

Harris vs. Trump: Indo-Pacific Alliances

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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 most recent memo in this series, on Trump and Harris' respective approaches to Taiwan policy, can be found [here](#).

Key Takeaways

Views on Alliances	Trump	Biden-Harris
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aimed for economic “fairness” and to reduce U.S. costs Tried to avoid open-ended overseas engagements Saw main utility of Asian alliances in countering China’s influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deepened ties with allies via expanded cooperative programs Sought intra-regional cohesion by encouraging allies to cross-link Harris likely to follow Biden approach while injecting more attention on human rights
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressured Seoul and Tokyo to increase spending on defense, including covering U.S. costs Transactional approach to cost-sharing, leveraging confrontational statements Raised the level of the Quad to pull in India 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refrained from public criticism of allies and emphasized collective action on North Korea and China Regularized Quad and built several new trilateral mechanisms involving Japan, Australia, South Korea and the Philippines, including the AUKUS pact

U.S. Defense and Security Alliances in the Indo-Pacific

The United States has formal bilateral defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia, comprising the foundation of its regional security strategy. Washington views these alliances as critical to ensuring regional stability, deterring adversaries, and promoting a “free and open Indo-Pacific” that supports economic prosperity and protects territorial sovereignty. The United States also pursues non-treaty defense cooperation with India, Singapore, Vietnam, and Taiwan and participates in less formal multilateral security frameworks such as the Quad and U.S. - Japan trilateral arrangements with Australia and South Korea.



The Candidates in Comparison

Trump

President Trump's approach to alliances in the Indo-Pacific reflected his broader aim to recalibrate U.S. relationships and prioritize narrowly defined national interests and economic "fairness." Referencing Andrew Jackson, Trump focused on self-reliance, military strength, and a push for direct economic and security benefits for the United States. This contrasted with his predecessors who emphasized shared values, diplomatic teamwork, and active support for allies, while often sidestepping "free-rider" concerns.

Trump's approach was exemplified by his criticisms of NATO members for not meeting defense spending targets, including his threat of a possible U.S. withdrawal from NATO if spending goals were not met. During the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump has asserted that he will not "[protect](#)" NATO allies that do not meet spending targets ([amounting](#) to two percent of a country's GDP). In February, he suggested that Russia could "do whatever the hell they want" with recalcitrant NATO member states.

While Trump views the Indo-Pacific as more strategically relevant than Europe, due to U.S.-China competition, he still has approached key Asian alliances with a similar transactional mindset and addressed points of tension with a confrontational tone. On Korea, he sought to renegotiate the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) to reduce the U.S. trade deficit. His economic focus extended to security relations with Korea; for example, Trump [expressed](#) frustration that Seoul was insufficiently financing the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile defense system to the country. Trump also pressured Seoul to increase its financial contributions from USD 900 million to USD 5 billion – via the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) – to help support the costs of the 30,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in the country. In the end, Trump's team [negotiated](#) a stopgap agreement in 2019 with South Korea to raise Seoul's contributions by 8.2 percent for one year, far short of the initial American request. The Biden administration eventually concluded those negotiations, agreeing to a 13.9 percent increase over five years.

Trump voiced similar concerns over cost-sharing in the U.S.-Japan alliance and criticized the treaty as "unfair" in 2019, although he confirmed U.S. commitments to defending Japan. His statements followed [Bloomberg reporting](#) that Trump had "mused" about withdrawing from the treaty, and expressed dissatisfaction about plans to move a U.S. military base in Okinawa. While cost-sharing issues persisted, the personal relationship Trump enjoyed with then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe provided ballast to stabilize bilateral relations, especially as the two countries deepened security cooperation and increased military exercises to address issues



relating to China's regional influence and North Korea's missile and nuclear threats. Trump's Japan comments reflected his tendency to question the necessity of alliance frameworks, emphasizing unilateral action over cooperation with allies in confronting China and other threats – while ultimately adhering for the most part to status quo arrangements. Trump would reiterate commitments to shared deterrence, but also make provocative statements – with a dealmaker's mindset – aimed at addressing perceived unfair burdens on the United States.

A second Trump term could see additional tough pressure directed at long-time U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Former Trump Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [stated](#) in April 2024 that there would likely be calls for Japan to boost defense spending even beyond its recently doubled target of two percent of GDP. Former National Security Advisor John Bolton has [suggested](#) that Trump would re-negotiate the U.S. – Japan security treaty to require that Japan defend the United States. Elbridge Colby, seen as a potential appointee in a Trump administration, has [criticized](#) Japan for “moving at a leisurely pace on defense” and said that South Korea should [take](#) “overwhelming responsibility for its own self-defense against North Korea” due to the U.S. focus on a potential conflict with China.

Former Trump National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, writing in a *Foreign Affairs* [editorial](#), asserted that leaders in the Indo-Pacific would “welcome” Trump's direct approach. O'Brien called for the U.S. to “focus its Pacific diplomacy on allies such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, traditional partners such as Singapore, and emerging ones such as Indonesia and Vietnam.” He also advocated for more joint military exercises with those countries and suggested that Taiwan be included in such activities.

Several of the countries O'Brien mentioned are relevant parties to ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. The first Trump administration maintained a tough stance on Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [vowing](#) to defend the Philippines in 2019 if China launched “armed attacks” on the country's vessels in the region. That was the first time the U.S. publicly clarified that it would defend the Philippines in the area under the U.S. – Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. It is likely that Trump will continue a hawkish stance on the South China Sea – which may fortify the alliance with the Philippines and relationships with other Southeast Asian partners. However, if Trump's relations with Chinese President Xi become more positive, there could be uncertainties about Trump's willingness to frame the South China Sea as a significant flashpoint, or to risk U.S. blood and treasure in the defense of Taiwan.

Given overall hawkish Republican Party views on China, it appears – in sum – that Trump 2.0 would aim to maintain strong U.S. and security commitments in Asia, but also work hard (even using threats) to convince Asian allies to pay more for defense.



Biden-Harris

Intense engagement and teamwork with allies and partners have been the hallmarks of the Biden-Harris administration's foreign policy. Biden has deployed an overwhelmingly positive tone in engagement with allies, emphasizing collective and coordinated approaches, focusing on military cooperation, extended deterrence, and joint efforts to counter North Korean threats and China's growing influence.

Biden has emphasized building a "latticework" of multilateral frameworks, fostering stronger connections both within the Indo-Pacific and outside the region, such as by bringing Europe into Indo-Pacific discussions, and expanding security-related cooperation to incorporate economic security matters and the creation of shared public goods in areas such as maritime security. Examples of these connections include the U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral, the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral, and the AUKUS military equipment partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom. A newer "mini-lateral" is the "Squad" with Australia, Japan, and the Philippines. That grouping held its first defense ministerial meeting in June 2023 and has since conducted a joint maritime patrol with future joint exercises likely.

Similarly, as also discussed in a [separate paper](#) in this series, the Quad, which the Trump administration resurrected in 2017, was elevated by the Biden administration to be a permanent leaders' level grouping. While some have viewed the Quad – which contains U.S. treaty allies Japan and Australia, in addition to Major Defense Partner India – through a security lens, the grouping has for the time being emphasized providing the Indo-Pacific with public goods. The pace of expansion in Quad activities related to security will continue to be gradual and largely dictated by India, regardless of whether Trump or Harris wins the presidency next month.

While Biden has also raised cost-sharing concerns with allies, he has avoided public criticism in his rhetoric. Rather, Biden has characterized the South Korean alliance as "ironclad." Vice President Harris referred to it as a "lynchpin of security and prosperity." In April 2023, President Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [announced](#) a Washington Declaration, which set up consultations on U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy on the peninsula and expanded joint military exercises and the frequency of deployment of U.S. strategic assets to the region while also extracting a renewed South Korean commitment to nuclear non-proliferation. Biden's administration is currently working to [negotiate](#) the next five-year military cost-sharing agreement before the end of the year, likely hastened by concerns within Seoul about a possible new Trump team seeking greater concessions. Regarding North Korea, Harris' past criticisms of the 2019 Trump-Kim summit and nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang suggest that she will follow Biden's standoffish stance toward Pyongyang, instead pushing to further bolster South Korea's deterrent capability.



Biden worked to significantly strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance, which he has referred to as “unbreakable” and as a “cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and around the world.” Vice President Harris, during a September 2022 visit to Tokyo, referred to the alliance in nearly identical terms, stating that it is a “cornerstone of what we believe is integral to peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.” The military relationship has evolved, with more joint military exercises, enhanced interoperability between the two militaries, and greater collaboration on space and cyber issues. The U.S.-Japan partnership has also been enmeshed in multilateral frameworks such as the Quad, the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral, and the G7. As with South Korea, the Biden administration reaffirmed the principle of nuclear extended deterrence to Japan – an aspect of relations that could get greater prominence with Shigeru Ishiba succeeding Fumio Kishida as Japan’s prime minister.

Biden, like Trump, expressed deep concerns about China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. As Vice President, Harris [repeated](#) the “free and open Indo-Pacific” refrain, and has been particularly vocal about reinforcing freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as well as calling out China’s “[bullying](#)” of regional partners. Harris echoed Biden’s positively toned rhetorical commitments to allies during her November 2023 visit to the Philippines. Harris visited Palawan, close to the disputed Spratly Islands, looked over the ocean, and [committed](#) to “stand with our Philippine ally in upholding the rules-based international maritime order.”

Kamala Harris is likely to continue much of the Biden agenda on alliances, having met face-to-face with the leaders of all U.S. treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific. While continuing to deepen the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan relationships, Harris would likely be a stalwart advocate of allies’ interests in South China Sea disputes and regarding Taiwan. Harris is also expected to emphasize human rights as part of her foreign policy – demonstrated during her time as a Senator and through her comments on the Israel-Gaza War as vice president.

What Businesses Should Watch

- **General Uncertainty Around Trump:** A second Trump administration pursuing transactional approaches could reintroduce a certain degree of uncertainty about the role of alliances in U.S. foreign policy. Potential tension over cost-sharing, especially with South Korea and Japan, could lead to scratchier ties with Tokyo and Seoul, or expand further if there is a greater emphasis on contributions by other allies such as Australia or the Philippines. Renewed Trump attempts to build personal rapport with authoritarian leaders like North Korea’s Kim Jong Un and Russia’s Vladimir



Putin could also raise doubts about alignment with allies on key geopolitical challenges.

- **Trump's Relationship with China:** It is widely expected that Trump will be harsh on China as a matter of general principle, although that will likely not extend to taking any risky steps around Taiwan, the South China Sea or the East China Sea. On the other hand, the likelihood of a U.S. -China "trade war" under Trump creates the possibility of a more positively framed, negotiations-oriented approach to China, indirectly impacting rhetorical and political support for treaty alliance relationships.
- **Presidential Personnel Choices:** Key advisors will play a role in shaping each candidate's approach if elected. A Harris administration's foreign policy could be influenced by the Vice President's current national security advisor Phil Gordon, whose worldview is shaped by his extensive experience in Europe and the Middle East, and who appears to be more concerned than Biden's inner circle about human rights-related issues. On Asia, Harris could pull from many holdovers from the Biden administration. Meanwhile, despite his bombastic rhetoric, Trump's foreign policy could be heavily influenced by advisors such as former National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien who have reinforced the value of alliances.

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