

AMERICA'S UKRAINE TEST

Matthew Kaminski

THE world gets no vote in the American election. *That's not fair*, as I've had friends overseas complain to me, not entirely in jest. *We should get a say! The outcome impacts everyone.*

This election offers a stark contrast in style and approach. Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are about as different as one could imagine. They are of different generations, genders, and races. One (Harris) laughs easily and the other (Trump) doesn't and makes fun of her for it, without cracking a smile. All for starters.

So, what will the impact of one or the other winning be on the world? The personal differences that people are by now familiar with can be applied to their approaches to foreign affairs. Trump's worldview is better understood than hers. His policy menu has been remarkably consistent since he walked down that golden Trump Tower escalator in 2015 to run

for president—even as his personal behavior is not exactly consistent. He is the America Firster, the neo-isolationist—wary of war, resentful of allies who allegedly enjoy a free ride under the American security umbrella or take advantage of the United States by running trade deficits. He doesn't like immigrants, except to marry them. He is transactional, not principled. As in business, he wants a deal with Putin or Kim, and doesn't care for precedent or niceties of traditional diplomacy.

We know less about Harris. She speaks with passion about abortion rights or law enforcement. Worldview? That's harder to discern. For the past three-plus years, Harris was part of team Biden. She went to the Munich Security Conference, that establishment conclave, to speak about the importance of American alliances. She has built a relatively traditional political career over two decades in California and Washington. She appears to be a

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Ukraine's President Zelensky meets Vice President Kamala Harris in September 2024

card-carrying internationalist. As one prominent retired American general told me recently, Harris could be a better version of the Biden foreign policy: "The steadier it goes with her."

These speculations are fun, especially for journalists, and one hopes even a little illuminating. But they're superficial, as I said, and miss a few important things. No one truly knows what a president will do in the world until, to commingle Mike Tyson and Harold Macmillan, an event, dear boy, punches them in the nose. While the president may be called the "most powerful" person in the world, their power to shape

outcomes remains limited. We don't live in the age of Caesars. And we conveniently ignore that American leaders may change but American interests stay remarkably consistent.

I think we can safely identify three areas where the next president will be challenged in foreign affairs and where the two contenders for the top executive office may react more similarly to each other—though we won't have a chance to run this as a controlled experiment—than we might expect. On the global economy, the new Washington Consensus is very much the opposite of the old "Washington Consensus" that

prized liberal economics and free trade. The new one embraces protectionism and industrial policy, and, as it happens, both Trump and Biden, and now Harris, are in this camp. Expect neither to push free trade deals. On China, Trump first turned the United States in adopting a bearish line—and Europe followed, especially after China's ally Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022. Harris and Trump are on the same page on China more or less too. And a new president will have to grapple with how to honor security commitments that Washington has made to allies (formally or not). Taiwan lurks in the near future, naturally, but so does East Asia, with Japan and South Korea facing China, North Korea, and Russia, a trifecta of adversaries.

But it is Ukraine that will be the most immediate test of the next president's commitment to support democracy and its friends in the world. Their responses will go a long way to answer how the next president views American power and its ability to shape outcomes.

At the surface level, the differences are obvious. Trump says he would cut a deal to end the conflict—even before Inauguration Day.

Strictly speaking that would be illegal, since only the sitting president can run U.S. foreign policy (and that will be Joe Biden until January 20th, 2025). But Trump's insistence he can end the war, coupled with his longstanding stated admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin and dislike for Ukraine, implies the United States would reduce or even cut aid to Ukraine if Kyiv were to buck at his proposed "deal." Trump's longstanding aversion to NATO also puts dark clouds over the alliance's prospects. JD Vance, the most anti-Ukraine member of the Senate, was the worst possible pick from Kyiv's point of view. By contrast, Harris represents Biden-era continuity and would support Ukraine with incremental, if large, aid packages "as long as it takes"—in her current boss's phrase.

Both seem plausible scenarios. I'd bet on neither. If you block out the noise around Trump and look at actual actions, the potential for a more sympathetic approach to Ukraine is coming into focus. As for Harris, she almost certainly wouldn't bring the same people or even basic assumptions as Biden in her approach to the war—which might also be good for Ukraine.

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Buried in the political news in the months leading up to the election, a more dynamic debate has started to play out within both camps. Those behind-the-scenes discussions mean that Trump and Harris's views—and ultimately policies—are still in flux.

For the Ukrainians, this is obviously existential. American decisions on military aid, political signals on any settlement and Washington's future relationship with Kyiv as well as Putin will decide what kind of state, if any, the Ukrainians will have. The stakes here are probably bigger than what happens on the battlefield in Ukraine in 2025.

As on most issues, Harris hasn't had time to publicly flesh out her views on the world since she abruptly stepped in to lead the Democratic ticket. To foreign officials and voters alike, she's a mostly blank canvas on which to project hopes and anxieties.

Based on conversations I've had with Ukrainians close to President Volodymyr Zelensky, you hear two things simultaneously: that Harris is reassuring as a member of a team they know well, and that they would also want

her to break with it once she enters the Oval Office.

The divisions within the Democratic Party and between the Biden Administration and the pro-Ukraine

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camp in Washington are greater than advertised. In public, Ukrainians and their allies along with most Democrats give Biden credit for building a global coalition and marshaling unprecedented military and economic support for Kyiv. In private, those assessments are less generous and, from some Ukrainian officials, biting.

Biden has slow-walked the supply of weapons and put restrictions on

their use, out of a concern over escalation with a nuclear-armed Russia that in retrospect looks exaggerated. That Biden caution and frequent indecision throughout the war has hampered Ukraine's campaign and frayed nerves in Kyiv.

Frustrations with Biden peaked during the July 2024 NATO summit. After a Russian missile partially destroyed a children's hospital in Kyiv as the summit started, the White House denied a Ukrainian request to use American-supplied weapons to hit the launch sites

of the missile in Russia itself. The request to allow Ukraine to strike targets deeper in Russia has been pending on Biden's desk for months.

The caution reflects Biden's own instincts and those of his team. Throughout the term, foreign policy has been closely held by a small team of long-time advisers—principally National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, his deputy Jon Finer, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. None, with the possible exception of Finer, are expected to stay on in a Harris administration.

Ukraine offers a chance for a break with Biden that would rhetorically be more subtle than her recent criticism of Israel—but substantively more consequential if she were to clarify that the United States wants Ukraine to emerge victorious and to back that up by lifting the restrictions on what kind of American weapons are provided and how they are used. Earlier in summer 2024, Harris attended the Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland, and to Ukrainians' delight invoked "our strategic interests" in forcefully supporting Ukraine.

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Mostly out of view as well, there's a struggle for where Trump will take foreign policy. Like Harris, he has sent signals on Ukraine that all sides in this argument—from Putin and the rising isolationist wing of the Republican Party to Zelensky himself—are projecting their hopes onto.

Articulated in Freudian terms, it was the Trump id that led to the pick of Vance. The Ohio senator comes from the wing of the party—and the family, as his friend Donald Trump Jr. again made clear with a viral tweet that mocked Zelensky—that doesn't think Ukraine is America's problem. Given intellectual heft by Elbridge Colby and the New Right and populist venom from the Marjorie Taylor Greenes and Tucker Carlsons, this crowd would cut Kyiv off and explain away Putin's *Anschluss*.

The Trump ego has at the same time embraced a realist-bordering-on-internationalist approach toward Ukraine.

Remember, and the Ukrainians for sure do, that his administration armed the Ukrainians with javelins in 2017 that saved them in 2022 when Putin went in big. Barack Obama had refused to send the Javelins after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and started a proxy war in eastern Ukraine. Trump points out that Ukraine lost significant chunks of territory during both the Obama and Biden terms and zero during Trump's.

After choosing Vance and claiming the nomination, the first foreign leader that Trump called was Zelensky. People who are familiar with the details insist it went even better than the warm readouts from their conversation suggest. According to them, Trump told Zelensky it was "fake news" that he'd help Putin and promised to push for a just peace.

That phone call—Trump had enough self-awareness not to call it "perfect," which was how he described the conversation with Zelensky in 2019 that led to his first impeachment by Congress over freezing military aid allegedly to press the Ukrainians to investigate Joe Biden's son Hunter for corruption—was a not-so-subtle message to the Republican fringe on Ukraine to shut up. In spring 2024, after spending months talking down Biden on Ukraine, Trump provided House Speaker Mike Johnson with political cover to approve the \$60 billion aid package to Ukraine.

"The fact that Trump described this as a good call means his animus against Zelensky is old news," John Herbst, the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine who tracks their Washington lobbying closely at the Atlantic Council, told me. "It's why the populist wing of the party was against Ukraine. If Trump is not there, then they're not there."

Zelensky and his people also see Ukraine allies in Trump's orbit and have worked to cultivate three in particular: former National Security Council chief Robert O'Brien, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Senators Tom Cotton and Marco Rubio. These men are mentioned in discussions about national security posts in a second Trump administration. Notably, Pompeo was the second byline on David Urban's op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* that laid out an ambitious plan to support Ukraine, including membership in NATO. It's one that even a neocon would like. The sharpest contrast to the Urban-Pompeo proposal isn't the current Biden or any future Harris approach but what the Project 2025 wing of Trump World has put forward.

All the usual Trump caveats apply. No one knows what Trump will do, often not even Trump. The constants of his decade on the world stage are unpredictability; a transactional, as opposed to principled, approach to foreign affairs; and a penchant for personalizing policy.

In a conflict between Trump's id and ego, the id often prevails—that would be a bad-case scenario for Ukraine. At the presidential debate in September, Trump refused to say that Ukraine's victory was in America's national security interests. To be fair, the moderators didn't ask Harris the same question.

But the bottom line is that Trump's victory in November doesn't necessarily mean Ukraine's doomed or Putin's saved. The outcome is up for grabs and the people around Trump are fighting over it.

No matter who wins the White House, the next president will have to define any U.S. engagement in Ukraine far more clearly in terms of American interests.

The Ukraine skeptics have done that already: Why spend billions on a lost cause in Ukraine when undocumented immigrants are "invading" across America's southern border and working families here could use the cash? Give Putin the land he conquered already in Ukraine, they say, and this will be over.

There's a better counterargument that the other side of the Trump brain can embrace as could any future Harris

administration. Top leaders at NATO and Ukrainians themselves have been making it for a while: Putin is China's proxy, and the clash in Ukraine is truly over whether the free world or a Beijing-led alliance will prevail. Similarly, the recent efforts by Washington

and some of its European allies to engage Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić are driven by the desire to keep the Balkan country out of the Chinese/Russian sphere of influence—which in Europe only includes Belarus for the time being.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the late Carter-era national security adviser, once said: "It cannot be stressed enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire." His fellow ethnic Pole Radosław Sikorski, the country's current foreign minister, updated that in a talk on the sidelines of the NATO summit this way: "Russia can either be an ally of the West or a vassal of China. Putin chose the latter."

A world with spheres of influence—the kind sought by China and Russia—would hurt America in multiple ways, not least economically by shrinking the space

available to U.S. goods, including for defense hardware and investment. That is an interest-based argument for arming the Ukrainians to win the war that they, not American soldiers, are fighting.

What does victory look like for Ukraine? Trump and Harris can do what Biden hasn't done and define it: ensure a sovereign Ukraine emerges with its security guaranteed ultimately by the United States via a robust NATO.

This fight isn't about land. The mollify-Russia caucus gets that wrong. A land deal won't satisfy Putin. He wants to subjugate Kyiv and turn his sights elsewhere. Putin and the Ukrainians, in moments of candor, agree on that.

To achieve a just peace, the Ukrainians want to make their sacrifices in the past decade of war with Russia count. Ukraine can give up territory, even if no politician can say so now, in exchange for a place securely in the West—with a Ukrainian state that has defensible borders and resides inside NATO. Ukrainian politicians and officials have privately told me as much since the war

started. To bring about that outcome, Ukraine will need more robust military firepower and victories on the battlefield to force Putin to the table on terms they can accept.

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The good outcome for Ukraine and the United States isn't all that hard to picture after the November 2024 U.S. elections. The surprise of the past few weeks: It's equally easy, but obviously far from a sure thing, to imagine it happening under a Harris or a Trump presidency.

What the U.S. does in Ukraine will reverberate around the world. In Asia, they used to say, "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow." More recently, reflecting the growing concern about the ambition of the Chinese, that's "Ukraine today, Indo-Pac tomorrow." Allies and foes will be watching closely.

The Biden record on supporting its friends is mixed. Less than a year into his term, he pulled the U.S. forces out of Afghanistan, leaving behind some tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for the Americans, \$300 billion in U.S. military kit, a bilateral security treaty in tatters, and American standing and

deterrence weakened. Whatever you think about the merits of the war there, America abandoned its allies in Afghanistan—from which Biden’s presidency never recovered. The downward turn in his approval ratings dates back to September 2021.

The Ukraine decision will reverberate in America itself. The country is a paradox. I wrote a column earlier in 2024 entitled, “Welcome to Another ‘American Century.’ Also: We Suck.” As Tony Blair recently noted, the U.S. is relatively more powerful now than it has been at any time since the turn of the century. Who’s the world’s largest producer of oil? Of

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gas? Who has the strongest military, or the most advanced technological and entrepreneurial ecosystem, by a long way? Whose economy has grown faster and kept unemployment lower than almost any developed economy? Whose share of the global economy has grown, while China’s declines? You get the drift. Yet Americans suffer from a crisis of confidence, a hangover from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the painful great recession, and more recently Covid-induced inflation, that has destroyed U.S. self-confidence. Ukraine could see the U.S. snap out of it, or sink deeper into a mostly self-imagined funk. ●

