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J.D. Vance Is Wrong About Ukraine … Again

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U.S. Senator and Republican vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance speaks during a campaign event at Arizona Biltmore Resort in Phoenix, Arizona, on September 5, 2024. **Olivier Touron / AFP**

During an appearance on The Sean Ryan Show, Republican vice-presidential candidate J.D. Vance unveiled a "peace plan" to end Russia's war against Ukraine. Former President Donald Trump has already said he would resolve the conflict within 24 hours before he even swore the oath of office, should he win the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The proposal shows how he thinks that would be possible.

But the outlined strategy seems to offer a simplistic approach to the complex issue ignoring the campaign's own "strong+smart" diplomacy formula. Vance's math was wrong when he opposed sending more aid to Ukraine. Now, he is wrong again.

The discussed peace plan centers around a negotiated settlement, proposing that the current line of demarcation between Russia and Ukraine become a heavily fortified demilitarized zone

to prevent further Russian aggression. In this scenario, Ukraine would retain its independence but adopt a neutral stance, refraining from joining NATO or other allied institutions.

It remains unclear who would oversee the demilitarized zone given Russia's supposed fear of NATO boots on the ground. Furthermore, the proposal does not consider whether Ukraine would really agree to forgo reclaiming nearly 20% of its territory currently held by Russia and 6 million of its citizens behind. Moreover, ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty under a neutrality agreement is close to impossible, particularly in light of the past experiences with the Budapest Memorandum.

To evaluate the effectiveness of any strategy, we must first determine if it addresses the root cause of the problem. Vance's focus on purely economic interests and natural resources is misplaced. Russia holds 24.3% of global gas reserves, compared to Ukraine's 0.6%. Crediting Crimea's gas reserves of 165.3 billion cubic meters with Russia's interest in the peninsula is oversimplistic.

What is more critical is the strategic significance of control over the Black Sea and the effort to undermine Ukraine as a successful democratic project among post-Soviet republics. Returning Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea would be another contribution to European energy decoupling from Russia and ensuring security in the region.

What truly motivated the invasion was Moscow's intolerance of Kyiv's efforts to determine Ukraine's own future and diminish Russia's influence in the country. Moscow has responded with genocidal aggression against a nation that refuses to accept its social contract on power transfer and governance. While Ukraine seeks alignment with Western values and democratic principles, Russia aims to establish a system that combines autocracy with elements of tsarism and import it to the formerly oppressed states.

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Ukraine's success as a strong and prosperous democracy is directly linked to U.S. strategic interests. If Ukraine falls, it could trigger a domino effect that shrinks the democratic world. Though it may seem unthinkable today, by the end of the century, the U.S. may lose not the will but the capability to act as a global policeman in a world increasingly dominated by autocracies governed by force rather than rules. The unthinkable is already unfolding in the heart of Europe, driven by a series of mounting geopolitical mistakes.

Thus, Vance's disregard for the "good versus evil" narrative is blindsided. Meanwhile, an attempt to justify or excuse an invasion of one state against the other by corruption is despicable. If corruption was a good reason to invade a country, the world would be a much more violent place.

Corruption costs the EU, the USA's closest ally, up to a trillion dollars per year. Moreover, Ukraine's problem with corruption pales in comparison to that of Russia. To fight corruption one needs stronger democratic institutions, not an army of looters, rapists and killers. In fact, over the last decade, Ukraine has made significant strides in strengthening its anti-corruption institutions, rising by 11 points in the Corruption Perception Index.

Another claim that does not hold up to fact-checking is the assertion that Europe has underfunded the war. While Washington has donated slightly more military aid, European government contributions surpass the U.S. in total aid by more than 20 billion euros ($22.5 billion). Moreover, according to the Department of Defense, U.S. assistance to Ukraine has resulted in billions in industrial base impact, benefiting over half of the states across the country.

It is true that "American taxpayers have been very generous to the Ukrainians," and equally true that Ukrainians are deeply grateful for the invaluable support that has been crucial to the survival of 40 million people. However, those who have survived Russian aggression are concerned that decades of Russia's soft power have clouded the perception of some in the West, blurring the reality of the situation.

Only a "fairytale mindset" could believe that it is possible to find common ground with a nuclear empire driven by revanchist ambitions. Given the claim that no current American political leader comprehends the situation in Ukraine and the region, it's striking that J.D. Vance appears to be at the forefront of the group he criticizes.

Related article: The Fighting in Kursk Is Already a Small Victory for Ukraine

Those politicians and intellectuals imagining their ideal future as a return to a preferred past are a long way from reality. For some, this means a return to the pre-2014 status quo — a period they view as before recent disruptions. In contrast, Putin and his allies are looking to the status quo before 1991, when Ukraine gained independence and the Soviet Union fell.

Vance's suggestion that aligning with Stalin as an example of U.S. diplomacy with "bad people" to maintain global peace is highly inappropriate. Stalin orchestrated the genocidal Holodomor famine in Ukraine. But Vance also forgets that the USSR, fighting for survival in WWII, chose to cooperate with the U.S. out of necessity for its own survival.

Currently, Russia has been encouraged by Washington's desire to avoid direct confrontation with Russia at almost any cost. As it is supported by China, North Korea, and Iran, Moscow has little incentive to change its geopolitical stance. Diplomatic efforts with Russia have repeatedly failed. Since 2014, there have been over 200 rounds of negotiations under the Minsk agreements, facilitated by the West.

Putin's true red line is an independent Ukraine, particularly one that is democratic. His demands are clear: Ukraine's capitulation, demilitarization, russification, and gradual re-colonization. Delusional thinking from people like Vance that territorial concessions, lifting sanctions, or keeping Ukraine perpetually at the NATO doorsteps will solve the issue is likely to exacerbate it instead.

This is despite the fact that NATO enlargement had nothing to do with events in 2014. That aggression was sparked by Ukraine's attempt to sign a trade agreement with the EU and protests against a Russia-oriented president. Moreover, Russia's reaction to Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, which expanded the Russia-NATO border, was notably lethargic. Without NATO membership, Ukraine might have faced the erosion of its sovereignty by Russian aggression in the long run.

However, this can easily be avoided with the real “strong+smart” strategy. Vance claimed that Ukrainians themselves admit they are incapable of victory. This deliberately disregards the message that Ukrainian decision-makers, diplomats, and civil society leaders have repeatedly conveyed: the war is winnable.

Recently President Volodymyr Zelensky has pledged to present a comprehensive victory plan to the U.S. presidential administration and candidates this September. The plan encompasses key military, economic, diplomatic, and security components, outlining Ukraine's strategy for securing peace and its long-term position in global security architecture. But as Zelensky acknowledged, his plan’s success depends on who sits in the White House.

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