

Instant Insight: Kamala Harris and Asia Policy

JULY 24, 2024

Key Takeaways

- **Vice President Harris' personal views on many Indo-Pacific issues are uncertain given her role as the number-two executive.** Harris' official policy portfolio has focused on other areas, and as part of President Biden's team, she may continue to defend some of the previous administration's positions regardless of her personal beliefs.
- **Even so, available evidence suggests that Harris' approach to Asia policy is unlikely to be an exact copy of Biden's.** Her views expressed during her time as a senator and 2020 presidential candidate show differences from Biden's. Exposure to greater decision-making authority, wider advisory networks, and new sources of political pressure could alter some of her prior beliefs.
- **Although she rarely engaged with the Indo-Pacific as a Senator, Harris has become broadly familiar with the region as Vice President.** She made four official trips to seven nations in East and Southeast Asia since January 2021, underscoring her interest in deepening U.S. engagement.
- **Harris' approach to Indo-Pacific security cooperation is likely to demonstrate the greatest continuity with Biden's agenda given their shared pool of advisers.** Drawing on guidance from the Biden team, Harris met face-to-face with the leaders of all five of Washington's Indo-Pacific treaty allies. She also met China's President Xi Jinping during the November 2022 APEC summit in Bangkok and represented Washington at the September 2023 ASEAN Summit. In short, Harris is a known quantity in the region, which could help build trust.
- **Harris' views on Indo-Pacific trade policy, however, show some signs of potential divergence from those of the current administration.** Seeking union support, Biden took a cautious approach to free trade agreements (FTAs) but still promoted multilateral mechanisms such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Harris has been more solidly in the progressive camp on trade, opposing trade agreements on both labor and environmental grounds. For example, she opposed the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) – which Biden supported.



Vice President Harris' Previous Regional Engagements

Date	Destinations	Highlights
August 2021	Vietnam, Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Met with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan PhucBecame first VP to visit Vietnam
September 2022	Japan, South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Led U.S. Presidential Delegation to the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's funeralMet with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol
November 2022	Thailand, The Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Attended 2022 APEC Leaders Meeting in Bangkok and held sideline meetings with world leaders including Chinese President Xi JinpingMet with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.
September 2023	Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Represented the United States at the 2023 ASEAN Summit in Bangkok and re-affirmed Washington's commitment to Southeast Asia

Policy Positions

Security

If she is elected president, Vice President Harris is unlikely to deviate from the Biden administration's emphasis on defense ties as essential to deterring aggression from China, Russia, and other adversaries. In the Senate, Harris served on the Intelligence and Judiciary Committees, but much of her work on the Intelligence Committee seems to have focused on Russia. She is therefore likely to draw from the Biden team's pool of advisers to boost her knowledge of Indo-Pacific security dynamics. During her tenure in the Senate, Harris either missed or voted against three out of four annual defense spending budget bills.

- Alliances:** Harris said little about the U.S. alliance system while in the Senate. After she became Vice President, however, alliance-building became an important talking point on many of her international tours. At the Munich Security Forum in February 2024, Harris [reiterated](#) her support for NATO and aid to Ukraine. During her September 2022 visits to Tokyo and South Korea, she called the U.S.-Japan alliance a "cornerstone of what we believe is integral to peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region," and said the U.S.-South Korea alliance is a "lynchpin of security and prosperity."



- **Non-ally engagement:** As Senator, Harris did not sponsor any major initiatives to boost cooperation between the United States and non-allied Indo-Pacific partners. After becoming Vice President, she played a key role in Biden's efforts to reverse the previous administration's stance on regional engagement. At the 2023 ASEAN summit in Jakarta, Harris [advocated](#) for deeper U.S. partnerships to shore-up regional security, especially in the maritime domain. She also highlighted the economic and strategic importance of growing U.S.-Southeast Asia ties, [noting](#) that Washington must "pay attention to 10, 20, 30 years down the line, and what we are developing now that will be to the benefit of our country then."
- **North Korea:** One notable exception to Harris' relative silence on Indo-Pacific security issues in the Senate was her concern about the Trump administration's negotiations with North Korea, which she repeatedly criticized during her 2020 presidential bid. Harris characterized the February 2019 Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi a major policy [failure](#). Harris seems to have maintained her hardline stance toward North Korea throughout her tenure as Vice President. During a visit to the DMZ in September 2022, she condemned North Korea's "provocative nuclear rhetoric" and underscored the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program.
- **South China Sea:** After becoming Vice President, Harris became especially outspoken about freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. During her August 2021 trip to Hanoi, she [accused](#) China of "bullying" rival claimants. While visiting the Philippines in November 2023, she became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit the island of Palawan, which lies adjacent to the disputed Spratly Islands. There, she [pledged](#) to "stand with our Philippine ally in upholding the rules-based international maritime order."
- **Taiwan:** Harris supports the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. During her September 2022 Japan trip, Harris [stated](#) she opposes "any unilateral change" to the status quo, pledged to "continue supporting Taiwan's self-defense, consistent with our long-standing policy," and reiterated that peace in the Taiwan Strait was "an essential feature of a free and open Indo-Pacific."
- **Human rights:** As both a Senator and during her 2020 presidential campaign, Harris expressed strong support for promoting human rights in foreign countries, which could impact U.S. security cooperation with certain partners. For example, Senator Harris [aligned](#) with progressives on efforts to limit U.S. military aid to Saudi Arabia after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and she [criticized](#) the Indian government over its Kashmir policy. She also [rebuked](#) China for human rights abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, co-sponsoring the October 2019 Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act



and accusing the Trump administration of “turning a blind eye” to Beijing’s human rights abuses. Even as Vice President, Harris has been vocal about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, although she has not openly diverged from Biden’s stance.

Together, these points suggest that Harris’ positions on Indo-Pacific security issues are unlikely to stray very far from Biden’s agenda, at least initially. Her key foreign policy advisers – including her national security adviser Philip Gordon – are “traditionalists” with views similar to those of recent Democratic administrations. The Harris campaign will no doubt maintain Biden’s “tough on China stance,” signal an intent to deepen Washington’s alliance system in the Indo-Pacific, and push to accelerate the growing integration of the United States’ defense-industrial base with that of its regional partners.

Trade and Economics

Harris will likely advocate for maintaining Biden’s rigorous system of “small-yard, high-fence” export controls, investment restrictions, and tariff policies aimed at bolstering U.S. supply chains and curbing China’s technological prowess. Beyond China, however, Harris appears to be even more progressive on trade than Biden. Harris was notably pro-labor and pro-environment in the Senate, linking trade issues with climate change and workers’ rights. It seems that any trade deals initiated by Harris could impose rigorous environmental and labor standards.

- **Multilateral Trade Agreements:** While serving in the Senate, Harris opposed two major free trade agreements (FTAs) – the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – on the grounds that they did not offer adequate environmental and labor protections. Harris has yet to comment on Biden’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF); she might support the green investment and supply chains policy pillars of IPEF while turning off the trade pillar – which is already a mostly moot point given the pillar’s failure. Harris has not commented extensively on other major trade initiatives such as the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS).
- **Tariffs:** Senator Harris seemed to favor limited and surgically applied tariffs intended to protect strategic or vulnerable industries, especially from China. During her first run for the presidency, Harris said she does not identify as “protectionist Democrat,” but that some controls were necessary for holding Beijing “accountable” for intellectual property theft and for “dumping substandard products into the economy.” However, Harris was a vocal critic of the Trump administration’s “trade war” and its associated tariff policies, describing them as a “trade tax” that would ultimately raise prices. As Vice President, Harris has made similar remarks about Trump’s proposal for a ten



percent tariff on all imports, claiming that universal duties would raise costs for American families.

- **Export Controls and Investment Controls:** Even before entering the Biden administration, Harris avored restrictions on the U.S. operations of Huawei and other Chinese tech companies with alleged ties to China's government and military. She also supported greater scrutiny on inbound and outbound foreign investment linked to China. Based on her past positions, Harris would likely maintain Biden's targeted restrictions on high-tech exports such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and quantum computer components. She could also preserve Biden's rigorous controls on U.S investments in China's tech sector and Chinese investments in sensitive U.S. industries.
- **Subsidies:** Harris is a vocal supporter of the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, which have dispensed billions of dollars of support via grants and tax credits to boost domestic semiconductor, electric vehicle, and green technology producers. Harris may leverage the success of those measures – both signature pieces of Biden's legacy – and make them a key part of her campaign to persuade voters that she can govern effectively.

In brief, Harris' pro-labor and pro-environment track record suggests her approach to Indo-Pacific trade policy would be more likely to shift from Biden's playbook than her approach to security issues. Major labor unions known for opposing trade agreements have already endorsed her candidacy.