



WHAT A HARRIS FOREIGN POLICY COULD MEAN FOR EUROPE

- Americans may not vote on foreign policy issues, but issues such as Ukraine, Gaza and China have wide-ranging domestic consequences. The world is a more dangerous place than it was four or eight years ago. Ironically, while domestic issues dominate the campaign, typically the early crises that incoming administrations must confront are foreign.
- Kamala Harris would bring far more to the foreign policy and national security table than many of her predecessors, based on a combination of lived experience and her tenure as Vice President.
- As the sitting Vice President, in the past ten weeks, she has had to thread the needle carefully, but has staked out positions, principally on Gaza, that differ from the Administration's. Expect more next year.
- China, Ukraine and the Middle East will dominate the early agenda.
- Europe will have opportunities, but rightly so has recognized that regardless who wins in November, the old paradigms are being quickly discarded.

During my most recent set of visits to London, Paris and Berlin, and not surprisingly given the events of the past ten weeks, it was clear that the mood in Europe has shifted decisively from conviction that Donald Trump would win to conviction that he will lose. Equally not surprisingly, conviction that, perhaps as early as the third week of January 2025, NATO and Ukraine would be doomed has been replaced by a series of probing questions about what a Kamala Harris foreign policy could look like. As I tempered the earlier conviction last Spring, I have since August tempered the second one – this race is too close to call, but let's assume that Harris is inaugurated as the 47th President of the United States. What would this mean for Europe?

It is axiomatic that American voters typically do not factor foreign policy considerations into their decisions to vote. (The impact of the failure at Desert One on the Carter re-elect may be an exception.) There is an irony here, in that while domestic issues tend to dominate the agendas of incoming administrations during the transition and early days in office, far too often the baptism of fire involves foreign policy and national security crises that present leaders early on with challenges to which they had little exposure prior to inauguration.

The world Harris will inherit on January 20, 2025, assuming she wins, is a more dangerous place than the one Joe Biden inherited on January 20, 2021. The threats have evolved significantly in the past few years, with regional adversarial actors – China, Russia, Iran and North Korea – focused since the Cold War on regional issues having taken tentative steps to align largely since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine to engage the United States and its allies on a global scale. The threat trajectories are increasingly global, with each adversary extending its reach well beyond its traditional sphere of engagement. The old playbooks are now out of date and no longer fit for purpose. Add to the mix that we are witnessing the future of warfare evolve in real time on the battlefields of Ukraine, with significant dislocation. Moreover, the need for rethinking both offensive and defensive postures in light of the lightning speed with which generative AI is transforming all manner of life, is no longer a luxury but an imperative.



Admittedly, though not unlike many of her predecessors, when it comes to a Harris foreign policy/national security/defense, we do not have much to go on in terms of deliverables, but her lived experience places her above many of her predecessors. Compared to President Biden and much of today's foreign policy establishment, Harris came of age in a different time under different life circumstances. She is the daughter of immigrants (and spent part of her youth in Montreal). She was exposed to civil rights activism from an early age, and served as a prosecutor before becoming a Senator.

In the Senate, Harris served on the Homeland Security Committee and the Select Committee on Intelligence. As Vice President, she undertook 17 trips abroad, attending among other things the Munich Security Conference shortly after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. She has met with a range of leaders, over 150 according to [CNN](#) (*see also* Eric Bazail-Eimil writing in POLITICO, "[Here are the world leaders Harris has on speed dial](#)"), far more as the POLITICO piece notes than one might expect of a one-term US Senator and former state prosecutor and attorney general.

In Her Words

During the lead-up to the 2020 race, there was little discussion of Harris' foreign policy orientation as there was not much to analyze from her four years in the Senate. In [answers](#) given to the Council on Foreign Relations in August 2019, among other responses, Harris

- suggested her administration would cooperate with China on global issues such as climate change, but would stand up for human rights;
- would rejoin the JCPOA if Iran returned to compliance;
- supported a full withdrawal from Afghanistan;
- would re-evaluate our relationship with Saudi Arabia and called for an end to US support for the Saudi war effort in Yemen ([supporting a 2018 Senate resolution](#) calling for an end to weapons sales to Saudi);
- voiced support for a two-state solution; and
- vowed to continue to support Ukraine and its sovereignty and territorial integrity (note this was before the 2022 invasion), characterizing the occupation of Crimea as a "severe violation" of international norms.

Fast forward to July, and Harris emerged as the Democratic Party standard bearer with no primary contest, and her campaign (with 100 days from start to finish) has studiously avoided going into great detail on most issues, as a tactical matter.

While the campaign may attribute domestic and foreign policy achievements of the Biden administration to Harris (as has the Trump campaign, for polar opposite reasons), this was the Joe Biden show, the President having (rightly) fashioned himself as the foreign policy president. To add to the mix, Harris is still the Vice President and, as such, has needed to thread the needle carefully in choosing when and by how much to introduce any daylight between her vision and the stated policies of the Biden administration. These policies reflect the fact that the President has been fully engaged on foreign policy matters for over 30 years – years dominated by the Cold War and the age of largely undisputed US dominance. And it



bears mentioning that, as president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass has [noted](#), the vantage point to gain foreign policy exposure offered by serving as Vice President should not be underestimated,

Harris has not exactly shied away from national security themes. Her DNC [speech](#) as well as points made in her debate with Donald Trump did touch on foreign policy issues. It was not accidental that former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director Leon Panetta, who offered a full-throated endorsement of the Vice President from a national security perspective, [spoke](#) on the final night of the DNC.¹ And while we may not be able to pinpoint with certainty her strategic thinking, we might divine a direction of travel based on who she is, her lived experience and who she has chosen to rely on for foreign policy input.

Her DNC speech set out some clear national security lines: “As president, I will never waver in defense of America’s security and ideals, because in the enduring struggle between democracy and tyranny, I know where I stand, and I know where the United States of America belongs.” In words not typically associated with Democrats, Harris also said, “As Commander-in-Chief, I will ensure America always has the strongest, most *lethal fighting force* in the world.” In [remarks](#) at the Munich Security Conference in February, Harris described NATO as the “greatest military alliance the world has ever known” and challenged the Trump isolationist wing head-on: “Isolation is not insulation. ... Let me be clear. That worldview is dangerous, destabilizing and indeed short-sighted. That view would weaken American and undermine global stability and undermine global prosperity.”

During the debate with Trump, she touched on Ukraine, Gaza and China (admittedly though in the case of China, it really was more about tariffs). In a sense these “foreign policy” issues bleed into the domestic political landscape, each for different reasons.

- Ukraine presents a clear choice between defending democracy and caving to an autocrat, with Trump seemingly committed to achieving his peace in a day by forcing the Ukrainians to the negotiating table through a threatened cut off of support for the war effort if they don’t engage with Putin.

¹ Harris has benefitted from a flood of endorsements from officials who had worked in the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush and/or Donald Trump (in a [letter](#) signed this past week 111 officials, which followed a [letter](#) signed by 17 former staff members from the Reagan administration and a [letter](#) signed by 238 staffers who worked in the Bush I or Bush II administrations or for Senators John McCain or Mitt Romney) as well as from other prominent Republicans, including members of Congress. Some Republican officials spoke at the DNC. Harris also has the endorsement of former Vice President Dick Cheney and his daughter former Rep. Liz Cheney. Former Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez also endorsed Harris.

This afternoon, National Security Leaders for America released a letter signed by over 700 current and former national security leaders, and former military officials, endorsing Harris. Among other points made, the letter states, “Vice President Harris has proven she is an effective leader able to advance American national security interests. Her relentless diplomacy with allies around the globe preserved a united front in support of Ukraine’s fight against Russian aggression. She grasps the reality of American military deterrence, promising to preserve the American military’s status as the most ‘lethal’ force in the world.”



- Gaza presents a separate set of domestic issues given the schism in the Democratic Party over the way in which Israel has pursued its efforts to eradicate Hamas, and were the situation in Lebanon to deteriorate to the point where Israel and Hezbollah end up in a full-on war, gas prices would likely surge upward. Harris called for a cease-fire in March ahead of Biden’s call at the end of May.

In July, she declined to preside over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s address to Congress, though [delivered](#) remarks (highly unusual, but understandable given the timing) following her meeting with him after the Congressional address. (These were the only official White House remarks relating to the visit.) Separately, in unusual cadour, she [said](#) “What has happened in Gaza over the past nine months is devastating. ... We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to the suffering. And I will not be silent.” In her DNC speech, her remarks on Gaza were longer than the cumulative drive-by on other foreign policy matters, calling for a two-state solution, “where the Palestinian people can realize their right to dignity, freedom and self-determination” (echoing her remarks following her meeting with Netanyahu). In the debate, she reiterated this commitment. These were not remarks President Biden could have delivered.

- China presents a third set of domestic issues in light of the threats by Trump to impose across the board tariffs.

Selection of Key Advisers

It will be instructive to see who she selects to advise her on foreign policy/national security matters. The contours of a Harris foreign policy will be shaped significantly by whom she chooses as her Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, CIA Director, Director of National Intelligence and National Security Adviser (and this is, not surprisingly, a favored parlor game in DC, not least among those angling for appointments – see today’s [“Who could be in Harris’s Cabinet? Let the chatter begin”](#) and last month’s [“Behind the Curtain: The Harris Cabinet”](#)).

In what observers have noted was not simply an off-the-cuff comment, Harris has said she will appoint a Republican to her Cabinet, which could well mean a Republican could serve in one of the national security/defense/foreign policy positions. President Clinton tapped Republican William Cohen to serve as his Secretary of Defense, and President Obama tapped Republicans Robert Gates (as a Bush II holdover) and then Chuck Hagel to serve as his Secretary of Defense. Neither Donald Trump nor Joe Biden reached across the aisle.

The National Security Adviser is likely to be Phil Gordon, and the Deputy NSA could be Rebecca Lissner (they currently advise her in her capacity as Vice President).

Gordon, who served in both the Clinton administration and the Obama administration (where he was intimately involved in Obama’s Syria policy discussions), joined the Harris team on Day One and became her national security adviser 14 months later. His expertise is Europe and the Middle East, rather than Asia. He speaks several foreign languages.

A student of decades of failed interventions across the Middle East (in his 2020 book, he examines interventions in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Syria, as well as in Afghanistan), he



concludes that regime change rarely works. He faults policymakers for routinely underestimating the challenges and overstating the perceived threats to US national interests, for failing to appreciate the conflicts of interest that exiles and local officials bring to their engagements, for failing to anticipate and prepare for the chaos that typically accompanies regime collapse, for prematurely declaring victory, and for burdening the country with significant human and financial costs.

As noted by Tracy Wilkinson in the Los Angeles Times ([“The next-generation foreign policy of Kamala Harris”](#)), Gordon has “advocated for a less hubristic and hegemonic U.S. role in the world and one with lower U.S.-centric ambitions.” Ultimately it is more than embracing the importance of working with allies, it is about reversing the traditional default of the foreign policy establishment and recognizing the limits of projecting US power.

Alexander Ward, writing in the Wall Street Journal ([“The Skeptic Who Could Shape Kamala Harris’s Foreign Policy”](#)) reports that Gordon had urged caution over the withdrawal from Afghanistan and suggested retaining a small military presence, putting him at odds with both Biden and Harris. In 1999, while serving on the National Security Council under President Clinton, Gordon supported military strikes on Serbian forces to force them out of Kosovo. In 2013, Gordon advocated bombing Syria after chemical weapons were deployed by President Bashar al-Assad, urging President Obama to enforce his “red line” (which Obama declined to do). In 2018, Gordon co-wrote [an article](#) in Foreign Affairs in which the authors set out a series of policies to counter the Kremlin, which included imposing sanctions, persuading social media to better moderate content to combat disinformation and leaking embarrassing information about Putin. “If this package of measures sounds like a prescription for a new Cold War with Russia, it is,” they asserted.

Yasmeen Abutaleb, writing in the Washington Post ([“Trusted aide would play key role in Harris review of U.S.-Israel policy”](#)), suggested that the most significant departure from Biden foreign policy would be Gordon’s views as to the approach to addressing the seemingly intractable Middle East conflict. She writes, “While the other officials were almost entirely focused on dissuading Israel from a full-scale assault, Gordon was already asking about the ‘day after,’ one of the people recalled. How does this end? Gordon asked of the military campaign. How will the United States advance a two-state solution once the war is over?”

As for Lissner, Michael Hirsh writing in [Foreign Policy](#) reminds us, based on a book Lissner co-authored with another Biden national security official, that she believes that the United States should give up on strategic primacy and the “increasingly obsolete post-Cold War ‘liberal international order.’” She sees the need to discard the Wilson, FDR and Truman view of transforming the world into America’s image and instead calls for preserving an open global system so the country can prosper. This also means discarding both containment and ideological crusades in the “pragmatic interest of keeping trade open and bolstering cooperation on critical issues such as climate change, future pandemics, and artificial intelligence regulation.” America is the only guarantor of an open system, and it should pursue what she and her co-author refer to as “accessible global commons.”

Robbie Gramer, writing in Foreign Policy last month ([“Inside the White House Effort to Prevent a Coup in Guatemala”](#)), cites a largely overlooked effort led by Harris’ foreign policy



team to provide critical support to Guatemala's incoming government of Bernardo Arévalo de León earlier this year in the face of efforts of the prior government to derail the peaceful transfer of power.

Some Predictions

If I had to guess, Harris will be strongly influenced by international law and norms, infused with a keen sense of the American values so often championed by recent immigrants to the United States, and a comfort with seeing issues through the prism of uplifting women and girls. Overall, expect a continuation of Biden foreign policy prescriptions, with a dash of Obama caution.

I could see an embrace of multilateralism, while retaining the primacy of the role of the United States, and a willingness to view foreign policy and national security through a wider aperture than has historically dominated Washington thinking. That wider aperture of necessity also encompasses climate change, and the myriad issues associated with it, ranging from food insecurity, to climate-driven migration, and the imperative of developing different approaches to so-called Global South issues, as well as AI, quantum computing, space and the resilience of democracy in a world where autocracy and illiberal democracy remain ascendant. There could be tremendous synergies around collaborative investment in AI and clean tech (with opportunities presented for creative ways of working around the Inflation Reduction Act, and a consistent approach on hardening supply chains.

I would expect that in a Harris administration China would continue to be viewed as the most significant foreign policy/national security agenda item. I would also expect that her administration would continue to support Ukraine, but it is difficult to know where she lands on the policy continuum over escalation. Would she embrace, for example, an approach that is less restrictive than the current Biden administration approach regarding use by Ukraine of US-supplied long-range weapons in an offensive capacity? If I had to guess, there would be a loosening of restrictions.

Similarly on Israel, it is unclear whether or not she would take a tougher on attaching conditions to the use US-supplied weapons in Gaza. She would continue the longstanding support of Israel's right to defend itself, but she will likely temper the support (consistent with how European allies have sought to balance their positions) as long as Palestinian human rights remain at risk and the humanitarian crises continue.

What Might this Mean for Europe?

Undoubtedly, diplomats across Europe continue to weigh policy positions from a two-track perspective – a Harris victory and a Trump victory, with additional matrices charting potential policy outcomes based on which party controls the House and the Senate. I assume the perceived odds of a Democratic victory surged in late July, presenting policymakers and defense/security analysts with the added challenge of reading the (new) Harris tea leaves. That said, there are few surprises. Europe has already been engaged in soul-searching as policymakers and defense/security analysts contemplate not only a possible Trump presidency, but a more disengaged America regardless of which party sets foreign policy, disengaged that is relative to the hyper-focus on China.



A Stimson policy paper ([“American Roulette: Scenarios for US Retrenchment and the Future of European Defense”](#)), for example, sets out three scenarios for Europe (that likely frames the outcomes) – a Taiwan contingency, a hollow NATO contingency and a Trump contingency. Stimson posits that Europe must address its collective action challenge by considering: who is Europe in this equation; which systems and capabilities are needed, which is not just a question of spending more money, but also one of which countries contribute; who reaps the benefits of more spending – the US from where arms are purchased (in the short-term this is the far more expedient option), or is there a basis for creating a sustainable defense manufacturing base in Europe; and how Europe must organize its preparedness, meaning which are the institutional structures for doing so (EU, NATO or sub-NATO (Weimar Triangle of Poland, France and Germany))?

The urgency of answering the questions facing Europe is lessened somewhat if Harris wins, but the questions nonetheless need answering, and the inputs for these answers will need to come from both sides of the Atlantic. That said, as to broader input on the overall geopolitical landscape, the Harris administration will set out where it stays the course, or where it diverges, from a combination of domestic considerations and where it sees US benefits to embracing new approaches. While Europe would welcome recalibration in China policy, for example, so as to avoid being caught between Beijing and Washington, maintaining or altering end goals will of necessity start and finish in Washington.

There is a separate set of considerations, which I address to the British. The new Labour government, against a long list of pressing domestic priorities and little room from a fiscal perspective to maneuver to effectively address the domestic issues let alone fund more for defense or development aid, will have to navigate differing conceptual approaches on Ukraine, China and Gaza. Perhaps the best opportunity for Britain is to present to the United States a united European front on national security issues (with the wider aperture I noted) for which it once again can play the interlocuter with Paris, Berlin and Brussels.

A united European front on national security issues has the added benefit of sidestepping for the moment crafting the more formal steps Britain and the European Union must take for Britain to begin to undo the myriad drags on the British economy that sprang from Brexit. In doing so, though, the Starmer government will face of deep distrust on the part of leaders on the continent that has yet to fully dissipate after the fraught four-year dance around withdrawal, the rise of the far right on the continent (not to mention Reform UK), the bandwidth constraints across the European Union exacerbated by Ukraine and Gaza and the relatively more precarious domestic positions of President Macron and Chancellor Scholtz.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy, on his visit to DC a week ago that marked the launch of a [US-UK Strategic Dialogue](#) started the ball rolling, but much remains to be done. And, of course, new players will be at the table one way or the other come January 20, 2025.

Plenty to consider, but first she has to win.

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Mark S. Bergman
[7Pillars Global Insights, LLC](#)
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