WASHINGTON -- Crises in Gaza, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine have dominated the news this summer and even grabbed the attention of many Americans who are usually indifferent to international affairs. Yet the events might as well be in a parallel universe for all the notice they are getting in this year's congressional campaigns.

Candidates are not raising such subjects in appearances or television ads, except for some Republicans who are broadly blaming President Obama, strategists in both parties say. Nor are local reporters or voters asking about them.

The focus, as in most nonpresidential election years, is on domestic issues -- jobs, health care, and the right to abortion and birth control -- that are closer to home for voters fatigued by more than a decade of military engagement abroad. In 2010, Republicans capitalized on voters' disgruntlement with a spotty economic recovery and Mr. Obama's just-signed health care law to capture a majority in the House and increase their Senate minority.

The recent debate over what to do about the surge of Central American children illegally crossing the border from Mexico is no exception, despite its foreign roots. Voters see the border turmoil as a domestic issue, something happening here rather than "over there," according to party strategists and independent analysts.

"We're in an interesting time," said Jennifer Duffy, who analyzes Senate and gubernatorial races for the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. "I'm not sure a decade ago what's going on in the world right now would be so ignored by the electorate. But I think that there's a lot of fatigue among voters, especially about war."

Ms. Duffy and David Wasserman, a Cook colleague who monitors House campaigns, said they had seen little reaction from candidates to the various international crises. Foreign policy and national security topics were not even among the top 20 subjects covered by 2014 political television advertisements through July 29, according to Kantar Media CMAG, which tracks such ads.

"Despite everything going on in the world, we're seeing almost none of it show up in campaign ads," said Elizabeth Wilner, the senior vice president for politics at Kantar Media Ad Intelligence. "The closest you get to foreign policy or national security are ads that mention U.S. dependence on foreign oil."

Citizens for Responsible Energy Solutions, an independent energy group supporting incumbent Republican senators, recently bought television time in Tennessee to benefit Senator Lamar Alexander in the state's Aug. 7 Republican primary. An ad opens with "International conflicts. The border crisis. America's security is threatened." before segueing to a pitch for Mr. Alexander and domestic energy sources.
Geoff Garin, a Democratic pollster, reached for a Cold War-era adage, "politics ends at the water's edge," to explain why campaigns have been mostly quiet on overseas conflicts, despite their potential importance. "Voters' interest ends at the border's edge," Mr. Garin said.

In recent years there have been breaks from the norm, showing that foreign policy can be pivotal to the outcome of midterm elections when voters see a direct threat to national security or believe Congress can change the direction of foreign policy. But those conditions are absent this year.

In 2002, with the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks fresh in Americans' minds, the country at war in Afghanistan and President George W. Bush seeking support to invade Iraq, Mr. Bush and congressional Republicans successfully made the midterm elections a referendum on which party could best safeguard national security. They won House and Senate majorities.

But in 2006, voters disillusioned with the Iraq war gave control of Congress to the Democrats, who promised to use Congress's budget powers to bring the troops home.

Now, both parties are war-weary. In December, the Pew Research Center's quadrennial survey, with the Council on Foreign Relations, of Americans' attitudes found that for the first time in a half-century, a majority -- 52 percent, including similar percentages of Republicans, Democrats and independents -- agreed that the nation should "mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own." A Pew poll in mid-July found that despite the United States' investment of lives and resources in Iraq, 55 percent of Americans said the country had no responsibility to "do something" about the sectarian violence there.

When foreign affairs have entered this year's midterm debate, they have generally been part of Republicans' broader indictment of the lame-duck president. Lately, Republicans have criticized Mr. Obama as disengaged, saying that while the global fires burn, he spends too much time outside Washington to raise campaign money and stump for domestic causes like job-creating infrastructure projects. Democrats, however, grouse to the White House if the president goes a day without talking about jobs or looks preoccupied with dead-end diplomacy.

Republicans "aren't running around campaigning about unrest in Gaza or mishandling of the situation in the Ukraine or the plane crash," said Brad Dayspring, a spokesman for Senate Republicans' campaign committee. But he added that some Republican candidates were "trying to paint a general state of incompetence in managing the government, and I think foreign policy plays into that pretty greatly."

Even Republicans seeking state office have campaigned against Mr. Obama. A recent advertisement for a Republican leader of the Tennessee House showed photographs of masked jihadis and Mr. Obama while a narrator intoned ominously: "In Obama's Washington, everything is headed in the wrong direction. But in Tennessee, we're on the right track."

Republicans would run a risk if they got too specific in criticizing Mr. Obama's foreign policy actions. While polls over the past year have shown that a majority of Americans disapprove of his handling of foreign policy over all, most -- including many Republicans -- share his aversion to getting drawn into particular hot spots like Syria and Ukraine and agree that it is time for "nation-building here at home."

Democrats acknowledge privately that the bewildering mix of international crises is not improving the party's prospects, considering that its November fortunes are tied, as is typical in a president's sixth year, to Mr. Obama's sagging popularity.

"What is dangerous for us," a Democratic strategist said, "is the extent to which there is a general sense of anxiety and angst about the world," which could reduce voter turnout.

While voters have shown little interest in foreign policy during this election cycle, that could change after the
November results are in and the 2016 presidential race gets underway. Then, Democrats and some Republicans predict, Republicans could struggle as their isolationist and interventionist factions square off in the nominating contest to replace Mr. Obama.


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GRAPHIC: CHART: Campaign Ads Are Quiet on Foreign Affairs: Despite several crises abroad, very few House and Senate advertisements this election cycle have mentioned foreign policy. The chart below shows topics referenced in 1,155 distinct television ads from Jan. 1 to July 29. Many ads referred to more than one. (Source: Campaign Media Analysis Group at Kantar Media)

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