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Reset After the Republicans' Revanche

By Glenn C. Altschuler

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On Tuesday, U.S. voters are expected to send a stinging rebuke to President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party. Stirred up by radio and television "trash talkers" such as Glen Beck and Tea Party radicals, they are upset at the slow pace of recovery from the Great Recession. They are angry about unemployment; according to the Labor Department, unemployment remains at 9.5 percent, but because many have given up searching for work, it is actually closer to 15 percent. Moreover, the majority of Americans are frustrated with trillion-dollar deficits, and they've turned against the administration's health care reform bill as an unwanted and unwarranted intrusion into individual medical decisions. In all likelihood, control of the U.S. House of Representatives will return to the Republican Party. In the U.S. Senate, the Democrats will probably remain in the majority, but the Republicans will almost certainly make significant gains.

One result of the Republican gain will be a stalemate on domestic legislation as each party positions itself for the presidential election in 2012. Since Obama won't be able to do much to improve the U.S. economy, he may well turn to foreign policy to enhance his record. Given the challenges to the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan and the global war on terror, however,

accomplishments won't come easily.

What impact will the shift toward more Republicans in Congress have on U.S.-Russian relations? In 2011, the New START treaty may be ratified by the U.S. Senate and signed by Obama, who advocates sharp reductions in the nuclear missiles, warheads and launchers of the two countries. Endorsed last month by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by a vote of 14-4 and by virtually every former U.S. secretary of state and defense who is alive today, the treaty could be a way for Republicans, who on other issues will be at war with the president, to get credit for their willingness to be constructive and bipartisan.

But then again, newly elected right-wing Tea Party Republicans may make it more difficult to reach the 67 votes necessary for ratification. In general, they will probably try to convince Obama to take a tougher stance on Russia on security and other issues.

Whatever the outcome of the Senate deliberations on New START, the contacts between Russia and the United States may well be dominated by Obama's efforts to enlist President Dmitry Medvedev to pressure the rulers of Iran to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. Already under pressure to do more to deter the Iranians, whose influence in the Middle East continues to grow, Obama may be forced by more confident and bellicose Republicans to consider bombing the facilities, which are well-encased and far below ground. He's likely to resist, but he cannot afford to look weak or indecisive. China, with whom the United States is constantly at odds over trade, interest rates and currency, won't be of much help, especially if it means endangering their own access to oil. So Obama may look to Russia to find a way to persuade the Iranians to back off or back down.

Such help, if it's forthcoming, will surely have a price attached. To warm relations with the Kremlin, Obama could support repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. Enacted in 1974, when the Soviet Union restricted religious minorities — mostly Jewish refuseniks — from emigrating, the legislation withholds most-favored-nation trade status from countries that violate human rights and thwart the reunification of families. Jackson-

Vanik would be an idiosyncratic relic of the Cold War, if it weren't for one very serious issue that has a negative impact on U.S.-Russian relations:

Jackson-Vanik stands in the way of Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization. Many Republicans as well as Democrats — with the notable exception of Vice President Joe Biden — regard Jackon-Vanik as a relic of the Cold War. Jewish organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, which now advocates "graduating" Russia from Jackson-Vanik, could provide them "political cover," if necessary.

Obama might sweeten the pot by promising to dispose of the Magnitsky bill recently proposed by Senator Benjamin Cardin and Representative James McGovern — both Democrats — which would impose economic sanctions and visa bans on Russians linked to the prison death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky.

The other way Obama can improve U.S.-Russian relations is to continue his policy of stepping back from Georgia, Ukraine and Central Asia. This has been the most sensitive area in U.S.-Russian relations over the past 10 years. We remember how bad relations became under former President George W. Bush because of U.S. foreign policy in Russia's backyard.

Regarding Russia and other nations, however, Obama's foreign policy options are rather limited. And caution is his natural instinct. But neither allies nor adversaries should discount the possibility that, out of frustration or domestic political calculation, he will, like some of the presidents who preceded him, become more militant and militaristic.

Let's hope that Obama retains his moderate foreign policy — even as the Republicans try to put pressure on him. A moderate foreign policy can only help U.S.-Russian relations.

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