

Obama's last State of the Union address seeks to frame 2016 presidential race

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Washington: President Barack Obama's final State of the Union address Tuesday night is his last high-profile opportunity to speak to the public before voting in the first presidential nominating contests begins on Feb. 1 with the Iowa caucuses.

After six years of pitching ambitious proposals in his annual speech to both houses of Congress, Obama plans to return to the hopeful tenor of his two presidential campaigns and give voice to themes that Democrats can embrace in their campaigns to replace him and win back control of Congress.

The State of the Union, a kind of progress report from the president, also sets out the president's agenda for the year. Over the years, the State of the Union has suffered a major drop-off in TV viewers amid the proliferation of cable channels and other tempting distractions on a Tuesday night.

Obama won't directly appeal for Americans to keep the Democratic Party in the White House for a third straight term. But he will outline domestic and international priorities that build on steps he's taken in office, a vision certain to be more in line with Hillary Clinton and other Democrats than the Republican presidential candidates.

Some presidential candidates, including Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, will be on hand for Obama's address. Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent seeking the Democratic nomination, will also be present.

"He feels very optimistic about this future," White House chief of staff Denis McDonough said, but the country Obama has led for the last seven years doesn't always see it the same way.

Seven in 10 Americans said they see the U.S. heading in the wrong direction, according to an NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll last month. That's a marked decline from just two months earlier, and an even steeper fall compared to the first year of Obama's presidency, when less than half said in July 2009 that the U.S. was heading down the wrong path.

Driving that pessimism across the country, polls show, are steep concerns about national security in the era of the Islamic State group and lingering trepidation among some about the quick pace of social change in the U.S.

On the other hand, while 2015 was a volatile year for Wall Street, Americans are more confident about the economy than they were a few years ago.

Over the past year, Obama has reached a nuclear deal with Iran, re-launched diplomatic relations with Cuba, secured a global climate pact and an Asia-Pacific trade deal and negotiated a budget deal with the Republican-led Congress. Unemployment has fallen to 5 percent, and renewed confidence in the economy led the Federal Reserve to start raising interest rates.

However, the White House said Obama would not address the 10 U.S. Navy sailors that were being held by Iran Tuesday. The Pentagon said the sailors had drifted in Iranian waters after encountering mechanical problems. American officials said Tehran had given assurances the sailors would be returned safely and promptly.

Obama will offer a renewed call for unfinished pieces of his agenda that already have a foothold in Congress, such as approval for his Asia-Pacific free trade pact and bipartisan efforts to overhaul the criminal justice system.

"What I would like is to see the president talk about what is, of course, the number one issue on Americans' minds today and that is terrorism, national security, the situation in the Middle East and the attacks on America," said Republican Sen. John McCain.

Obama is expected to keep up his appeals for broader actions to address gun violence. He'll also try to convince a public increasingly skeptical of his foreign policy stewardship that he has a handle on the volatile Middle East and is taking steps to prevent terrorism in the United States.

The president has invited a refugee from war-torn Syria to attend the speech, a symbolic counter to Republicans proposing to block Syrians seeking asylum in the U.S. But the selection is also a reminder of Obama's inability to end the bloodshed in Syria, where the nearly five-year civil war has spurred a refugee crisis and created a vacuum for terrorism.

Republicans selected South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley to give the opposing party's rebuttal. In another reminder of the fast-approaching election, Haley, whose parents are immigrants from India, is seen as a potential running mate for the eventual Republican nominee.

- AP