

Trump, Harris and the Future of US Foreign Policy

by Riccardo Alcaro

Both candidates for US president, Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Kamala Harris, have foreign policy experience, the former from directing it during his presidential term and the latter having helped define it as Joe Biden's vice-president. The policies they have directed or promoted, as well as the statements they have made during the campaign, provide enough evidence to reconstruct their positions on the general direction of US international action and the main dossiers on the agenda. Naturally, once in office Trump or Harris might make different assessments, but overall it is possible to make a plausible assessment of their goals – and the challenges to achieving them – in the three major theatres of American interest: Europe, the Middle East and East Asia.

The Euro-Atlantic theatre

Trump's policy towards Russia's war against Ukraine would take the form of a 'dual pressure'. To force the

parties to the negotiating table, he would warn Ukraine that he would halt military assistance and threaten Russia of increasing weapons transfers to Ukraine. The resulting hypothetical agreement would envisage an end to hostilities in exchange for Ukraine's neutrality, although Kyiv would continue to benefit from American arms supplies (in the form of loans and sales). Russia would be left with *de facto* (not *de jure*) control of the Ukrainian territories that it occupies now, but would not get any significant sanctions relief. In this scenario, America's European allies would be consulted little or not at all.

This approach would encounter obstacles at every step. Some Republicans, most Democrats, and the foreign and defence policy establishment in the United States would recoil at any deal that Russia could present as victory. The Ukrainians, supported by most NATO European members, are unlikely to accept

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territorial losses lacking strong security guarantees that Trump is apparently unwilling to give. Most critically, Russian President Vladimir Putin may determine to continue the war effort in the conviction that, in the end, Trump would not have domestic incentives (and the personal commitment) to keep up a costly financial and military support for Ukraine against which he has campaigned for months.

Harris's strategy is geared towards continuing military support for Ukraine and only starting negotiations with Moscow with full involvement of Kyiv and participation of European allies. For this approach to work, Harris would first have to count on a majority in Congress willing to provide aid to Ukraine, which is tall order given the Republicans' advantage in the Senate in this election cycle. In addition, it is not clear what Harris's position on fundamental dimensions of conflict management is, from authorising Kyiv to use Western weapons to hit military targets in Russia (possible) to giving it a guarantee of early NATO accession (unlikely). These operational and strategic uncertainties risk weakening the Ukrainian resistance and dividing the Europeans, undermining the attempt to build a more stable framework for European security.

The Middle Eastern theatre

The differences between Trump and Harris are less pronounced in the Middle East. In continuity with his first term, Trump would give Israel *carte blanche* to continue its operations in Gaza and Lebanon. He would also revert to a policy of maximum pressure

on Iran (in spite of his occasional hints that he is open to some form of understanding with Tehran) and push for Saudi Arabia to join the Arab-Israeli diplomatic normalisation known as the Abraham Accords.

For her part, Harris would follow Biden's line of supporting the military degradation of Iran's network of non-state allies in the Levant (Hamas and Hezbollah) and Yemen (the Houthis). Harris would also be committed to the relaunch of the Israeli-Saudi normalisation talks, potentially increasing the United States' already considerable concessions to Riyadh in terms of nuclear assistance and defence guarantees. Unlike Trump, Harris would place more emphasis on relieving the military pressure on the Palestinians and offering them a prospect of statehood. She would also consider indirectly backing the ongoing détente between Iran and the Gulf Arab countries as a conflict prevention framework.

Both Trump's and Harris's approaches come up against significant obstacles. Support for Israel or, in the case of Harris, reluctance to put it under any significant pressure, will continue to force the United States to adapt to the choices of an ally that tends to act with little regard for Washington's sensitivities. This would increase the risk of direct US military involvement in a potential escalation with Iran, which neither Trump nor Harris wants but could be unable to prevent. Moreover, the Saudi leadership seems unwilling to normalise relations with Israel in the absence of a prospect of a resolution of the Palestinian issue, which is further

away than ever. America's Middle East policy thus risks becoming a constant exercise in damage limitation regardless of who wins the White House.

The Asia-Pacific theatre

The theatre of greatest convergence between Trump and Harris is the Asia-Pacific, as both favour a hard line towards China. This is not to say that there are no significant differences, however.

Trump would aim to weaken China through an aggressive decoupling approach by means of high tariffs, export controls and pressure on third countries, including Europeans, to cut off their business ties with Beijing in sensitive technology sectors. Once again, this approach presents significant challenges. Tariffs would cause economic damage to the United States. They would also harm its allies, which would face the prospect of China dumping its goods in excess on their markets, thereby potentially diminishing their willingness to coordinate with Washington. Moreover, it is unclear to what extent Trump is willing to commit to the defence of America's Asian partners, and in particular whether he is prepared to militarily oppose a Chinese attempt to force Taiwan's unification with the mainland by military means.

Harris would continue the modular and multilateral containment of China initiated by Biden, which includes targeted controls on the export of advanced technologies and the strengthening of multilateral partnerships such as AUKUS (the

military cooperation agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom), the United States-Japan-South Korea and United States-Japan-Philippines trilaterals, as well as the forum on Indo-Pacific security governance with Japan, Australia and India known as the Quad. Harris could increase support for Taiwan but at the same time continue the Biden administration's high-level dialogue with Beijing to contain the risks of conflict. Harris's reluctance to identify what the room for compromise with China could be, however, weighs on this approach, while her resolve to invest the necessary (and considerable) resources for making the United States' military deterrence capacity in the region more credible also remains uncertain.

Conclusions

Trump's foreign policy orientation originates from a combination of aggressive unilateralism and nativist nationalism. His stated aim is to secure America's primacy by restructuring its system of alliances as a clientele network and engage with rival powers from a position of strength (as the 'boss of bosses', so to speak). On paper, Trump's unscrupulous transactionalism gives him greater freedom of action, because it is indifferent to the constraints emanating from norms, shared practices and alliances. On the other hand, it lends an ineliminable erratic character to US international action that would make it harder to consolidate over time whatever gains the United States would attain.

Harris aims to strengthen US leadership by maintaining America's alliance

systems in Asia, Europe and the Middle East, but without engaging in conflicts with no clear way forward (or out). The problem is that maintaining strong alliances may be incompatible with a hands-off approach to crisis management in Europe, the Middle East, and potentially the Asia-Pacific. Ultimately, Harris could be faced with the choice of whether to engage the United States in the various theatres more extensively and intensively than it is the case today or scale back the scope and ambition of the alliances.

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- 24 | 62 Theophilus Acheampong, *Developing Green Value Chains: Collaborating for a Mutually Beneficial EU-Africa Partnership*
- 24 | 61 Ibrahima Hathie, *Rethinking AU-EU Cooperation for More Sustainable Agri-food Systems*
- 24 | 60 Hanne Knaepen, *How the EU Can Reset Its Adaptation Partnership with Africa*
- 24 | 59 Rajiv Kumar, *Europe's Semiconductor Revival: Can Foreign Firms Ensure Success?*
- 24 | 58 Ettore Greco, *Balancing Privacy and Innovation in AI Adoption across the G7*
- 24 | 57 Ettore Greco, *Fostering AI Innovation and Competition: The Way Ahead*
- 24 | 56 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Tragedy behind Israel's Ostensible Triumph*
- 24 | 55 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Root of Western Haplessness with Israel*
- 24 | 54 Darlington Tshuma and Bongwiwe Mphahlele, *South Africa's G20 Presidency: Tapping into Africa's Potential through Financial, Climate and Food System Reform*