

AMERICAN NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY AND THE 2024 ELECTION

Dov S. Zakheim

ON July 21st, 2024, President Joe Biden announced in a letter to the American people that “while it has been my intention to seek reelection, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the Country for me to stand down and to focus solely on fulfilling my duties as President for the remainder of my term.” His decision to withdraw from the 2024 Presidential Race has changed the prospects for American foreign policy after his term comes to an end.

Prior to his announcement, it was not at all clear that Joe Biden could prevail in his electoral contest with Donald Trump. And whereas the incumbent U.S. President is a long-time internationalist in general, and Europeanist in particular, Donald Trump demonstrated during his first term in office that his approach

to foreign policy was purely transactional—with no sense of commitment to Washington’s allies, partners, and friends, or antipathy towards its adversaries. Donald Trump’s statements in the current electoral cycle have given no hint that his approach to America’s overseas relations has changed since he left the White House in 2020. Indeed, in choosing JD Vance as his vice-presidential candidate, the former has signaled that he is totally comfortable with American neo-isolationism, which he has long trumpeted under the slogan he recycled from the 1930s, “America First.” The Democrats’ near unanimous decision to anoint Vice President Kamala Harris as Biden’s replacement has fundamentally changed Trump’s prospects for reelection and with it, the likelihood that America would indeed continue its slow turn inward.

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Photo: Guliver Image

Vice President Kamala Harris during her visit to Guatemala in June 2021, where she addressed the region’s migrants with the words “do not come”

Unlike Joe Biden, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee three times between 2001 and 2009, served as its ranking member when he was not chairman, and brought decades of foreign policy experience to the Vice Presidency, Kamala Harris had virtually no foreign policy experience while holding various elected offices in California. In order to gain some foreign policy credibility, Harris has traveled overseas widely throughout her term as Vice President, visiting 21 countries and meeting with over 150 leaders. That, however, has not necessarily translated into foreign policy expertise.

During the early years of the Biden Administration, Harris cut at best a middling figure while on foreign travel. She traveled to Mexico and Guatemala in 2021 and to Honduras in 2022 as part of her effort to address the “root causes” of illegal immigration into the United States. While in Guatemala, she urged potential migrants not to make the trip to the United States, stating “do not come.” Do not come—as if that would have made a difference to those clamoring to enter America illegally and who probably were not even aware that she was visiting their country. By all accounts, her efforts to address America’s immigration challenge bore

no fruit, as migration continued to spike in the Administration's first three years, and not only from Guatemala and Honduras.

Moreover, despite her putative role as a key official addressing immigration matters, Harris hardly threw herself into her task. She never returned to Mexico, Honduras, or Guatemala after her initial visits and never even visited El Salvador, the third "so-called" northern triangle country supposedly in her purview. Indeed, she never met with the successive Border Patrol chiefs, who served during her years in office. And she made only one apparently perfunctory visit to El Paso, on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, which has long served as a crossing point for illegal migrants. Meeting with the Border Patrol chiefs, and extended visits to the border as well as repeat visits to the northern triangle states logically should have been key elements of her mandate. But because they were not, it came as no surprise that her critics argued that to all intents and purposes she was disengaged from the region and from the task to which she had been assigned.

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In any event, immigration only began to level off after Biden himself began to incorporate many of the same restrictive policies that marked the years that Trump was president. By then, the Administration no longer touted Harris as a key policymaker on immigration. In trying to paint the rosiest possible perspective on what many saw as her failed efforts to affect the trajectory of illegal immigration, Harris' supporters either claimed that her mandate extended only to those "root causes" and that she had never really been in charge of immigration policy, or they asserted that she actually had been quite successful as the key person on immigration. That the two claims seemed to be contradictory, however, did not seem to bother her advocates.

During her first two years in office, Harris visited East Asia multiple times. She traveled to Singapore and Vietnam in 2021, and made little news as her public remarks hewed closely to the Biden Administration's foreign policy positions. On the other hand, the following year, she was guilty of a widely reported major gaffe. While visiting the demilitarized zone between

the two Koreas in September 2022, she spoke of the American alliance with "the Republic of North Korea." Worse still, she did not correct herself but continued with her speech. Perhaps more than anything else, that slip in particular created the image of a Vice-President who was a babe in the woods of foreign policy.

Harris attended the November 2022 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting, where she met with key Asian leaders, including a brief meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. She also visited the Philippines and Thailand on that trip. Her role in all three venues was to reiterate the Biden Administration's commitment to an enduring American presence in the region and particularly resisting Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea. She received some press coverage but made few headlines and announced no initiatives.

Harris also visited Europe on numerous occasions, including participating in the annual Munich Security Conference, which many European and non-European leaders attend.

For that reason, the venue tends to be a stage for American leaders. A plane-load of Senators and Congressmen have

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always attended; and Biden himself spoke at the event multiple times, both as senator and then as Vice President. Indeed, he committed a major gaffe of his own when he addressed the conference in 2013. In what were clearly unscripted remarks, the then Vice President said: "I also mean to be back here in Germany, to be back here in Europe. I have traveled over 640,000 miles since I've been Vice President, and most of the time the President sends me to places that he doesn't want to go. So, I've spent an awful lot of time with

McCain and others in Afghanistan and Iraq, and so it's nice to be here in Germany." The Iraqi and Afghan ambassadors who were sitting in the front row were hardly amused, and the rest of the attendees responded not with laughter, as the transcript recorded, but rather with shocked silence.

When Biden addressed the conference in 2021 during his first year in office as President, and did so virtually

due to Covid, he did impart an important message, telling his audience that “America is back.” Attending the conference in person the following year, Harris committed no vice-presidential blunders, but neither does she appear to have made much of an impression on her audience. Indeed, in 2022, Secretary of State Tony Blinken, who accompanied her, played a far more consequential role interacting with the foreign leaders in attendance, many of whom he had dealt with for some time while serving as Biden’s senior Senate staffer for foreign policy issues.

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whose ties to Europe are far longer and deeper, who has taken the lead on NATO policy. She does not appear to have played a substantive role in the process that led to Finnish entry into NATO. Nor was she given the task of convincing Türkiye’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán to lift their respective holds on Swedish entry into the military alliance.

Finally, until she became the Democratic nominee for president upon Biden’s withdrawal from the race, Harris had not played a leading role in formulating America’s response to the Gaza War or in developing policy regarding any other aspect of Middle East politics. Though she met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as with Zelensky she did so only in Washington. Her only visits to the region as Vice President have been to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

By all accounts, Harris has become much more visible and outspoken on foreign and national security issues beginning in 2023. Foreign leaders reportedly claim that she has displayed much more *gravitas* in their dealings with her than was the case in the first years of the Biden Administration. In particular, she has vocally supported Ukraine’s efforts to roll back Russia’s

invaders, especially in her remarks to the 2024 Munich Conference, while she has continued to criticize China’s aggressiveness in the South China Sea ever more vocally.

Most significantly, Harris has veered somewhat from Biden’s full-throated support for Israel. She has voiced more sympathy for Palestinian suffering in Gaza than the president. Her stance has caused

much chagrin for Israel’s American advocates, but their often vocal concerns have not led her to alter her public position. Indeed, her views on the war may have contributed to her decision to choose Minnesota governor Tim Walz over Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro as her running mate. Shapiro has been an outspoken advocate of Israel and a critic of pro-Palestinian demonstrations on college campuses. Walz has been far more reticent on both issues. Nevertheless, Harris has always supported the close Israeli-American alliance, and so, for that matter, has Walz.

Despite her higher foreign policy profile, Harris does not appear to have negotiated any substantive agreements or even coordinated joint activities with any foreign leader, as, for example, did Vice President Al Gore. During the Clinton Presidency, Al Gore

jointly led a commission with Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to improve U.S.-Russian cooperation.

Nor was Harris responsible for any successful overseas initiative, such as

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Vice President George H. W. Bush’s coordination of support for the successful airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1984. Nor does she appear to have had the same degree of overall influence over key for-

ign policy decisions, as did Vice President Dick Cheney, a former Secretary of Defense, who had years of experience with foreign officials.

Indeed, Harris appears to have no close relationships with any foreign leader. One-off meetings, or even multiple meetings that do not lead to initiatives of any kind, simply do not develop the depth of relationships that American policy leaders, whether presidents or senators such as John McCain, or for that matter, Senator Joe Biden, were able to forge over the years.

Harris’ choice for vice-president, Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota, adds at least some national security heft to the Democratic ticket. Walz appears to have been chosen in part because he shares Harris’ progressive views, but also because he comes across

as a common sense mid-Westerner. He certainly had the early and vocal support of the far-left Congressional “squad” and Pramila Jayapal leader of left-wing progressive caucus in the House of Representatives, in which he had served for six terms. Indeed, his left-wing supporters could not resist crowing over the fact that it was he, and not the more moderate and strongly pro-Israel Josh Shapiro, whom Harris chose as a running mate.

While serving in Congress Walz posted a moderate-to-Left voting record. He voted to repeal the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force that was the basis for continuing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but nevertheless supported funding for those wars—a position that became increasingly controversial as the two wars dragged on. Walz was a member of the House Armed Services Committee, which, like its Senate counterpart, sets national security policy as well as pay increases for the military. That committee often favors increases in defense spending above the Administration’s request, and is usually bi-partisan in doing so. Indeed, it has long been one of the more bipartisan committees in the House of Representatives, and continues in that

vein even in today’s bitter partisan environment. For his part, Walz fit well into the committee’s bipartisan ethos.

Walz was also a member of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, which focuses on human rights abuses in the country, maintains a political prisoner database, and, more recently, tracks what it terms “Chinese transnational oppression” of Chinese minorities in the United States and elsewhere. Walz’ interest in Chinese human rights stemmed from his years as a young teacher in both Hong Kong and the People’s Republic. He speaks

Mandarin, though not fluently.

Walz also was a member of the House Veterans affairs Committee and briefly served as its minority ranking member. He held leadership positions in both the Congressional Veterans Jobs Caucus, and the bipartisan House National Guard and Reserve Caucus. The latter seeks to ensure that Guard and Reserve “have the proper inputs on policy, procurement, force structure and utilization within the Department of Defense.”

Walz’s membership of the two committees and of the veterans’ caucuses,

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as well as his voting record on national security, reflect his own military experience. He is a decorated veteran of the National Guard, in which he enlisted at the age of 17 and served for 24 years, at one point reaching the rank of Command Sergeant Major and retiring as a Master Sergeant. His service included a six-month deployment to Europe after the events of September 11th, 2001, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom—the War in Afghanistan. He did not see combat, but could have deployed to Afghanistan and Iran any time after 2001 until his retirement, had Washington chosen to “federalize” his unit as it did other National Guard units during those conflicts. By the time he retired, he was the highest-ranking enlisted soldier ever to serve in Congress.

Apart from his early years in the Far East, and his military deployment to Europe, Walz’ travels outside the United States have been relatively limited, however. As Governor, he has led business delegations to Canada, and in June 2024 was part of the American delegation to France to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day. But, like Harris, Walz does not appear to have developed close relationships with foreign leaders, nor has he negotiated any national security agreements with foreign officials.

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The Democratic ticket’s relative lack of deep foreign policy experience need not necessarily prove a hindrance to a successful Harris administration’s foreign and national security policy, especially given Walz’ military background. Much will depend on the quality of Harris’ advisors. It is worth recalling that Harry Truman had virtually no foreign affairs background and had only been overseas as an artillery officer in World War I. Yet, he successfully brought the war with Japan to an end; blocked Soviet efforts to destabilize Greece and Turkey; and launched the reconstruction of Western Europe in the form of the Marshall Plan. It also was during his administration and with its leadership that both NATO and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade came into being. What underpinned Truman’s success was the quality of his leading advisors, most notably Secretary of State Dean Acheson and General George C. Marshall, who announced his eponymous plan and who served Truman as Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Special Envoy to China.

Harris may not have a Marshall or an Acheson to support her, but she does have a long list of former Obama and Biden Administration officials to choose from. In particular, Philip

Gordon, her current national security advisor, as well as assistant to the president, likely will have an important role in her administration. During the first Obama Administration, Gordon was Assistant Secretary of State for

European and Eurasian Affairs, while during the second Obama Administration, he was White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf Region with the rank of Special Assistant to the President. Other veterans of the current as well as previous administrations who might have leading national security positions in a Harris administration

include Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kath Hicks, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, Secretary of the Army and former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Christine Wormuth, and former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy.

In contrast to Harris’ foreign policy background, there is little that is not known about Donald Trump’s foreign and national security policy orientation. He is fundamentally transactional, and primarily concerned with his personal self-interest. His relationship with

Russian President Vladimir Putin is puzzling, to say the least. His policies toward China, particularly with respect to trade, reflect either his personal isolationist proclivities, or those of the MAGA base to whom he carefully

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caters. His negative attitude toward NATO and the allies bound by this treaty likewise reflects his isolationist impulses, as well as his seining belief that the allies should pay the United States for the protection it affords them. His attitudes toward both China and Europe do not appear to have changed since he last served as president.

While in office, Trump maintained a relatively close relationship with now late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The Japanese leader went to great lengths to flatter him from the earliest days of his presidency, and with Trump “flattery will get you everywhere.” On the other hand, Trump blew hot and cold in his interactions with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, agreeing to meet the dictator in two summits and then turning on the North Koreans when the summits yielded no results.

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to the outsized influence of his daughter Ivanka and his son in law, Jared Kushner, both of whom served as his senior advisors. Trump also maintained close ties with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, due to both

Kushner’s relationship with the Crown Prince and his own business prospects in the oil-rich kingdom. Trump evinced little interest in Saudi Arabia’s human rights record and likewise tended to ignore Egypt’s alleged human rights violations. His indifference to Egypt’s human rights record was reportedly due to an illegal Egyptian donation to his 2016 presidential

campaign, but equally likely because he invariably tended to ignore human rights concerns.

Finally, one of Trump’s signature programs, or at least promises, was restricting illegal immigration along America’s southern border. Trump promised to build a border wall, which he never completed. He did authorize, or at least permit, the caging of captured migrants, including children. His relations with Mexico were generally bad; during his campaigns he promised to make Mexico pay for the border wall. In addition, in at least one instance, he

threatened to send troops into Mexico to stanch the flow of immigration to the United States.

JD Vance, Trump’s choice for his vice-presidential running mate, has less than two years of service in the Senate and no prior governmental experience. He enlisted in the Marine Corps, spent four years in the service, and was deployed to Iraq for six months. He did not see any combat and was assigned as what he termed a “combat journalist,” which in reality amounted to a public affairs official. He retired from the Marine Corps with the rank of Corporal; he does not serve in the Reserves.

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Several veterans of his previous administration could return in a second Trump administration. Among them are Robert O’Brien, who was Trump’s fourth national security advisor; Mike

Pompeo, who served as both CIA Director and Secretary of State; Nadia Schadlow, who worked in the White House as deputy National Security Advisor; and, in a somewhat lesser position, Elbridge Colby, who coordinated his department's defense strategy as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. None of these people have broken with Trump, or publicly criticized him, as have two of his former Secretaries of Defense, Jim Mattis and Mark Esper.

There are, of course, other candidates for leading national security posts if there is a second Trump administration.

These include Republican senators Tom Cotton (Arkansas), often mentioned as a possible secretary of defense, and Marco Rubio (Florida), a potential Secretary of State, as well as Trump's first, and short-lived, national security advisor, retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn. Unlike the others, Flynn has virtually no chance of obtaining Senate confirmation; his radical views have alienated both Democratic and Republican senators. Trump could of course, name him an acting cabinet officer; the former president has shown considerable disdain for the confirmation process. Or Flynn could return to his previous post, which requires no Senate confirmation.

Despite the usual speculation about who might be the winning candidate's senior advisor and cabinet officers, presidents will not necessarily pursue policies with which they previously were identified or indeed with their stated priorities

during their campaigns for the White House. Moreover, external events will influence a president's decisions—which indeed might involve an about-face from his (or her) previous priorities. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it, “the enemy gets a vote.”

During the 2000 election campaign, and indeed

during the first eight months of his administration, George W. Bush's national security concerns centered on walking away from the anti-ballistic missile treaty as well as increasing what he and his team of “Vulcans” (of which I was one) considered to be an underfunded defense budget. As I recalled in my memoir (*A Vulcan's Tale*), “No one [...] made an issue of Iraq [...] In fact [...] the notion of going to war to unseat Saddam [Hussein, the Iraqi dictator] was never debated among the Vulcans... Instead, while all the Vulcans agreed that Saddam had to go, policy discussions relating to Iraq during the campaign and the [post-election]

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transition centered on toughening sanctions against Baghdad to accelerate the economic squeeze that would lead to the regime's collapse.”

As for Afghanistan, it “commanded even less attention from the Vulcans than did Iraq. No one spoke about unseating the Taliban. No one pointed out that al Qaida was in virtual control of pieces of the country. Afghanistan simply was not on anyone's radar screen in 1999 or the year 2000.” In sum, the incoming George W. Bush Administration did not focus at all on Afghanistan until September 11th, 2001.

It is also worth noting that presidents can (and do) ignore the recommendations that their senior advisors proffer to them, and at times have done so on the most critical of issues. Truman ignored George Marshall's strong opposition to recognizing the State of Israel and instead elected to follow the advice of his political aide, Clark Clifford. Similarly, Lyndon Johnson stubbornly refused to give any weight to Under Secretary of State George Ball's opposition to continuing, indeed, escalating, America's operations in the Vietnam War. It was a decision that ultimately led Johnson to withdraw from the 1968 presidential campaign.

Finally, there is the reality that not all advisors to a presidential candidate will ultimately serve in a new

administration, or even if they do, may not occupy the positions they sought or expected. For example, during the 2000 campaign, Donald Rumsfeld thought he would be named Director of the Center Intelligence Agency, not Secretary of Defense, a position he had held a quarter century earlier. It was widely anticipated that Indiana Senator Dan Coats would win the defense job. But Coates did not interview well with president-elect Bush, and Bush instead chose Rumsfeld to be his Defense Secretary, while Coates was named Ambassador to Germany.

Nevertheless, whom a president chooses as his or her team of advisors does constitute an indication of the administration's priorities, at least at the start of its term of office. It is for that reason that America's allies, partners, and friends make every effort to determine as best they can not only the candidate's own statements during the campaign, but the previous writings and statements of those whom they believe are the candidate's closest advisors. In this regard, it can be said that the Democratic candidates appear to be more internationally oriented than their Republican counterparts. Still, given Trump's previous track record, what he and his administration might or might not do if he defeats Harris and returns to the White House will remain an open question that might only be answered on a day-to-day basis. ●