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ANALYSIS - Midterm election weighs on Obama's foreign policy

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By Matt Spetalnick

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Facing a tough two years at home if the Republicans win big in next month's congressional elections, U.S. President Barack Obama might be tempted to look abroad to make his mark.

But with the public fixated on high unemployment and a sputtering economy, and the 2012 presidential race approaching, Obama is more likely to keep his focus where the votes are -- on his domestic priorities.

While some of his predecessors have been able to turn to foreign policy to stay more relevant when stymied by a hostile Congress, Obama can hardly afford to be seen as distracted from bread-and-butter issues in the second half of his term.

Though there is nothing to suggest a retreat from the world stage, which would worry many Americans and alienate allies, Obama is unlikely to launch any bold new foreign policy initiatives after the Nov. 2 elections.

"The notion that somehow he's going to earn his Nobel Peace Prize in the last two years of his term is not very realistic," said James Carafano, a foreign affairs expert at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

For Graphic: Obama's challenges, click link.reuters.com/tem72p

Many analysts credit the Obama administration with improving the tone of U.S. foreign policy after eight years of what critics called "cowboy diplomacy" under Republican George W. Bush but they see few tangible achievements so far.

Signs of vulnerability at home could weaken Obama's hand with foreign leaders as he grapples with an array of challenges: a troubled war in Afghanistan, withdrawal from Iraq, nuclear standoffs with Iran and North Korea, strains with China and stumbling Middle East peace efforts.

A Republican takeover of one or both chambers of Congress could also make it harder, if not impossible, for Obama to tackle unfinished business like ratification of a new nuclear arms control treaty with Russia, closing the military prison at Guantanamo and passing a bill to combat global climate change.

Obama's next big diplomatic test will be an Asia tour, including back-to-back summits with the Group of 20 and Pacific Rim countries, that starts just days after the congressional elections.

U.S. presidents have embraced foreign policy before when faced with legislative gridlock, allowing them to act internationally with fewer congressional constraints as they sought to forge legacies as global statesmen.

After losing Democratic control of Congress in 1994 in the middle of his first term, President Bill Clinton ended up helping to broker a peace deal in Northern Ireland, working to quell the Balkans conflict and guiding NATO's expansion.

"WE ARE THE WORLD" NO MORE?

Obama is in a different situation. Whereas Clinton had a robust economy, Obama is presiding over an anemic recovery from the worst recession in decades.

Polls show voter disenchantment over the economy is likely to translate into big losses for Obama's Democrats on Nov. 2.

With his own re-election expected to hinge on his economic record, Obama will want to avoid the perception he is focusing on foreign policy at the expense of domestic concerns.

"The question is whether it's worth spending political capital on foreign initiatives important to him but maybe not so much to the bulk of the American people," said Christopher Preble, a foreign policy analyst with the Cato Institute.

The White House has insisted Obama can juggle competing priorities and will not skimp on his international agenda.

Despite that, he scrapped overseas trips twice this year to stay home to deal with domestic matters, fueling the impression that foreign policy was taking a back seat. The Asia tour is his first extensive international travel of 2010.

Obama, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year more for his lofty diplomatic vision than any concrete accomplishments, laid out an ambitious to-do list in his address to the U.N. General Assembly last month and pledged U.S. global leadership.

But gains by Republicans could complicate his efforts, especially if they press for a more conservative course.

Many have backed Obama's plan to raise troop levels in Afghanistan to confront a resurgent Taliban but criticize his plan to start drawing down in July 2011. That could make it a source of bitter debate in the 2012 presidential campaign.

Though Afghanistan has barely figured in the run-up to November's election, polls show growing public opposition to the war. Liberal Democrats crucial to Obama's re-election would be incensed by any delay in the withdrawal timetable.

Republicans who have accused Obama of being naive in his dealings with China and Russia -- as well as in his outreach to the Muslim world -- could push for a tougher line.

As the presidential campaign nears, Obama is also less likely to push Israel too hard in peace efforts to avoid angering its base of support with U.S. voters and lawmakers.

And a congressional power shift could weigh on Obama's approach toward Iran and North Korea, where the administration has spearheaded new international sanctions while keeping the door open to diplomatic engagement.

"The 'We are the World' theme won't work in the second half of his term," Carafano said.

(Editing by John O'Callaghan)



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