

POLITICS

China Is a Big Factor in This Election. How Kamala Harris and Donald Trump Differ.

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Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris is likely to maintain a balance in the U.S.-China relationship. (BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

In the run-up to the 2020 election, then-Democratic presidential contender Kamala Harris stressed she wasn't a "protectionist Democrat." But the [world has changed](#) as the U.S.-China rivalry has intensified, with Harris, once again a presidential candidate, likely to keep recent pressure on China, including recent tariffs.

After former President Donald Trump started the trade war in 2018, Harris described the tariffs as a cost borne by American families. But the world has changed since then as Russia's war in Ukraine and Covid exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and an escalation in U.S.-China friction has led many U.S. officials naming China as the country's biggest threats.

The Biden administration has kept those early tariffs and added a new batch this summer, even as they have favored a series of export and other restrictions to [limit China's access to critical technologies](#), efforts to bring allies with them and investing to [shore up U.S. production](#) of critical goods at home.

Trump has proposed a 60% tariff on all Chinese goods, which economists at the Peterson Institute for International Economics estimate could translate to a 3.5% after-tax income cut for a typical household in the middle of the income distribution. Analysts see the tariff proposal as an initial salvo to open up dealmaking with China, which could mean more volatile policy.

Harris comes from a pro-trade state given California's heavy reliance on agricultural and technology exports. Indeed, Gov. Gavin Newsom met with a Chinese leader Xi Jinping last fall to navigate escalating tensions.

But with a geopolitical backdrop that has changed such that both parties are staunchly in the tough-on-China camp married with Harris' focus on workers, analysts see little sign that she meaningfully backs away from the Biden approach on tariffs or trade restrictions.

The Harris campaign didn't respond to requests for comment.

“Her governing coalition is very protectionist so she is likely to maintain the status quo on tariffs on sensitive areas,” says Clayton Allen, a director at Eurasia Group covering U.S. politics and policy.

Plus, the technical and policy staff in both administrations are likely to be pulled from a group with similar views on China and trade broadly, paving the way for continuity if she wins, adds Eswar Prasad, a Cornell professor and former China head of the International Monetary Fund.

But there could be some nuance in the shape and implementation of those restrictions. Harris’ connections to the technology sector could make her more attuned to U.S. companies’ concerns about how these restrictions could hurt their own prospects, write analysts at Beacon Policy Advisors.

“She recognizes the need to sell our stuff and policies to allow that, but she is also very focused on workers and is clearly committed to climate and sustainability, probably more than Biden. That will be very much part of her policies,” says William Reinsch, a senior advisor at Center for Strategic & International Studies and previously head of the National Foreign Trade Council that represented multinational firms on trade and tax policy issues.

And when it comes to the environment, Harris could go further than Biden. That could translate into more of a willingness to adjust some of the recent measures, including tariffs and trade restrictions, on clean tech imports so that it doesn’t slow the energy transition. Harris had also opposed the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement on climate and labor grounds—and that shape how the pact is tweaked when it comes up for renewal in 2026.

Whereas Trump has floated the possibility of allowing China to invest in the U.S. to build plants—or localize—the focus on protecting U.S. manufacturing could keep a Harris administration from encouraging such investment in the U.S. **Instead, Prasad says Harris could rely on increasing subsidies or other support to speed up green energy initiatives that both target climate change and further revive U.S. manufacturing.**

More broadly, analysts expect Harris to be less likely to blow up the U.S.-China relationship with some of the more hawkish proposals coming from the Trump camp that lay the groundwork for a bigger decoupling and escalation in military skirmishes.

As a first-term president, Matt Gertken, chief strategist at BCA Research, tells *Barron's* that Harris could be more risk-averse and try to maintain a balance in the U.S.-China relationship more than a second-term Biden or Trump, who could take a more aggressive and offensive approach that leads to an economic decoupling or military conflict.

Dialing it down a notch could be a salve for investors. “Rapid deterioration would lead to punitive U.S.-China trade measures, saber-rattling, and a sharp drop in investor sentiment and corporate spending that would undermine her economic footing and reelection odds,” Gertken adds.

On the international stage, Harris is expected to strengthen relationships with allies in Asia and show support to create a more united front against China. In a 2022 visit to the Philippines, Harris called out China’s “bullying and excessive maritime claims” in the South China Seas and flew to the island of Palawan that is embroiled [in a territorial dispute with China.](#)

Analysts expect Harris to reinforce a commitment to allies in the Indo-Pacific and create a contrast to her opponent, especially with Philip Gordon, her current national security adviser and strong proponent of NATO, on the shortlist to lead foreign policy.

The Trump campaign has suggested Taiwan, for example, needs to pay the U.S. more for protection against China, [☑](#) along the same lines of Trump's questions about NATO.

With broad agreement on the trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship among the parties—and within the Democratic Party—China is keenly watching not just who wins in November but who is filling key national security and foreign policy seats—and the level of their hawkishness and potential for dealmaking.

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