

Count on Wide-Open 2016 Debate Over U.S.'s Role in the World

Republican candidates and Democrat Clinton differ substantively about projections of American power



ENLARGE

Republican presidential candidate Sen. Marco Rubio laid out in a recent speech an expansive formula for using American power to protect economic and national-security interests. *PHOTO: DAVID*

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By

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May 18, 2015 11:37 a.m. ET

The political world was obsessed last week with Jeb Bush's problems in saying whether he would or wouldn't have ordered the invasion of Iraq. But a more provocative statement about projection of American power actually came from a fellow presidential contender, Marco Rubio, in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"As president, I will use American power to oppose any violations of international waters, airspace, cyberspace or outer space," Sen. Rubio declared. "This includes the economic disruption caused when one country invades another, as well as the chaos caused by disruptions in chokepoints such as the South China Sea or the Strait of Hormuz."

That expansive formula for using American power to protect economic as well as national-security interests was, in turn, followed over the weekend by Sen. Rand Paul staking out a far less aggressive position at a Republican candidate forum in Iowa. He questioned whether ousting Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was a good idea under any conditions: "Is Iraq more stable or less stable after Saddam?"

Combine all that with the fact that Democrat Hillary Clinton seems inclined to show that she would be more aggressive than President Barack Obama has been abroad while also trying to avoid alienating her party's liberal (and largely anti-interventionist) base, and you can see something very significant breaking out: a wide-open 2016 debate over American intervention in the world.

In this emerging debate, there are no clear lines in either party. "It's not terribly useful to speak of a Democratic foreign policy or a Republican foreign policy because essentially you have Republican foreign policies, plural, and Democratic foreign policies, plural," says Richard Haass, a former State Department and White House aide who now is president of the Council on Foreign Relations.

This debate is the logical extension of a tumultuous decade and a half since the terror attacks of 9/11, when the old rule book about American intervention was thrown out without a new one to take its place. Fair or not, a common rap on President George W. Bush was that he was too eager to intervene abroad, and a common rap on President Barack Obama is that he hasn't been eager enough.

On one level, this isn't a new debate. "American history has been one of oscillation between two extremes: Pulling back from everything or getting involved in everything as if it's our fight," says James Steinberg, former deputy secretary of state who now is dean of the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.

But the backdrop has changed significantly. We now are in a post-Cold War world, where the threats to American security lie as much in nonstate actors as in hostile nations, where economic competition weighs as heavily as military competition and where the searing experience of long and unresolved wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has shaken easy assumptions about America's ability to steer events.

On the Republican side, those circumstances have opened a path for the arguments of Mr. Paul, who has found some traction within his usually hawkish party with his argument that the U.S. has been too eager to intervene around the world, especially in the Middle East. In essence, he seeks to take the GOP back to its early 20th century skepticism of America as global cop.

But the same circumstances also have produced the diametrically opposed views Mr. Rubio expressed in his speech last week. He laid out perhaps the most aggressive view of American power projection of any of the 2016 contenders. He said he would be guided as president by three "pillars"—a more robust military, use of American power to guard the global economy and use of that same power to promote American values.

In a question-and-answer session after his speech, Mr. Rubio said his formula referred to diplomatic power as much as military power, and the role he envisions "is not world's policeman." Still, his is an aggressive view of using American muscle by any standard. Other Republican contenders fall somewhere between the Paul and Rubio poles, as New Jersey

Gov. Chris Christie did in a Monday national-security speech in which he stressed the need to “strengthen existing alliances and build new ones” to cope with problem spots.

For her part, Mrs. Clinton faces some tough decisions. As secretary of state, she pushed for intervention in the civil war in Syria and, ultimately, became an advocate of a multinational military move into Libya to get rid of Moammar Gadhafi. She’s also been a proponent of keeping military options on the table in dealing with Iran’s nuclear program.

But she’ll also have to defend herself against Republican charges that she and her Obama administration colleagues were too eager to withdraw troops from Iraq, as well as the jibe Mr. Paul delivered from the opposite direction this weekend, that the Libya intervention was misguided.

In short, the debate over global intervention is on. You’ll need a new scorecard to keep it all straight.

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