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Foreign Policy to the Limelight

President Obama may shift his focus from domestic affairs

By Michael Cecire

After President Obama was re-elected in 2012, he returned to the White House with an agenda to maintain the America-first policy that largely characterized his first term. “For we, the people, understand that our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it,” Obama said in his 2013 inaugural address, highlighting domestic issues as his continued prime focus. “We believe that America’s prosperity must rest upon the broad shoulders of a rising middle class.” As the president heads into the second year of his final term, however, foreign policy is likely to factor more strongly.

Although the Obama administration has typically subordinated foreign policy to domestic issues, true to the campaigns he ran in 2008 and 2012, the new year could

The international force in Afghanistan is scheduled to end involvement in 2014, but a limited number of troops will remain.

usher a more comprehensive foreign policy agenda. In 2014, foreign policy could even take the limelight for the first time in Obama’s presidency.

The most pressing issue for the administration is the growing uncertainty over U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force is scheduled to end its mission in Afghanistan by the close of 2014, but a bilateral security agreement between the U.S. and Afghanistan was prepared and finalized to keep a residual force of American troops in the country to continue assistance with training programs and limited counterterrorism operations.

Though the security agreement received approval from a Loya Jirga, a consultative assembly of some 2,500 Afghan elders, Afghan President Hamid Karzai reversed his position and imposed new demands on the U.S. before signing the agreement. These stipulations included a demand that the U.S. cease counterterrorism raids on private homes and that the U.S. begin “meaningful” negotiated peace talks with Taliban rebels.

So far, U.S. officials have balked at the new demands. If an agreement is not met, U.S. officials warn, a “zero option” – the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops and the withholding of aid – is a real possibility. Though Karzai and his advisers reportedly regard zero option talk as a negotiating tactic, some U.S. observers see this as a genuine possibility to be considered. “The zero option increasingly looks like the least bad of the range of bad alterna-

The administration’s most pressing issue: growing uncertainty over U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

tives available to the U.S.,” noted Steven Metz, a research professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Army War College, in a recent *World Politics Review* column. “There is little sign that the security gained from continued involvement is worth the cost, or that the assistance that has not yet worked to the degree expected will in the future.” The U.S.-Afghan agreement will be an executive priority especially leading up to Afghanistan’s presidential elections in April.

Another major strategic driver is the issue of Iran. Iran’s presidential election in June 2013 saw a landslide vic-

tory for Hassan Rouhani, a purported moderate who has helped soften Iran's hard-line position toward the West, particularly on the issue of the country's nuclear program. Since Rouhani has come to power, relations between Iran and the West have experienced a significant thaw.

In September, during a United Na-

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tions meeting in New York, Rouhani and Obama talked in a historic phone call, a first since the U.S. and Iran broke diplomatic relations after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. And in November, Iran signed an interim agreement with the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, plus Germany, freezing Iran's nuclear program in exchange for limited relief from international sanctions.

The administration's challenge will be to capitalize on Rouhani's apparent willingness to deal while striking an appropriate balance between caution and giving Iran the economic relief it needs to politically validate its diplomatic open-

ing. Although 2013 has seen unprecedented progress in Iranian-Western relations, the durability and outcome of these and future arrangements will depend on how the situation is managed in the new year.

Other international issues are also likely to feature strongly in 2014. The Winter Olympics, which begin in February, will be set in Sochi, Russia, about 250 miles from Chechnya, a restive region in the North Caucasus. This has raised concerns that the upcoming games could see an increased risk of terrorism.

Meanwhile, in the Pacific, China's unilateral expansion of its air defense zone over disputed territory in the East China Sea in late November – and Japan's decision to beef up its military to counter Beijing's assertiveness – could presage additional challenges for the U.S. in 2014.

However, though foreign policy challenges abound, a more foreign policy-oriented 2014 could be a function of structural political realities rather than specific events. Lincoln Mitchell, a Columbia University political scientist, says that presidents have historically used their second terms to focus on international policy issues.



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Foreign policy may play a larger role during the rest of Obama's term.

Mitchell adds that the dynamics of the American electoral cycle generally make a U.S. president less able to focus on domestic policymaking in his second term, particularly during mid-term election years like 2014. More specifically, Mitchell says that because the House Republican caucus appears to be “against everything” that the administration proposes, it is very hard for Obama to work with them. “Domestic policy requires working with Congress,” says Mitchell. “You can't legislate with

executive orders – but you can do some foreign policy that way.”

Political logjams between the administration and the Republican Party will keep Obama from being able to achieve much in Congress, particularly in an election year. And given the limited utility of executive orders in shaping domestic policy, foreign policy has become the “easiest place to go,” Mitchell says. “The major legislative days of the Obama administration have been in the past for awhile.” |