

## SENATOR MARCO RUBIO SAYS ELON MUSK IS A BITCH FOR CHINA

Afterward, Rubio not only accelerated his criticism — pushing legislation that banned imports from the Xinjiang region, where China allegedly operated enslaved labor camps — but also attacked Elon Musk’s electric car company for opening a showroom in the region.

“Right after President Joe Biden signed Sen. Rubio’s Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act into law, @Tesla opened a store in #Xinjiang,” Rubio tweeted in 2023. “Nationless corporations are helping the Chinese Communist Party cover up genocide and slave labor in the region.”

Now Rubio’s efforts to aid the Uyghurs could become a focus of his nomination hearing to be President-elect Trump’s secretary of state. His human rights advocacy could not only complicate his diplomatic work with one of America’s primary adversaries but potentially pit him against Trump and Musk, his key ally.

Rubio, like many Republicans, has already closely aligned himself with the president’s foreign policies — particularly on Ukraine. Rubio initially was among the strongest supporters of Ukraine after Russia’s invasion in 2022. As Trump has vowed to scale back U.S. aid to Ukraine, Rubio in April voted against a bill that included billions of dollars for Ukraine, calling it legislative “blackmail.”

But Rubio has not moderated his stance on China, writing in his 2023 book that Chinese leader Xi Jinping heads a “brutal totalitarian state” that seeks “complete and total global supremacy,” and advocating for military aid for Taiwan for defense against an invasion by Beijing, which claims the island democracy as part of its territory.

Trump, by contrast, has sent far more mixed signals on China. He has threatened to impose tariffs on Chinese imports, raising the prospect of a trade war. But in November he called Xi “an amazing guy” and in October he suggested on Joe Rogan’s podcast that Taiwan should pay the U.S. for military protection.

Musk, meanwhile, has deep business ties in China. Tesla was in line to receive \$390 million from automobile emission credits in 2021 awarded via the Chinese government, according to a report by Nikkei Asia. The nation is the second-largest Tesla market, and the company's Shanghai factory produced its 3 millionth car in October. Musk said during an April visit to Beijing that he had a "lot of fans in China. Well, the feelings are reciprocated. I'm a huge fan of China." As for the Uyghurs, biographer Walter Isaacson wrote that Musk told him "China's repression of the Uyghurs ... had two sides."

Rubio spokesman Dan Holler, asked to respond to questions about potential policy differences on China between him, Trump and Musk, responded: "Rubio as a senator is different from Rubio as a secretary of state. In this role he is going to be implementing the president's policies." Musk and a Trump spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk boards his private jet to leave Beijing on May 31, 2023. Musk met multiple government officials, attending the All-in Summit. On Beijing's intent to reunite Taiwan with China, he said, "From their standpoint, you know, maybe it's now just like Hawaii or something like that." © Jade Gao/AFP/Getty Images

Rubio's rhetoric raises the question of whether he will clash with Musk or Trump on China, or curtail his criticism if he is confirmed — and whether Trump will tolerate dissent rather than firing his secretary of state, as he did with Rex Tillerson.

Xie Feng, China's ambassador to the United States, did not respond to a request for comment. Liu Pengyu, a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, did not respond directly to questions about Rubio and whether Beijing would lift the ban on him entering the country if he becomes secretary of state. Instead, the spokesman said via email that the embassy would not comment on Trump's election and his pick of Rubio.

"What we want to say is that developing China-U. S. relations well serves the fundamental interests of the two countries and their peoples," the spokesman said.

For Rubio, though, his battle for human rights in China runs deep. In his books, media appearances and Senate speeches, he's drawn a line from the communist dictatorship in Cuba to the suffering of minorities in China.

In 2021 testimony to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Rubio vowed that “I will not stop fighting, nor will I remain silent until all Uyghurs are free.”

## External threats

Rubio has often spoken about his parents’ journey as they “came to America following Fidel Castro’s takeover” as he had said on his official Senate website. Rubio’s parents were admitted for permanent residence more than two years before Fidel Castro overthrew the Cuban government and took power in 1959, as Rubio biographer and Washington Post reporter Manuel Roig-Franzia has reported.

Rubio said in response at the time that his parents wanted to return to Cuba but could not do so because of the rise of Castro.

In any case, the story of Castro’s rise and the effect on Cuba and Rubio’s family became central to his world view as a politician. Because of his upbringing, Rubio thought he knew better than most of his Senate peers about the effect of communist rule, he wrote in his 2023 book, “Decades of Decadence.” What he has seen in China and other authoritarian countries, he wrote, has convinced him that “external threats” posed by such countries to the United States “are still very much with us.”

After joining the Senate in 2011, Rubio used his perch to focus attention on autocrats in Latin America, Russia and elsewhere.

Rubio stands in the VIP box at the Republican National Convention on July 17 with Donald Trump and House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana) in Milwaukee. © Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post

Rubio did at times speak hopefully about U.S.-China relations, including at the 2014 confirmation hearing of Sen. Max Baucus (D-Montana) to be ambassador to China, where he said “our policy isn’t to contain China. On the contrary, I think we see a growing economy that we can be trade partners with, a billion people we can sell our products and services to.”

As the hearing ended, Baucus said in an interview with The Post, Rubio told him that he planned to take a trip to Asia.

“Are you going to China?” Baucus said he asked.

“No, I’m not going to China. I’m afraid of China,” Rubio said, according to Baucus.

Baucus, who was unanimously confirmed as ambassador, said Rubio’s response troubled him because “very few American high-level officials have been to China, understand China or know China. It’s a huge problem we’re facing.”

Holler, Rubio’s spokesman, disputed some details of the exchange, saying, “It is definitively not true and the context around the conversation is, Marco wasn’t going to China — he jokingly said they might not let him out if he goes.”

In testimony during that Foreign Relations hearing, Rubio said that if China was willing to use its newfound economic and military might to commit itself to “respect for human rights, I think that would be an extraordinary development for mankind,” according to a transcript.

But if China used that power to oppress neighbors and “people within their own country, I think we have a big problem and a major, major challenge,” Rubio said.

Jonathan Slemrod, a former legislative assistant in Rubio’s Senate office who later served as policy director during the senator’s 2016 presidential campaign, said that “Early in his first term, I don’t know if he fully grasped the threat of China.” But as Rubio “traveled the country and ran for president, he heard from real people who did feel left behind by trade and other areas where China is to blame. He spent a lot of time on the Intelligence Committee. He learned a lot about the threat from China that shapes how he thinks today.”

By 2018, Rubio had become convinced that his concerns about China had become reality — a view that was hardened after a fateful meeting with a woman named Rushan Abbas.

# A Uyghur advocate

Rushan Abbas, of Herndon, Virginia, holds a photo of her sister, Gulshan Abbas, in Washington on Dec. 17, 2018. Gulshan Abbas disappeared in Xinjiang. Rushan Abbas said she thinks her criticism of the government is the reason. © Jacquelyn Martin/AP

Abbas was born in the Xinjiang region and attended Xinjiang University, where she helped organize pro-democracy demonstrations in her homeland before she moved to the United States in 1989 and became a U.S. citizen.

In 2017, China began its campaign to forcibly assimilate Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking people whose Muslim faith has put them at odds with the officially atheistic government, which critics say has used methods such as “reeducation” to quash dissent and quell potential separatist movements. Scholars estimate that more than 1 million Uyghurs were detained for weeks or years. China has denied charges that its policies amount to genocide.

Abbas said in an interview with The Post that in September 2018, six days after she spoke on a panel hosted by the conservative Hudson Institute in Washington called “China’s War on Terrorism,” her sister Gulshan Abbas disappeared in Xinjiang. Abbas has never spoken with her since then, and said she thinks her criticism of the government led to her sister’s disappearance.

Abbas’s story came to the attention of Rubio, who found parallels with the way Cubans were treated by the Castro regime, and embraced her cause as a symbol of what he called China’s genocide of the Uyghurs. In February 2019, Abbas testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on which Rubio sits, that “What the Chinese government is doing is evil, a crime against humanity.” Rubio then invited Abbas to be his guest at the 2020 State of the Union speech, saying she had “tirelessly raised awareness of the atrocities taking place in Xinjiang at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party.”

That turned out to be a decisive step in highlighting the Uyghur plight.

“At the time we were still not getting a lot of platforms. Inviting me the way he did provided a very essential platform to raise awareness of the root cause and expose China’s atrocities as well as highlighting my sister’s case,” Abbas said.

Rubio brought Abbas to Congress to focus attention on proposed legislation that would forbid the import of goods suspected of being made with enslaved labor in the Xinjiang region.

The effort won plaudits across party lines, although the Trump administration had reservations. It wasn't until the last days of the Trump administration that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that China had committed "genocide" and "crimes against humanity." Pompeo said that the United States had gathered evidence that decades-long repression against Uyghurs had escalated since at least March 2017.

By acting in the last hours, the Trump administration avoided a diplomatic blowup with China, leaving it to Biden. Rubio, meanwhile, plowed ahead on his legislation.

Rubio worked closely with Sen. Jeff Merkley, (D-Oregon) on what became known as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which was signed into law by Biden in December 2021.

Merkley said in an interview his experience working with Rubio showed him that the senator from Florida "has brought a serious mind to foreign policy issues" and has been a tireless advocate for the Uyghurs and other victims of repression.

"He was deeply concerned about human rights issues in China," including what Merkley called "the effort to obliterate the culture of Tibet." Merkley said "we had a kind of affinity for each other's views" on China that continues to this day.

Rubio, meanwhile, was banned in July 2020 from entering China because of his statements about the Uyghurs. A month later, he was sanctioned by China for an unspecified action in which he and others "behaved egregiously on Hong Kong-related issues."

Rubio responded with a taunting tweet: "Last month #China banned me. Today they sanctioned me. I don't want to be paranoid but I am starting to think they don't like me."

The Tesla Inc. Gigafactory in Shanghai in December 2020, the end of its first year selling China-made cars. Rubio has criticized Musk for opening a Tesla showroom in the Xinjiang region.© Qilai Shen/Bloomberg

Soon, he turned his ire to Tesla's decision to open a showroom in the Xinjiang region — a critique he doubled down on in his 2023 book, writing: "If Tesla cares about America's future, it would prioritize expanding production lines in the United States, not opening a showroom in Xinjiang or new factories in Shanghai."

Rubio has also been particularly outspoken in support of Taiwan, including providing military aid for defense against an invasion by Beijing. China claims Taiwan as its own, and regularly threatens to take control of the self-governing island by force should Taiwan declare formal independence. Rubio wrote in his book that one reason U.S. support of Taiwan is so important is that Chinese leaders who want to take over Taiwan "have been watching very closely what happens there as Putin seeks to absorb Ukraine by force."

In a 2023 report titled "Diversity Over Diplomacy: How Wokeness Is Weakening the U.S. State Department," Rubio accused Biden's State Department of not prioritizing a strong stand against China in favor of more liberal cultural policies. The report alleged the State Department's "top priority" is to promote a woke agenda, which China and other adversaries have exploited to make inroads in countries that don't share U.S. interest in such matters.

A State Department spokesman responded that Secretary of State Antony Blinken believes that efforts at diversity are "about bringing as many perspectives to the policymaking table as possible to make U.S. foreign policy stronger, smarter, and more creative."

At times, Trump has been tough on Xi, and he campaigned last year on a pledge to impose a 10 percent tariff on Chinese goods. But Trump has sent conflicting signals.

While many of his top picks for military and diplomatic positions are strongly in support of arming Taiwan, Trump complained on the Joe Rogan podcast in October that Taiwan doesn't "pay us money for the protection, you know? The mob makes you pay money, right?" Trump said that Taiwan "stole our chip business," referring to computer microchips manufactured on the island.

The production in the United States of such chips has declined in recent years, leading to a shortage of the crucial component of everything from cars to weapons systems. That prompted Congress to pass, and Biden in 2022 to sign the CHIPS and Science Act, which provides \$52 billion in subsidies to the semiconductor industry to spur production. Trump has criticized that legislation, saying “We put up billions of dollars for rich companies.”

Musk said at the 2023 All-in Summit that Beijing’s “policy is to reunite Taiwan with China. From their standpoint, you know, maybe it’s now just like Hawaii or something like that.” Musk said the situation is getting to a “very high temperature” and that Beijing has made clear that it must be resolved, with the question being whether that will be through military or diplomatic means. Musk’s comment prompted a Taiwanese official to respond that Taiwan is not part of China and “not for sale.”

Rubio’s strong criticism of China comes amid his evolving position on sending U.S. military supplies to Ukraine. He once called Russia’s invasion “the single greatest threat Europe has faced since the 1940s,” adding in a CBS interview that Putin “is not going to stop with Ukraine ... He must pay a big price for it.”

But in April, Rubio voted against an aid package for Ukraine, putting him on the losing side of a 70-29 vote. Explaining his turnabout at the time, Rubio said on CBS that the bill amounted to “moral extortion” and complained that Democrats were not doing enough to stop illegal immigration into the United States. “You don’t have to be a fan of Vladimir Putin to want to end the war,” he said, adding that he wants a negotiated settlement to what he said is a “stalemate war.”

There have been signs, however, that Rubio’s alliance with Trump has its limits. Rubio is critical in his 2023 book about a Trump administration trade deal with China, which he said helped Beijing by enabling American companies to supply “a desperately needed cash boost for critical Chinese industries.” And, when Trump was threatening to withdraw from NATO, Rubio in 2023 was a lead sponsor of legislation that requires congressional approval of such an act, a move that was widely seen as an effort to prevent unilateral action by Trump or another president.



# Key advisers

When Abbas learned that Musk had become a key adviser to Trump, she was concerned about what it meant for Uyghurs, given Musk's business interest in the Xinjiang region. But she said she felt reassured when Trump picked Rubio for secretary of state, along with Rep. Michael Waltz (R-Florida), also an advocate for the Uyghurs, to be national security adviser.

Rushan Abbas, Campaign for Uyghurs founder and executive director, testifies to a congressional panel on China on Sept. 12, 2023. After Rubio met with Abbas in 2018, his concerns about China were hardened. © Mariam Zuhaib/AP

“Senator Marco Rubio has been a tireless defender for human rights with a strong focus on addressing the ongoing mass detention and the genocide of the people for years since 2017, 2018, when mass detention started,” she said. When she thanked Rubio for his effort, she said he replied: “It’s our duty and responsibility to defend people’s human rights.”

It remains unclear whether China will rescind its ban on Rubio entering the country, and how that will affect his role in structuring relations with the country.

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), who worked with Rubio on the NATO legislation, said that the idea for the bill stemmed from Trump’s suggestion that he might try to withdraw from the treaty. The law was intended as a signal to nations who feared that the U.S. would pull out that “the commitment of America to NATO wasn’t just dependent on who was in the Oval Office.”

When Kaine searched for Republican support, he focused on Rubio, who was “prompt to say, ‘Sure,’ and very easy to work with on this bill. It was historic.”

In a sign of Rubio’s likely support from Democrats, Kaine told The Post that he has never worked with a secretary of state with a better understanding and empathy for Latin America than Rubio — a striking comment given that Kaine was the running mate of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

“I believe that with Marco Rubio, we might finally have a secretary of state who will really take this region seriously,” Kaine said, referring to Latin America, stressing that “by saying that, I don’t mean to demean other secretaries of state.”

Indeed, Kaine said he waited to speak positively about Rubio until after Trump picked him for fear that it might have undermined Rubio's chances. "Will he be able to stand up to Trump? I don't know. But will he be effective in a room advocating a position that he holds? Sure. I don't know whether Trump will agree or not ... but Rubio will be able to make a persuasive case on the viewpoints he holds."