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## Obama, GOP could meet halfway on foreign policy

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Voters gave no clear direction to U.S. foreign policy in this month's congressional elections, leaving President Barack Obama and his strengthened Republican opponents plenty of room in which to find common ground - or duke it out over pressing international challenges.

Senior GOP lawmakers say Republicans will challenge Obama over his approach to Iran's nuclear program, and are balking at Senate approval of a new nuclear arms control accord with Russia.

They'll help cushion Obama, however, against criticism of his Afghanistan war strategy from his own Democratic Party's liberal wing.

Afghanistan "is one area where Republicans feel comfortable standing with the president," Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, told the Halifax International Security Forum, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on Nov. 6.

The new House of Representatives leadership will back Obama if he convinces them that he intends to succeed, according to Stephen Hadley, former national security adviser in the Bush White House, who briefed House members just after the midterms.

"I think their view is, if the president is committed, serious, willing to do what is required to succeed, we're with him. But the risk is if the president does not show that kind of focus and commitment. Nobody wants to put young men and women in harm's way, if all we're doing is stalling for time or going through the motions," Hadley told McClatchy Newspapers.

Foreign policy, according to multiple opinion polls, had little influence on the Nov. 2 elections that gave the Republican Party control of the House and pared the Democrats' majority in the Senate.

For instance, a Pew Research Center poll of 2,373 registered voters taken Oct. 27-30 showed that unemployment was uppermost on the minds of 39 percent, while 25 percent said health care and 17 percent cited the federal deficit. Afghanistan was a distant fifth at 5 percent, and terrorism trailed at 3 percent.

Obama could find more space in which to pursue foreign policy - the prerogative of the executive branch, experts said - as sharp differences with Republicans on domestic issues are expected to create legislative gridlock.

"Chances are, you haven't painted yourself into a corner on (foreign policy) issues," said Christopher Preble, the director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Key congressional players will remain largely the same: Eight of 11 Democrats, including Chairman John Kerry of Massachusetts, and all eight Republicans will be back on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Control of the House International Relations Committee will shift to the GOP. And while it lacks the weight of its Senate counterpart, the House panel could use its oversight of the State Department budget to challenge policies such as Obama's opening to Cuba, especially if Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, a Cuban emigre, takes charge.

Some Republicans read the GOP's election victory as a mandate for a more conservative approach to foreign policy.

"The question is whether the administration is going to have its foreign and national security policies reflect the reality that there will be far more Republicans in power (when the new Congress convenes) in January than there are now," said Randy Scheunemann, the top foreign policy adviser to the 2008 presidential campaign of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

Tensions emerged immediately after the elections.

Conservative Republicans balked at an administration move to bring to a vote by the lame-duck Senate the nuclear arms reduction treaty at the core of Obama's effort to "reset" relations with Russia.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the New START treaty on Sept. 16, with three Republicans joining the 11 Democrats in the 14-4 vote.

The White House, however, fears that the next Senate's beefed-up conservative contingent will make it harder to win the 67 votes required for the pact's approval there. The treaty would cut the sides' nuclear warheads by some 30 percent and allow them to resume monitoring each other's arsenals after a year's absence that has concerned the U.S. intelligence community.

The fate of the treaty, which some conservatives think is fatally flawed, was still undecided as the lame-duck Congress prepares to meet Monday. Some lawmakers, however, believe it will pass if Obama can strike a deal on GOP demands for more funds for modernizing U.S. nuclear arms facilities.

At the moment, however, Republicans don't seem eager to take up controversial matters in the lame-duck session.

"It's mostly going to be housekeeping matters," said Michael Franc, a political analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Obama can expect Republican heat over his diplomacy-centered effort to coerce Iran into ending its uranium enrichment program, which the U.S. and its allies think is part of a covert nuclear weapons development program.

"The first question that the Congress is going to look at in great detail is whether the administration is fully implementing existing sanctions. There are a lot of Republicans on Capitol Hill who believe they are not," Scheunemann said. "They have authority to go after a

number of companies (doing business with Iran) that they haven't exercised, both banks and companies."

Republicans, Graham said, also will press Obama to seek an international ban on sales of gasoline and other refined petroleum products to Iran. The Islamic republic has the world's fourth largest reserves of oil, but only the capacity to refine about 40 percent of its annual needs.

But if stiffer sanctions fail to work, Obama should be ready to launch airstrikes against Iran's nuclear facilities and "neuter the regime's ability to wage war against us and our allies" by hitting its navy and air force as well, he said.

The U.S. also should be prepared, Graham continued, for Iranian retaliation against American forces in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq as well as Iranian-directed terrorist attacks against U.S. targets around the world.

"You can expect for a period of time for all hell to break lose," he said. "You must have to almost plan for that. And weigh that against the idea of a nuclear-armed Iran and what that means to the future of the world."

GOP support on Afghanistan will be critical to Obama, especially after he unveils a policy review in December that is expected to say that while his surge of 30,000 additional U.S. troops has produced progress, more time is needed to reverse the Taliban-led insurgency.

"He'll have bipartisan support for Afghanistan through the balance of his first term, with majority GOP support and substantial Democratic support," said Ronald Peters, a congressional expert at the University of Oklahoma. "The Democrats may have had a political incentive to vote against Bush, but they have less incentive to vote against Obama, even for similar policies."

Moreover, Republicans could find themselves tarred with their own "soft on terrorism" brush if the tea party movement's anti-spending leaders try to cut funding for a war portrayed as a struggle against al-Qaida.

The new chairman of the House Armed Services Committee is expected to be Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., who's called the Pentagon "a Defense Department in decline" and advocated more military spending.

(Roy Gutman contributed to this report.)