

# Rubio Is in Spotlight on Second Big Day of Cabinet Hearings

*Senator Marco Rubio, who is nominated for secretary of state, has a long history of personal and policy differences with President-elect Donald Trump.*

**By Michael Crowley**  
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When President-elect Donald J. Trump's choice for secretary of state, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, appears before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations today, it may be easy for him to persuade senators that he can lead American diplomacy at a moment of unusual global turmoil.

The harder task may be convincing them that he can credibly represent a president with whom he has a long history of personal and policy differences.

As a third-term senator who holds generally mainstream foreign policy views, Mr. Rubio, 53, is expected to be confirmed with relative ease later this month after Mr. Trump, once inaugurated, officially nominates him to succeed Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken.

Unlike several of Mr. Trump's other top cabinet picks, Mr. Rubio has decent relations with his fellow Senate Democrats, no scandalous allegations about his personal behavior and relevant policy experience. He serves as vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and is a member of the committee that will question him.

Even senior Biden administration officials believe that Mr. Rubio can be a responsible leader of the State Department as the Trump administration confronts a roiling Middle East, the war in Ukraine and looming threats from China.

The bigger questions revolve around Mr. Rubio's relationship with the incoming president.

The two battled for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination in a duel that began with policy differences and descended into mutual personal ridicule. Mr. Rubio declared Mr. Trump an unfit-for-office "con artist," and even mocked his manhood, accusing his rival of having "small hands." In response, Mr. Trump derided Mr. Rubio as a scripted establishment politician and taunted him as "Little Marco."

Mr. Rubio, a Miami native, law school graduate and former Florida state legislator, has since worked his way into Mr. Trump's favor. The Floridian was reportedly among the finalists to serve as Mr. Trump's running mate last year.

But some prominent Trump supporters remain distrustful of Mr. Rubio. They recall his vote to officially certify the 2020 election results despite Mr. Trump's false claims of election fraud. And they consider Mr. Rubio's foreign policy record dangerously interventionist.

The son of Cuban immigrants, Mr. Rubio has long been a hawkish voice on national security issues, often in ways that clash with Mr. Trump's views.

Mr. Rubio opposed the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, which was set in motion by the Trump administration. He criticized Mr. Trump's effort to pull U.S. troops from northern Syria in 2019 and supported U.S. efforts to depose dictators in Syria and Libya, which Mr. Trump has called foolish.

Mr. Rubio also condemned Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a "gangster" for the 2018 killing of the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi; Mr. Trump downplayed the episode. Mr. Rubio has also branded President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, whom Mr. Trump openly admires, as a "killer" and a war criminal.

Those differences, plus his 2016 battle with Mr. Trump, have raised questions about whether Mr. Rubio can persuade foreign officials that he truly speaks for his president — an essential credential for a top diplomat.

Rex Tillerson, a former oil executive who served as Mr. Trump's first secretary of state, was widely seen as ineffectual once it grew obvious that he lacked the president's trust. (Mr. Trump fired Mr. Tillerson after less than 14 months.)

Democrats are likely to grill Mr. Rubio about his views on Mr. Trump's most divisive foreign policy positions, with potentially awkward results.

One likely topic is Mr. Trump's longtime criticism of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, including his threats to withdraw from the military alliance. In 2023, Mr. Rubio cosponsored a measure, clearly in response to Mr. Trump's commentary, requiring either the approval of two-thirds of the Senate or separate congressional legislation for that to happen.

Then there is the third rail of Trump World: Mr. Putin.

Mr. Rubio is a longtime Russia hawk who has insisted that the Russian leader be held "accountable" for crimes in Syria and Ukraine. Mr. Trump will brook no such talk.

At Mr. Tillerson's Senate confirmation hearing in January 2017, Mr. Rubio, then a questioner, pushed Mr. Tillerson to declare Mr. Putin a war criminal for Russian military actions in Syria and the murder of Russian dissidents. When Mr. Tillerson demurred, Mr. Rubio called his response "discouraging."

Any impression abroad that America makes exceptions to its support for "democracy and freedom," Mr. Rubio warned, "demoralizes these people all over the world."

A similar scene could play out on Wednesday if Mr. Rubio is pressed by Russia hawks on the committee. Like Mr. Tillerson, Mr. Rubio knows that Mr. Trump wants friendly dialogue with Mr. Putin and could wind up meeting with the Russian leader.

On at least one major issue related to Mr. Putin and Russia, however, Mr. Rubio appears to have softened his views. After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Mr. Rubio accused Mr. Putin of war crimes and supported a huge U.S. aid package for Kyiv.

More recently, Mr. Rubio has suggested, in line with Mr. Trump, that the war is stalemated and that peace talks should begin.

Last April, with his name circulating as a possible Trump running mate, Mr. Rubio was one of 15 Republican senators who voted against a fresh aid package for Ukraine.

It is unclear how central a role Mr. Rubio might play in any Ukraine talks. Mr. Trump has named a special White House envoy for the conflict, as well as ones for the Middle East and for vaguely defined “special missions,” raising questions about how much important work will be left for Mr. Rubio.

On other major issues, little daylight exists between Mr. Rubio and Mr. Trump. Mr. Rubio calls for giving no quarter to the governments of Cuba and Venezuela, saying any promises of political reform they might make cannot be trusted. Mr. Trump has said much the same.

Mr. Rubio is also a constant critic of Beijing’s authoritarian government, declaring [in a recent report](#): “Communist China is the most powerful adversary the United States has faced in living memory.”

Mr. Trump has used similar rhetoric and vows to confront China — although Mr. Trump also seemed to relish negotiating in his first term with China’s president, Xi Jinping.