

The White House, Congress, and the Middle East in 2011: Political and Policy Forecast

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On January 10, 2011, Dan Glickman and Vin Weber addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Glickman, a senior advisor at the Bipartisan Policy Center, previously served as a Democratic congressman from Kansas and as secretary of agriculture in the Clinton administration. Mr. Weber, a partner with the law firm of Clark & Weinstock and former chairman of the National Endowment for Democracy, served six terms as a Republican congressman from Minnesota. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Dan Glickman

The 112th Congress includes nearly 100 new members, and the House leadership has changed as well. Currently, it remains unclear what positions these new members will take on foreign policy issues. One indication of where Congress is heading may come this spring, when a bill to raise the government debt ceiling will come to the fore. Republicans will no doubt use this essential bill as a vehicle to extract something from the administration; the question remains what they will want and how much they will get.

Indeed, concerns about the deficit top the agenda in Washington's new political climate. Raising taxes or cutting defense or Social Security will be difficult, so deficit reduction will largely target discretionary spending. Republicans are already talking about an initial \$100 billion cut in such spending, which would undoubtedly translate into cuts in the international affairs budget.

Regardless of district, voters in the heartland are primarily concerned about the economy, not foreign affairs. Accordingly, the new Congress may be indifferent about funding the foreign affairs budget. Despite public perceptions of runaway foreign spending, however, the entire foreign affairs budget is less than 1.4 percent of total spending.* And this small investment represents big payoffs in terms of keeping the United States safe and advancing stability and peace in the Middle East. For example, a robust foreign affairs budget helps maintain the gains in Iraq as the State Department leads the transition to civilian-led operations. It also allows Washington to counter Iran's nuclear program and strengthen weak states such as Yemen and Afghanistan.

Foreign aid is not popular, especially since many Americans have grossly exaggerated ideas about how much it

costs. For comparison's sake, a year's worth of foreign aid to Israel is roughly equivalent to only one week of U.S. spending on Afghanistan. Even so, it is unclear how some of the incoming committee chairs will approach the issue. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-MI), chair of the House Appropriations Committee, has ambiguously committed to funding foreign aid, stating that the United States should spend what is necessary, but not one dime more.

Each of the "three Ds" -- defense, diplomacy, and development -- is central to U.S. national security. The Obama administration has been more aggressive in elevating economic aid to the same level as diplomacy and defense, whether by strengthening the historically weak U.S. Agency for International Development or advancing the AIDS healthcare initiative. Worldwide, 3.2 billion people are living in or on the edge of poverty, and the United States must work on integrating them into the global economy so they can be productive players in the international system. Economic aid also has a humanitarian component, such as responding to earthquakes and floods. Nevertheless, there will be enormous pressure to cut such programs in the new Congress.

A strong president is needed to counter the problems facing the United States. The president can shape public opinion to a much greater degree than Congress can, recapturing the agenda with a State of the Union address that advances big, bold ideas. Furthermore, the president derives strength from domestic successes, which for now center on how the economy performs. Global perceptions of the United States will improve if the president regains the initiative. Institutionally, the world is facing a leadership void that the United States must fill. Yet although many Americans want their country to be strong overseas, they do not seem willing to spend the necessary resources.

** Editors note: The foreign affairs requests for FY2010 was \$53.8 billion ([source: U.S. Department of State \(http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122513.pdf\)](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122513.pdf)), while the total operating budget for FY2010 was \$3.5 trillion ([source: CNN \(http://money.cnn.com/2009/04/02/news/economy/congress_budget/index.htm\)](http://money.cnn.com/2009/04/02/news/economy/congress_budget/index.htm)).*

Vin Weber

Debt and budgets dominated the past election, and foreign affairs funding seemed to be at risk. Yet House Representatives are now backing away from their proposal to cut spending by \$100 billion. The House leadership has more in common with the president on foreign affairs than is generally acknowledged. For example, the new Foreign Affairs Committee chair, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), is an internationalist and a passionate supporter of democracy assistance, much like most of the House Republican leadership.

The new House should not be compared to that of 1995, whose leaders -- Newt Gingrich, Dick Armey, and Tom DeLay -- did not care much about foreign affairs. Despite polarization on so many issues, there is broad bipartisan support for the administration's Middle East policies, thanks to organizations such as The Washington Institute.

Arab-Israeli peace. The House Republican leadership supports the Middle East peace process, which is not to be conflated with great optimism for its success. In fact, the Republican ascendancy may have strengthened Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's hand, which could prove fruitful for a peace agreement. Israel has become a bellwether topic for Republicans, and the party's presidential candidates (with the exception of Ron Paul) will try to outdo each other on the issue. This does not solely reflect the narrow Christian right's interests: Republicans in general appreciate the similarities between Israeli and American values.

Iran and Iraq. Congressional Republicans support the combined policy of diplomacy and sanctions on Iran, and there is broad agreement on its successes to date. They also strongly back the administration's Iraq policy; withdrawal is moving ahead, and the United States is strengthening Iraq as an emerging democracy. On both Iran and Iraq, Republicans were skeptical of Obama's rhetoric before he assumed office, fearing that engagement with Tehran would be futile and that the withdrawal from Iraq would be precipitous. They now support President Obama's policies, however.

Afghanistan-Pakistan. The president has more support on this issue from congressional Republicans than from

Democrats. Whether this situation endures will be seen in the next vote to fund the war in Afghanistan. Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA) is currently leading investigations into corruption in Afghanistan, and although those efforts are warranted, they could potentially strengthen opposition to the war.

Counterterrorism. Both parties tend to agree on counterterrorism matters, and divisive issues such as civilian trials for suspected terrorists and the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention center are not as prominent as they once were.

Economic aid. Although Republicans generally support a narrower economic aid policy, perceptions that China is outmaneuvering the United States in places such as Africa could push them to approve increased economic assistance. U.S. policy on humanitarian assistance, such as funding the UN Relief and Works Agency, will not change because the political ramifications are too great.

United Nations. Republican skepticism toward the UN arises from the organization's unfair treatment of Israel, its inefficiency, and its debating-society-style rhetoric. Yet many Democrats remain idealistic about the body based on its World Food Programme (which feeds a billion people per year) and the humanitarian work conducted by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). In other words, the Democrats view the UN as necessary, while the Republicans view it as a necessary evil. Both parties ultimately support the organization, albeit with different attitudes.

Congressional views aside, presidential leadership is critical to advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East. House Speaker John Boehner is correct in his assessment that, when it comes to foreign policy, there is no substitute for the president's voice.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel. ❖

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