



## **Marco Rubio's Stunning 180: From Neocon to America First?**

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**Glenn Greenwald (GG):** Marco Rubio sat down for a lengthy interview in the State Department with Megyn Kelly on Friday. I wasn't sure how that interview would go. I don't typically think of Megyn as a foreign policy commentator and analyst and journalist as much as she does domestic politics, but the questions were actually really good. She gave a lot of thought to it and asked most of the questions that I would have asked or wanted to hear Marco Rubio's responses to. And I found his responses remarkable. It didn't sound like Marco Rubio. And unlike Mike Pompeo who would occasionally just throw a kind of slogan into what he was saying to make it sound like he was more compatible with Trump, this is a Marco Rubio who was being very thoughtful, very comprehensive in what he said. And he sounded like this for the full hour. And as I said, it wasn't just some empty slogans. It was a whole worldview that he has clearly embraced. So I just want to show you a little bit of this, or maybe a little bit more than a little bit, just enough to get a real sense for where the Trump foreign policy might actually be going and the reason they chose Marco Rubio, or at least the directions they gave to Marco Rubio in order for him to become Secretary of State. So here is Marco Rubio explaining to Megyn Kelly about the need for a pragmatic foreign policy and not one that is dogmatic about the need for the US to rule the world to act.

**Megyn Kelly (MK):** It's such a tricky time to be Secretary of State, especially as a Republican, because you look at the Republican Party and it's fractured internally about where we should be on foreign policy. It's not like during the Bush years where it was, you know, we were much more "neo-conny" on the right. And now there's a real division within the right, within MAGA even, on what we should do about Ukraine. Most of the party, I think, wants nothing to do with that anymore. What kind of sabre-rattling should we be doing about Iran? You know, there's a large strain that believes none. We should be focused on China and we should stop demonising Iran and Russia and keep our eye on our biggest threat. I know you think they're our biggest threat as well. So just give me the 30,000-foot level view of how you're going to navigate that fraction.

**GG:** I mean, it is just so interesting because that is a massive foreign policy division within the Republican Party, within American conservatism, within the MAGA movement. And it's sad that that debate really doesn't exist in the Democratic Party, that the Democratic Party, with a few exceptions, a very few exceptions, tends to be unified about the view of foreign policy that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris pursue and that Democrats believe in. A very bellicose, assertive, internationalist, globalist, Atlantis, NATO-based foreign policy. That we should be involved in every one of these countries. We should be constantly intervening, Syria and Libya and Iraq and Ukraine and Israel and Gaza and Iran. Hakeem Jeffries just gave a speech this weekend about how Israel crushed Hamas and now is the time to go after Iran when they're weak. This is what the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives is talking about. And as Megyn Kelly notes, there's a huge division in even the MAGA movement about whether that's the US's business, whether that's in the US interest. And here's what Marco Rubio told her.

**Marco Rubio (MR):** ...a lot of time in American politics, debating tactics like what we're going to do, who we're going to sanction, what letter we're going to send or whatever. I think it really has to start with strategy. What is the strategic objective? What's the purpose, the mission? And I think the mission of American foreign policy, and this may sound sort of obvious, but I think it's been lost. The interest of American foreign policy is to further the national interest of the United States of America.

**MK:** America first.

**MR:** Well, and that's the way the world has always worked. The way the world has always worked is that the Chinese will do what's in the best interest of China, the Russians will do what's in the best interest of Russia, the Chileans are going to do what's in the best interest of Chile, and the United States needs to do what's in the best interest of the United States. Where our interests align, that's where you have partnerships and alliances. Where our differences are not aligned, that is where the job of diplomacy is to prevent conflict while still furthering our national interests and understanding they're going to further theirs.

**GG:** I mean, just even the way he talks about China and Russia and Iran there, without any of the demonising rhetoric, typically characterising Marco Rubio's references to America's enemies, he's describing them in very neutral terms. In fact, equating them with the United States. He is saying China acts in its interest, Russia acts in its interest, Iran acts in its interest, Chile acts in its interest, and we act in ours. And he goes on to say that our alliances are not religious partnerships. They should exist only insofar as they serve the interests of the United States and of the American citizens in the United States, as he goes on to clarify. Oftentimes when we talk about US interests, we mean the interests of a very tiny slice of military and economic elites. And this is the emphasis on what are the foreign policies that serve the interests of the American people. Now, I want to be clear that they are not perfect on this, to put that mildly. Just today, Donald Trump, clearly influenced by Elon Musk, talked about the need to bully the South Africans and punish the South Africans to change their land distribution laws. Because as a white South African, Elon Musk has made very clear for a long time he believes those are racist against white people. So why is it in the interest of the

American people to be involved in South Africa's land distribution laws? And then today, in the wake of the Netanyahu meeting, Trump said in the Oval Office, when asked whether or not the United States would support Israel's annexation of Gaza and the West Bank, began saying how tiny of a little bit of land Israel has, basically implying that yes, we would support more Lebensraum, an expansion for Israel because their country is too small. How is that in American's interests? So these are not ironclad principles that they're going to follow. They're going to violate these constantly. But directionally and tonally, and even in terms of policy, this is a change in direction.

**MR:** And that's been lost. And I think that was lost at the end of the Cold War because we were the only power in the world. And so we assume this responsibility of sort of becoming the global government in many cases, trying to solve every problem. And there are terrible things happening in the world. There are. And then there are things that are terrible that impact our national interest directly. And we need to prioritise those again. So it's not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power. That was an anomaly. It was the product of the end of the Cold War. But eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet. We face that now with China and to some extent, you know, Russia. And then you have rogue states like Iran and North Korea you have to deal with. So now more than ever, we need to remember that foreign policy should always be about furthering the national interest of the United States and doing so to the extent possible, avoiding war and armed conflict, which we have seen two times in the last century, be very costly. You know, they're celebrating the 80th anniversary this year of the end of the Second World War. You know, that, I think if you look at the scale and scope of destruction and loss of life that occurred, it would be far worse if we had a global conflict now and life on the planet. And it sounds like a pervertedly, but that's how you have multiple countries now who have the capability to end life on Earth. And so we need to really work hard to avoid armed conflict as much as possible, but never at the expense of our national interests. So that's the tricky balance. So I think returning us to that, now you can have a framework by which you analyse not just diplomacy but foreign aid and who we line up with and the return of pragmatism. And that's not an abandonment of our principles. I'm not a fan or a giddy supporter of some horrifying human rights violator somewhere in the world. By the same token, diplomacy has always required us and foreign policy has always required us to work in the national interest, sometimes in cooperation with people who we wouldn't invite over for dinner or people who we wouldn't necessarily ever want to be led by. And so that's a balance, but it's the sort of pragmatic and mature balance we have to have.

**GG:** Now, the reason why, and there's so many reasons why that's a big change, two things in particular. One is, again, this admission that the United States does not rule the world, cannot rule the world. We are not in a unilateral, unipolar world any longer. That in particular, China, but also Russia, are great powers and need to be understood as such. We can't just bully them around. And that means we have to readjust our thinking. We're no longer this empire, this superpower that goes around ruling the world by force. That is a vital admission that senior government officials have been, and the United States have been very reluctant to make. And the other part that is so striking, particularly coming from someone like Marco Rubio, is this

idea that just because there are bad governments in the world, governments we don't like, we consider repressive, whatever, doesn't mean we have to go and try and isolate them or destroy them. For somebody like Marco Rubio, whose obsession in life has been: The Cuban government is repressive and communist, the Venezuelans are repressive and communist, we have to go and change the regimes in these countries, which they've tried to do. We just saw Trump despatch Richard Grenell to Venezuela to meet with President Maduro, not with the fake president of Venezuela, Juan Guaido, or this opposition leader we pretend – the real actual leader, not the one we want, but the actual leader of Venezuela. And he met with him, and we don't know what deal was done, but six American hostages or prisoners were released to Richard Grenell, and there was an agreement to allow deported Venezuelans back into their country. Clearly, this is an attempt to improve relations with Venezuela rather than to try and overthrow it, which has been done in the first Trump term and failed, which is why John Bolton was gotten rid of. But it's hard to overstate just how much of a radical change Marco Rubio's worldview is compared to what he said previously, and maybe that's because he's finally accepting the reality of China's emergence and Russia's. The United States tried to defeat Russia and couldn't, and now has to accept that reality. Here is Megyn Kelly asking about the perception that Trump is going around bullying other countries with tariffs, and here's what Marco Rubio said about that.

**MK:** The New York Times said: Okay, you guys got away with this with Colombia. But you're not going to be able to pull that trick with Russia, with China, with Iran. If you try to sort of bully these stronger nations in this way, it's not going to go very well. Is that a fair point?

**MR:** Well, we're not interested in bullying anybody, and we don't feel like we bullied Colombia. We feel like we had a deal. Colombia signed a deal. They signed a piece of paper that said: Yes, send us these aeroplanes, and then halfway into the flight, they broke it. And so our answer was: Well, now we flew these planes, we had to bring them back to the United States, so now you're going to come pick them up. Why are we going to pay for those flights? Because you cancelled them. It's not bullying. They broke a contract that we had made with them. Obviously, look, China has nuclear weapons. They're tough people. There's no doubt about it. They're tough people. They have nuclear weapons. They're a great power with a large economy. They're going to be a global power, but it can't come at our expense. And so ultimately, when you're dealing with great powers like China, it's going to be at the highest levels of their president and ours, or their premier and our president, and that interaction will happen. In the case of Russia, the same. Obviously, whatever happens with Russia will be a Putin-Trump dynamic. But I think most certainly, sure. I mean, the world is... The way you treat... Not the way you treat countries, but the way you approach a nation has to be based on the strategic balance.

**GG:** I mean, again, I can guarantee you I can find endless amounts of clips of Marco Rubio talking about these countries with nothing but venom and demonization. And now he's responsible for engaging in diplomacy with the world. He's talking about them with a certain level of respect, because you just can't indulge in the delusion any longer that the United

States can go around the world doing what it wants. Here is Donald Trump today. I'm not going to read this whole thing, but we'll just put the tweet on the screen. But essentially, he imposed 25% tariffs on Mexico and Canada. A lot of people went ballistic. The Wall Street Journal page, that whole crowd, the stock market took a hit. Whether he quickly did a deal because he wanted to avoid the turbulence to the market or whether this was his strategy all along, which I've always believed, which is to threaten sanctions as a way of getting a deal, similar to the way he threatens war to get deals, who knows? But in less than 24 hours, the sanctions have been lifted as a result of a conversation that he had with President Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico and then also with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. It seems like there's at least a 30-day freeze on those as well. Here you see the Justin Trudeau tweet from today: "I had a good call with President Trump. Canada is implementing our \$1.3 billion border plan", and other kinds of things that were depicted as concessions.

**GG:** So this shows that Trump's not trying to pursue conflict for its own sake. He sees the threat of conflict as a path to resolution. Here is Megyn Kelly asking Marco Rubio about China and about the US role in the world.

**MR:** The call was very straightforward and I basically said, you're acting in the best interest of China, we're going to act in the best interest of America. We're two great powers and in areas where we can work together, there's probably no problem in the world we couldn't solve working together. In areas where we have disagreements, we have a responsibility to manage it so it doesn't escalate into something catastrophic. But be clear that what really matters is the decisions we make moving forward. And you know, China wants to be the most powerful country in the world and they want to do so at our expense. And that's not in our national interest and we're going to address it. We don't want a war over it, but we're going to address it. In the case of China, there's two things. I've just described one, which is the grave threat that they pose to our national interest. And the other is the mature realisation that no matter what happens, China is going to be a rich and powerful country. We are going to have to deal with them. In fact, and I said this in my call with their foreign minister, but I've said this publicly, the history of the 21st century will largely be about what happened between the US and China. So for us to pretend that somehow we're not going to engage with them is absurd. Control that. They're doing it because it's in their national interest. They are doing, frankly, what I would do, maybe not the human rights violations, but they are doing what anyone would do if they were the leader of China. They are acting in China's best interest. What's been missing is American policy that acts in our best interest.

**GG:** I mean, I can't emphasise how remarkable that is to hear United States leaders talking about China in this way, not leading with their vicious, evil dictators and communists who are... But saying: Look, we may not like it, we may wish it weren't true, but the reality of the world is that China is a very serious and large economic and military power that we cannot change that. We have to deal with them, we have to get along with them, we're competitors with them, but the history of the 21st century will determine how well the United States and China manage their competition. That is a radical change from even the last administration where the Democrats have been incredibly hawkish on China, but the reality is that it's not

just that China is a major power, it's that the United States and China are inextricably linked in ways that countries have not been that the United States or the US security state have wanted to target. Now, the same thing with Panama. A lot of people say: Oh, Trump's threatening to take the Panama Canal. If you listen to what Trump is saying, it seems clear that what he's doing is saying he wants a better deal in terms of how much American ships are charged for passing through, and they also think China's influence is excessive because that's obviously an important part of the world for the United States, and that's what they're bargaining for. Here is Marco Rubio talking to Megyn Kelly about the ceasefire that Donald Trump, by all accounts, was responsible for facilitating in Gaza.

**MR:** This is a businessman who's involved in politics, not a politician involved in politics, so he approaches these issues from a transactional business point of view, so he is not going to begin what he views as a negotiation or a conversation by taking leverage off the table. And that's a tactic that's used all the time in business, it's being applied to foreign policy, and I think to great effect in the first term. You look at the Abraham Accords, and the Democrats mocked the Abraham Accords when they were made. And then by the end of the Biden administration, they became the linchpin of a lot of what we're hoping to build on. That never would have happened had there not been a transactional approach. You look at what his envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, has achieved. The Biden administration asked Witkoff, they asked for him to be involved in these conversations. He has brought a businessman's approach to a very delicate and intractable foreign policy challenge, and delivered a ceasefire that obviously is tenuous and has long term challenges to it, but there are hostages being released every day. That didn't happen for over a year and a half until he became involved, and that's the president's envoy and very close friend who's brought the same kind of business approach to some of these challenges.

**GG:** There's just no denying that. There's no denying any of this. That if you do not deal with these countries practically, if you keep beating your chest and engaging in these kinds of moralistic declarations of superiority, if you try and talk tough, even though you cannot back it up, you're going to look like an idiot. And it is the case that Trump likes this boisterous, aggressive discourse, these kinds of threats, these very melodramatic threats, but that is how he conducted himself as a business person. As I said when I was doing litigation in New York, that's when Trump was a real estate mogul, and his organisation was notorious for just being incredibly litigious and refusing to settle and threatening all the time. That is wholly Trump's entire self-branding, it is the art of the deal. And the art of the deal is you threaten and you threaten and you threaten to destroy somebody unless they come to the table with better terms and then you get a good deal that way. And that seems to be infused into US foreign policy at least thus far, and I'm not saying that's ideal, but it's certainly better than indulging these fictions that we've had for decades under both parties that the United States can go around the world just condemning everybody and denouncing everybody and ordering everybody around and punishing them if they don't obey, because that world no longer exists and it's really amazing to hear Marco Rubio admit that. And again, it's not a new admission. As we showed you he was admitting it since at least 2023 on Fox.

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