



**America Votes 2024:  
The Transatlantic Impact**

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**Pacific Crossings**

*Bonnie S. Glaser*

## Pacific Crossings

*Whether Harris or Trump, relations between Washington and Beijing will remain turbulent.*

**By Bonnie S. Glaser | September 5, 2024**

*Regardless of the American presidential election's winner, US-China relations are likely to remain fraught as the two countries intensify their military, technological, economic, political and ideological competition.*

Republicans and Democrats have now come to the rare bipartisan view that China is a threat to vital American interests. In 2023, members of the US Congress [introduced](#) 616 pieces of legislation that contain a variation of the word "China". The US public is also leery. A Pew Research Center [poll](#) published in May found 81% of Americans held unfavorable views of China, including 43% whose views were very unfavorable.

On the campaign trail, former President Donald Trump emphasizes the risks posed by China's unfair trade practices. His running mate, JD Vance, has gone further, [branding](#) China the biggest threat to the United States. Vice President Kamala Harris has said little on the issue since entering the race. She mentioned China only once in her speech at the Democratic convention, pledging to ensure that "America, not China, wins the competition for the 21st century". The 2022 National Security Strategy of the Biden-Harris administration [charged](#) China with intending to "reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit".

The outcome of the November vote may not alter the trajectory of US-China relations, but potential differences in policies that both major candidates would pursue have implications for US allies, including those in Europe.

Trade is likely to again be the focus of a Trump 2.0 agenda, but, in contrast with Trump 1.0, less effort will be put into negotiating a deal with Beijing. Greater effort will instead be applied to decoupling. Trump has promised to "end reliance on China" by adopting more trade barriers, including a 60% tariff on all imports from the country and revocation of its most-favored nation status. He has floated a four-year plan to phase out all Chinese imports of essential goods, ranging from electronics to steel to pharmaceuticals. Trump has also vowed to introduce rules that strictly limit US investment in China and Chinese investment in the United States to those that serve American interests.

Building on President Joe Biden's "invest, align, and compete" strategy toward China, a Harris administration would likely continue implementing targeted de-risking actions. These include export controls to restrict Chinese access to advanced semiconductors and industrial policies to spur domestic growth of strategic industries, such as those relevant to critical minerals, renewables, semiconductors and health care. As a strong supporter of the CHIPS and Science Act, Harris might support a "CHIPS 2", as [proposed](#) by Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, to secure the United States' position as a world leader in semiconductor manufacturing. Harris has criticized Trump's tariff plans as a tax on middle-class families. She would employ "targeted and strategic tariffs to support American workers, strengthen [the US] economy, and hold our adversaries accountable", [according](#) to one of her spokespersons. If the Biden administration does not conclude a US outbound investment regime to control transactions involving China-based companies engaged in activities related to semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and artificial intelligence, Harris will take it across the finish line.

Her Taiwan policy would also likely mirror Biden's approach, including increased arms sales and strengthened political, economic and security ties, while remaining committed to Washington's "One China" policy. However, Harris might not echo Biden's persistent stance that he will send US forces to defend Taiwan if China invades the island. She may opt instead to return to a more traditional policy of strategic ambiguity. A Harris administration would attach priority to preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and, like the Biden administration, encourage US allies to contribute to bolstering deterrence.

Trump's policies regarding Taiwan are less certain. The former president could be tempted to engage in horse-trading with Beijing aimed at extracting trade concessions in exchange for limits on US security cooperation with Taiwan. China hawks in his administration and Republicans in Congress who are sympathetic to Taiwan, however, would probably oppose such a deal. While a Harris administration would continue to quietly urge Taiwan to do more to enhance its defense capabilities, that message is likely to be delivered more publicly by a Trump team that could link Taiwan's defense spending and policies to US military assistance.

China's human rights abuses in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet could receive greater attention in a Harris administration than they have in recent years. In their time in Congress, Harris and Walz scrutinized and criticized China's human rights violations. But the issue is unlikely to be a top policy priority, in part due to the widespread belief that the United States has little leverage over Chinese domestic policies. Trump continues to extol authoritarian rulers and rarely, if ever, mentions human rights. At a New York City rally in May, he [praised](#) China's leader, Xi Jinping, as one of several authoritarian rulers who are "at the top of their game, whether you like it or not".

Overall, significant continuity in policy toward China is expected if Harris wins. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [told](#) Xi that Harris shares Biden's view of responsibly managing competition with China so that it does not veer into conflict or confrontation. Sullivan also stated that Harris agrees with the need to maintain high-level, open lines of communication. Where US and Chinese interests intersect, such as on climate change, Harris would support continued cooperation. She would also continue to work with US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific based on the belief that a unilateral US approach to Beijing is in most instances unlikely to be effective in protecting shared interests.

Trump's approach to China is likely to be more unpredictable and volatile. While some members of his cabinet may favor closer alignment on China policy with allies, Trump asserted in his speech at the 2024 Republican National Convention that countries that are considered "so-called allies" have "taken advantage of [the United States] for years".

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### **About the Author**

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