

# Obama's Foreign Policy Turn

By [Andrew Hammond](#)

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U.S. President Barack Obama's victory over Mitt Romney is a landmark moment in U.S. politics. He is only the second Democratic president after Bill Clinton to win re-election since Franklin Roosevelt, and he did so despite a challenging economic headwind of sluggish growth and 8 percent unemployment.

While many Democrats are elated by Obama's success, it is unlikely that he will secure major new domestic policy successes. His narrower victory margin gives him a weaker electoral mandate. Moreover, congressional Republicans, who were so at odds with the president's first-term agenda, have maintained their grip in the House of Representatives.

Washington politics thus has the potential for four more years of polarization and gridlock. This is likely to encourage Obama to turn his focus toward foreign policy, as was the case with other second-term presidents in the post-World War II period.

To be sure, Obama may still achieve some domestic success, including a long-term federal budget bargain with Congress. But many re-elected presidents in the post-war era have found

it difficult to acquire momentum behind significant new legislation.

In part, this is because the party of re-elected presidents often holds a weaker position in Congress in second presidential terms. Thus, Presidents Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, Richard Nixon in 1972 and Bill Clinton in 1996 were all re-elected alongside Congresses where both the House of Representatives and Senate were controlled by their partisan opponents.

Two other issues have undercut the productiveness of second terms. First, re-elected administrations have often been hit by scandals in recent decades. Thus, Watergate ended the Nixon administration in 1974, Iran-Contra damaged Ronald Reagan, and the Lewinsky scandal led to Clinton's impeachment hearings in 1998.

It remains to be seen whether any major scandals will have a lasting impact on the Obama administration. However, some Republicans are already putting pressure on Obama over what they perceive as his team's cover-up of events surrounding the September killing of the U.S. ambassador in Libya.

Even if Obama and his administration escape a significant scandal, he will not be able to avoid the lame-duck factor in his second and last term. One way to delay this factor is to focus more on foreign policy and remain a major player on the world stage. This is especially likely if the economic recovery picks up the pace in coming months.

Foreign policy could become an especially strong point for Obama if Israel ups the ante with Iran on its nuclear program. A missile strike by Tel Aviv, with or without the support of Washington, remains a real possibility in 2013.

The probable stress by Obama on foreign policy will be reinforced by a desire to establish a significant legacy. Previous presidents have often seen foreign policy initiatives as key to the legacy they wish to build, including Clinton, who devoted much time trying to secure a Palestinian-Israeli peace deal.

Almost two decades later, with a significant breakthrough between the Israelis and Palestinians still lacking, other areas of the world are as important to any Obama foreign policy legacy. In particular, following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the intended drawdown in Afghanistan, Obama has said he will make Asia-Pacific a foreign policy and security priority and focus on high-growth markets through initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Outside the Asia-Pacific region, Obama would like to improve relations with Russia and revive the dormant "reset." His Russia initiative needs to focus on boosting economic ties and building upon key first-term achievements, including Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization.

In the next few weeks, this goal would be boosted if Congress grants Russia permanent normal trade relations by repealing the Jackson-Vanik restriction that has been a continuing bilateral sore, even though the restriction has been waived each year since 1989. With U.S. exports to Russia set to reach around \$10 billion in 2012, Washington understands that there is much more upside potential in economic ties, especially in light of Russia's WTO accession.

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