

**2024 US Presidential elections:  
Considerations regarding US foreign policy**

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Foreign policy has always been a crucial component of US politics, influencing the electorate's decisions and the international community's perceptions of American leadership. The post-World War II era marked the beginning of continuous American engagement in global affairs, characterized by the establishment of international institutions (e.g., United Nations), alliances (e.g., NATO), and a commitment to the liberal international order. The Cold War period saw a consistent foreign policy focus on containing the spread of communism, leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The post-Cold War era presented new security challenges (internal conflicts, peacemaking missions, etc.) and opportunities, with the US becoming a unipolar power. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US has witnessed numerous security (e.g. 9/11 terrorist attack and the 'global war on terror') and foreign policy issues (e.g. rise of new global powers). The US foreign policy aims to transform the international security landscape and determine regional and global dynamics<sup>1</sup>.

Recent administrations have varied in their approach regarding foreign policy. The Obama administration emphasized multilateralism and diplomatic engagement, exemplified by the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Agreement on climate change. In contrast, the Trump administration adopted an ‘America First’ position, characterized by skepticism towards international alliances and institutions, and a focus on renegotiating trade deals to favour American interests. According to many political analysts, the position of the US in the international system is at stake. President Joe Biden supports a traditional US leadership position in maintaining an international order based on principles and rules. In contrast, Trump vigorously defends a foreign policy that prioritizes US interests. This involves the reduction of the US international involvement and the active engagement of other states in international affairs<sup>2</sup>.

The 2024 US presidential elections are pivotal in global politics, with several foreign policy challenges demanding attention. These challenges include the ongoing geopolitical tensions with China and Russia, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the war in Gaza, the relations with North Korea, the threats against Taiwan, the climate change, the energy security, and the NATO alliance. During the recent debate, President Biden and former President Trump presented different views on handling the above topics.

One of the most pressing foreign policy challenges is the complex relations with China and Russia. Both nations pose distinct but related challenges to US interests and the broader international order. China’s rapid economic growth and expanding global influence have made it a central focus of US foreign policy. The trade war initiated during the Trump administration highlighted the economic dimensions of this rivalry. China’s unfair trade practices and intellectual property challenges have intensified competition with Trump and Biden promised to increase trade tariffs and continue the trade war with the People’s Republic of China. However, the competition extends beyond economics, encompassing technology, military capabilities, and ideological influence. Likewise, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s decision on the Belt and Road Initiative and China’s economic and development penetration in the Middle East and Africa threaten US security at all levels<sup>3</sup>. The US believes that China has a revisionist role in the international system, by becoming a regional hegemon in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, China is trying to become a digital superpower by exporting not only its products and services but also its digital authoritarian model<sup>4</sup>. On the contrary, China argues that the US wants to disorder its upward trajectory, change its political system, and dissolve it, as it did with the Soviet Union.

The Biden administration is taking a firm stance on China’s actions in areas such as human rights and regional security, while also seeking to engage on global issues like climate change, striking a delicate balance between competition and cooperation.

Tensions persist in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, where China's assertive behavior raises concerns among US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The issue of Taiwan is a dangerous one. Regarding this issue, the US and its allies seek to prevent any risk-taking leadership in Taiwan from declaring de jure independence, which will trigger Chinese military involvement.

The electorate is increasingly aware of the complexities of the US-China relationship, and the 2024 candidates must address concerns about economic security, technological competition, and military preparedness. Both candidates have pledged to undertake action against China. However, when 69% of conservative Republicans and 38% of moderate and liberal Republicans, and 30% of conservative and moderate Democrats, and 25% of liberal Democrats describe China as an enemy, political analysts say it leaves the field open<sup>5</sup>. It seems that Democrats have a softer position on China<sup>6</sup>. Proposals may range from strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific to investing in domestic industries to counter China's technological advancements. Based on the relentless strategic competition between these two states, some experts argue that war between them is now inevitable and that it is even likely to take place within the current decade.

Among the key topics highlighted in the presidential debate were the management of ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. To begin with, Russia continues to be a significant foreign policy challenge, particularly considering its actions in Ukraine and its interference in democratic processes. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have strained US-Russia relations. Additionally, Russia's malicious cyber activities and disinformation campaigns pose a persistent threat to US democratic processes (e.g. US Presidential elections in 2016 and 2020). The Biden administration has imposed sanctions on Russia and sought to rally European allies in a joint response. In May 2024, Biden, recognizing the gravity of the situation, removed certain restrictions on the use of US weapons. Thus, he authorized their deployment to target military installations within Russia that are supporting an offensive against the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. Biden remains steadfast in his support for Ukraine in the wake of Russia's invasion and has announced the deployment of numerous new air defence systems to Kyiv. In June 2024, during the G7 Summit in Italy, Biden and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy agreed to sign a bilateral security agreement between the US and Ukraine<sup>7</sup>. This Summit was very important because it came a few years after Biden declared at his first meeting that the US was back as a global leader following the disruptions to Western alliances that occurred when Trump was president. Finance officials from the G7 had already agreed on how to move toward an agreement on a US proposal, to provide more money for Ukraine from Russian assets frozen in their countries<sup>8</sup>. Biden also proved his solid commitment to NATO when he proposed the host of the Summit in Washington to mark the organization's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO on 10 July 2024.

At the Summit, he mistakenly introduced Zelenskyy as ‘President Putin’, a mistake that has further questioned his candidacy, but also his ability to make decisions for important foreign policy issues<sup>9</sup>. Biden made this error after the non-successful debate with Trump, which coincides with several Democrats urging that he step down as the party’s presidential nominee.

A conclusion that arose from the NATO Summit was that the idea of Ukraine becoming the 33<sup>rd</sup> member faces significant challenges. Michael Carpenter who is the National Security Council Senior Director for Europe mentioned that the US is discussing offering Ukraine ‘a bridge to NATO’<sup>10</sup>. However, many members worry that formal membership is unfeasible while Ukraine is at war due to NATO’s Article 5 clause which considers an attack on one member an attack on all. These concerns overlook the current US political environment. In case, Trump wins the upcoming elections, Ukraine’s ‘bridge to NATO’ may become past. As already mentioned, Trump has threatened to withdraw from NATO or could weaken it by cutting funding, withdrawing troops, and obstructing decisions. He also promised to end the Ukraine war in a single day. Even without a change to the US presidency, continued support from the US and European governments is uncertain<sup>11</sup>. For the US and NATO, securing Ukraine’s future is not merely altruistic, but a self-defense measure needing immediate action. While bilateral agreements are useful, they lack stability amid political shifts. NATO membership appears to be the most lasting solution to this conflict.

Another critical issue is the US and North Korea relations. Since the breakdown of the Hanoi Summit in February 2019, North Korea has aggressively advanced its nuclear doctrine, missile and satellite technology, cyber capabilities, and political alliances with Russia and China. Both candidates seek to project strength and confidence, but their historical approaches to addressing North Korea differ significantly. On the one hand, Trump’s preference for a leadership style centers around top-down interactions, favoring one-on-one engagements with other world leaders. On the other hand, Biden prefers a bottom-up approach, closely coordinating with allies and partners, and taking input from the working level.

Considering their differing policy records on North Korea, Trump, and Biden each face unique opportunities and challenges when addressing Pyongyang. Given the current geopolitical circumstances, achieving de-nuclearization, and effectively managing risks, let alone reengaging with North Korea, will be challenging. However, the specific strategies employed by each candidate could significantly impact the future of US-North Korea relations. On the one side, the Biden administration has embraced a pragmatic approach to North Korea, showing a willingness to engage in dialogue without preconditions for denuclearization. This pragmatism includes collaborating closely with allies, especially South Korea and Japan, to enhance

defence and deterrence against escalating nuclear threats. On the other side, the Trump administration has a range of opportunities and risks for the US and North Korea relations. At the beginning of his first term, Trump took a tough stance on this country, through the imposition of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and a containment strategy. During 2018 and 2019, he changed course by directly engaging with President Kim Jong Un. It is conceivable that a second Trump administration might adhere to a hardline approach towards North Korea, given the Republican Party's deep-seated distrust of communist regimes and conservatives' inclination towards assertive engagement. However, Trump's openness to dialogue with North Korea could surpass that of other Republicans with entrenched reservations, potentially inspiring hope among observers<sup>12</sup>.

The future direction of NATO and the transatlantic relationship are also critical topics. The dividing line between Biden and Trump is obvious. The former recognizes the importance of international partnerships and alliances, and the latter argues that Washington should take unilateral actions on international trade issues. Biden stated that he has the support of numerous nations around the world to support Ukraine, including Japan and South Korea because they understand that having divergent views poses a serious threat to global peace and stability. He also assaulted Trump by warning of a downgrading of NATO and claimed that the current presidency was the one with zero US military deaths internationally. Instead, Trump placed particular emphasis on the origins of the wars rather than their management. Specifically, he attributed the origins of war in Ukraine to the Biden administration's lack of efficient deterrence efforts. He underscored that if he had been president, President Putin would not have invaded Ukraine. Concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war, most American voters are in favor of Ukraine, but this is not enough, as the declarations of Trump have led Americans to consider that an endless war is being supported with financial and military aid. Trump's campaign website states that every day that this proxy war continues, international security and the possibility of global nuclear war are at risk<sup>13</sup>. However, the debate revealed the joint position of the candidates regarding the importance of a robust NATO for the US interests.

The US continues to play a significant role in addressing regional conflicts and humanitarian crises around the world. From the Middle East to Africa to Latin America, the next president will need to navigate complex situations that demand both strategic and humanitarian responses. The ongoing conflicts in Syria, Gaza, Yemen, and Afghanistan, as well as the humanitarian crises they have precipitated, will require careful attention. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 50% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning aged under-30s sympathize with Palestinians compared to less than 20% of voters aged over 50<sup>14</sup>. The US's approach to these conflicts will involve balancing military engagement with diplomatic efforts and international aid. Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, led to the adoption of a

harsh counterinsurgency strategy through massive retaliation by Israel, both in Gaza and the West Bank. The international community was divided between those who consider Israel's response legitimate and those who consider it to have exceeded the moral and legal limits of war. In addition, this attack led to a further expansion of the war into neighboring states, with the involvement of Hizbullah in South Lebanon and other jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq. An indicative example of horizontal escalation is the activity of the Houthis in areas of the Red Sea, whose attacks have affected the safety of maritime routes. Biden has strongly supported Israel with military and economic aid packages, although his administration has been critical of its continued military operations and the high civilian death toll.

Trump stressed that under his leadership, Hamas and Iran would not have attacked Israel, and he pledged not to constrain Israel's actions in Gaza if reelected. He criticized Biden for what he viewed as ineffective measures, dubbing him a 'bad Palestinian'<sup>15</sup>. This stance by Trump is likely to resonate with a portion of the American public, including critics of Biden's approach within the Democratic Party. Moreover, Trump's support for Israel's military goals was mentioned in his radio interview on 4 April 2024: *'Look, [the October 7th, 2023, attack on] Israel should have never happened. If I were President, it would not have happened. Iran was broken. They had no money. They had nothing. Furthermore, we would have worked, and a deal with Iran would have been more challenging to talk to them. Nevertheless, October 7th would have never happened. However, it is what it is, and what I said very plainly is to get it over with. Let us get back to peace and stop killing people. Get it over with. They have to get it over with because we have to. You have to get back to normalcy and peace'*<sup>16</sup>.

During the debate, candidates focused on the previously mentioned topics, and they overlooked the significant implications of climate change and energy (in)security. Challenges such as extreme weather conditions are leading to higher energy costs and causing damage to housing and critical infrastructure, but also pose health risks. When they questioned how to tackle the climate crisis, Biden stated that he adopted the most extensive climate change legislation in history which is the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act<sup>17</sup>. Overall, Biden's political agenda regarding climate change, environmental protection, and energy issues, considers the investment of more resources to address climate change as an 'existential threat'. To respond to the voters' continuous demands for sustainable jobs, Biden declared on 26 June 2024, that the climate crisis creates jobs and that new technologies will be promoted. There is a clear political divide among Americans when it comes to dealing with global climate change (44%) and getting other countries to assume more of the costs of maintaining world order (42%). A percentage of 70% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents prioritize climate change, while only 15% of Republicans and

Republican-leaningers share this view, highlighting the polarization<sup>18</sup>.

On the contrary, Trump stated that if he will be reelected, the US would once again withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement (as he did in his first term) and reject ‘radical green practices’ that work in no way other than to upgrade Russia’s status and of Saudi Arabia as global suppliers of oil and natural gas. He also supported that he would overturn all of Biden’s policies on international energy diplomacy as he sees them as distorting market forces and driving up international energy prices. Last, but not least, he mentioned that the US could pressure other polluting nations and ensure equitable burden-sharing in carbon emissions reduction<sup>19</sup>. Voters should have better insights from both candidates regarding climate change and energy. While these topics may not be the primary concerns for many voters they have wide-ranging implications.

The domestic media presented the debate as a deadlock. Recent polling data, including a New York Times/Siena College poll, indicates that Biden is behind Trump by 6 points among voters and a 3-point decline since his debate performance<sup>20</sup>. Other polls reflect a similar, albeit slightly smaller, shift away from Biden in favour of Trump<sup>21</sup>. As the 2024 US presidential elections present a critical stage for American foreign policy, grasping public sentiment becomes vital for policymakers, researchers, and individuals. Roughly 25% of Americans believe it is crucial to prioritize promoting human rights in other countries, global space exploration efforts, and reducing military involvement overseas. Similarly, 23% and 22% of the population consider supporting Ukraine and Israel, respectively, as critical issues. At the bottom of the list of foreign policy priorities are efforts to promote global democracy, a significant focus for the Biden administration, and aiding refugees fleeing brutality worldwide.

The next president will face a range of complex and interrelated challenges that will require a nuanced and strategic approach. As the electorate evaluates the candidates’ visions for the future, the importance of coherent and effective foreign policy cannot be overstated. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2021, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and the potential involvement of other regional non-state actors such as Hizbullah, along with worsening environmental challenges and uncontrollable migration flows, and China’s further commercial and economic recklessness, have all contributed to a deepening of the gap and a politicization of this electoral battle, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. The clash of two distinct narratives on foreign policy will be a vital feature of the uncertain elections of November 2024. ***The world will be watching closely as Americans choose their next leader, whose foreign policy choices will shape the global order for years to come.***

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