

Republican Control of Congress Could Change Obama Foreign Policy

By Scott Stearns
November 5, 2014

With Republicans set to take control of the U.S. Senate early next year following the results of Tuesday's midterm elections, President Barack Obama may face a different foreign policy landscape during his last two years in office.

Republican control of both houses of Congress would limit the president's room to maneuver on two of his biggest foreign policy goals, said American University assistant professor Guy Ziv.

"This will create much more difficulty for President Obama to make the kind of progress that he's wanted to see in both the Iranian negotiations - Iran's nuclear negotiations - and the Israeli/Palestinian peace process," said Ziv, who teaches classes on foreign policy and international negotiations. "Both of those issues have regrettably been used over the years as a partisan football on Capitol Hill."

Iran's nuclear program

Talks on Iran's nuclear program are scheduled to end later this month, with international negotiators working to convince Iran to limit its atomic activities in exchange for easing some economic sanctions.

Many Senate Republicans are wary of a deal that allows Tehran to continue enriching any uranium, but Obama already has the authority to waive U.S. sanctions without congressional approval.

Cato Institute analyst Justin Logan said that could change as Republicans move to more forcefully confront Iran.

"There's some prospect that a large Republican wave and takeover of the Senate could raise the prospect of sanctions bills against Iran without that waiver authority," Logan said. "But that requires Congress to sort of take responsibility for the policy and leave its fingerprints on the policy. And historically, [it has] been very wary of doing that."

Republican Senator John McCain has led his party's criticism of the slow U.S. support for moderate rebels in Syria and may push for a more active military role, said Atlantic Council analyst Robert Manning.

"I think on the security side, you are likely to see Senator McCain taking over the Armed Forces Committee in the Senate, and I think that may be contentious in terms of defense spending and some of our military activities in the Middle East and elsewhere," Manning said.

While the U.S. has started a program to train and equip Syrian rebels, the issue is not likely to go away given the fight against Islamic State militants.

"There's a program in place. It is not being conducted the way Senator McCain would like it to be conducted," Cato's Logan said. "So I think the change here might really be how the conversation goes, what sorts of hearings happen, and how Republicans in the Senate can affect the press coverage, what is said about the president's policies."

State Department

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said U.S. diplomats cooperate equally with whomever controls Congress.

"The State Department is a nonpartisan building and one where we work with Democrats and Republicans, so we will continue to move forward with that in mind," Psaki said.

As for Secretary of State John Kerry's tenure, there were press reports during this campaign quoting Obama administration sources criticizing his foreign policy pursuits being "untethered" from the president.

Psaki said the White House is "making pretty clear he will be here."