

## U.S. Midterm Elections and Foreign Policy Perspectives

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### Introduction: The Red Tide

On November 2, 2010, United States political trends held true as the Republican Party (GOP) claimed at least 60 seats in the House of Representatives and 6 seats in the Senate during the 2010 United States midterm elections. Since 1914, only twice has the incumbent party held the majority in both the Senate and House after the midterm elections. Two years after the U.S. electorate hoisted Barack Obama, the progressive African American senator of Illinois, to the presidency, the midterm elections saw the U.S. political pendulum swing back to the right, undoing the Democratic Party's gains made in 2006 and 2008. Furthermore, the Republicans picked up nine governorships, several of which were in key swing states that Obama relied on during his 2008 presidential campaign.

President Obama and his administration have in the most part been accepted with great fanfare abroad and have made impressive attempts in mending diplomatic relations and reshaping U.S. leadership in the post-9/11 environment. These very policies and reforms on issues such as climate change, immigration, nuclear non-proliferation and financial market reform have come under constant attack from the American conservative right, claiming Obama to be soft on national security and painting him as a chummy bedfellow of European heads of state. The new political scenario leaves the Obama Administration hand-cuffed on several domestic policy issues, and the administration will no doubt have to realign its agenda and priorities, especially on domestic issues such as health care and public spending. Nevertheless, even without a majority in Congress, the U.S. presidency still wields considerable autonomy and bargaining power when it comes to foreign policy. This "Commentary" will examine the post-midterm political environment and its effects on future U.S. foreign policy.

### A Deep Political Divide

The midterm elections have caused deep political rifts across the U.S. Congress, causing both parties to move away from the moderate middle. The ultra-conservative "Tea Party" movement captured headlines and dominated discourse in the run-up to the 2010 mid-terms. These populist, self-proclaimed "outsiders" gained momentum by attacking the political establishment (both Republican and Democrat) and have taken radical stances on issues like government regulation, immigration, environmental policy, and gay marriage, amongst others, creating a new conservative coalition within the GOP. The Tea Party backed newcomers to Congress will now hold seats on the House leadership team, the steering committee and the GOP's policy panel.

On the other side of the aisle, the bruised and battered Democratic Party moved even further to the left with the defeat of almost half of the conservative Democrats, know

as the “Blue Dogs”,<sup>1</sup> that were up for re-election in the House. These conservative democrats often were a headache for the Obama Administration when trying to pass different domestic initiatives such as health care reform and financial stimulus. However, they were strong supporters of Obama’s aggressive Afghanistan policy that has consisted of drastic increases in troop numbers and unmanned drone attacks, policies that have often come under attack from the liberal democrats. With the promised July, 2011 troop withdrawal from Afghanistan drawing closer, and the horizon looking dimmer, a more liberal democratic caucus will most likely pressure Obama to realize his promises, even if it is merely a symbolic gesture.

### **Possible Political Gridlock**

The split Congress will now have to get to work to pass legislation as a series of deadlines looms in the upcoming months. In the wake of the midterm elections, leaders of both parties have said that they are willing to cooperate to a certain point in order to pass pending legislation; however, we will soon find out if bipartisan cooperation is possible or if both sides will take rigid stances and vote along party lines, resulting in a political stalemate and possible government stagnation. By February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Congress will have had to vote on three very contentious issues: the “debt ceiling”, or how much the Treasury can borrow, the Bush tax cuts that will expire in late December and the 2011 budget. The Republican “tea party” contingent has vowed to uphold the conservative stances that got them elected, and the previously mentioned “blue dog” defeat will make bipartisan cooperation difficult to achieve.

### **Perspectives on Post-Midterm Foreign Policy**

While the Democrat’s domestic agenda has seemed to hit a serious roadblock, the outlook for the Obama Administration’s foreign policy objectives does not seem as grim. Foreign policy was not a focus during the midterm elections and the U.S. presidency enjoys a good amount of maneuvering room regarding foreign policy even with a split Congress. That said, Congress controls budgetary spending and Republicans will now preside over key congressional committees regarding foreign affairs.

Many Republican candidates preached fiscal responsibility and the reduction of national debt while campaigning. Budgetary restrictions will now most likely replace ideological differences when debating the direction of U.S. foreign policy, and national security will remain a top priority for both sides. In the wake of the midterm elections, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: “What I have always found is that when it comes to foreign policy, it is important to remember that politics stops at the water’s edge. And you can build coalitions, and you can make your case, and you can find allies on issues that are in America’s interest and in the furtherance of our security and our values.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Democratic Blue Dog Coalition is a group of United States Congressional Representatives from the Democratic Party identifying themselves as moderate-to-conservative Democrats committed to financial and national security and favoring compromise and bipartisanship over ideology and party discipline. (U.S. House of Representatives 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Keyes, Charley, Laurie Ure, and Pam Benson. "Shift to GOP control in House signals shift in foreign policy matters." *CNN International* 2 Nov 2010: n. pag. Web. 13 Nov 2010.

## Military Spending

Military spending will be a focus for Congress as budget deadlines linger and the national debt continues to increase. Since taking office in 2006, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has advocated for more efficient military spending and has reduced the defense budget by eliminated some of the Pentagon's major weapons systems; however, efforts to kill other programs have been defeated under heavy pressure from military contractors and members of Congress. Budget and public spending will dominate discourse under the new Congress and the Defense Department will be no exception. The House Armed Services Committee will now be headed by Republican Congressman Howard "Buck" Mckeon who has openly favored increasing the military budget. Mckeon stated that a growth rate of one percent over the next five years is not enough to keep up with modern military needs.<sup>3</sup> This may not only cause a standoff between him and Gates, but also with many Republican colleagues such as Rand Paul, the new "tea party" backed Senator from Kentucky, who recently said military spending should be part of the cuts needed to balance the federal budget.

## Af-Pak

The Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre will continue to be a top priority for both the Obama Administration and Congress. Throughout the last two years, Republicans have backed Obama's aggressive military campaigns against Al Qaeda and Taliban strongholds in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most analysts signal that there will not be much change in regards to the war in Afghanistan; however, as Obama's promised July 2011 troop withdrawal approaches, Obama will face scrutiny from both parties. From one side, Republicans will demand the Obama Administration to maintain a strong physical presence in Afghanistan should security conditions not improve, and on the other side, Obama now faces a more liberal democratic party that wants to withdraw from Afghanistan as soon as possible, pressuring the Administration to stick to its word and not cave in to Republican pressure. July 2011 will signal the beginning of withdrawal and the handing over of security forces to the Afghans; however, the White House recently signaled that the American combat mission will last until at least 2014. Obama may have to weigh the costs of a premature withdrawal before Afghani security forces have full control or lose the support of his party.

There is currently a \$2 billion aid package for Pakistan awaiting congressional approval. This will allow Pakistan to buy American-made arms, ammunition and accessories from 2012 to 2016. This would replace a package that expired on Oct. 1 and complement \$7.5 billion in civilian assistance the administration has committed to Pakistan over five years. Many believe that a Republican controlled House will be critical on Pakistan policy and question the aid packages destined for Islamabad. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, the New York Times published a feature article on the lack of any visible progress in rebuilding the Swat Valley after military offensives against the Taliban and the devastating summer floods, signalling the frustration of international donors over the Pakistani government's incompetence and corruption.

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<sup>3</sup> CNN Wire Staff "Gates: Pentagon must cut overhead, restrain spending." CNN 09 May 2010: n. pag. Web. 14 Nov 2010.

## The Middle East

Most analysts and policy makers believe that there will be little change in policy towards Middle East in the post midterm environment. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said recently that he does not expect the election results to have an impact on the Middle Eastern peace process and that the pursuit for peace in the region has historically been bipartisan. However, the Obama Administration and Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, have suffered a rocky relationship throughout the past two years and the now Republican controlled House could mean a change in US-Israel relations.

Republicans are generally strong supporters of Israel and the 112<sup>th</sup> US Congress will be no exception. Newly elected tea party-backed Republican Senator Marco Rubio will most likely preside over the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, is expected to lead the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Both are pro-Israel and have expressed their concern about Israeli "isolation", criticizing the Obama Administration's policy towards the US ally. In a statement celebrating Israel's independence, Rubio expressed "grave concerns about the direction of current U.S. policy towards Israel," and continued by adding, "The growing alienation of Israel has adverse consequences for the U.S., Israel and the world, as our mutual enemies are emboldened by any signs that Israel does not have our full support."<sup>4</sup> Netanyahu and his colleagues in Jerusalem will no doubt be delighted with the midterm election results, as Israel's conservative right's criticism of current US policy towards the region run parallel with many House and Senate Republicans.

## Asia

In the immediate wake of midterm defeat, President Obama took off for a 10-day, four-nation tour of Asia. Washington will be looking towards Asia in the years to come as a way of tapping into the emerging markets to boost the domestic economy, while cementing key allies in the region to counter China's growing presence. The White House and Congress could find future common ground on several fronts regarding Asia. Recently, there has been growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Congress in response to Beijing's currency devaluation policies. The tour stopped in India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea, but not China. These countries, both old and new allies, will serve as key pieces to current and future foreign policy in Asia and prove to be economic and political counterweights to China in the region. The White House has criticized China's currency manipulation and at the closing of the G-20 Summit, Obama stated that the US will closely watch the evaluation of China's currency.

Free trade agreements and the liberalization of foreign markets will be a priority on Obama's foreign policy agenda. Republicans are strong proponents of free trade and the White House has focused on emerging Asian economic powers in the hope that they will prove to be lucrative for US businesses and spur job growth back home. During President Obama's recent visit to India, the two countries laid out deals for

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<sup>4</sup> McCormack, J. (2010, April 20). *The Weekly Standard*. Retrieved November 14, 2010, from The Weekly Standard: The Blog: <http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/rubio-israel>.

billions of dollars in U.S. made military aircraft to India that will create roughly 30,000 jobs in the US and cement US-India defense relations for the future. In Seoul, President Obama and President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea failed to reach an agreement on a long-awaited free-trade agreement; however, working out their differences will be a priority for both sides in an attempt to reach an agreement in the near future.

### **Russia and START**

US relations with Russia could feel the affect of a Republican takeover of the House. On Tuesday, November 16, chief Senate Republican negotiator Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona moved to block a vote on the pact for a new arms control treaty with Russia, known as the new START treaty, which has formed part of the Obama Administration's 'reset policy' with Russia. The White House had hoped to pass the treaty during the lame duck session; however, should this not happen, it will be unlikely that the treaty will move forward next year when the Democrats have fewer seats in the Senate. The failure to pass the new START treaty will affect relations between Moscow and Washington as both have seen the treaty as a priority in their foreign policy and questions now arise as to if this will affect Russia's willingness to cooperate with US operations in Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion: Current Realities and Questions to Be Answered**

Unlike the 2008 presidential elections that focused heavily on foreign policy, the 2010 midterm elections were centered strictly around domestic issues. Barack Obama is now viewed through a realistic lens by the international community, largely due to the global economic recession that he adopted when coming to office and his failure to live up to the unrealistic aspirations that awaited him. The United States continues to be burdened by the economic crisis, the war in Afghanistan (that has spread to Pakistan), withdrawal from Iraq, a national debt that is of increasing concern, and the emergence of new powers in Asia. The Obama Administration will now have to face these challenges amidst fierce political opposition of a divided Congress and increasingly tight budgets.

There are now deep rifts between the Democrats and Republicans in Congress and the midterm elections have moved both parties away from the center. While the possibility of political gridlock is likely on the domestic front, the Obama Administration will still have considerable leeway to advance its foreign policy objectives and could look abroad to accomplish its goals. In the end, we are left with a series of questions as a politically divided United States will try to make gains in an increasingly competitive international arena:

- 1) Will the Republicans stay true to their campaign promises and push for drastic budget cuts in the years to come? And if so, how will this affect U.S. foreign policy?
- 2) Will the Republicans friendly ties with Israel make a Middle East peace deal even more unlikely under the Obama Administration?
- 3) Obama Administration policy on complex issues such as immigration, climate change and energy was met with fierce criticism by the right. Now that the

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Republicans control Congress, will they be able to substitute criticism with coherent policy making on these issues?

- 4) China and many Asian countries are on the rise. Will Democrats and Republicans be able to forge middle ground on national security and economic policies in the region?
- 5) How will the midterm elections affect transatlantic relations? With fewer allies to count on back home, will the Obama Administration further rely on its European allies to support its foreign policy agenda; and how will Europe view and react to Obama's midterm defeat?

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