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Leader of the Free World: Obama's 2nd-Term Foreign-Policy Priorities

What it will mean for the president to "finish what we've started" on the global stage

By Heather Maher - NOVEMBER 7TH, 2012

Barack Obama campaigned for reelection by asking Americans to give him another term so he could "finish what we started" in 2008. "We've come too far to turn back now," he said. "We've got too much work to do to implement health care. We've got too much work to do to create good jobs. We've got too many teachers that we've got to hire. We've got too many schools we've got to rebuild. We've got too many students who still need affordable higher education. There's more homegrown energy to generate. There're more troops that we've got to bring home That's why I'm running for president of the United States of America." Last night, he won that second term. Today, the work begins.

Not surprisingly, Obama's domestic agenda for the next four years doesn't look much different from his first-term agenda. The economy may now be slowly improving rather than worsening, and the unemployment rate has been dropping instead of rising, but economic issues will remain his most urgent concern. He recently told MSNBC that if reelected, his first priority will be to push for passage of a debt reduction plan to cut spending and raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans. He said he will have a "mandate" to take that balanced approach, and he sounded confident that Republicans in Congress will agree.

Immigration Reform Expected

Obama has also outlined economy-boosting initiatives aimed at increasing manufacturing and energy production, investing in infrastructure, and encouraging

businesses to hire more workers. But there is also unfinished business from his first term that will need attention. His administration still has work to do to implement his banking reform plan, and much remains to be done on his 2010 landmark health-care reform legislation -- so-called "Obamacare" -- which is scheduled to take effect in 2014.

Many observers expect Obama to take up immigration reform. Days before the election, Obama told a reporter, "Should I win a second term, a big reason [will be] because the Republican nominee and the Republican Party have so alienated the fastest-growing demographic group in the country -- the Latino community."

Judd Legum, the editor in chief of ThinkProgress, a liberal online political news site, says Obama is also likely to return to the issue of climate change, which went nowhere in his first term, largely because of concerns that regulation would worsen the already bad economy. "I do think the extreme weather we've been having in the United States -- particularly Hurricane Sandy, which just hit the East Coast -- is going to draw renewed attention to [climate change], and I think there's hope that Obama will take up some of these initiatives that were talked about," Legum says. "Maybe a cap-and-trade program to limit carbon emissions, or maybe something else."

Obama 'Unleashed'?

The president's second-term foreign policy agenda also looks set to largely build on what he's already begun. There's the war in Afghanistan to wind down by 2014, the anticipation that tough sanctions on Iran will bear fruit, and the recent U.S. pivot, both militarily and economically, to the Asia-Pacific region. Republicans warned before the election that a second-term Obama, freed from the pressure of being reelected because of term limits, would be "unleashed" and emboldened to pursue his own agenda.

Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the CATO Institute, says that's a wrong assumption. Second-term presidents care about their legacy, he says, and want to leave office as popular figures. And beyond that, there are always political repercussions for the president's political party. "If a president were to do something in foreign policy that was dramatically at odds with what the public wanted, they risk doing serious harm to [their] party, and I think they care about that," Preble says. "We actually saw that, to a certain extent, in the second Bush term, when President Bush tried to make some changes to foreign policy, but on the critical issue of Iraq -- which, by 2005-2006, the public had turned decisively against -- his decision to expand the war, contrary to public sentiment, I think clearly hurt the Republican Party in 2006 and 2008."

On the big issues, Preble says he expects Obama to continue the same policies he has for the last four years. He points out that sanctions on Iran are working - they have crippled the country's banking sector, hobbled its oil industry, and sent its currency plummeting. "All of those things will take some time, but they appear to be having some effect, at least on the state of the Iranian economy," he says. "So I think he is likely to continue along that path for a while longer."

Mideast Not a Priority

Preble doesn't agree with the speculation in some quarters that a second-term Obama will feel freer to take a tough line with Israel and press the Jewish state for concessions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In fact, he doesn't see that issue as a priority for Obama. "Whenever the United States applies pressure to the Israeli government to, halts the expansion of settlements in the Palestinian Territories, it has failed," Preble says. "And so if he's likely to go down that road, I can't imagine that he's likely to succeed. I frankly would be surprised if he invests a lot of political capital there, considering all the other issues on the table."

On the issue of Syria, where a bloody war between the government and antiregime fighters drags on, Obama has taken a largely hands-off approach, except to help organize the disparate rebel factions and lead international calls for President Bashar al-Assad to step down. Preble says "barring some very dramatic change," considering U.S. public opinion against another U.S. military operation, Obama will stay the course.

Obama's much-heralded "reset" with Moscow at the start of his first term led to cooperation on issues including Iran and Afghanistan, but President Vladimir Putin is now in power and demonstrating what many see as open disdain for the United States. Preble said his sense is that Obama "hasn't really made a connection with President Putin," but he doesn't foresee major changes in U.S.-Russian relations, and in fact doesn't rule out Russian cooperation on Syria and even China.

And finally, on China: Obama talked tough during the campaign about Beijing's trade policies - calling them unfair and even illegal - and vowed to take action. He has already overseen Defense Department changes that will increase the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region and serve as a counterweight to China's military ambitions in that part of the world. Preble says in the wider Asia-Pacific region, he expects Obama to strengthen U.S. ties with traditional allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, but also to reach out to countries that have shown interest in closer U.S. ties, like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.