

## THE U.S. ELECTIONS 2024 AND FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA: AN ANALYSIS

By  
**Mahrukh Khan**  
Research Fellow  
Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by  
**Dr Neelum Nigar**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



As Election Day approaches, the race between the two candidates – Democratic nominee Kamala Harris and Republican nominee Donald Trump – keeps getting tighter. The campaign took a significant turn after President Biden’s withdrawal from the race and his endorsement of Vice President Kamala Harris. For many, the 2024 elections represent a critical crossroads for the U.S. – selecting its first female president or opting for a second Trump presidency.

While the people do vote directly, Presidential elections in the U.S. are uniquely decided through the Electoral College. This system allows each state in the U.S. to allocate votes based on its population. A presidential candidate must secure a minimum of 270 electoral votes from 538<sup>1</sup> to win the presidency. While most states have a predictable voting pattern, few battleground states or ‘swing states’ remain decisive in determining the outcome. Since August 2024, states like Georgia, Arizona, and North Carolina have seen continuous fluctuations between both presidential candidates with Trump on a slight lead, while Kamala Harris has maintained a slim lead in Nevada. Similarly, in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania the polls have remained tight with Vice President Harris on an initial lead.

<sup>1</sup> “How the President is elected?” <https://www.usa.gov/election>

## U.S. Presidential Candidates and Foreign Policy Agenda

U.S. elections is set to significantly influence both American and international politics as it carries global significance. The result will shape not only the U.S. domestic and foreign policy, it will also impact the global security dynamics, international economic realities, and for countries like Pakistan influence regional strategic dynamics. The comparison below outlines the differences between Kamala Harris's and Donald Trump's stance on multiple foreign policy issues that will have profound implications around the globe.

So far, both Harris and Trump have articulated differing visions of foreign policy. While Kamala has favored establishment of alliances, diplomacy, and climate action, Trump has pushed for more nationalistic agendas, and reduced global cooperation, particularly on issues like military alliances such as NATO as well as climate change.

Some of the key foreign policy positions of the two candidates include:

### ➤ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

Irrespective of who enters the Oval Office, the United States will redefine its relationship with NATO. Should Trump return as President, NATO will face significant changes in the relationship in terms of U.S. engagement. In contrast, should Kamala Harris win, the trajectory of the relationship will be more subtle, with continuation of Biden's policies. Overall, however, NATO is expected to experience a redefined relationship with the U.S., regardless of who enters the Office.

#### **Kamala Harris**

Kamala Harris has positioned herself as a strong supporter of multilateral cooperation and NATO. She has referred to NATO as central to America's approach to global security and called its commitment to NATO ironclad.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Donald Trump**

Trump maintains that his administration would not abide by the alliance's collective defense clause<sup>3</sup> and at the same time push European countries to drastically increase their military spending.

### ➤ China

The primary foreign policy challenge that any U.S. administration, incumbent or incoming, faces is dealing with a power balance in a rapidly changing global environment, one in which China continues

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<sup>2</sup> Promises Kamala Harris has made so far in her campaign, CNN, October 11, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2024/08/politics/kamala-harris-key-issues-dg/>

<sup>3</sup> Promises Donald Trump has made so far in his campaign for a second term, CNN, October 11, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2024/04/politics/trump-campaign-promises-dg/>

to rise and reshape the world order. Both presidential nominees hold strong policy options for China on trade, economy, and security issues. While China remains one of the biggest geopolitical challenges for the U.S., both Harris and Trump have failed to outline a clear policy approach on China.

#### **Kamala Harris**

Harris has consistently acknowledged the tension between the U.S. and China. However, she maintains that she will not seek conflict with China but the focus will be on mitigating risks and protection of American interests.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Donald Trump**

For his part, Trump maintains an aggressive posture. He has threatened to intensify the trade war with China with higher tariffs on imports and proposed revoking China's status of the Most Favored Nation.<sup>5</sup>

### ➤ **South Asia**

South Asia has been one of the pivotal fronts of U.S. strategic policy, especially within the context of U.S. competition with China. To many in the U.S. policy circles, South Asia looks increasingly unstable and requires a stronger ally to further its interests in the region. Irrespective of who eventually wins the White House, they feel that the U.S. national interest dictates the pursuit of a stronger strategic partnership with India along with multiple partnerships in the region.

#### **Kamala Harris**

India remained a key bilateral relationship in the Biden administration, viewed as a pivotal counterbalance to China, especially in the 'Indo-Pacific' region. Harris's policy towards India will follow in the same footsteps with more strategic alignment. On the other hand, after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the region as a whole has remained of less interest to the U.S.

#### **Donald Trump**

Bilateral approaches of the Trump administration, if he wins Office remain uncertain. Trump's outlook towards countries in South Asia remains transactional. Despite being a strategic ally, he called out India as the abuser of the global trade regime<sup>6</sup> and is expected to have greater scrutiny of the bilateral relations.

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<sup>4</sup> Caitlin Yeilk, "Trump and Harris' views on China, according to their records and what they've said," CBS News, September 12, 2024 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-harris-china-2024/>

<sup>5</sup> Caitlin Yeilk, "Trump and Harris' views on China, according to their records and what they've said," CBS News, September 12, 2024 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-harris-china-2024/>

<sup>6</sup> "Why the US-India relationship needs a healthy dose of realism," Chatham House, October 8, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/10/why-us-india-relationship-needs-healthy-dose-realism>

## ➤ South East Asia

Southeast Asia plays a critical role in the geo-political competition in the region, especially on the issue of the South China Sea and furthering U.S. interests in the region and beyond. Constituting a policy of interest and benefit as well as strengthening alliances in Southeast Asia remains one of the top priorities for both candidates.

### **Kamala Harris**

Like Biden, regional stability remains one of the most prominent features of Harris's policy approach to Southeast Asia. She has also acknowledged the existing gaps in the policy towards the region and has pledged to make it up for it, especially on initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. In addition, if elected President, she has also promised to enforce the rule of law and international norms in the region.

### **Donald Trump**

Trump's policy in Southeast Asia will be per his policies towards China. During his first term, his actions in the region were less drastic than promised. His engagement with North Korea remained an issue of contention even within his own administration. However, with his reelection into Office, the internal resistance to his policies on the region might decrease as he brings officials more aligned with his policies.

## ➤ Middle East

The Middle East is a topic of most divergent policy choices by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. The region is primarily divided into three zones of policy; Iran, Israel-Palestine, and U.S. alliances with the Arab and Gulf states.

### **Kamala Harris**

On the issue of the ongoing war in Gaza, Kamala Harris supports a cease-fire, release of hostages, and a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine issue.

### **Donald Trump**

In comparison, Trump's approach to policies in the Middle East is more confrontational, entailing support for Israel and an aggressive posture toward Iran.

## ➤ Russia-Ukraine

The U.S. elections can most likely impact the fate of the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite U.S. sanctions, Russia has remained resilient and has been able to withstand the pressures on the economy from the impact of war and sanctions and has kept its armed forces well supplied. While Harris brings a sense

of policy continuity for Ukraine, Trump's policy towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict remains uncertain at best.

### **Kamala Harris**

Harris has reaffirmed U.S.'s support to Ukraine. She has promised to back Ukraine for as long as it takes, building on the larger threat Russia poses to Europe.<sup>7</sup> In addition, she has advocated and encouraged the U.S. Congress to provide more aid and financial assistance to Kyiv.

### **Donald Trump**

In contrast, Trump does not support any additional aid to Ukraine if he is reelected as the president. He brands the conflict as one for which the European countries need to financially step up their contributions instead of the U.S. and pledges to end the war.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The world is undergoing far reaching changes, intensifying major-power competition, and growing chaos and conflict. On November 5, 2024, as America selects its next president, the consequences of the voters' choice will be felt throughout the globe. The scope and intensity of U.S. engagement with the world and relations with individual countries will be determined by the nominee who finally enters the Oval Office. The elections will be a defining development for the U.S. as it pursues foreign policy goals around the world.

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<sup>7</sup> "Kamala Harris's Positions," Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/election2024/candidate-tracker/kamala-harris#russia%E2%80%93ukraine>

<sup>8</sup> "Donald Trump's Positions," Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/election2024/candidate-tracker/donald-trump#russia%E2%80%93ukraine>