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Rand Paul to walk fine line in his first foreign policy speech of 2016 campaign

Statements ahead of the senator's foreign policy speech paint a picture of ambiguity on national security issues born of two masters: the Republican base and his libertarian pedigree. Is it possible for Paul to serve both?

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Without realizing it, the Drug Enforcement Agency has raised the stakes for Rand Paul's presidential campaign.

Paul, the libertarian-pedigreed Kentucky senator vying for the Republican nomination, threw a gauntlet in his Tuesday announcement speech. On "day one" of a Paul administration, he declared, he will end ... some aspect of dragnet surveillance. Paul is expected to flesh out more of his foreign policy and national security stances – which have shifted as he has prepared for his run – in front of the USS Yorktown near Charleston, South Carolina, on Thursday.

Within hours of Paul's campaign announcement, USA Today revealed that the breadth of the security agencies' surveillance dragnets is even broader than NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden indicated. For 21 years, the DEA secretly maintained a warrantless stockpile of the records of Americans' international calls, a prelude to the NSA's domestic phone metadata troves that may be ongoing in different form. Methods originally justified for the drug war were repackaged for the war on terrorism.

The question now confronting Paul, whose political biography has been about restraining the most coercive aspects of government power that many Republicans laud, is how thoroughly he intends to dismantle a surveillance infrastructure whose roots run deep and wide. Paul's foreign policy speech on Thursday ought to be a barometer for any effort to back away from his typically sweeping national security critiques.

There is, for instance, ambiguity in Paul's day-one pledge. Contrary to how many pundits understood his speech, Paul did not promise to stop NSA surveillance. He did not even promise to stop all NSA bulk surveillance. Collecting "phone records of law-abiding citizens" as none of the government's "damn business" is just one of the NSA's dragnets, the one that exclusively concerns Americans, and the one where a consensus for rollback already exists.

The DEA dragnet is different. As reported, it collects, without warrants, records of Americans' international calls, similar to an NSA power blessed by a 2008 change to surveillance law. Would Paul ban that? His campaign did not clarify.

Mass surveillance is a national security issue on which Paul has his footing. He has appeared less sure of himself on several others in the four years he has spent in the Senate.

Paul, in 2011, advocated capping the growth of defense spending. Last month, Paul proposed boosting it by \$190m over the next two years. (An aide argued to Bloomberg's Dave Weigel that Paul has been consistent.) That same 2011 proposal pledged to "eliminate all international [foreign aid] assistance", something Paul walked back during a Wednesday appearance on NBC's Today show.

A politician with national attention from the start of his Senate career in 2011, Paul has been sanding down the edges of his foreign policy. A 2013 speech at the Heritage Foundation sounded more dovish notes than all other Republicans of similar stature, but still talked about an open-ended war against "radical Islam" – a note he re-emphasized in his announcement speech – and kept bombing Iran "on the table" in the event of failed nuclear diplomacy. (The same speech praised what Paul called "strategic ambiguity", which may explain some of the evolution.)

Paul's stance on foreign interventions – a last resort, and only with a credible plan – is beginning to blur as well. He opposed Barack Obama's 2011 campaign to oust Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, which has left Libya the kind of charnel house it was intended to prevent. He opposed Obama's 2013 proposal to bomb Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. In the past several months, he has been open to bombing the Islamic State, but has been vague on whether he will vote for congressional authorization of the broader anti-ISIS war.

On Wednesday, Paul told Savannah Guthrie on the Today show that he would "keep an open mind" about the prospective nuclear deal with Iran and testily backed off a 2007 quote characterizing Iran as a negligible threat. Yet Paul made clear his instincts, unlike his expected rivals for the nomination, are to keep the US out of a new war: "I am in favor of negotiations over war and I think have been one of the reasonable people in our party who has not been beating the drums for war."

"In the past, he has exhibited a skepticism toward the argument that intervention is almost certain to make a bad situation better," said Christopher Preble, a foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute who shares that skepticism.

GOP hawks remain Paul's bane. Some of his moderated positions appear to account for their opposition, yet that opposition shows no sign of ebbing: Bloomberg's Josh Rogin reported the architect of the 2004 smears on John Kerry's Vietnam record will create ads portraying Paul as weak on Iran.

"In spite of the unpopularity of the wars they've advocated, they continue to have enormous influence in the leadership of the Republican Party," Preble said.

The Yorktown speech will be one early indication of Paul's 2015-era security views. The next will concern surveillance.

On 1 June, if Congress does nothing, the legal authorities underlying the NSA's domestic phone surveillance dragnet will expire. Paul forcefully opposed renewing them in 2011, and his announcement speech heralded his ongoing opposition.

Yet, surprisingly, Paul voted against a bill last year that arguably would have done less to constrain the dragnets. With the DEA's additional surveillance practices – and their ongoing authorities – now on display, Paul faces a choice about how far to cast his surveillance skepticism, and however he chooses risks alienating some portion of the Republican base.

Paul's position is reminiscent of Barack Obama's first presidential bid. His loud rejection of the Iraq war raised popular expectations that he would move US statecraft in a more dovish direction. Yet Obama also promised to escalate the Afghanistan war and pursue al-Qaida around the globe, which turned out to be the more reliable guide to his foreign policy.