

# The Washington Times

## Republican Senate takeover gives neocons, war hawks bully pulpit

*GOP eyes expanded Islamic State war, increased pressure on Russia and Iran, insiders say*

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Republican insiders say legislation already is in the works to pressure the White House into expanding the war against the Islamic State and increasing pressure on Russia and Iran, as the GOP takeover of the Senate provides neocons and war hawks with their first bully pulpit since the end of George W. Bush's presidency.

While there will be pushback from isolationist voices in the party's libertarian wing, it won't take center stage, according to senior Republican congressional advisers who say that after years of standing by while the Obama administration has pursued a "lead from behind" foreign policy, the GOP is now poised to push the White House toward a more decisive leadership posture on the world stage.

"What we saw Tuesday night was the American people moving the Democrats out of the way, because they certainly haven't led on national security," said one adviser who, like several others, requested anonymity in order to speak candidly. The adviser asserted that a "mandate" has now been established for "Republicans to push certain foreign policy initiatives."

Authorizations to send heavy weapons to Ukrainian forces battling pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine and sophisticated arms to moderate opposition rebels in Syria have "languished on the Senate floor" over the past two years because Majority Leader Harry Reid "wouldn't let them through," said one senior adviser to a key Republican lawmaker.

Those initiatives "will now go for up-or-down votes," once Sen. Mitch McConnell assumes the majority leadership post and key committee chairmanships are filled by GOP critics of the Obama administration's foreign policy — such as Sen. John McCain helming the Senate Committee on Armed Services, the adviser said.

Increasing aid to Syria's rebels is likely to be among the first priorities. Mr. McCain essentially said as much Monday when he issued a statement asserting that "the administration's current strategy in Syria is a disaster."

"Despite vocal support for moderate opposition fighters in Syria, the administration has continuously failed to match its actions with its rhetoric, providing little meaningful support to those fighting and dying in the battle against [the Islamic State]," said Mr. McCain, Arizona Republican.

Though more moderate than Mr. McCain, Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, who is set to head the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, has been deeply critical of President Obama's policies, particularly toward Russia.

Following Moscow's recognition this week of separatist elections held in eastern Ukraine, Mr. Corker issued a statement that Washington "must work with Europe to continue imposing costs against Russia and reassure our support for Ukraine through stepped-up assistance."

While the White House already has imposed sanctions on dozens of Russian individuals and entities, the Foreign Relations Committee in September unanimously approved legislation that would expand sanctions on Russia's defense, financial and energy industries, as well as provide lethal military and nonmilitary assistance for Ukraine. The bill was co-sponsored by Mr. Corker and the committee's current chairman, Sen. Robert Menendez, New Jersey Democrat.

### **The veto factor**

What remains to be seen is how the president will respond to such legislation, which is likely to pass the full Senate.

Mr. McConnell may pave the way for Mr. Corker, Mr. McCain and other GOP foreign policy hawks like Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to try to play "back-seat driver" to the White House, but at the end of the day, "if the president doesn't want to do what they push for, that's entirely up to him," said one senior congressional aide.

With that in mind, another senior aide said the Republicans are unlikely to be able to come up with the 67 votes required to override a presidential veto. "The GOP won't have it," the aide said.

It's a factor that limits Republicans' ability to play spoiler if the White House accepts an Iranian nuclear deal that they deem deficient.

"A GOP-controlled Congress will have more flexibility to have up-or-down votes on things like whether or not to keep up sanctions pressure on Iran," the aide said. "But the president still has the ability to veto things, and he has the ability to waive such sanctions."

Some foreign policy analysts point to such factors as proof that what Republicans really gained Tuesday is control of the bully pulpit.

"The biggest impact will be the ability of Republicans to make noise," said Gordon Adams, an international relations professor and U.S. foreign policy analyst at American University.

"They can influence the atmosphere of debate and, to some degree, put the administration under pressure," Mr. Adams said. "They can jump up and down and wave their arms, but Congress does not make policy. Actually, policy — deploying troops, ordering bombing sorties, leveling sanctions — gets made in the White House."

Such logic hung in the backdrop Wednesday, as Mr. Obama said he is "eager to work with the new Congress" but that lawmakers can be trusted to "pass some bills I cannot sign."

Mr. Obama did suggest he is well aware of coming Republican pressure for him to clarify his strategy for defeating the Islamic State, also known as ISIL and ISIS.

Apparently wary of GOP criticism that he reached beyond his executive authority in September by opening a bombing campaign against the group in Iraq and in Syria, the president said he intends to move quickly to engage the new Congress "over a new authorization to use military forces against ISIL."

### **Free trade opportunity**

Such engagement is likely to prove tricky over the coming year. But there is one foreign policy matter on which the White House and a Republican-controlled Senate may see eye to eye quickly.

Congressional advisers say the GOP-led Senate is poised to move quickly on reinvigorating stalled efforts to achieve a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) — two massive free trade deals that Mr. Obama has consistently voiced support for during recent years.

At issue is the so-called "trade promotion authority," which would allow the White House to negotiate the final terms of the two deals without having to allow Congress to debate the terms and add amendments. The president has pushed for Congress to provide such authority — arguing that it is essential to winning concessions from other nations in order to finalize the trade deals.

But Mr. Reid, yielding to labor unions that oppose the deals, opposed the White House on the issue early this year, making it clear that as long as he was Senate majority leader, there would be no up-or-down vote on whether to give such authority to the president.

Some foreign policy analysts believe Republicans are eager to push such a vote now since it would will be a "win-win" for them, because Democrats are divided on the issue.

On the one hand, the White House will be under pressure to accept the new authority as a GOP olive branch on foreign policy; on the other, Mr. Obama is likely to be lambasted for it by key players in his own Democratic base.

"The president has found his greatest resistance on free trade is from Democrats, not Republicans," said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow specializing in foreign policy at the

libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. At the same time, "this issue presents the GOP with a place to demonstrate they're willing to work with the administration on something."

Separately, Mr. Bandow suggested that while "some libertarian sorts like [Sen.] Rand Paul will obviously resist," most Republicans will unite behind the party's hawks on other foreign policy initiatives — particularly because of a sense that the White House will veto anything truly interventionist that arrives from the new Senate.

"Whether the issue is ISIS or Ukraine, I think they should be considered cheap votes, but Republicans will get behind them because they know they will embarrass the president and Democratic members of Congress," Mr. Bandow said.

Others say there's reason to be skeptical about the prospects of Republican unity behind a hawkish foreign policy platform in the Senate in the year ahead.

"The architecture that existed for Republicans in the previous decade under George W. Bush has eroded, and the neocon vision lacks popular resonance," said Brian Katulis, a national security analyst at the Center for American Progress in Washington. "It's not a popular policy to say, 'Let's send troops to somewhere like Iraq or Syria.'"

"I think the sharp divisions within the Republican Party on foreign policy that existed before the election remain, and remain very strong," Mr. Katulis said. "The truth of the matter is we're looking at a Republican Party that is perhaps more at odds with itself on a whole set of foreign policy issues than it may be with many of the Dems — so I don't envy McConnell's challenge of navigating whether or not to have up-or-down votes on things like Syria."