

# **GOP field struggles to define foreign policy**

By Michael O'Brien - 06/28/11 05:45 AM ET

The GOP presidential field is expressing its most divergent views on foreign policy in more than a decade, reflecting a degree of uncertainty over whether the party is backing away from the strong, interventionist policy that defined its last decade.

The field has no clear heir yet to that viewpoint, pioneered by former President George W. Bush and carried forward by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) in the 2008 White House race, although former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty (R) is best positioned to carry the banner, according to Republican foreign-policy observers.

“I think Pawlenty and his statements is the heir to the McCain-Reagan active, internationalist foreign policy that has characterized Republicans for a couple generations,” said Randy Scheunemann, a former adviser to McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign who’s advised former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin (R) in the past few years.

Pawlenty has sought to stake out the most hawkish stances in a field that’s shown reluctance to embrace the kind of muscular, interventionist foreign policy that has characterized the Republican Party in the past. He’ll have the opportunity to solidify that position with a major speech Tuesday at the Council on Foreign Relations.

After having faced criticism for his relative inexperience as a candidate, President Obama now boasts of foreign policy achievements — namely, the killing of Osama bin Laden and the surge of troops in Afghanistan. Ironically, most of the Republicans looking to unseat him are now struggling to burnish their foreign-policy credentials.

Some have sought to do so with trips — former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has traveled to Afghanistan, Pawlenty’s been to Israel, and the other candidates have made their own visits, too. But none has the extensive credentials of McCain, a longtime fixture on the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Affairs committees.

Whether that will affect the trajectory of the 2012 election, in which the economy is easily the top issue, remains unclear. Foreign-policy experience can be a factor in elections (Obama’s pick of then-Delaware Sen. Joe Biden as vice president in 2008 was assumed to be motivated by foreign policy), but is rarely decisive.

“I think there’s clearly been a change ... in the Republican candidates in the way they’re talking about these issues. They no longer sound like John McCain,” said David Boaz, an executive vice president at the Cato Institute and a critic of military intervention. “But where they’re actually coming down is not clear yet.”

Both advocates and opponents of the active, interventionist foreign policy agree that the Republican Party isn’t becoming “isolationist,” but that it’s certainly less unified in its approach.

On the issue of Afghanistan, for instance, most of the Republican hopefuls are reacting to decisions Obama has made as commander in chief instead of making pronouncements of their own. That could change Tuesday, however, during Pawlenty's speech on "the Arab Spring and recent decisions concerning U.S. involvement in Afghanistan."

One of the reasons Pawlenty stands out in the foreign-policy arena is because other candidates suffer from muddle, particularly the front-runner, Romney, who faces accusations of projecting too timid of a foreign-policy vision and one that's based on the direction of political winds.

Romney's always said that he supports the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan based on the advice of commanders on the ground, but he turned heads when he expressed skepticism during a debate earlier this month toward the lessons of the war there.

The former Massachusetts governor wasn't directly critical of Obama's Afghanistan speech on Wednesday night, but complained the president had set an "arbitrary timetable for withdrawal."

Romney said he'd wait for the testimony of military commanders, and a day later, after Adm. Mike Mullen and Gen. David Petraeus testified they recommended a less brisk withdrawal, Romney blasted Obama for failing to follow their advice, and "put[ting] at risk the success of our mission in Afghanistan."

But that hasn't satisfied Romney's critics, who accuse him of lacking boldness.

"Romney seems to be putting his finger in the wind and acting accordingly," said Marc Thiessen, a Washington Post columnist and former speechwriter for Bush.

It's not clear whether Romney is trying to occupy a more pragmatic part of the field left open when Govs. Haley Barbour (R-Miss.) and Mitch Daniels (R-Ind.), each of whom has expressed skepticism toward the rising costs of U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, decided not to run.

"It seems to me that on the part of the front-runner, Gov. Romney, it's still baby steps," said Boaz.

Part of the candidates' struggle is based on the absence of not having a clear figurehead to lead the party, leaving each to stake out his or her own turf.

Figures like Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas) have managed to build political support by shying away from the more hawkish wing of the GOP, and his efforts to drag the Republican Party in his direction have only exacerbated the muddle. He's a candidate for president, but he's viewed as something of a long-shot candidate.

And perhaps as a testament to the uncertainty over foreign policy in the GOP at the moment, Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), a strident critic of the operation in Libya, has been relatively quiet about Afghanistan. Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin (R) has been similarly silent.

An exception has been Jon Huntsman (R), the former ambassador to China, who's taken a bolder position on the Afghanistan war, calling for an even quicker withdrawal of U.S. troops than Obama had ordered.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), meanwhile, is trying to chart what his advisers argue is a completely different path from Obama and his Republican competitors.

He's called for an overarching review of U.S. military strategy that would encompass and tie together U.S. military engagements abroad.

*John T. Bennett contributed.*