

Harris vs. Trump: India Policy

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This is the ninth in a series of TAG memos examining how the outcome of the U.S. presidential election could shape U.S. policy toward the Indo-Pacific region in 2025. The latest memo on the pharmaceutical industry can be found [here](#).

Key Takeaways

Policy	Trump	Harris
Trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursued nationalist trade policy, including tariff increases • Likely to focus on de-risking U.S. investment from China and bolstering supply chains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May push to broaden economic partnership and deepen green technology cooperation • Could revisit tariffs or return to negotiating more ambitious trade agreements
Geopolitics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested in defense trade and reducing licensing burdens • May be less hostile toward India's relationship with Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely to maintain continuity through the Quad structure • May emphasize human rights and democracy

- The United States and India share fundamental concerns about China and want to collaborate on defense and critical technology. The U.S. -India strategic partnership is on an upward trajectory and is expected to weather the upcoming change in U.S. leadership.
- India is closely watching the U.S. election but expects overall continuity in U.S. policy given Modi's positive relations with both Republican and Democratic leaders. Presumptive Democratic candidate Kamala Harris is seen in India as supportive of deeper U.S. -India ties, and former President Donald Trump and Modi also built significant rapport.
- Harris would aim to build on President Joe Biden's expanded economic and strategic partnership with India, which focused on technology, clean energy, and critical minerals. She could further advance progress under the initiative for Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), Trade Policy Forum (TPF), Commercial Dialogue, and U.S. -India 2+2 Dialogue. She may, however, put more emphasis on Indian human rights and democracy issues than Biden.
- A second Trump presidency would likely return to a more transactional and less process-oriented relationship with India, which could lead to renewed



trade tensions amid overall strong ties. Trump would put less emphasis than Harris on human rights, climate change, or India-Russia relations.

The Candidates in Comparison

Trade

Trump: When proposing a 10 percent tariff on all U.S. imports on the campaign trail, Trump has frequently cited India's 100 percent tariff on U.S.-made motorcycles. Robert Lighthizer, Trump's former trade representative, could return in a senior role if Trump is re-elected and has voiced his belief that India is the "most protectionist" country in the world – while pointing to the U.S.'s large trade deficit with India.

During his presidency, Trump initiated trade investigations and imposed tariffs against India and other major trading partners – most notably Section 232 actions on steel and aluminum. Negotiations on a so-called "mini trade deal" between Washington and New Delhi started in 2018 and continued through 2019, and the Trump administration suspended India's benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) as negotiating leverage. The U.S.-India deal was potentially a significant one, cutting tariffs on as much as USD 10 billion in bilateral trade, eliminating some non-tariff measures, and providing new market access for U.S. agriculture products. But the deal fell apart at the negotiating table, despite expectations it would be announced during Trump's February 2020 visit to India.

In a second term, Trump's policies to de-risk U.S. supply chains from China are anticipated to be even more aggressive than those of his first term. As a result, more U.S. firms may accelerate steps to diversify their supply chains away from China and consider India as an alternative. But Trump's confrontational approach to trade may result in bilateral clashes and create political risk for such moves.

Harris: A Harris presidency can be expected to follow the Biden administration's approach to trade with India – perhaps with more emphasis on "green" trade. As part of the 2024 campaign, both Biden and Harris have pointed to likely additional trade actions against China, and deep anxiety about U.S. trade dependence on China and China's growing "overcapacity" in manufacturing. In parallel, the Biden/Harris administration has pursued deeper engagement with India on supply chain resiliency.

Biden also expanded U.S.-India defense and aerospace trade cooperation, including a landmark deal between Boeing and Air India for 200 U.S.-built aircraft. The two nations are pursuing defense co-development and technology partnership aimed at improved military interoperability.



To resolve some perennial trade disputes with India, the Biden administration revived the U.S. -India Trade Policy Forum (TPF) – a venue for discussing bilateral trade issues that meets annually at the ministerial level and in working groups throughout the year. Although constrained by the Biden administration’s lack of willingness to contemplate reciprocal tariff reduction, the two sides were able to resolve seven disputes pending at the World Trade Organization, thereby improving market access for tree nuts, poultry, and chickpeas.

Under a Harris presidency, the TPF’s newly established “Resilient Trade Working Group” will likely focus on trade facilitation, good regulatory practices, and labor and environment issues. Harris can be expected to continue Biden’s sharp focus on labor and environment issues in the trade context. Harris’ choice for U.S. Trade Representative would be an important signal as to whether her administration would continue current USTR Katherine Tai’s dogmatic approach on digital issues – or steer toward being more supportive of Silicon Valley.

Both Candidates: One area of emerging concern for either Harris or Trump would be India’s increasing use of non-tariff barriers, particularly the use of “quality control orders” that specify India-specific standards in key sectors, such as toys, medical devices, cosmetics, and chemicals, among others. While Trump, in his public statements, has almost singularly focused on tariffs when it comes to trade with India, his USTR could be expected to raise these concerns as well. An incoming Democratic administration would be more likely, however, to raise these issues both bilaterally in the TPF as well as in coordination with other trading partners, such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and Canada

The United States and India, on the sidelines of the G-20 Leaders’ Summit in September 2023, announced the creation of an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), an initiative to bolster east-west transportation corridors between the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and India. While near-term progress on this corridor may be difficult due to ongoing tensions in the Middle East, either Harris or Trump could pursue this idea to link South Asia to the Middle East – if Saudi Arabia, the UAE and India prioritize the initiative.

Geopolitics

Trump: Former President Trump’s foreign policy toward India focused on deepening defense and security ties, bolstered by strong chemistry with Prime Minister Modi. Their personal relationship, exemplified by the ‘Howdy, Modi!’ rally in Texas co-hosted by Trump in September 2019, could help set the stage for greater diplomatic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific aimed at shared concerns about China’s regional assertiveness. India is particularly focused on its tense border dispute with China.



Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy welcomed India's "emergence as a leading global power" and strategic partner. During his presidency, the U.S. and India set up new mechanisms to foster defense collaboration, including a U.S. - India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue starting in 2018 and the revival of the Quad, a shared platform driven by the United States, India, Australia, and Japan to support a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Washington and New Delhi also signed two "foundational" agreements to formalize military-to-military ties. A second Trump term could see continued engagement with the Quad, although perhaps with a narrower scope than the Biden Administration - de-emphasizing Biden's working groups on climate, health, and infrastructure that Trump may see as "not essential" to U.S. interests. *(For more details, see TAG's earlier E24 memo on the Quad [here](#)).*

Biden has downplayed human rights concerns with India, and a second Trump presidency would almost certainly keep human rights issues on the back burner. Meanwhile, a likely Trump push for an armistice between Ukraine and Russia could create breathing room for Delhi's working relationship with Moscow.

Harris: Democratic candidate Harris is expected to pick up the mantle of Biden's India policy, which sought collaboration with India as a "Major Defense Partner" rather than pursuing a transactional approach. Harris administration cooperation with India could focus on defense, climate change, critical minerals, and high technology.

Biden and Modi launched a U.S. -India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) in 2023 which could expand further under Harris. Biden elevated the Quad to be a leader-level summit, and the United States and India came together with Israel and the UAE to form "I2U2" to discuss food security and technology cooperation. Harris would certainly continue and expand these "minilateral" dialogues.

Biden and Modi have enjoyed a positive relationship, creating a strong foundation for Harris. Biden congratulated Modi immediately upon his re-election last month, and the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to a "trusted, strategic technology partnership." Biden and Modi met three times in 2023, at the G7 and G20, and when Biden hosted Modi for a State Visit in June 2023. Vice President Harris also met Prime Minister Modi one-on-one in her role as Chair of the National Space Council (an area of personal interest for Modi) and hosted a luncheon for him during his State Visit in June 2023.

Nevertheless, the U.S. -India relationship has faced moments of friction under Biden. Prime Minister Modi paid a visibly friendly visit to Vladimir Putin in Moscow earlier this month, and the optics of that visit, which coincided with a NATO Summit in Washington and a horrific Russian attack on a children's hospital in Ukraine, were unwelcome in Washington. In 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed an indictment alleging the involvement of an Indian intelligence official in



a failed murder-for-hire plot against a U.S. citizen. As the daughter of an Indian immigrant, Harris may be inclined to – and face pressure to – press such concerns along with India’s internal human rights troubles more firmly than Biden. Still, Harris has observed Biden handling such issues in private in order to keep the broader U.S.-India partnership on track. Harris would likely continue to raise issues of contention privately while also deepening areas of convergence.

This report was prepared by the TAG India Practice and the TAG Research Team.