

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Bob Corker's Challenge on Capitol Hill

W. James Antle III February 22, 2013

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Two new Republican members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have recently given speeches describing their foreign-policy views in detail. Florida senator Marco Rubio warned the Brookings Institution of a growing isolationist strand within his party. Kentucky Republican senator Rand Paul argued for a return to conservative realism.

Conspicuously missing from this short list is Tennessee senator Bob Corker, who is the committee's new ranking Republican. Corker has been less vocal about his foreign-policy preferences, at least in public, to the consternation of some Republicans who would like to know more. "He is somewhere between [Rubio and Paul] on the spectrum," says Heritage Foundation senior research fellow Steven Groves.

That of course leaves a great deal of room for interpretation, especially on a committee that also includes Arizona senator John McCain, the hawkish 2008 Republican presidential nominee. McCain, Paul and Rubio are forceful personalities for Corker to try and keep on one page as ranking member.

When the past ranking member, senator Richard Lugar, lost his Republican primary last year, Corker wasted no time in letting it be known that he coveted the top spot himself. But the circumspect Tennessean was viewed with suspicion by some GOP hawks, who saw him as being too skeptical of foreign military interventionism for their tastes.

Corker backed the Obama administration on the New START nuclear-arms treaty, which most Republicans opposed. He is viewed as cautious about U.S. involvement in foreign civil wars and has publicly expressed doubts that the Obama administration's drone-strike program is legal. Oklahoma senator Jim Inhofe, a more hawkish Republican, considered vying with Corker for ranking member.

But Corker, the only Republican to win a genuinely competitive Senate race in the Democratic year of 2006, was also a steadfast supporter of the Iraq war. He has urged Obama not to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan until after that country's 2014 elections. Corker did express some doubts about the

2009 Afghan surge, telling Agence France-Presse, “I have no idea what [the strategy] is, other than sending additional troops. I hope we dig a lot deeper.”

The Tennessean has certainly dug deep when it comes to traveling abroad, visiting 48 foreign countries by the end of last year, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan three times apiece. Corker also reportedly spoke to many Republican foreign-policy thinkers in the run-up to succeeding Lugar, including realists and neoconservatives alike.

Corker told Foreign Policy’s Josh Rogin, “quietly we’ve done a significant amount of travel throughout the world to understand issues more deeply, we’ve had meetings and briefings with numbers of people with varying backgrounds and have really tried to immerse ourselves in such a way that if I am the person, I have the ability to be effective.”

Christopher A. Preble, vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, would certainly agree with the “quietly” part. “I’m waiting to see how he votes on the Hagel nomination and perhaps how he treats Rand Paul,” says Preble. “For now, at least from my perspective, he seems to be keeping a low profile.”

The nomination of Chuck Hagel, a former Republican senator from Nebraska, for defense secretary has become a flashpoint among his former GOP colleagues. Corker joined a large majority of Republicans in blocking Hagel, who became an Iraq war skeptic, though he said he was open to allowing the nomination to ultimately proceed to a majority vote. Only four Republicans voted to end debate on Hagel’s nomination.

Despite an infusion of Tea Party freshmen who expressed at least some willingness to scrutinize the Pentagon budget and the interventions it funds, the Hagel fight suggests many Republicans have barely moved from their Bush-era positions. McCain used much of Hagel’s committee testimony to relitigate the Iraq war, while Texas Republican freshman senator Ted Cruz was surprisingly hawkish in his questioning as a candidate who had been endorsed by fellow Texan—and strict noninterventionist—Ron Paul.

The Hagel nomination is outside of Corker’s jurisdiction, but it is a window into the foreign-policy views of many of the Republicans he will lead. While Corker hasn’t been out front on these issues, has been praised for improving relations between committee staff and the staff members for individual Republican members.

Republicans describe Lugar as cordial, but his frequent alliances with Democratic members caused strains. Corker's more predictably Republican posture, when compared to his six-term internationalist predecessor, has led to greater staff comity. "Even when he supported New START, his support wasn't knee-jerk or immediate," Groves says. "Lugar came out in favor before it was even transmitted to the Senate."

Another example Groves gives illustrating the new regime's differences with Lugar is Corker's opposition to the United Nations Disabilities Treaty. "He voted against something that could be described as giving benefits to the disabled," Groves adds. "That's not an easy vote."

It is widely expected that Corker will try to step up the Foreign Relations Committee's oversight of the State Department. The senator has been particularly critical of the Obama administration's handling of the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. After returning from a trip to Libya, Jordan and the Syrian border, he declared, "I am convinced more and more that al-Qaida, its affiliates and other violent extremist organizations continue to be a serious threat to America and other countries around the world who share our democratic values."

It remains to be seen how much Corker can do with just a minority of the committee's members—and a fractious lot at that. Nor can anyone foresee what international events might completely alter the committee's agenda. Nevertheless, it seems as if anything that would move the Senate Republicans more decisively from the foreign policy of George W. Bush won't be an easy vote.