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Jeff Schapiro

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Tim Kaine twice planned to quit politics. Opportunity twice persuaded him otherwise.

In 2000, Kaine was readying to retire as Richmond mayor, capping six years in a contentious City Hall. Emily Couric was dying of cancer. She shut down her campaign for lieutenant governor, urging Kaine to run in her stead the following year. He won, positioning himself to grab the governorship four years later.

In 2009, Kaine was looking beyond elective office. He’d been considered by Barack Obama for vice president and later was Democratic national chairman. Then, Jim Webb said he was quitting the Senate after a single term. Webb implored Kaine to run in his stead in
2012. He won, opening — quite literally — a world of opportunities.

After about eight months in Washington, Kaine is the Senate’s eyes and ears on the Middle East — and just in time for a dramatic turn: possible U.S. military action against the Syrian government for attacking civilians with chemical weapons in a grim escalation of the nation’s civil war.

Kaine, the kid from the Midwest who came of age in the South, is the new chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee that oversees American policy in a crescent that extends from Morocco in the west to Bangladesh in the east and includes every trouble spot in between.

Sitting in his dimly lighted office in downtown Richmond on Monday, Kaine said that a United States weary of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot rule out armed intervention in Syria. But in considering an attack, Kaine said, the Obama administration must consult with Congress and seek its OK.

Kaine last month joined Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, in urging a streamlining of the War Powers Resolution of 1973. It lays out a process — long disputed — through which the executive and legislative branches determine whether and when our country goes to war.

“If you don’t go on the board on some kind of military action … why have a Congress?” said Kaine, the father of a Marine second lieutenant in basic training at the Marine Corps base in Quantico.

Kaine sees U.S. military action against President Bashar Assad as a logical next step, albeit “very problematic because of the nature of the Syrian opposition.” It is riddled with elements of the al-Qaida terror network, a foreboding sign for a possible post-Assad government. That is why the opposition must demonstrate it is inclusive, said Kaine, affirming a stance by the full Foreign Relations Committee.

There is much on the line for the U.S. in the Middle East and Asia. These are regions, as the Arab Spring and its troubling aftermath in Egypt and Libya demonstrate, where it may now be easier to discuss representative democracy, but it remains difficult to implement, certainly by Western standards.

In a world no longer shaped by the Cold War struggle, said Kaine, “there is still a great clamor, ‘What is the United States going to do?’ And to the extent folks don’t get the answer they like, it hurts our credibility with them. The perception is less important than what is the right thing to do as we define it.”

On American policy toward Egypt, where the military toppled the popularly elected
Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, Kaine is doing what some might consider unexpected: He is breaking with his friend in the White House.

Kaine and Obama have close ties. They share Midwestern roots, having grandparents who grew up in the same town. Kaine was the first Southern governor to endorse Obama for the Democratic nomination in 2008.

Kaine said Washington should cut all aid to Egypt, including $1.3 billion in direct assistance. A freeze is increasingly popular in Congress but resisted by Obama. The administration, instead, is canceling joint military exercises and delaying delivery of U.S.-built fighter jets.

Kaine said Saudi Arabia’s decision to provide Egypt $12 billion in financial aid is diminishing U.S. leverage. But, he said, Washington should be working with the “modernizing camp within the Egyptian military that wants to move to small-d democracy.”

Kaine’s new role in foreign relations, coupled with his assignment to the Armed Services Committee, represents a continuum for Virginia, which has long had a say in the Senate on matters military and diplomatic.

Harry F. Byrd Jr., John W. Warner, Chuck Robb and Webb could be quiet or outspoken voices, but always firm.

Unlike some of his predecessors, Kaine does not bring to his latest assignment credentials that might suggest a nodding familiarity with the issues. For example, he did not serve in the military. But as a high school and law student, he was a missionary in Honduras, learning and living the challenges of the struggling Central American nation and, in the process, mastering Spanish.

It is a useful skill for a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. After formal meetings with the president of Peru, a country roiled by a debate over the world’s access to its vast natural gas reserves, Kaine and his guest had an opportunity to speak directly, without translators and handlers.

It was, for Kaine, yet another opportunity.

Contact Jeff E. Schapiro at (804) 649-6814. His column appears Wednesday and Sunday. Watch his video column Thursday on TimesDispatch.com. Follow him on Twitter.com/ @RTDSchapiro. Listen to his analysis 8:33 a.m. Friday on WCVE (88.9 FM).
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