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Mark N. Katz

What Difference Will It Make? Impact of a Harris or Trump Presidency on American Foreign Policy

KEY MESSAGES

- If she is elected president, Kamala Harris is likely to continue President Joseph Biden's foreign policy, though her tone on the Middle East may differ somewhat from his
- Just as Biden continued much of former President Donald Trump's foreign policy, a re-elected Trump is likely to continue much of Biden's
- While Biden and Harris have been strong supporters of NATO, Trump has been more critical of it. Still, many see Trump's criticisms of NATO as being designed to push its European members to spend more on defense, not to pull the US out of the alliance
- Trump has provided ample reason to doubt that he would be as supportive of Ukraine as Biden has been and Harris is likely to be. Still, Trump does not want to see Ukraine collapse on his watch. And Trump's relations with Vladimir Putin might deteriorate sharply if the Russian president does not accept Trump's conflict resolution efforts
- European policymakers should increase their countries' defense expenditures in order to encourage the US to maintain its commitment to NATO. But European policymakers should also intensify planning for an independent European defense in case the American commitment falters
- European policymakers should do more to point out to their American counterparts that the Western competition with China is not just taking place in Asia, but worldwide – including in Europe

DIFFERING TONES BUT SIMILAR POLICIES

If Vice President Kamala Harris is elected as president of the United States in November 2024, the substance and tone of American foreign policy can be expected to remain much the same as it has been during President Joseph Biden's term. But if former President Donald Trump is elected, the tone of American foreign policy will undoubtedly change back to the belligerent "America First" theme he adopted during his first term. Europeans, then, understandably fear that Trump's disdain for NATO has not diminished. Ukrainians also have reason to fear that Trump will not be

nearly as supportive of Kyiv as Biden has been or as Harris is likely to be.

It has been noted by several observers, though, that American foreign policy during both the Trump and Biden administrations has been broadly similar (Wong 2022). Could it be, then, that if Trump is elected again, he will continue many of the same policies that Biden pursued – especially where these were continuations of his own policies? Harvard University Professor Stephen M. Walt (2024) argued just this in a January 2024 *FP* article entitled, "Another Trump Presidency Won't Much Change US Foreign Policy."

It is noteworthy that Trump and Biden – as well as Harris – have indeed had similar approaches on several foreign policy issues.

Trump and Biden have seen China not just as a security threat but also an economic one. Biden maintained the trade sanctions that Trump imposed on China. Harris, by contrast, has criticized Trump's sanctions on China as having negative effects on US consumers. It is not clear, though, whether she would move to lift any of them. She has, however, consistently described China as a security threat. She expressed support for "Taiwan's self-defense, consistent with our longstanding policy," as Biden has done (McCartney 2024). By contrast, Trump has raised doubts about whether the US would defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack (Tang 2024).

Late in Trump's first term, Washington helped arrange for normalization agreements (popularly known as the "Abraham accords") between Israel on the one hand and four Arab states – the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan – on the other. Biden not only supported this process but tried to extend it to Saudi Arabia (Singh 2024). Both Harris and Trump are likely to continue to support the Abraham accord process.

Trump pulled the US out of the 2015 Iranian nuclear accord, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2018. Despite Biden's hopes of reviving it, the growing tensions between Iran and the US on several issues (including Iranian support for Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel and support for Russia against Ukraine) prevented this. Trump's view of the JCPOA is likely to be as negative as it was during his first term. While Harris supports reviving it, it is doubtful that she can be any more successful at doing so than Biden (Von Hein 2024).

Harris has been more critical of Israeli military policy in Gaza than Biden, but some observers believe that she has stated publicly what Biden has expressed privately (Daniels et al. 2024). Yet while she has criticized Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's policy toward Gaza and voiced sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians there, Harris has also expressed "unwavering commitment" to Israel and described Hamas as a "brutal terrorist organization" (Dovere 2024).

Trump, by contrast, has publicly been more supportive of Israeli efforts in Gaza, urging the Israelis to "finish what they started" and "get it over with fast." But Trump has also said, "I'm not sure that I'm loving the way they're doing it," and "let's get back to peace and stop killing people." One of the Israeli journalists conducting this interview with him claimed that both Trump and Biden were "turning their rhetorical backs on Israel" (Sullivan 2024). It seems highly likely that the Gaza conflict will continue past the January 20, 2025, inauguration date for the next president even if a broader conflict between Israel and Iran is avoided. Harris might be more critical of Netanyahu than Trump, but both Trump and Harris can be expected to continue supporting Israel while also urging an end to the conflict.

Trump adopted a harsh policy aimed at stemming illegal immigration across the US-Mexico border. While Biden criticized Trump for this, US border policy under Biden ended up having many similarities to Trump's (Kight 2023). Whether Harris or Trump wins the November 2024 presidential election, both will continue these efforts though their rhetoric about this issue will differ markedly.

Two areas many see Harris and Trump differing over are American support for NATO and American support for Ukraine. Harris has supported Biden's policy of strong support for NATO and can be expected to continue this if she is elected. Trump, by contrast, has been highly critical of NATO both during his first term and subsequently, and is thus likely to remain so during a second term.

Trump's criticisms, though, have mainly been about how several NATO governments are not spending enough on defense and seem directed more at getting them to "pay their fair share." This, however, is something that post-World War II presidents before Trump and Biden have also called for. They, of course, did not threaten to withdraw the US from NATO or encourage Russia to "do whatever the hell they want" to NATO members that do not spend enough on defense like Trump has done (Ibesa and Kim 2024). But since the end of Trump's first term at the beginning of 2021, the number of NATO states spending at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense has risen from six to 23 in 2024 (Falkenek 2024). Trump's threat of not being willing to defend states that do not spend enough, then, now appears to apply to fewer countries. Although former Trump National Security Adviser John Bolton (among others) have warned that

Trump's threats to pull the US out of NATO should be taken seriously (Bolton 2024), Trump may actually intend them as a bargaining tactic. If either Trump or Harris wins the election, both can be expected to push other NATO members to increase their defense expenditures, though in very different tones of voice.

Regarding Ukraine, Harris can be expected to continue Biden's policy of providing Kyiv with strong support, Congress permitting. Whether Trump would do so, however, is unclear – especially given his past animosity toward Ukrainian President Zelensky and his oft expressed admiration for Russian President Putin. Trump has even claimed that he can settle the Russian-Ukrainian conflict "in a day" (WSJ Video 2023).

But if Trump wins a second term, how would he react if – as seems highly likely – he cannot resolve the conflict "in a day," or at all? Will he really end US aid to Ukraine and risk the humiliation of the Kyiv government collapsing on his watch like the Kabul government did on Biden's? This does not seem like something Trump would relish. Indeed, at one campaign appearance in February 2024, Trump claimed that he would do more to protect Ukraine than then candidate Biden (Gold 2024). Trump might also react quite negatively if Putin did not accept his conflict resolution efforts. Trump might be more assertive than Harris about stating that the war needs to end with a ceasefire in place or some other compromise that Kyiv does not want to make (Arnsdorf et al. 2024). Harris, though, might also be more willing to push for an end to the conflict on terms such as these, even if she is reluctant to say so publicly during the election campaign. Interestingly, there are those who see not just Harris, but also Trump as being more supportive of Ukraine than Biden has been (Kaminski 2024). Trump's positive description of his July 2024 phone conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also suggests that Trump's previous animosity toward him may have dissipated (Holmes 2024).

As he was during his first term, Trump may be willing to make deals with authoritarian adversaries in the hope of replicating a "Nixon in China" moment. But if the experience of his first term is any guide, Trump may be no more successful at this in a second term. Both Trump and Harris, though, can be expected to cooperate with America's authoritarian allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), albeit with differing levels of enthusiasm.

Policy toward climate change is also something that Biden and Trump have disagreed upon. Harris has backed Biden's support for policies to mitigate this problem while Trump largely opposes them



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(Wolf 2024). Neither Harris nor Trump, though, may be able to do much about it. Harris may not be able to get climate change policies passed by Congress if (as seems likely) either of its two houses is controlled by Republicans. Nor will Trump be able to do much to stop Democratic-controlled state governments as well as corporations, foundations, and investors concerned with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues from adopting their own climate change policies. For both Harris and Trump, climate change issues are likely to be a lower priority than security and trade issues.

THE VICE-PRESIDENTIAL FACTOR

According to *POLITICO*, Harris's choice as vice president, Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota, diverges "little from his running mate's messaging" on foreign policy issues (O'Brien and Bazail-Eimil 2024). He has been supportive of Israel but called for humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza, critical of Russia and supportive of Ukraine, skeptical of free trade agreements when he was a member of Congress but supportive of expanded trade as governor of Minnesota (Berman and Roy 2024). Republicans have criticized Walz for being "soft" on China, but he has been a consistent critic of Beijing's human rights shortcomings (Rogin 2024). As vice president, he is likely to support Harris's foreign policy and certainly not challenge it.

On the other hand, Trump's choice for vice-presidential running mate – Senator J. D. Vance of Ohio – has some very pronounced views on foreign policy. Vance has opposed US military support for Ukraine because he does not think it can win its war with Russia, sees Asia as a more important priority for the US than Europe, strongly supports Israel, and is a climate change skeptic. Unlike Trump, whose foreign policy views seem transactional and subject to change depending on circumstances, Vance's views appear to be more deeply held and ideologically rooted (Lindsay 2024).

This is important because given Trump's current age of 78, there is a strong possibility that he may not be able to serve out the full four years of the presidential term lasting from January 2025 to January 2029. Vance, though, may only be able to put his imprint on American foreign policy if Trump passes away and Vance inherits the Oval Office from him. If instead he is ailing but alive, Trump himself can be expected to try to project an image of just being "temporarily indisposed" and rely not on Vance but trusted Trump family members and White House staff to act on his behalf. These might well engage in their own free-lancing efforts which they claim Trump supports, but these are likely to be more pragmatic and transactional than ideological.

But whether it is Harris, Trump, or (in the event of the president's death) either of their vice presidents who end up overseeing American foreign policy for all or part of the next four years, reacting to events

might be the main driver of their foreign policies and not the foreign policy agenda that they advocate before taking office.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

European policymakers, of course, cannot be complacent about the extent to which American support for NATO and Ukraine will continue if Trump or even Harris is elected president in November 2024. It would be prudent, then, for European governments to continue to increase their defense spending and support for Ukraine not only because these are sensible policies but also to encourage the US to continue doing so. European governments have no interest in giving Trump or similarly minded politicians in Washington an excuse for not defending a Europe that they claim is not interested in defending itself.

Hopefully, the US commitment to defending Europe will continue. But if they fear the possibility that it will not, then European governments should intensify consultations and preparations regarding independent European defense efforts. While a good thing to do in and of itself, this would also be useful for showing Washington that Europe is indeed serious about its own defense. There is, of course, a risk that if Europe convinces the US that it is willing and able to defend itself, then there are those in Washington who will conclude that the US no longer needs to be as involved in defending Europe and can turn US attention more toward the Chinese threat in Asia.

To forestall this possibility, European leaders should launch a campaign to persuade American officials, legislators, media, and public opinion that just as the West's Cold War competition with the Soviet Union took place throughout the globe, its competition with China is also worldwide – including in Europe. Indeed, Chinese support for Russia in its war against Ukraine has made China a threat to Europe. European policymakers should work with American ones on countering and hopefully reducing Chinese support for Russia, which threatens both Europe and America.

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