



Rubio, Paul Highlight GOP's Foreign Policy Divide

By [Scott Conroy](#) - March 3, 2014

As last month's tense standoff in Ukraine morphed into a full-blown international crisis over the weekend, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio led the Republican charge in criticizing President Obama's handling of the situation and calling for a much tougher line against Russia.

First, in a Politico [column](#) on Saturday, Rubio outlined eight steps that he said the White House should take to “punish Russia” for its incursion into the Crimean Peninsula.

Then, in an [appearance](#) on “Meet the Press” the following day, the Florida Republican doled out more of the “heavy criticism” he said the administration deserves while also outlining the case for rethinking the U.S.-Russian relationship.

“They're increasingly behaving like an enemy of international peace and international norms,” Rubio said of the Putin regime. “If you look after the end of World War II and certainly through the Cold War era, the spread of democracy and freedom and established norms for nations to interact with one another so that we would never have another world war -- Russia doesn't, under this President Putin, does not seem interested in any of that. And they are, certainly as it regards to that, an enemy of the United States.”

This depiction was a stark yet unsurprising one, in that it came from one of the leading GOP advocates for a robust projection of U.S. power on the international stage.

Equally revealing -- and unsurprising -- in his response to the Ukraine crisis has been Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, a likely rival to Rubio in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries.

From his opposition to intervention in Libya and Syria to his calls for cuts in the defense budget, Paul has been the standard-bearer in Washington for the Republican Party's ascendant non-interventionist wing, which has shaken up the internal foreign policy debate within the GOP in recent years.

Early last week, Paul could not have sounded a more different note from Rubio's than when the Kentucky senator told [The Washington Post](#) that the U.S. should seek a “respectful” relationship with Russia.

"Some on our side are so stuck in the Cold War era that they want to tweak Russia all the time, and I don't think that is a good idea," he said.

As the crisis in the Crimea continued to escalate, Paul issued a [statement](#) Friday advising the Russians to abide by their past commitments to Ukraine's territorial integrity.

"Economic incentives align against Russian military involvement in Ukraine," he said. "Russia, which has begun to experience the benefits of expanded trade with World Trade Organization accession, should think long and hard about honoring their treaty obligations and fostering the stability that creates prosperity for its citizens."

The statement was notable for its lack of a suggestion that the United States should punish Russia if the latter's aggression continues.

Paul has not weighed in further on the conflict, and a spokesperson did not answer a request for further comment on Monday.

Rubio's move to speak out forcefully on the issue carries little short-term political risk for a senator positioning himself as a strong Obama critic in advance of a presidential run he is expected to launch about a year from now.

But to non-interventionist thinkers, Paul's more cautious tact figures to pay long-term dividends among voters both in and out of the GOP, who increasingly want the United States to reduce its footprint on the international stage after more than a dozen years of war.

"Obama's a unifying issue for Republicans, and it's pretty safe if you're aspiring to something higher to build your support within the Republican base by criticizing Obama," said Chris Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "But there are huge differences between Marco Rubio and Rand Paul, and eventually those details are going to get fleshed out."

In a Pew Research Center [poll](#) released in December, 51 percent of respondents said that the United States invests too much in trying to solve world problems. Just 17 percent, however, said that the U.S. does too little, and 28 percent said it does the right amount.

Surveys conducted during the 2012 [campaign](#) showed Republican primary voters to be split on whether the U.S. should intervene less abroad, and there is little doubt that there has been a major shift within the GOP rank and file on foreign policy since the Bush/Cheney years.

Rubio has at times appeared to acknowledge this sea change.

In a [speech](#) at The American Enterprise Institute last November, for instance, the Florida senator pushed back against the neoconservative label that had been increasingly applied to him, dismissing as "obsolete" the notion of a foreign policy divide between hawks and doves.

And indeed, the menacing prospect of a full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine does at least present one unifying factor for the GOP, regardless of which side one takes in the debate.

“I would think Ukraine is more of a unifying thing for Republicans than Syria or other issues, and the reason for that is there isn’t really a military option in Ukraine that makes sense,” said James Carafano, vice president of foreign and defense policy studies at the Heritage Institute. “Even the most hawkish guys in the party would recognize that.”

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