In the last two months the dynamic of this year’s midterm congressional elections shifted away from primarily domestic themes toward national and homeland security priorities. For several weeks in late summer the nation’s major media headlined three security threats:

» The threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ("ISIS") provided the most powerful impact on American public opinion.

» Before that, the crisis posed by migrant children crossing the border from Mexico into the U.S. captured the headlines, and

» While overshadowed by the ISIS threat, the successful Russian takeover of parts of eastern Ukraine has caused many Americans to worry about how far Russia will ultimately go.

HOW THE CHANGE COULD AFFECT MIDTERM RESULTS
Congressional Democrats hoped to focus the midterm elections on domestic and parochial issues that favor them. They highlighted pocketbook issues for the middle class, women’s rights, and local issues that would motivate their base voters to turn out. On the other hand, congressional Republicans planned to emphasize the electorate’s discontent with Obamacare and blame Democrats for the nation’s sluggish economic growth. But by mid-September other events conspired to overshadow these domestic policy themes.

First, the Republican establishment successfully struck back against Tea Party insurgents. In primary elections for seats in the House of Representatives, the Republican establishment rose to the occasion to defeat all of the Tea Party candidates who would have made a difference in determining which party controlled Congress. While headlines focused on the Tea Party candidate’s defeat of former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA), that congressional district is solidly Republican and his Tea Party successor will surely win the general election. The outcome will have no effect on control of the House.

In the Senate primaries, the establishment likewise successfully supported its candidates to defeat Tea Party challengers in seven races. The most notable was the impressive defense of Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), who narrowly defeated...
As the focus of midterm elections shifts from domestic to national security concerns, pressing maritime issues have been put off.

his Tea Party challenger. Powerful establishment forces, like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, poured money and other critically important resources into the campaign that made the difference. Consequently, the Republican strategy avoided key errors of the past where eccentric candidates proved embarrassing to the brand in the general election. The success of the Republican establishment also robbed Democrats of potentially galvanizing issues, particularly regarding women voters.

Second, national and homeland security issues have dominated the headlines for several weeks. The most important of the developments appears to be the dramatic impact on public opinion of the ISIS beheadings of American citizens in Syria. Polling data showed that over 90 percent of Americans knew of the beheadings. These atrocities, combined with dramatic and frightening news reports about the ISIS invasion of Iraq and potential threats to the homeland, alarmed the American people.

Public opinion shifted dramatically to favor direct U.S. military intervention to destroy ISIS. This was a stunning about-face from the public’s opinion a year ago, which had disapproved President Obama’s proposal to use limited cruise missile strikes against Syria to compel it to relinquish its stockpile of chemical weapons. Within a year of that disconnect, President Obama, who successfully won election twice by reflecting America’s then-prevailing fatigue with prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, once again found himself forced to respond to a national security crisis amidst both fear and public opinion skeptical about the efficacy of American military power.

The events involving ISIS in Iraq followed on the heels of other disturbing homeland security and national security challenges this summer. The crisis at the border, where many thousands of migrant children sought refuge from violence in Central America, raised deep concerns among the American people. While public opinion was more divided on this issue, what it meant, and how to deal with it, the crisis shifted public concern away from domestic economic and women’s issues and toward homeland security. The best evidence that the crisis aided congressional Republicans is President Obama’s decision to postpone his promised executive action on immigration policy until after the midterm elections.

Finally, the Russian aggression in Ukraine caused considerable unease among the American people. While less dramatic than ISIS, Russian successes in eastern Ukraine left the impression with many voters of a feckless Obama Administration.

One of the most striking aspects of these recent developments is the potential impact on the gender gap. By mid-September, polls showed the drumbeat of security concerns caused women respondents to express concern about the adequacy of President Obama’s leadership to confront the security threats. Overall, in recent years, women voters have favored Democrats by a wide 14 percent margin while men favor Republicans by a like margin. And, of course, there are more women voters than men. So if Republican candidates can persuade women voters that they are better defenders of national security, then they stand to prosper from the current angst over security concerns.

Ultimately, with margins so tight in key Senate races, dramatic events unfolding during the run-up to Election Day on November 4 could affect the outcome. So far, events have broken in favor of Republicans, and there is even chatter by commentators about a “wave election.” But that trend could dissipate.

The border crisis that gripped the nation in July quickly passed as the number of child migrants at the border dropped dramatically and what was once broadcast as a mass humanitarian crisis was averted. The gravity of the ISIS threat to America remains unclear, but the acute fear prompted by the beheadings and stunning ISIS gains against the Iraqi military may have peaked. Ironically, this threat could provide President Obama an opportunity to appear stronger just before the election. Republicans will no doubt be on alert for an “October surprise.”
WASHINGTON INSIDER

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARITIME POLICY

Congressional leaders postponed important issues until after the midterm elections, including policies affecting the maritime industry. Congress is notoriously loath to take unnecessary votes just before elections. These issues may be addressed in the lame duck session or in the new Congress depending on the electoral outcome, which may not be clear until December 6 because of potential run-off elections in Louisiana and Georgia.

Congress agreed to a continuing resolution to keep the federal government operating into the lame duck session. But whether appropriations levels of the government will be determined then remains unclear. Depending on the election results, the lame duck Congress may only agree to extend the continuing resolution further into the new Congress.

Tea Party darling Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) has called for the continuing resolution to extend to March 2015 to allow the new Congress to finalize appropriations. But it may not be in the interest of the parties to kick the can down the road into March. Even if Republicans should triumph in the Senate, Republican leaders will have to consider carefully whether it really works to their benefit to postpone the appropriations decisions into the next Congress.

Likewise, the matter of popular tax-extender legislation remains to be determined. When last proposed in the Senate in May by Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), the tax-extender bill featured approximately 50 measures, including investment and renewable energy tax credits, and totaled $85 billion in annual tax relief. The legislation is crucial to the expansion of offshore wind energy in the U.S., and it enjoyed overwhelming bipartisan approval.

But it ultimately foundered on the rocks and shoals of election year politics as Senate Republicans sought to add an amendment to repeal the Obamacare medical device tax, which Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) then blocked. After the midterm elections the tax extender bill should be voted upon. Whether it will include a repeal of the medical device tax or not will be of less consequence then. Thus the elections should clear the way for enactment of tax-extender legislation.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Other important maritime proposals remain. Will Congress extend the moratorium on the Environmental Protection Agency’s small vessel general permit scheduled to cover almost one million vessels in December? Also, the U.S. fleet trading internationally is pressing Congress to increase funding for the Maritime Security Program (MSP).

Representatives of industry and labor recently testified that while the domestic maritime industry is robust, the international U.S.-flag fleet faces strong headwinds caused by cuts in government cargoes, tax and regulatory policies, and the excess capacity plaguing international shipping. These challenges can be addressed by an increase in the MSP appropriation, reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank’s charter, and a restoration of the 75 percent cargo preference requirement for food aid cargoes.

After the midterms, Congress should enact these measures, which will not only aid the maritime industry but also strengthen both our nation’s security and its economy.