

## Instant Insight: J.D. Vance on Asia Policy

JULY 16, 2024

### Key Takeaways

- **Appeal:** Former President Trump likely picked J.D. Vance to be his running mate to cement his legacy by elevating a surrogate who shares his beliefs, rather than to appeal to any demographic segment or geographic region.
- **Trade:** Vance has readily aligned with Trump's protective trade agenda and is a vocal supporter of higher tariffs and other trade barriers, particularly with respect to China.
- **National security:** Vance is skeptical of the costs of the U.S. alliance system and the efficacy of military intervention – a departure from the Republican Party's traditional “peace-through-strength” approach to foreign policy.
- **Implications:** The extent of Vance's potential impact on policy decision-making in a second Trump administration remains uncertain, but his heir-apparent status will help integrate Trump's worldview on trade, security, and economic issues into the Republican Party's future agenda.

### Biography

J.D. Vance was elected as the junior U.S. Senator from Ohio in 2022. He rose to prominence after the publication of *Hillbilly Elegy*, his 2016 memoir in which he recounts the socio-economic challenges of growing up in the American “Rust Belt” in a white, working-class, and drug-afflicted family. Prior to election, Vance served in the U.S. Marine Corps, attended Ohio State University on the G.I. bill and then Yale Law School, and began his career working in corporate law and venture capital (VC). During his time in the VC world, Vance worked for former PayPal CEO Peter Thiel, who was instrumental in encouraging Vance's political career and provided at least USD 15 million to Vance's 2022 Ohio Senate campaign.

Despite his harsh criticism of Trump during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, Vance secured Trump's endorsement for his 2022 Senate campaign, aggressively reworking his public image to channel Trump's populist policies and rhetoric. A controversial candidate, Vance narrowly won election to the Senate with just 53 percent of the popular vote in Ohio – nearly 10 points behind popular Republican Governor Mike DeWine. Vance currently serves on the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs; the Senate Committee on Commerce,



Science, and Transportation; and the Senate Special Committee on Aging. He is married to Usha Chilukuri, a lawyer and daughter of Indian immigrants, and they have three children.

## Why Did President Trump Pick Him?

While vice presidential running mates are often chosen to appeal to a specific electoral demographic group or geographic regions, Vance appears to have been chosen as Trump's running mate based on personal chemistry and legacy-building reasons. As a man who understands and channels Trump's worldview, Vance may not appeal much to certain targeted constituencies – namely minorities, independents, suburban women, and disaffected “Haley Republicans.” Thus, his selection shows a certain amount of confidence on Trump's part. More usefully, Vance is energetic, young – at just 39 years old – and has malleable political and policy views, demonstrating that he can serve as an effective surrogate for Trump. Vance could also help cement Trump's worldview on trade, security, and economic issues into the next generation of Republican Party leadership. Accordingly, his nomination as vice president can be seen as another moment of transformation for redefining Republican Party orthodoxy.

## Vance's Asia Policy Perspectives

### Trade Protectionism

Vance is a vocal supporter of tariffs and other protective trade barriers, particularly with respect to China. He readily aligned himself with the first Trump administration's trade policy and supports “broad based tariffs” on a range of Chinese goods. In a 2021 op-ed co-authored with former U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, Vance **called** out the loss of manufacturing jobs as a critical factor leading to societal decline – consistent with themes in his book *Hillbilly Elegy* – and blamed China. Vance also **believes** that trade and immigration issues are “two sides of the same coin” and seeks economic policies that do not rely on inexpensive labor either at home or overseas.

Vance has endorsed and called for an expansion of the Trump Administration's tariffs on Chinese imports, suggested that U.S. companies have exploited “cheap overseas labor,” and stated that the 2018-19 Trump tariffs worked to “offset unfair economic advantages.” Vance's views on the current socioeconomic trajectory of the United States have been heavily influenced by outside advisors like **Oren Cass** and **Peter Thiel**.

- Vance has also **criticized** the Biden Administration's approach to raising tariffs, framing them as politically motivated and geared at “protecting green energy jobs at the expense of the industrial heartland.”



- Vance introduced **legislation** to eliminate EV subsidies under the Inflation Reduction Act, and replace those rules with subsidies to promote gas-powered vehicles made in the United States. He has generally positioned himself as “blue-collar,” pro-union, and anti-big business.
- Vance has teamed up Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) to **crack down** on Wall Street banks and praised antitrust actions by the current aggressive Federal Trade Commission chair Lina Khan, who was appointed by President Biden.
- He **opposes** the Nippon Steel acquisition of U.S. Steel, and has suggested that the Biden tariffs do not help the steel or natural gas industries in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, or Pennsylvania.
- Vance introduced **legislation** designed to “restrict China from accessing American financial markets and exchanges if they continue to violate international financial law, manipulate their currency, abuse transparency and disclosure rules, or refuse to fulfill over USD 1 trillion of defaulted debt obligations to American citizens.”
- He has also co-sponsored legislation that would close the **de minimis** loophole, strengthen **tariffs** on Chinese automobiles and electric vehicles, and seek to end China’s classification as a **developing nation** in international organizations.

## Isolationist Foreign Policy

Like Trump, Vance represents a break with the Republican foreign policy approach of “peace-through-strength,” which has dominated the party since President Ronald Reagan and throughout both Bush presidencies. Vance leans isolationist, or at least non-interventionist, **arguing** that national interest should be prioritized over ideology in foreign policy. He remains highly skeptical of the U.S. alliance system and the “free riding” of U.S. allies, and has been sharply critical of U.S. military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam – which he **argues** were ideologically driven failures of the “foreign policy establishment.”

- Vance has been a prominent skeptic of U.S. aid to Ukraine and NATO – contending that the U.S. needs to focus instead on challenges in East Asia. He voted against the annual defense bill in 2023 and opposed supplemental national security assistance to Ukraine, Israel, and the Indo-Pacific earlier this year.
- In a speech at the Munich Security Conference in February, Vance explicitly **stated** that East Asia will dominate U.S. foreign policy over the



next four decades. He has **argued** for redirecting weapons shipments away from Ukraine and to Taiwan.

- Vance sticks with prior practice in supporting a policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan, but he believes that the United States must be prepared to impose significant costs on any Chinese attacks on the island. At the same time, he believes Taiwan needs to do more for its own defense.

## Impact in a second Trump Administration?

It is unclear what kind of impact J.D. Vance will have in a second Trump administration. Vance has limited government experience - only serving in the U.S. Senate for one-and-a-half years - and has largely built his political platform by channeling Trump's populist preferences on trade, economics, and foreign policy without becoming involved in any rigorous policy oversight. Vance's policy preferences - like his politics - appear malleable. Unlike former Vice President Pence, he is not widely respected by Republican members of Congress, and it is unclear if he can serve as an effective policy bridge between a re-elected Trump and the legislative branch in the same way that Pence did during Trump's first term. The nature of the limited role of the vice president and Vance's own inexperience navigating and directing government bureaucracies could mean that his impact on U.S. policy trajectories could be muted. As noted above, however, Vance's real impact will be in cementing Trump's populist policy preferences - and future initiatives - in the Republican Party agenda for the longer term as his political stature grows. Vance, of course, would also step in as U.S. president if Trump became unable to serve.