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Rand Paul: Mugged by reality?

Forced to grapple with a shifting global landscape, he's trying to shed his dovish image.

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As Rand Paul announced his presidential campaign Tuesday, he called for a national defense “robust enough to defend against all attack, modern enough to deter all enemies, and nimble enough to defend our vital interests.” He also called for a “foreign policy that protects American interests and encourages stability — not chaos.”

Later this week, the Republican will speak in front of an aircraft carrier as part of his campaign roll-out. In the months ahead, he’ll talk far more frequently about foreign policy. He also is planning to issue a series of position papers on America’s role in the world.

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It’s all part of a campaign strategy to eliminate the widespread suspicion that the Kentucky senator is an isolationist echo of his father Ron Paul, the libertarian icon who frequently inveighed against U.S. intervention overseas.

But even as Rand Paul spoke Tuesday, a group calling for a more hawkish U.S. policy on Iran prepared to launch a \$1 million ad campaign casting him as weak on the issue. And to many foreign-policy conservatives, Paul’s past expressions of skepticism about U.S. intervention abroad and support for sweeping cuts to the defense and foreign-aid budgets speak more loudly than his words on the campaign trail.

“Rand Paul has been mugged by reality, and he’s adjusting a bit — but only a bit,” Weekly Standard editor William Kristol said. “From my point of view, he’s not really come to grips with the world as it is.”

Paul’s advisers insist that his views have matured since being elected to the Senate in 2010. He has spent months educating himself on international affairs and talking to leading experts, and he’s developed a “conservative realist” vision of America’s role in the world that is not isolationist but still judicious about U.S. entanglements overseas.

“I do believe quite honestly that at this stage in terms of foreign and national security policy he is probably the best prepared candidate of the field,” said Richard Burt, one of a core group of

foreign policy experts advising Paul. “He really has invested in this area, and now has I think much more confidence about talking about it and dealing with it.”

Paul may lose support from some libertarians who supported his father’s past campaigns for president and had put their White House hopes in his son. The Paul team’s goal, though, is to get enough support from enough slices of various constituencies — libertarians who are willing to compromise, conservatives who are tired of war, and maybe even some Democrats — to help power him through the race.

Paul, an ophthalmologist by training, was clearly influenced by his father’s views early on in his Senate career. In 2011, he proposed eliminating all foreign aid, including to Israel, insisting: “I just don’t think you can give people’s money away when we can’t rebuild bridges in our country.” As he seeks the presidency, he’ll likely face a wide and varied GOP field that includes candidates with far more hawkish views — some of whom openly disdain him.

Paul’s advisers say that since last spring he’s received a series of briefings on foreign policy and national security issues from experts from across the ideological spectrum — liberals, neoconservatives, and people in and out of government. He’s met with U.S. officials involved in the Iran nuclear talks, the German ambassador to the U.S. and Russian business leaders, said Burt, whose diplomatic career included serving as ambassador to Germany and as an assistant secretary of state for Europe.

The foreign policy eminences Paul has consulted include Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, and Brent Scowcroft, who served as national security adviser to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush and who was a leading critic of President George W. Bush’s Iraq war. According to Burt, Paul has also chatted briefly with Henry Kissinger, a former secretary of state who is a favorite go-to for White House hopefuls.

Paul is a voracious reader, his advisers say, wolfing down everything from think tank articles to lengthy memoirs. He’s read tomes by and about elder statesmen such as James Baker, Colin Powell and the late George Kennan. A prize-winning biography of Kennan written by John Lewis Gaddis appeared to have a notable impact on Paul’s thinking, his advisers said; Kennan was a foreign policy realist who argued that the U.S. must distinguish between its vital and its peripheral interests.

Whatever the reason — his ramped-up education about on-the-ground realities, worries that GOP donors and elites see him as weak on defense, or perhaps the impossible-to-ignore chaos in the Middle East — Paul has made a series of foreign policy-related moves over the past year that seem at odds with his earlier views.

For instance, he’s backed off on his past support for ending U.S. aid to Israel. In a Time magazine op-ed titled “Rand Paul: ‘I Am Not an Isolationist,’” he argued that President Barack Obama hasn’t been aggressive enough against Islamic State militants. Paul recently called for giving the Kurds who are battling the Islamic State their own country, although during his speech Tuesday he shunned the idea of nation-building.

Last month, Paul, who has previously proposed slashing the Pentagon, introduced a budget amendment that would increase defense spending over the next two years by \$190 billion. The

move, which would be funded by cutting other spending, put him in line with proposals by other likely presidential contenders such as Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, who has been styling himself as a national security hawk.

But Paul hasn't suddenly turned into a neoconservative.

He's spoken in favor of the Obama administration's move to normalize relations with Cuba, unlike Rubio and other prospective White House candidates such as former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.

He's supported the Iran nuclear talks, unlike others in the GOP 2016 field. (Paul did, however, sign on to a letter by GOP senators which appeared aimed at undercutting the talks, and he's struggled to explain that.. Over the weekend, potential 2016 GOP rival Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said the only Republican who could have negotiated a worse nuclear deal with Iran than Obama was Paul.

Paul's support for the Kurds includes giving them more weapons, but he doesn't feel the same about Syrian rebels for reasons that include fear the arms would land in the hands of extremists. He also insists the Obama administration was wrong to intervene in Libya.

In a speech last October at the Center for the National Interest, Paul referenced former President Ronald Reagan, Kennan and others as he laid out his case for "conservative realism," which essentially argues that the U.S. needs to be more picky about its foreign entanglements.

"War is necessary when America is attacked or threatened, when vital American interests are attacked and threatened, and when we have exhausted all other measures short of war," Paul said.

Lorne Craner, another key foreign policy adviser to Paul, argued that what the senator is calling for is not some brand new thing. "I think he's trying to revive a kind of moribund tradition in the Republican Party," said Craner, a former State Department official and past president of the International Republican Institute.

Aside from Craner and Burt, Paul's foreign and defense policy advisory team includes experts such as Rob Givens, a retired Air Force brigadier general; Elise Jordan, a writer and commentator who has worked for the National Security Council; and Janet Mullins Grissom, whose extensive policy and political resume includes working for Baker. The advisers converse with Paul on a regular basis; Burt and Craner each said they see him face-to-face at least once every two weeks.

Looking ahead to the presidential race, Craner said Paul would do more to spell out his foreign policy perspective to the public. Whether it's through TV morning shows, special speeches or as part of his stump speech, the Republican senator will hammer home that he is, as one aide put it, a "non-unnecessary interventionist."

Paul's backdrop during his South Carolina stop this week will be the aircraft carrier USS Yorktown, at Patriots Point, another sign that his team wants to make sure he's seen as strong on

defense. Craner also said position papers on national security and foreign policy issues will be a priority in the coming months.

Steve Munisteri, who left his position as chairman of the Texas Republican Party to serve as a senior adviser to Paul, said the first thing the candidate needs to do is “get out and campaign,” especially in Iowa and New Hampshire, “where people ask you very specific questions” in often small settings. He said he also would advise Paul to speak at venues such as college campuses to get across his message to range of potential supporters.

“Some candidates, when they come under further scrutiny and are asked tough questions, don’t do well. I think time and exposure is Rand Paul’s greatest ally,” Munisteri said.

At the same time, in trying to fashion a foreign policy that largely relies on examining each matter on a case-by-case basis, Paul risks coming across as muddled.

That can be especially frustrating for many libertarians, including those who have long supported his father and who could prove an important voting bloc for Rand Paul. (During a 2012 presidential debate, Ron Paul, when asked to describe himself in a single word, replied: “Consistent.”)

But David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of “The Libertarian Mind,” said that, to win, a politician such as Paul has to look beyond hard-core libertarians anyway. Boaz expressed personal disappointment in some of Paul’s recent positions, but ultimately, he said, many libertarians will admit that Paul is the most “non-interventionist major presidential candidate we’ve seen in years.”

Especially in the early states, Boaz added, Paul “has to make clear that he is patriotic, he is pro-American. A lot of times anti-interventionist sentiment from the left sounds anti-American.”

When it comes to libertarians, having someone like Ron Paul, a former Texas congressman, at your side or stumping on your behalf could be a great asset. But Munisteri suggested that is not likely to happen, since it’s clear that son and father aren’t always on the same page.

“Ron is going to say what he believes even if it contradicts Rand on an issue,” Munisteri said. “I think that it’s always a good idea not to have a surrogate unless that surrogate is 100 percent matched up on everything you’re saying.”