

CONFLICT IN SYRIA

Vote on Syria Sets Up Foreign Policy Clash Between 2 Wings of G.O.P.



Senators John McCain, left, and Lindsey Graham after meeting with President Obama on Monday to discuss an attack on Syria. Both senators favor intervention.

By [JONATHAN MARTIN](#)

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WASHINGTON — The Congressional vote on whether to strike Syria will offer the best insight yet on which wing of the Republican Party — the traditional hawks, or a growing bloc of noninterventionists — has the advantage in the fierce internal debates over foreign policy that have been taking place all year.

Republican divisions on national security have flared over the use of drones, aid to Egypt and the surveillance practices of the National Security Agency, and the tensions have played out publicly in battles between Senator John McCain of Arizona, a former Navy pilot and Vietnam prisoner of war, and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, a libertarian-leaning freshman. Mr. McCain memorably called Mr. Paul and his compatriots [“wacko birds.”](#) and Mr. Paul suggested that hawks like Mr. McCain were [“moss covered.”](#)

But those intermittent spats could pale in comparison with the fight over whether to attack Syria, an issue on which Mr. McCain, a former Republican

presidential candidate, and Mr. Paul, a possible contender in 2016, will almost certainly be the leading spokesmen for their party's two wings.

Mr. McCain has long advocated intervention in Syria's civil war. After meeting with President Obama at the White House on Monday, he said that it would be "catastrophic" if Congress did not approve the president's proposal and that such a rejection would result in the United States's credibility being "shredded."

Mr. Paul on Sunday made clear his opposition to Mr. Obama's proposal, taking to Twitter and the talk shows to taunt Secretary of State John Kerry.

"John Kerry is, you know, he's famous for saying, you know, how can you ask a man to be the last one to die for a mistake?" Mr. Paul said. "I would ask John Kerry, how can you ask a man to be the first one to die for a mistake?"

A top aide to Mr. Paul said Sunday that the senator would mount a lobbying campaign in the House, where senior leaders like Mike Rogers, Republican of Michigan, who is the chairman of the Intelligence Committee, will face off against a new vanguard of members like Justin Amash, Republican of Michigan, who are opposed to what they see as risky foreign entanglements.

But even Republicans who are not active supporters of Mr. Paul recognize that the country and their party are susceptible to a come-home-America message at a moment of war weariness and, among conservatives, profound distrust toward Mr. Obama.

"Americans have become increasingly inured to events thousands of miles away, within a distant and disconnected culture," said a longtime Republican strategist, Alex Castellanos, citing a nation "exhausted by crises." "They know our country is already overextended and doubt leaders who tell them there are 'no good options' but demand we choose one anyway."

As a result, Mr. Castellanos said, "Rand Paul is actually in sync with a crisis-weary America and a fatigued G.O.P."

Mr. Paul is very much aware that the vote offers just that chance to reorient, at least for now, the Republican center on foreign affairs. And the debate gives him the chance to re-establish himself as the leading voice of the libertarian-leaning Tea Party movement after months in which Senator Ted Cruz of Texas has won significant attention.

To Republicans concerned about next year's midterm elections, such a divisive public battle amounts to a distraction. They would prefer to focus on issues that voters say they are most interested in: taxes, spending, Mr. Obama's health care law.

But the Syria measure also has important implications for the 2016 Republican presidential contest. White House hopefuls in Congress will be forced to choose between the wishes of Tea Party activists opposed to a strike and the wishes of more traditional Republicans, whose ranks include some major donors and Israel supporters with whom presidential candidates typically align themselves.

And as the hawks are aware, a "yea" vote on taking action in Syria would put potential opponents of Mr. Paul, like Senator Marco Rubio of Florida and Mr. Cruz, on the same side as Mr. Obama.

Dan Senor, a Republican strategist and foreign policy hand in President George W. Bush's administration, lamented the trend of what he called "neo-isolationism" in either the Democratic or Republican Party when it does not hold the White House. But he acknowledged that the current mood of Republicans left Mr. Paul in a better position.

"He is a skilled enough politician to tap into these sentiments and take advantage of them," Mr. Senor said.

Senior House Republican aides said there was little appetite in conservative districts for a strike on Syria, and, as one put it, "the administration doesn't have one red cent of credibility in the bank" with members of Congress.

This is precisely what worries Republicans who support a more hawkish foreign policy.

"We cannot make this about the president versus Congress or him shuffling off responsibility," Mr. Rogers, the Michigan Republican, [said Sunday](#) on "State of the Union" on CNN. "We can have all of those debates at another time. This is really about the credibility of the United States of America standing up for an antiproliferation and use of chemical and biological weapons."

The hope among these interventionists is that they can make the vote less about enabling a despised Democratic president and more about sending a

message not just to Syria but also to a potentially more dangerous nation: Iran.

“Right now, the easy Republican vote looks like the vote against Obama,” said Michael Goldfarb, a neoconservative lobbyist and writer. “Ten days from now, a vote against Obama could look like a vote for Assad, especially if Republicans succeed in blocking U.S. action, and Assad goes on to prevail, having used chemical weapons, with Iran at his side.”

Mr. Goldfarb’s message to Congressional Republicans is this: “Voting to let an Iranian proxy keep killing his own people with weapons of mass destruction may be as risky as it sounds.”

Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina also raised the danger from Iran on Monday afternoon after he and Mr. McCain met with Mr. Obama. “The connection between Syria and Iran is clear as a bell,” Mr. Graham said.

Mr. Graham, a longtime friend and ally of Mr. McCain, also had a message for those he called the libertarians: “Fortress America I just don’t think will work.”

Two potential Republican presidential candidates in 2016, Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey and Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin, both expressed concern at a governors’ forum in July about the rising strength of national security libertarianism among Republicans, but they have so far kept quiet about Syria.

There will be many more votes and debates between the Syria resolution and the 2016 primaries. And the hawks note that although Mr. Obama defeated Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2008 in part because of her support for the Iraq war resolution, another Democratic presidential nominee, Mr. Kerry in 2004, fended off a liberal threat in a more dovish party even though he backed the same measure.

“Isolationist tendencies don’t do well in American politics over the long run,” Mr. Senor said.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 2, 2013

An earlier version of this article misstated the Sunday morning program from which Representative Mike Rogers, Republican of Michigan, was quoted. It was “State of the Union” on CNN, not “Face the Nation” on CBS.