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Can China fill the gap as next US president tackles loss of influence in Middle East?

Analysts say both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris will have to come to terms with Beijing seeking a greater role as Washington loses sway

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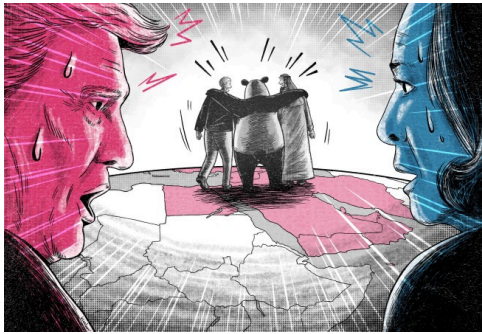


Illustration: Lau Ka-kuen

The presidential race between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris comes at a time of rising geopolitical tensions on multiple fronts. In the third of an [in-depth series](#), Zhao Ziwen looks at how the election will affect Middle East policy and China-US rivalry in the region.

The widening conflict in the [Middle East](#) is one of the main issues dominating the current US debate about foreign policy, with the decision to send troops and advanced missile defences to Israel prompting Iran to warn that Washington is putting its own troops' lives at risk.

It may even have a direct impact on the result of the presidential election with anger at the White House's pro-Israel stance threatening Vice-President Kamala Harris's prospects of taking Michigan, a key swing state that has a significant proportion of Arab-American voters.

But many observers believe that no matter what the result, the next president will face the stark truth that US influence in the region will be increasingly limited and it will feel an increasing need to focus more resources on the Asia-Pacific and its growing rivalry with China.

However, Beijing's growing role in the Middle East could also turn the region into another battleground in the [US-China rivalry](#), potentially reshaping the contours of Washington's foreign policy, according to experts.



Analysts say US presidential candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris face similar constraints when it comes to their Middle East policy. Photo: AP

John Calabrese, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, noted that the policy differences between a Donald Trump administration and a Harris administration might be smaller than many expect. He said that both would be constrained by the same reality: the narrowing scope of US influence in the region.

"The range of policy options available to the US in the Middle East has become narrower, and there is a clearer understanding of the limits of American influence," Calabrese said.

“Addressing the war in Gaza, redefining relations with the Gulf Arab states, and managing Iran” will be the three main issues for the US, he added.

In the Republican Party’s 28-page platform, Trump’s vision of governance mentions the Middle East only twice, and with scant details. It calls for Washington to “stand with Israel” and “seek peace in the Middle East” but does not give any specifics.

Harris, for her part, has not released a comprehensive foreign policy outline. However, she has consistently emphasised support for Israel in her campaign while also voicing concerns about the plight of the Palestinians.

Despite the lack of clarity in their official platforms, the policies of both candidates align in key areas. Trump’s four years in office were marked by robust support for Israel, along with his administration’s “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran.

Harris is expected to continue US President Joe Biden’s approach to the Middle East: backing Israel while maintaining a focus on humanitarian aid for Palestinians, and working with regional partners to counter Iranian influence.

“A Trump administration will likely be based on a set-up that is more committed to Israeli positions, as evidenced by his 2020 peace plan and the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital,” said Clemens Chay, a research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute.

“Vice-President Kamala Harris has largely stuck to the [Biden] administration line, which has demonstrated a current lack of political will in Washington to restrain Israel.”

“Compounded by the fact that in an election year, the Biden administration’s room to operate is limited if he is to avoid exacerbating the domestic political impact of war,” Chay added.

“How a Harris administration would perhaps go further, from what is deemed at the moment a low baseline, is to achieve a ceasefire.”

Although both sides are likely to continue to support Israel, there is a growing consensus that Washington’s direct involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts – including the Israel-Gaza war – is becoming unsustainable.



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Ahmed Aboudouh, an associate fellow at British think tank Chatham House and head of the China Studies unit at the Emirates Policy Centre in Abu Dhabi, suggested that the US would increasingly prioritise its competition with China in the Asia-Pacific region, reducing its direct engagement in the Middle East.

“In the long run, I still see the US recalibrating its posture in the region in a way that allows it to balance its strategic priorities towards keeping China in check in Asia and simultaneously maintaining the bare minimum security stability in the Middle East,” he said.

“This means reducing the cost of its involvement by shifting from a micromanagement approach to offshore balancing.”

Both the Trump and Biden administrations have played a role in this shift. Trump pulled the US out of the Iran nuclear deal, while Biden withdrew troops from Afghanistan.

This “offshore balancing” strategy has also been evident in Washington’s efforts to normalise relations between Israel and Arab states, particularly in the Persian Gulf region, to counter Iran’s influence.

The Abraham Accords, a landmark diplomatic achievement initiated during Trump’s presidency, were among the few foreign policy successes inherited by the Biden administration. However, the potential for a historic Saudi-Israeli normalisation deal has since stalled because of the Gaza conflict.

Aboudouh noted that the Israel-Gaza war and the rising hostilities between Israel and its neighbours had essentially closed the door on any significant US withdrawal from the region in the near future.

"As the war in Gaza and the regional escalation have taught since [Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel], the door for the US to exit the region is completely shut," he said

"Washington is being taken captive by the region," he said. "As much as the region has always been shaped by the US preferences. This means that withdrawing from the Middle East in a strategic sense is not on the table."



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Washington has stepped up its deployment in the region because of the Gaza war and its spillover into Iran and Lebanon. Biden was also directly involved in ceasefire negotiations for nearly a year, showing a political commitment that has not been seen in the region for years.

"It is unlikely the case where Washington will reduce its involvement in the Middle East in the near future, given the fact that the Pentagon has been extremely rapid in deploying its forces – naval, air, or otherwise – since the start of the Gaza war," Chay said.

While Washington grapples with these challenges, China is stepping up its influence in the Middle East, positioning itself as a counterpoint to US dominance.

In addition to brokering a deal to resume diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran last year, China helped broker a unity deal among 14 Palestinian factions, including Hamas, in July.

Beijing's diplomatic manoeuvring in the region has been aimed at positioning itself as a vital voice – particularly among [Global South countries](#) – in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

"China has shown it is ready to challenge the US position in the region. The Gaza conflict has been the biggest opportunity since [Chinese President] Xi Jinping came to power to do so," Aboudouh said.

"Beijing could skilfully undermine Washington's credibility and image across the Global South by siding with the Palestinians and consistently demanding a ceasefire," he added.

Calabrese said that a major battleground in the rivalry between Beijing and Washington could be the Gulf region, given China's cooperation with US allies there.

This is especially true of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose cooperation with China in sensitive hi-tech and military fields is viewed by Washington as an unprecedented risk.

"Washington will closely monitor China's engagement in the Gulf, particularly efforts to prevent Beijing from establishing a military presence or making advances in artificial intelligence and other critical technologies," Calabrese said.

"Success in this area will depend on the US' ability to strengthen its security and tech commitments to offset Gulf states' growing ties with China."

China's growing influence in Iran – Washington's biggest regional enemy – is also being closely watched by the West.

Since the Israel-Gaza war started, Beijing – the biggest buyer of Iranian oil – has maintained close communication with Tehran on regional issues ranging from the Red Sea crisis to Israel's strikes against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

According to Calabrese, Washington insiders – and especially Trump's supporters – still believe that "Iran is central to all the challenges facing American interests in the Middle East".

"These voices will likely push for tighter sanctions enforcement and a stronger retaliatory stance against actions by Iran and its proxies," he added.

Some observers noted there was still a gap between Beijing's aspirations and its capabilities.

Chay said that while China's competition with Washington in the Middle East was largely economic, its willingness to become an active regional mediator remained limited.

“Beijing’s activist approach has been largely constrained to small diplomatic wins,” he said.

“But when it comes to taking on significant security or mediation roles, there is a lack of political will to intervene at the scale the US has historically done.”

Aboudouh agreed, pointing out that Beijing’s moves were primarily aimed at undermining Washington’s standing in the region, without shouldering the same security responsibility or diplomatic costs.

“China’s strategy is to position itself as an alternative to the US, but without engaging in the heavy lifting required to de-escalate regional tensions,” he said.

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