republican members of congress as well as the traditional lead role taken by the executive in these matters, will be a natural place for Obama to turn his attention. It is not at all clear towards what areas of foreign policy Obama will begin focus more. Afghanistan and Iran will remain America's preeminent foreign policy challenges, but the policies there are not likely to change because of the election.

One possibility is that important foreign policy issues which although important have not been priorities of the administration such as global climate change, the evolving situation in the Balkans or other issues of this sort will get more attention now. This is not exactly a revolution in foreign policy, suggesting that in the big picture not much will change and that the best indicator of what post-midterm election Obama foreign policy will be is what the administration has been doing the last two years.