WAR IN UKRAINE

What JD Vance has said about the war in Ukraine

What a second Trump term would mean for Kyiv with a VP who says concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin are in America's best interest.

Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance speaks during the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee on Wednesday. | Jabin Botsford / The Washington Post via Getty Images

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By Nikki Aggarwal and Daryna Mayer

Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's announcement Monday of JD Vance as his running mate sent ripples through the international community, and Vance wasted little time letting the party in on his worldview.

"Together, we will make sure our allies share in the burden of securing world peace. No more free rides for nations that betray the generosity of the American taxpayer," Vance, a Republican senator from Ohio, said as he addressed the Republican National Convention on Wednesday night.

If the Republican ticket wins the presidential election in November, the consequences of Vance's being the vice president will be felt in few places more than in Ukraine, as he has repeatedly criticized U.S. support for its war against Russia. His words are likely to do little to reassure America's friends about what a second Trump administration would mean for the 2½-year-old war in Ukraine.

While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his senior ministers or generals have not commented on Vance's nomination, foreign policy experts and Ukrainians are extremely about its implications for Kyiv's defense against Russia's occupation of swaths of eastern Ukraine.

"Ukrainians are in a terrible position," said Rajan Menon, a defense expert and professor emeritus at the City College of New York. "The U.S. has been the principal supplier by a long shot compared to the Europeans. If it steps away, Ukrainians will lack not only the critical air defense to protect their cities but also artillery."

Ukrainian soldiers fire a howitzer toward Russian positions at the front line in Donetsk region. | Efrem Lukatsky / AP file

While Vance, 39, and the former president appear to be broadly aligned on foreign policy, Vance's worldview appears more nuanced and consistent than that of his prospective boss. Vance's approach to international issues marks a departure from the post-World War II international "rules-based" order of previous administrations and indeed from the policy ideology of former Vice President Mike Pence, who saw America as a global superpower.

Instead, Vance's views echo the "America First" ideology and specific alliances of Trump's first term. He has support Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-line approach and he has, like Trump, cultivated ties to strongmen such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán; he has questioned unsophisticated aid for Taiwan and called for a swift end to the war in Ukraine — potentially allowing Russia to keep annexed territory — will worry Kyiv and its NATO allies.

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On the eve of Russia's full-scale ground invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Vance remarked on a podcast: "I don't really care what happens to Ukraine one way or another."

In the years since, Vance has criticized the aid the U.S. has provided to Ukraine under President Joe Biden. The $61 billion aid package Congress approved in April runs contrary to the politics of "scarcity" that underpin Vance's foreign policy ideology. Much like Trump, Vance has attacked America's NATO allies for not paying their fair share in aid for Ukraine.

"There is frankly no good reason that aid from the U.S. should be needed," Vance wrote in London's Financial Times newspaper earlier this year. "Europe's made up of many great nations with productive economies."

He later added that the gap between what Ukraine needs and what America can provide isn't just ideological. "It's math," he said in The New York Times in April this year. "Ukraine... needs more matériel than the United States can provide."

Although Europe has boosted its defense spending, Gustram Wolff, former director of the German Council on Foreign Relations research institute, said "that trend will need to accelerate much more quickly under a Trump/Vance presidency."

Meanwhile, Vance's nomination has caused disquiet on the streets of Kyiv.

"I was baffled when I heard Trump's choice," 22-year-old marketing director Serhii Zharavlev said NBC News on Wednesday before Vance's speech to the convention. "It is obvious we can't call him our friend with such a position."

Others were more immediately worried.

"If a person with such views about Ukraine occupies the VP's position, it will influence Ukraine in a bad way," said Anna Uryupina, a 34-year-old florist. "I feel fear and distrust. As it is, we are going in the wrong direction because of people who have influence."

Just last week, Russian missiles rained down across Ukraine killing dozens and hitting a Kyiv children's hospital. The attack was the largest in months and the Ukrainian air force said Russia used its most advanced missiles that are difficult to intercept.

A Russian missile attack destroyed part of Kyiv's Ohmadyt Children's Hospital this months. | Roman Pilipey / AFP - Getty Images

Still, Ukrainians and experts alike are skeptical about the extent to which Vance can influence Trump, who is expected to accept the Republican nomination Thursday.

Uryupina, the florist, said Vance will do as he is told.

"Vance will dutifully support [Trump]. Because he sees this as an opportunity to become the president," Menon said. "He has shown himself to be a chameleon-like figure." Vance once described Trump as "America's Hitler."

The view of Trump and his allies is that the war is avoidable and could be ended quickly with concessions made, including allowing Russian President Vladimir Putin to keep some annexed territory in eastern Ukraine.

While former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said after a conversation with Trump this week that "I have no doubt that he will be strong and decisive in supporting [Ukraine] and defending democracy," Trump has proven unpredictable, having previously threatened to pull out of NATO altogether.

Vance has been more supportive of staying in NATO, but he has also described Ukraine ceding territory to Russia as being in "America's best interest."

If that does happen, says Wolff, now a senior fellow at the Brussels-based think tank Bruegel, "making major concessions to Putin will only embolden the neo-imperial Russia to be more aggressive, including against NATO countries."

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