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## What Might a Harris Foreign Policy Bring?

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*A potential Kamala Harris presidency is unlikely to change existing US foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region. That said, the possibility that a Harris administration may rely on ideas provided by Rebecca Lissner, a key adviser to Harris, for its foreign policy cannot be ruled out. While such a direction may provoke antagonism from China, a Harris foreign policy – relative to the prospect of another Trump presidency and its attendant uncertainties – may not be as bad for ASEAN.*



Caption: Kamala Harris at the 2022 Munich Security Conference. *Image from Wikimedia.*

Speculations over what American foreign policy under the potential leadership of Kamala Devi Harris might look like have begun in earnest, now that US president Joe

Biden – who announced recently that he would not be seeking re-election – has officially endorsed his vice president as his heir apparent in the race for the presidency. Although many Democratic Party leaders and supporters have joined the president in coalescing behind Harris, the official nominee of the Democrats will only be chosen at their party's national convention in Chicago next month.

Should Kamala Harris, if confirmed as the Democrats' standard bearer, triumph over Donald Trump when Americans take to the ballot box this November, what can we expect from the foreign policy of a Harris administration towards the Indo-Pacific region? Would she prove a "weak" leader – [as Beijing's state-backed news outlet Global Times has insisted](#) – whose presidency is unlikely to pose a threat to China?

## **Shaky Start**

Having carved a niche as the state of California's top law enforcement official and subsequently its junior senator, Harris stepped into the vice presidency with little foreign policy experience. Her initial foray into US diplomacy began with a stumble: her proposal to work with Central American nations to address the root causes of illegal immigration into the United States was quickly lumped with the related issue of the security of America's southern border, which she – as in the case of a clumsy [interview with the US news outlet NBC News](#) – tried unsuccessfully to avoid. Nor did the initial [turmoil among her staff](#) do her reputation any favours.

However, things have markedly improved since those rough beginnings, with seasoned Washington operators like Philip Gordon and Rebecca Lissner being enlisted to advise the vice president on foreign policy and national security matters. According to US congressman Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, Harris's performance at this year's Munich Security Conference making a case for America's role in Ukraine and NATO indicates that [she has been "stress-tested"](#) and found credible.

## **Staying the Course**

Given her inexperience as an international leader, it is highly likely that Harris, as US president, would continue the Biden administration's foreign policy, at least until such time as she has a firmer grasp on world affairs. Under her leadership, the United States is likely to continue supporting Ukraine and NATO while adopting a firm line against Vladimir Putin and Russia. Given her strong stance against Israel's handling of the Gaza conflict – [which she has referred](#) to as a humanitarian catastrophe for innocent civilians – it is possible that her Israel policy may prove less fixed and intransigent than Biden's. Indeed, she is on record for having called for a "temporary ceasefire" to the Gaza conflict well before her boss publicly did.

But far as the Indo-Pacific goes, it is unlikely that Harris would stray from extant US policy. As noted, many Chinese seem to think that Harris would prove weaker than Biden in dealing with China. As a US senator, she co-sponsored a bill [promoting human rights in Hong Kong](#) and supported another on [the rights of Uyghurs in Xinjiang](#); in both cases, the bills included sanctions against those deemed responsible for human rights abuses.

## China

As vice president, Harris has underscored America's support – “consistent with [the US's] long-standing policy” – [for Taiwan's self-defence](#) and [decried Chinese intimidation and coercion](#) against Philippine vessels in the waters surrounding the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea.

[In an interview with CBS News last year](#), Harris advocated a firm stance against China, calling for “de-risking” from Beijing – a policy that aims to reduce the extent to which the US and Western economies depend on China. “It's not about pulling out [from China], but it is about ensuring that we are protecting American interests, and that we are a leader in terms of the rules of the road, as opposed to following others' rules”, Harris explained in that interview.

Harris's remarks on China strongly hint at the influence of Rebecca Lissner, who currently serves as deputy national security adviser to the vice president. [In her 2020 book](#) *An Open World: How America Can Win the Contest for Twenty-First-Century Order* (co-authored with Mira Rapp-Hooper), Lissner argues that China constitutes America's “chief antagonist” to an open world through Beijing's determined efforts at forming exclusive territorial and technological blocs. Against such opposition, Lissner advocates a new vision and approach for America, one that allows it to de-risk itself while working with like-minded allies and rebuilding what she considers outmoded international institutions to set rules that ensure and enhance global openness. Lissner is adamant that the United States and the West should not pursue regime change around the world, but counter authoritarian competitors by preventing the rise of closed spheres of influence and preserving open access to the global commons.

Such an openness strategy is also in line with Harris's criticism of the [Trump administration's inconsequential efforts](#) to engage North Korea and rein in its nuclear ambitions, which do not close Northeast Asia off as much as create undue uncertainty and apprehension in the region. This is not to imply that Lissner's ideas would form the blueprint for foreign policy under a Harris administration. At the very least, it suggests that Beijing's hopes of a weak and unfocused America under Harris may be premature, perhaps even unfounded.

## ASEAN

Under Harris, the United States is also likely to stay the course taken by Biden in its ties with ASEAN and Southeast Asia, a region hotly contested by both Beijing and Washington. But whether Harris would do better than Biden at reassuring and improving the region's perceptions of America remains to be seen. [According to a 2024 annual survey](#) conducted by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, when asked who they would prefer to align with in the ongoing China-US rivalry, slightly more Southeast Asian respondents reportedly sided with the Chinese (50.5%) than with the Americans (49.5%). That said, a Harris-led America would presumably play the kind of international leadership role ASEAN desires of the United States than a Trump-led one is likely to furnish. While ASEAN leaders would no doubt redouble their efforts to keep a mercurial and capricious Donald Trump happy and engaged (were he to return as US leader), a President Harris is more likely to show up for ASEAN meetings in

person – the high-mark of ASEAN summitry success – than a President Trump ever did or would.

Southeast Asians have had a couple of opportunities to see Kamala Harris up close. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in August 2021, Harris, in her capacity as US vice president, visited Singapore and Vietnam to strengthen her nation's security partnerships and to expand economic cooperation with two of America's critical Indo-Pacific partners. Attending the 2023 ASEAN summit held in Jakarta in Biden's stead, Harris – in her fifth visit to the Southeast Asian region – engaged with leaders of the ASEAN member states as well as Australia, China, Japan and South Korea. Notably, as a senator, Harris was active in legislating against human rights abuses in Myanmar – [a concern she has repeatedly raised](#) during her visits to Southeast Asia. Welcomed or otherwise, ASEAN could expect a greater focus on Myanmar from a Harris administration than it ever did from the Biden – and, for that matter, the Trump – administrations.

## Conclusion

Should a Harris foreign policy adopt the contours and course of a grand strategy akin to what Lissner has counselled, it would probably surprise no one if China – still designated as America's chief antagonist – were to resume its age-old accusation against America over the latter's ostensible "Cold War" fixation with alliances and partnerships aimed at (in Beijing's view) encircling and counterbalancing China. In this regard, it is unclear whether Harris might tap into her part-Indian heritage – her late mother was from Tamil Nadu – to enlist India (as a member of the Quad) in checking an assertive China: she has come across as [ambivalent towards India](#). All things considered, the prospect of a Harris presidency is not the worst thing that could happen for the Indo-Pacific region.

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