

Post-Polls, Obama Faces Foreign Policy Test

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BRUSSELS ■ U.S. President Barack Obama could turn to foreign policy as a way to claw back popularity after his midterm elections setback, which has left him weakened in domestic politics.

Obama will face pressure to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy, such as using more force in Afghanistan and keeping troops there longer, after Republicans made gains in the Senate and captured the House of Representatives in Tuesday's elections.

But foreign policy also is an area in which Obama could have a relatively free hand, and he is likely to start efforts to rebuild his image abroad when he begins a trip to Asia on Friday.

There is some precedent: Bill Clinton fought back to win a second term as president after heavy Democrat losses in midterm elections in 1994. But Obama can expect no easy victories in the foreign policy arena.

"One classic scenario would be that the president, having lost his majority in Congress, would

focus more on foreign policy. This is something that Clinton did to an extent. The problem for Obama is that there is no low-hanging fruit on foreign policy," said Thomas Klau, a Paris-based analyst with the International Council on Foreign Relations.

"Afghanistan remains very difficult," Klau said. "Neither Iran or the Middle East conflict or indeed Pakistan or other geographical places suggest that a stronger, more sustained personal engagement from Obama would be very likely to usher in short-term breakthroughs," he said.

Global intelligence company Stratfor said the United States remained the global superpower and that a president who is weak at home is not by default weak abroad.

"In fact, a weak president often has no options before him except foreign policy," Stratfor said.

It is not clear where Obama might choose to make his mark, but he faces pressure to adopt tougher policies almost wherever he looks.

In Europe, the Republican gains could sharpen the divergence between the continent and the U.S. government on financial regulation, climate change and some foreign policies.

Ruprecht Polenz, the foreign affairs committee head in Germany's lower house of parliament, said it now would be more difficult to secure U.S. ratification of the START disarmament treaty with Russia and that Washington would be more self-absorbed.

"It is on the whole not a good thing for the world. No major international conflict can be resolved without the United States. So we must be ready for Europe to engage more boldly [in global diplomacy]," he said.

Waheed Omer, a spokesman for Afghan President Hamid Karzai, said the relationship with Washington would continue regardless of the elections. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the outcome would not affect its intention to keep fighting until all foreign forces leave Afghanistan.

But Daoud Sultanzoy, a U.S.-educated Afghan analyst, said Obama may have to take another look at strategy in Afghanistan, where U.S.-led NATO troops are bogged down fighting the Taliban.

"Obama will need to reverse from some of the policies, use some of the Republicans' values and basically reach out to them for a bipartisan [deal]," he said.

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