



Marco Rubio's hawkish foreign policy a centerpiece of his accelerating campaign

By Chris Adams

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Sen. Marco Rubio, whose muscular foreign policy doesn't hesitate to exert U.S. influence or military might around the world, revved up an audience in South Carolina recently by referring to a line from the movie thriller "Taken."

That's the one where actor Liam Neeson vows to track down the people who had kidnapped his daughter. The same approach should be applied to global terrorists, said the Florida senator and presidential candidate.

"We will look for you," Rubio went on, "we will find you, and we will kill you."

A simple applause line from a Hollywood blockbuster says a lot about Rubio's foreign policy, which has been central to his rise in Washington. It's an approach that puts Rubio, a first-term Republican from West Miami, Fla., in the mainstream of his party's thinking. But he's also shown himself willing to go further than even his hawkish colleagues, and in some cases – such as his push-back on administration policy on Cuba – when there might not be a political advantage to doing so.

"What differentiates him from the rest of the field?" asked Christopher A. Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank. "They're all hawkish – just not to the extent he is. He's a very strong supporter of intervention generally, and supported the use of force by President Obama as well as President Bush, even at a time it wasn't politically popular."

Rubio has, he said, "an aggressive enthusiasm for intervention abroad."

Rubio's views will be on display this week in what could be a pivotal speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, a nonpartisan think tank that [will host Rubio Wednesday in New York](#) to "discuss the role of the United States in the 21st century."

It's being billed as his first policy speech since Rubio announced his run for president last month. And it will be before heavyweights of foreign policy and political circles.

With the spotlight on him, political analysts say, Rubio needs to articulate a broad foreign policy vision. So far, the senator has relied on his position on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as one way to demonstrate his policy credentials.

That, they said, is only a start.

"He's citing his committee assignment in the Senate to suggest he is better informed than the governor-candidates, but that's not enough to convince people he understands the world," said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.

"Rubio is generally seen as hawkish, certainly compared to Rand Paul," he added, referring to the Kentucky Republican senator also running for president. "Mostly this is due to his hard-line positions on Cuba and Venezuela, but Rubio needs to fill out the foreign policy picture as the campaign goes along."

Since coming to Washington in 2011, Rubio clearly has been willing to take risks, both challenging the White House and at times members of his own party.

His views, articulated in speeches since becoming a senator, look back to the post-World War II era and note that interventionist U.S. policy made the world "vastly more peaceful and prosperous" than at any other time in recorded history.

"So this is the world America made, but what is the role for America now?" he asked in 2012. "Is now finally the time for us to mind our own business? Is now the time for us to allow others to lead? Is now the time for us to play the role of equal partner?"

In a word, no. He has urged military action or support in Libya and Syria, for example, and supported giving authorization to the president to take [the military steps necessary to destroy Islamic State terrorists in Iraq](#). He has been supportive of foreign aid – something often targeted by conservative deficit hawks – and has said U.S. leadership in the world doesn't have to be just through its military.

"When done so effectively, in partnership with the private sector, with faith-based organizations, and our allies, foreign aid is a very cost-effective way not only to export our values and our example, but to advance our security and economic interests," [he said in 2012](#).

With some exceptions, his overall worldview matches many of his Republican competitors. The advantage Rubio has, according to Richard S. Conley, an associate professor of political science

at the University of Florida, is experience: “He’s pretty astute on these issues – in ways other candidates aren’t.”

Another way Rubio differs is his attention southward, to Cuba and Venezuela – even though experts said doing so offers little long-term political advantage.

On Venezuela, the South American country in the midst of a crackdown by an oppressive regime, [Rubio played a pivotal role in pushing the Obama administration](#) to eventually slap sanctions on seven Venezuelan officials.

On Cuba, Rubio has been a [strong voice in opposition to efforts by President Barack Obama](#) and many in Congress to thaw relations and boost travel and trade with the island nation. Despite urging by a business community interested in opening new markets in Cuba, [Rubio has said the freedom of oppressed people in Cuba](#) is “more important than the desires of some business interests to go to Cuba and make some bucks.”

His passion for those issues – of vital interest to Cubans and Venezuelans who, like Rubio, call South Florida home – could end up being a distraction on the Republican presidential trail.

“Those issues won’t resonate very much with primary voters in Iowa and New Hampshire,” said Darrell West, vice president and director of governance studies at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. “They are focused on bigger picture problems of Russia, Iran and ISIS. . . . The senator needs to redirect his attention to those issues, because candidates need to address the issues about which voters are worried. Most Americans aren’t that concerned about Cuba.”

But voters will be paying attention to foreign policy preferences. Asked in a late-April [NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll](#) which issues “should be the top priority for the federal government,” likely GOP primary voters put “national security and terrorism” in the top spot; among Democrats, it ranked fourth.