

Obama struggles to juggle economic recovery, foreign agenda

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 6 (Xinhua) -- When he was elected two years ago, U.S. President Barack Obama may not have expected something like this-- now nearly half of the voters think he does not deserve a second term.

But half way through his current term, the president appeared to have learnt more about the voters' backlash as he publicly admitted he suffered a "shellacking" in November's mid-term elections.

Obviously, trying to fix the economy in the rest of his term would be a must for a reelection in 2012, but there is also much unfinished business abroad, where his international standing and credibility is at stake. To make all these things right, it requires a juggling feat.

ECONOMY A MUST FOR REELECTION

When the Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives and a number of Senate seats in the mid-term elections, there was a lot of media speculations that the president would turn attention abroad, as a hostile Congress would try to cripple him on every single domestic issue.

As president Obama has a much freer hand in shaping the foreign policy, but he could not afford shifting focus away from the economy, which is the key to his reelection prospects, analysts said.

Steven Pifer, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said when U.S. voters go to the polls, 90 percent of them care about domestic issues.

"President Obama focuses on reelection, foreign policy is not going to be a big issue," Pifer told Xinhua. "The biggest single thing for President Obama in 2012 is if the unemployment rate is falling, and the economy is growing, people feel the economy is getting better."

The sentiments can't be more obvious in the the mid-term elections, during which voters were preoccupied with jobs and growth, and cared little about the war in Afghanistan. Anemic growth and a stubbornly high unemployment rate at nearly 10 percent made the governing Democrats pay dearly.

A recent survey showed 49 percent of the respondents say Obama does not deserve a second term, while 43 percent say he deserves.

"President Obama, if he is smart, will be less concerned about foreign policy issues -- other than preventing terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, than he will be with the domestic economy," said Justin Logan, associate director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"American presidents are elected and thrown out of office primarily based on macroeconomic conditions, and the current macroeconomic conditions are quite bad in America," he told Xinhua.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS ABROAD

While the focus is always on the economy, Obama also has to spare much of the time and energy to get some foreign policy issues fixed. With tens of thousands of U.S. troops still on the grounds of Afghanistan and Iraq, and lingering effects of a global financial crisis, the president has huge stakes in dealing with all the unfinished business abroad.

First comes the stalled direct peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

In his first day at the White House after taking office in January 2009, Obama busied himself with phone calls to the Middle East and naming former Senator George Mitchell as his Middle East envoy.

The president, who swept to power with the message of "hope and change," showed his resolve to seek to end one of the longest conflicts in the world, which had failed his predecessors.

Intense efforts led to the restart of direct negotiations on Sept. 2 in Washington between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian National Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas after a hiatus of nearly 20 months, and the Obama administration announced that all the core issues would be resolved within one year.

However, the direct talks ground to a halt in mid-September over the issue of settlement building in the occupied land.

By relaunching the direct talks, Obama has put his as well as U.S. credibility at stake, and he has no choice but to move it on.

He inherited two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet he managed to pull out U.S. combat troops from Iraq in mid-August and pool resources into the Afghanistan war, which he sees as the key to winning the war over terrorism.

In the run-up to and at the NATO summit held on Nov. 19-20 in Lisbon, Portugal, the Obama administration managed to unite the 61-year-old military alliance under a new

mission statement by means of "continuous bargaining, dialogue, diffusion and quest for formal consensus," as a U.S. columnist put it.

The U.S.-led NATO agreed to a timeframe for exit from Afghanistan, where the war launched by the Bush administration is being fought in the name of the bloc's largest and longest ever out-of-area military operation, involving some 150,000 troops from 49 countries.

"There is an increasing appreciation of our limitations in part because of the economic situation," said Pifer, who was a deputy assistant secretary of state under the Bush administration. "In Afghanistan, the United States cannot do it alone, Obama needs to find partners who can work with the capital problem."

The U.S. and NATO envision the handover of lead security responsibility to Afghan forces and a possible halt to combat missions by the end of 2014.

Obama said for the first time that his aim was to halt major U.S. combat operations by the target date, and significantly reduce the number of U.S. troops there.

But based on what U.S. and NATO forces are facing in Afghanistan, it is a rather big question mark whether they can pull away on time.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had cautioned that the handover must be shaped by the security situation and not by timetables, saying "there are no short cuts to peace."

With the end of the Afghanistan war in no clear sight and terror plots against U.S. targets and on U.S. soil on the tide, Obama is sure to feel the pinch as days draw closer to the reelection day.

Next come the nuclear issues of Iran and the Korean Peninsula. The Obama administration's approach of engagement and dialogue in the first place and sanctions that ensued all have failed to produce the desired results.

Iran announced in late November that the country has so far produced over 35 kg of 20 percent enriched uranium, which can be turned into weapons-grade materials by further enrichment to 90 percent.

Meanwhile, recent exchanges of artillery fire between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and South Korea have led to fresh tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

At the International Atomic Energy Agency's last Board of Governors meeting for 2010 which started in Vienna on Dec. 2, the UN nuclear watchdog's director general Yukiya Amano voiced concerns over the nuclear programs of both Iran and the DPRK.

But Obama's top concern for now is the passage in the Senate this year of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) he signed with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev in Prague in April.

The president is still rallying support for the pact, which he says is vital to U.S. national security.

The pact is seen as part of the efforts to reset relations with Russia and the Obama administration's major achievement in foreign relations.

Pifer lauded Obama's policy "resetting" on Russia. "It's of mutual interest and important for the U.S. to have better relations with Russia," he said, citing Russia's role in sanctions against Iran.

There is good news as well. More Republican senators have signalled a willingness to vote for the new START treaty, though Obama cannot make sure it passes this year.

The Senate, in a lame-duck session which possibly runs through the end of the year until the new Congress is sworn in in early January, has other pressing issues on its packed agenda such as tax cuts, government spending and gay rights.

Senate Republicans have said they would block consideration of any other issue until the Senate extended the Bush-era tax cuts that expire at the end of the month and financed continuing government operations.

Therefore, as Obama and Medvedev agreed the ratification process would be simultaneous at the U.S. Senate and Russia's Duma and with all eyes now on the Senate, its inaction is sure to cast doubt on Obama's credibility and hurt warming relations with Russia.

"MORE CONTINUITY THAN CHANGE"

Comparing Obama's foreign policy with that of his predecessor, Logan at the Cato Institute asserted that there is more continuity than change.

"President Obama has nearly tripled the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, expanded the defense budget, and engaged in a number of activist foreign policies that would be and in many cases have been well received by Republican foreign policy thinkers," he said.

"I suspect that he will maintain troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan as long as he is in office, and continue to expand the U.S. security role in Asia," Logan commented on Obama's top foreign policy priorities.

While the exact amount of change in U.S. foreign policy under Obama may be hard to gauge, he has obviously tried to shore up the country's image abroad and adopted a new tune in a number of issues.

At the UN Millennium Development Goals summit in September, he unveiled a new U.S. approach to foreign aid, which would seek to harness what he called the "most powerful force" the world has ever known for fighting poverty -- economic growth.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton submitted to Congress a draft report called 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), which seeks to revamp the U.S. diplomatic strategy for the years ahead.

The report, expected to formally roll out very soon, stressed that "to advance American interests and values and to lead other nations in solving shared problems in the 21st century, we must rely on our diplomats and development experts as the first face of American power."

In particular, the report said that "diplomacy and development must be mutually reinforcing," calling for a strengthening of the U.S. Agency for International Development as the world's premier development agency.