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The Rubio ‘doctrine’: it’s either him or the ‘global chaos’ of Obama and Clinton

In announcing his bid for the presidency, the Florida senator sought to draw a line between him and his Republican opponents on foreign policy – but is it enough to simply serve up scathing critiques of Obama’s failures?

By Sabrina Siddiqui

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For months, Marco Rubio has positioned himself as the defense hawk rising from the Republican rubble – a John McCain for the millennial set.

The junior senator from Florida has taken his position on the powerful Foreign Relations Committee to remind the world that he would re-open the prison at Guantánamo Bay, defend the NSA’s dragnet surveillance and “stand up” against North Korea.

Rubio has adopted the “Obama-Clinton foreign policy” line used by Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz and raised them an Ayatollah. Anything less than the “Rubio doctrine”, he says, would be “chaos”.

The highly public ramp-up of his borderless credentials has built to this moment: a self-made politician is now, at 43 years old, attempting a long-shot bid to secure his party’s nomination for president as a veteran of global affairs.

But foreign policy experts warn that if Rubio’s ultimate campaign plan is to simply serve up scathing critiques of Barack Obama’s failures – and by proxy those of Hillary Clinton, whom he calls “the architect” – he’ll have to do a better sales job if he wants to stand a chance against a former secretary of state.

“Too many of our leaders and their ideas are stuck in the 20th century,” Rubio said in a clear dig at Clinton on Monday, announcing his candidacy in Miami the day after she entered the race with a decidedly domestic pitch. “They have forgotten that when America fails to lead, global chaos inevitably follows, so they appease our enemies, betray our allies and weaken our military.”

After laying the groundwork on Sunday talk shows and the Senate floor, the Miami unveil served as the first openly presidential platform for Rubio to lay out a vision for America’s role on the

world stage that is at once openly interventionist and politically confrontational: likening Clinton to “a leader from yesterday”, Rubio soaked up major applause lines while criticizing a nuclear deal with Iran, the Obama administration’s souring relationship with Israel and renewed US ties with Cuba.

Just don’t try to call him inexperienced.

“President Obama’s been a failure not because he was only in the Senate for four years – he’s been a failure because his ideas are bad,” Rubio said in an interview on Fox News after his announcement. “I don’t care if he had been in the Senate for 50 years; if he had done what he’s done now, he would have failed, too. His ideas don’t work.”

Rubio has been espousing his foreign policy ideas on the airwaves since about a year ago, when he burst back onto the scene with an impassioned speech on the Senate floor against human and civil rights abuses in Cuba and Venezuela. Rubio has since emerged – especially amidst the thaw with Havana – as one of the most vocal skeptics of Obama’s foreign policy, dubbing the president “the worst negotiator” since Jimmy Carter.

Along with his fellow Republican presidential contenders who think they can go hawk-to-hawk against Clinton in a general election, Rubio has extended the attacks on Obama’s global legacy directly to the former secretary of state.

“In many respects I think it’s going to be a continuation,” he told Fox News on Monday. “You have to assume she’s going to continue his trajectory in terms of foreign policy positions.”

While Obama’s foreign policy may barely pass muster in the polls, experts said even relatively inexperienced Republicans – governors and junior senators alike – need to pass certain tests themselves.

“It’s not enough to criticize what has been done or what the other person proposes to do – you have to have a credible case of your own,” Christopher Preble, vice-president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, told the Guardian. “What do you believe are the criteria for the use of force, and under what circumstances should the US military be involved in other conflicts?”

For Rubio, that test often means using his position on the Senate foreign relations and intelligence committees to oppose the actions of the Obama administration. Most recently, he co-sponsored a bill that would allow Congress to reject a nuclear deal with Iran. He has also floated an amendment that would force Iran to recognize Israel’s right to exist as part of any agreement.

Rubio has been vehemently opposed to the Obama administration’s decision to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba, citing his personal background as the son of Cuban immigrants. He supported arming Syrian rebels but voted against a Senate resolution proposing US military

intervention in 2013, and has tied Obama's response to the civil war to the rise of the Islamic State.

The views are largely consistent with most members of the growing 2016 Republican field, save for the libertarian-leaning Rand Paul, who has advocated for a more isolationist approach. But Rubio and his advisers have said his foreign policy experience tops that of prospective opponents from within his own party.

Elliott Abrams, a former adviser to George W Bush and Ronald Reagan who has also advised Rubio on foreign policy, told the Guardian that Rubio's presence on the two Senate committees had allowed him to better understand not just the specific issues facing the country but also how to craft policy in response.

"Republicans have a choice to make between people who have been governors – like Rick Perry, Jeb Bush and Scott Walker, and therefore have executive experience – and people like Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio who have much more foreign policy experience," Abrams said.

"If it's a governor who's never served in a foreign policy position, they're going to have to make the argument that they do have relevant experience – and more relevant experience for being president than Hillary Clinton does."

Most polling indicates an uphill battle for Rubio against the likes of Bush, Walker and Paul. But top GOP aides believe he is the most gifted orator in the race, and many have privately said Rubio is the party's second choice for the nomination – leaving room for him to rise should Bush or other early front-runners stumble.

"I am prepared to debate foreign policy with anyone else running on this race," he said on Fox. "We don't just have speeches – we can tell you specifically what laws we would pass or repeal on each one of these issues. I think that's what distinguishes us."

If he did survive a primary, Rubio would have to contend with just how many of his foreign policy views are out of step with the broader American electorate. The majority of the US public remains war-weary after decade-long missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, unless there is a compelling national security interest.

Millennials are especially opposed to military intervention, a factor that has made Paul the leading Republican contender among a younger cohort of voters – even though Rubio is the youngest candidate in the race and has cast himself as part of a new generation of leadership.

Clinton, of course, is perceived by Democrats as just as hawkish as some Republicans and was defeated by Obama in 2008 in part for holding what voters saw at the time as an outdated approach to foreign policy, plus a vote for the Iraq war. This time around, she could be dragged down by Obama again for the opposite reason – being linked to his policies as a former member of his administration.

“She’s not merely in his party but executing, and in some cases crafting, the foreign policy of his administration,” Preble said. “It’s going to be hard for her to shift the blame elsewhere.”

Americans continue to disapprove of Obama’s efforts to defeat the Islamic State and his foreign policy overall. For Rubio, the challenge will be to prove to the American people that Clinton is equally to blame for their frustration, while making the case his are the answers they’ve been waiting for – or else.

“A Rubio doctrine would be that the United States is the indispensable power on the planet,” the senator told Fox News host Sean Hannity. “In the absence of American leadership, the result is a vacuum. That vacuum is filled by chaos.”