

Obama, in election mode, tightens his UN diplomacy

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By Ben Feller

WASHINGTON (AP) — The world's leaders are gathering in New York, but President Barack Obama has no plans to meet privately with any of them.

He will make time for "The View," a freewheeling TV talk show more likely to reach voters than Obama would with the diplomacy he is skipping at the United Nations.

Just six weeks until the election, the realities and priorities of campaign politics hang prominently over Obama's final turn on the world stage before facing voters.

Unlike his predecessors, he is skipping the face-to-face meetings with counterparts where much of the U.N. work gets done, leaving Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to pick up more of those sessions herself.

Obama's itinerary on Monday and Tuesday is compressed so that he can get back to campaigning in some of the most contested states such as Ohio and Virginia.

Obama's address to the U.N. General Assembly, while avoiding any references to Republican rival Mitt Romney, will be viewed in more of an election context by many observers. Those include the more than 130 heads of state and government who are keenly interested in who will be in the White House next year.

Obama's two worlds will collide in his speech Tuesday. He will have a chance to distinguish his world vision from Romney's at a time when foreign crises have intruded in an election focused primarily on the economy.

Obama campaign officials privately welcome the imagery of the president commanding the U.N. stage and making his case about a stronger U.S. position in the world. But the speech is less anticipated this year, seeming also to be squeezed into a pursuit of a second term built more on domestic concerns.

Obama is expected to explain, explore and defend U.S. engagement in the world as anti-American rage has run high in many nations, fueled by anti-Muslim film that was made in the United States but unconnected to and denounced by Obama's administration.

More than 40 people, including the U.S. ambassador to Libya, have been killed in violence linked to the protests over the film, raising hard questions about the transitions to democracy in the Middle East and North Africa.

The upheaval roiled the presidential campaign when Romney accused Obama's administration of sympathizing with those who attacked U.S. interests.

At the U.N., Obama will try to differentiate himself from Romney by projecting a less aggressive tone toward the world, while also defending America and not seeming like an apologist, said Shibley Telhami, a Middle East scholar and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

"That's a tough mix," he said.

The president has previewed his U.N. themes in campaign events, declaring that U.S. will stick with diplomacy but demand returns for Arab partners.

"My message to the presidents of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and these other countries is, we want to be a partner with you," Obama said. "We stand on the side of democracy. But democracy is not just an election. Are you looking out for minority rights, are you respecting freedom of speech, are you treating women fairly?"

Part of the world is on fire as Obama gets to the United Nations, as is the case each year for all presidents. He will be followed not just by the successes he likes to mention, such as the receding tide of U.S.-led wars, but by a Syrian conflict that has stymied the Security Council and by tensions with ally Israel over confronting Iran.

This time last year, with Mideast peace at the forefront, Obama's schedule was packed with personal diplomacy. He set up separate meetings with the leaders of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Afghanistan, Brazil, Turkey, Japan, Britain, and France, among others. This year, not one is scheduled.

"I think his engagement with foreign leaders has been, and will continue to be, extremely robust," said White House spokesman Jay Carney. "His attendance at (the U.N. General Assembly) is in keeping with attendance by past presidents engaged in a re-election campaign, and we'll be there overnight in New York."

Both Presidents George W. Bush in 2004 and Bill Clinton in 1996, though, held a series of meetings with foreign leaders during U.N. visits in their re-election years. The Obama White House opted not to jam in a few and risk offending the allies who were left out, administration officials said.

Instead, the secretary of state will see the presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Myanmar as well as the king of Jordan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Those meetings will be critical to Obama's foreign policy as Washington deals with the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the fallout from the Arab Spring and a delicate time in U.S.-Israeli relations, as officials in Israel continue to speak of a military strike on Iran.

Domestic politics bookend Obama's trip.

When he gets to town, Obama will join his wife, Michelle, on the set of ABC's "The View," where his appearance in 2010 drew a television audience of roughly 6.5 million people. The president's final business in New York will be to speak at Bill Clinton's global initiative — just a few hours after Romney does the same.

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