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Traditionally, U.S. midterm elections have been referenda on how a president has managed domestic affairs, a vote of confidence or rejection of his various policy choices. International events, however, can emerge as issues in the campaign to the extent that they indicate whether the country is moving in the right or the wrong direction.

In 2006, for instance, the Bush administration's mismanagement of the Iraq War became a factor in the recapture of both houses of Congress by the Democrats because it was put forth alongside domestic disasters—such as the handling of Hurricane Katrina—as part of an effective campaign slogan that “Americans can do better.” Now the Republicans are seeking to return the favor, not only by maintaining their control of the House of Representatives but by becoming once again the majority party in the U.S. Senate. With control of both chambers of Congress, the GOP would be in a position to shape the policies and reach of the last two years of President Barack Obama's term and could better position a Republican candidate to regain the White House in 2016.

Earlier this year, the conventional political wisdom was that problems with how the Affordable Care Act was rolled out, as well as a lackluster domestic economic recovery, would dominate the 2014 midterm campaign. To the extent that events over the past several months have improved the domestic situation, reducing the saliency of such appeals, it is not surprising to see increased discussion of Obama's handling of foreign affairs finding its way into many of the House and Senate contests. A series of crises—the Ukraine faceoff with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the stunning rise and newfound reach of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East and the specter of an Ebola epidemic finding its way into the American heartland—have

revived security questions as voting issues.

The perception that the U.S. is not safe, and that the policies of the administration are exposing vulnerabilities in the country's defenses, is being used to bolster the narrative that America is moving in the wrong direction and that the Obama administration **does not have a strategy** to address the challenges. Recent statements by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and a tell-all book from former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta have not helped the Obama team push back on the latter charge.

Yet the electoral message coming from the Republicans is also confusing and inconsistent. On the one hand, there is a clear charge that Obama is shirking America's responsibilities as a global leader, is not effective in marshaling U.S. power on the world stage, is not capable of facing down challengers like Russia and China, has abandoned pro-American allies and is backing away from directly confronting threats and annoyances. The subtext to voters, and to the world community indirectly, is that a Republican Congress would, via its control of the budget and the legislative process, put much more starch in the administration's national security policy. For instance, they might pass bills for the U.S. to provide military equipment to Ukraine and the anti-IS and anti-Assad Syrian groups, steps that the administration has been reluctant to take up to this point. The impression is that the Republicans would embark on a more activist foreign policy.

At the same time, however, a second and contradictory GOP campaign theme is that the U.S. needs to wall itself off from the world. Whether by imposing travel bans for persons traveling from Ebola-infected regions or by reinforcing border security to make it more difficult for economic migrants and would-be IS terrorists alike to reach the U.S., Republican candidates are touching upon a deep wellspring of frustration among parts of the U.S. electorate that want to reduce America's global footprint and to have other nations do more in the cause of world order. The polling data consistently indicates Americans' rejection of taking on any sort of "Globocop" role for the world. Protecting the home front and not going abroad in search of monsters to destroy, as President John Quincy Adams once advised, resonates strongly among many of the core Republican voters who plan to turn out in this cycle, many of whom blame Obama's supposed "internationalism"

for drawing America into crises and problems that do not directly concern Americans.

It is, of course, not unheard of that a political party will promote different and sometimes even contradictory appeals to voters, but it does make it harder to assess what exactly a Republican majority in Congress would do differently in terms of the advice it would give to, and pressure it would place on, the Obama administration. Would it push for greater U.S. intervention around the world, or would it look for ways to shield the American heartland from being negatively impacted by global chaos?

In assessing the Republican critique of the Obama administration's approach, [Ray Takeyh concludes](#), "It's true the public is unlikely to countenance a vast military enterprise for amorphous purposes. However, this does not mean that Americans are ready to turn their backs on their ideals or vacate their global responsibilities." Of course, Americans themselves are comfortable with their contradictions. They can be angry with Obama for not standing up to perceived global bullies like Putin or taking strong enough action vis-a-vis terrorists like IS, but also not particularly interested in going back to the precepts of unilateralism or assuming the lion's share of international aid and security.

In the end, even if the Republicans do regain control of Congress after the midterms, they might circle back to the same conclusions the Obama team has apparently reached: Americans want low-cost, no-consequence interventions that demonstrate American leadership and resolve but do not impose undue burdens on domestic society. Drone strikes, sanctions and "leading from behind"—all policy choices roundly criticized by the Republican opposition—have been the Obama administration's attempt not to vacate Washington's global responsibilities while also paying heed to Americans' continued aversion to new major interventions. Criticizing this in opposition is all well and good as an electoral strategy, but if Republicans begin to acquire more responsibility for governing, it is an approach they may also learn to appreciate. □

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appears every Wednesday.

President Barack Obama arrives to vote early in the midterm elections, Oct. 20, 2014, Chicago, Ill. (AP photo by Evan Vucci).

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