

Harris vs. Trump: Taiwan Policy

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This is the latest 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 previous brief on Trump and Harris' respective approaches to regulating inbound foreign investment can be found [here](#).

Key Takeaways

Policy	Trump	Harris
U.S.-Taiwan Bilateral Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boosted U.S.-Taiwan arms sales, security ties, and high-level visits • Pressured Taiwan to increase defense spending and procurement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked with Biden to build upon Trump-era engagement policies • Likely to continue U.S.-Taiwan defense cooperation, emphasizing asymmetric platforms
Taiwan's Economic & Geostategic Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a transactional view of Taiwan; described it as a bargaining chip • Criticizes Taiwan's chip sector dominance as bad for American industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees peace in the Taiwan Strait as vital to U.S. security and regional stability • May stress Taiwan's role as a model for democratic governance in the region

- Neither Trump nor Harris has articulated a detailed approach to Taiwan. **Both candidates see support for Taiwan as consistent with a broadly defined “tough on China” political agenda.**
- **Trump strengthened U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic and defense ties** by increasing high-level visits, authorizing larger arms sales packages, and enhancing military-to-military engagement. **The Biden-Harris administration maintained those practices** but supplemented them with additional avenues of economic security cooperation and talks on trade.
- **Trump and Harris have divergent views on Taiwan's long-term value despite the overlap in their track records on bilateral relations.** Harris would likely continue Biden's efforts to deepen diplomatic, economic, and defense ties with the island, potentially including more work on trade. A re-elected Trump could ramp up pressure on Taiwan firms to invest in U.S. manufacturing, levy higher tariffs, and make Taipei nervous about the U.S.-



Taiwan relationship. Trump's potential advisors, however, are more firmly pro-Taiwan than he is.

The Candidates in Comparison

Trump

U.S. - Taiwan Bilateral Relations: Amid the converging bipartisan focus in Washington on the challenges that China's economic and military strength pose to U.S. interests, Trump implemented several measures to expand U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic and military engagement. In February 2018, Trump signed into law the Taiwan Travel Act (TTA), which removed restrictions on officials from all levels of U.S. government to travel to Taiwan and permitted high-level Taiwan officials to enter the U.S. under certain conditions. During Trump's presidency, Taiwan saw a noticeable uptick in visits from high-level U.S. officials, including Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar.

The Trump administration also deepened U.S.-Taiwan defense ties. Just six months after entering office, Trump authorized a USD 1.4 billion arms sale in June 2017, followed by a total of USD 16.5 billion in additional sales over the next three years of asymmetric and traditional weapons, maintenance equipment, and munitions. The total value of U.S. weapons and related components exported to Taiwan via the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program under Trump – including “big ticket” deliveries such as F16V jets and M1A2 Abrams tanks – was roughly four times the value of sales thus far under the Biden administration. Part of this divergence stems from the backlog in delivery of Trump era arms sales.

Another measure of Trump's focus on security cooperation with Taiwan was naval activity. U.S. Navy vessels transited the Taiwan Strait at least 13 times in 2020 alone, compared to the three times per year under Obama and the 11 total operations conducted under Biden's tenure thus far.

Despite progress on diplomatic and defense cooperation, however, U.S.-Taiwan Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFA) talks remained stalled under Trump, in part due to a longstanding impasse on minimum residual levels of ractopamine in U.S. pork and beef products. Trump's focus on trade negotiations with China may also have contributed to the lack of progress on U.S.-Taiwan trade during his presidency. One notable exception was Trump's Economic Prosperity Partnership dialogue with Taiwan in 2020, which focused on cooperation pertaining to economic security.

Views on Taiwan's Economic and Geostrategic Value: Trump's transactional, “America First” worldview tends to frame the value of the United States' bilateral relationships in terms of economic costs and benefits. As a presidential candidate



in 2016, Trump floated that Taiwan could be a bargaining chip in U.S.-China relations, and more recently, Trump has questioned the U.S.-Taiwan relationship and expressed frustration that Taipei was not sufficiently paying the U.S. to fund its defense. He also criticized the imbalance in the economic relationship, claiming that Taiwan took away the United States' semiconductor business.

These comments suggest that Trump does not appear to have strong views about Taiwan's value as a democratic partner or its role in the U.S.-led liberal international order. Trump advisors are aware of Taiwan's strategic military position in the first island chain, but none of the position papers posted on Trump's campaign website reference Taiwan. Looked at as a practical matter, Trump's campaign rhetoric is at odds with the views of many of his potential second-term advisors – including Elbridge Colby, Matt Pottinger, and Robert O'Brien – who have argued that defending Taiwan is vital to preventing Chinese dominance of the Indo-Pacific and demonstrating U.S. credibility as the world's top military power.

Looking ahead, a second Trump administration could implement policies that inject greater uncertainty into the U.S.-Taiwan business environment, especially if he places a greater emphasis on addressing the trade deficit. Trump might pressure Taiwan firms like TSMC to invest more in U.S. manufacturing, benefitting certain state economies and further insulating U.S. supply chains. However, he could also impose higher tariffs on Taiwan technology exports, perhaps even beyond his proposed 10-20 percent blanket duties on all foreign products. Finally, given Taiwan's trade surplus with the United States, Trump seems unlikely to perpetuate the U.S.-Taiwan "21st Century Trade Initiative" started by Biden (currently stalled by U.S. politics).

On the other hand, Trump favors bilateral over multilateral trade talks which, if linked to the strong bipartisan support for Taiwan in Congress, could lead to an expansion rather than a contraction of U.S.-Taiwan trade discussions. Additionally, Trump could turn to incentives rather than punishments to entice technology transfers from TSMC. In short, observers should be cautious about taking Trump's Taiwan-related statements at face value since he has not – at least pre-election – consolidated his views.

Harris

U.S.-Taiwan Bilateral Relations: The Biden-Harris administration maintained and expanded many of the measures Trump took to deepen U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic and military cooperation. While U.S. arms sales to Taiwan slowed under Biden in terms of total dollar value, Biden's team put growing emphasis on less expensive but more impactful asymmetric platforms – especially mobile missile defense systems. The Biden administration approved the first-ever transfer of defense



articles to Taiwan under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) mechanism, leveraging the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act passed last year that authorizes up to USD 2 billion in annual military grants to Taiwan until 2027 (notably, the FMF system is typically used for lower-income and sovereign states, thus elevating unofficial U.S.-Taiwan ties).

Other forms of military-to-military cooperation also accelerated – including Taiwan’s participation in maritime drills, regularized U.S. Navy transits through the Taiwan Strait, and visits by U.S. military personnel to “frontline islands” near the Chinese coastline. Additionally, high-level U.S.-Taiwan exchanges that began under Trump continued under Biden and Harris – including Nancy Pelosi’s controversial August 2022 visit to Taiwan, about which the White House expressed significant reservations.

One important innovation was the Biden-Harris administration’s efforts to systematize U.S.-Taiwan trade talks, which became possible after then-president Tsai Ing-wen lifted restrictions on U.S. beef and pork products containing ractopamine. In May 2023, the partners reached a first round of understandings under the “21st Century Trade Initiative,” including agreements on standardized customs and border procedures, harmonized regulatory practices, and benefits to small businesses. Negotiations on more contentious issues – such as agriculture, digital trade, labor, and environmental standards – remain ongoing. The last round of talks under the Initiative was held in August 2023, and the discussions are unlikely to be meaningfully reconvened until after the U.S. election.

The United States and Taiwan are also engaged in a Science and Technology Cooperation Dialogue (STCD) initiated during May 2023. Those discussions are aimed at strengthening collaboration on a variety of issues including healthcare and cancer research, environmental modeling, semiconductors, and biotechnology.

Despite introducing novel areas of cooperation, the Biden-Harris administration’s approach to the U.S.-Taiwan bilateral relationship still resembled that of its predecessors from Jimmy Carter onward, walking a fine line between signaling commitment to Taiwan and managing U.S.-China tensions. Biden drew attention by publicly pledging that he would use military force to defend Taiwan in a crisis scenario at least four times – comments which were later blurred by his aides. Harris has been careful not to endorse those statements when asked for comment, relying instead on standard diplomatic language expressing opposition to either Taiwan independence or unilateral changes to the status quo.

Views on Taiwan’s Economic and Geostrategic Value: Although she has yet to articulate a clear Taiwan position, Harris appears to have a coherent vision about Taiwan’s economic and strategic value to long-term U.S. interests that is rooted in longstanding U.S. policy. During her four trips to the Indo-Pacific region as Vice



President, Harris delivered several speeches on the importance of allies and partners – including Taiwan – and on the U.S. priority of deterring Chinese hegemonic activity and maintaining regional order. While touring Japan in September 2022, for example, Harris delivered remarks aboard the *USS Howard* reiterating her belief that peace in the Taiwan Strait was “an essential feature of a free and open Indo-Pacific.” Similarly, the Democratic National Committee platform this year emphasized the importance of alliances and partnerships, as well as the U.S. commitment to stability in the Taiwan Strait under the longstanding One China policy.

Harris may also value Taiwan because its semiconductor industry plays a vital role in maintaining U.S. technological primacy and protecting American economic security. Much of the Biden-Harris administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy focuses on strengthening U.S. supply chain security (especially for high-tech imports linked to emerging technologies like artificial intelligence) while simultaneously denying China access to advanced technologies that could strengthen Beijing’s military intelligence apparatus and facilitate the export of authoritarian technologies abroad. In Harris’ view, a strong and resilient Taiwan serves both objectives, providing Washington with a steady stream of advanced semiconductors while simultaneously denying the most sophisticated varieties to Beijing.

Harris is a somewhat known quantity to Taipei (and other Indo-Pacific allies and partners). She travelled to the region four times as Vice President and briefly exchanged words with Taiwan’s President Lai Ching-te (when he was still Vice President) during a January 2022 trip to Honduras for the inauguration of President Xiomara Castro. As a fierce critic of China’s human rights violations who supported bills on Hong Kong and Xinjiang, Harris also shares many values with Taiwan’s robust democracy – potentially making her more amenable to deeper forms of U.S.-Taiwan cooperation.

For all of these reasons, a potential Harris administration is therefore likely to maintain Biden’s policies of greater diplomatic, military, and economic engagement with Taiwan – although she may not rush to repeat Biden’s pledges to defend Taiwan with military force in the event of a conflict with China.

What Businesses Should be Watching

- **The unpredictability of a re-elected Trump – versus the likely continuity of a Harris administration – creates risks for Taiwan-related business operations, compliance, and market access.** Under a second Trump administration, businesses should be prepared for reduced efforts between the United States and Taiwan to harmonize systems and processes (e.g., customs and inspection), the imposition of higher tariffs on Taiwan goods, and other abrupt policy shifts. Demonstrative pro-Taiwan policies from



either candidate could also raise the possibility of retaliatory measures by Beijing that increase business risk.

- **Unpredictability extends to how Harris or Trump may respond to China’s ongoing “grey zone” efforts** – including naval and median line intrusions, military exercises, misinformation campaigns, and the use of economic coercion – to undermine Taiwan’s democratic political system. The perceived strength of U.S. defense commitments to Taiwan is a barometer for overall Indo-Pacific stability and the region’s attractiveness to multinational corporations amid rising concerns about supply chain disruptions. Regional allies could view weakening U.S. commitments to Taiwan as a precursor to a weakening of their own security agreements with Washington.
- **U.S. efforts to boost its own domestic semiconductor manufacturing capabilities and assert itself as a central node in the semiconductor supply chain could create tensions with Taiwan manufacturers.** Under either leader, export controls on advanced semiconductors and their associated production equipment may become even more stringent. This policy trend – including rigorous application of the Foreign Direct Product Rule (FDPR) – could create compliance burdens for trade and investment with Taiwan companies that engage Chinese markets.
- **Multinational firms should also pay close attention to Taiwan’s domestic politics**, especially as local elections in early 2026 could reflect the public’s overall satisfaction with the Lai administration. Disagreements between the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) on how to manage relations with China could shape Taiwan’s engagement with the United States. Regardless of who sits in the Oval Office, some KMT-leaning officials may perceive U.S. efforts to bolster diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan as unnecessarily provocative. These concerns could affect discussions on defense procurement and trade access.

This report was prepared by [Nick Ackert](#).