

# **WASHINGTON ROUNDTABLE REPORT ON GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2024 US ELECTIONS**

SEPTEMBER 30, 2024  
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The discussion, titled “Geopolitical Implications of the 2024 US Elections,” explored the global geopolitical and geoeconomic implications of the outcome of the upcoming elections in the United States, especially those relating to the Arab region. The key takeaways from the discussion are mentioned below.

Unlike most of the earlier ones, the current US elections are significantly influenced by foreign policy matters. The Arab-American constituency could tip the balance in a deeply divided country fighting a closely contested election. Overall, the region, and especially Palestine, will experience a soft landing if Harris is elected, while they are likely to get a shock if Trump wins. Trump has already been paid for facilitating Israel’s next move in Palestine, which will be the annexation of the West Bank.

### Political Consultancy ‘Blob’

While the surveys indicate that Harris should adopt policies that shift the dial toward the demands of the progressives, even if slightly, the political consultancy blob, comprising major donors who control large super PACs and failed consultants who keep getting back, is inhibiting any changes and restricting her moves. The reluctance of Harris’s campaign, for instance, to allow a Palestinian survivor to speak at the DNC convention was succumbing to the pressure from this blob rather than a political calculation to maximize votes. While Harris and her team show a lot of promise, their challenge will be to get past the political consultancy blob and implement policies in the Middle East.

### Kamala Harris is Different from Biden

Unlike Biden, who has visceral, rigid feelings about Israel and is unwilling even to welcome the thought of Israel ever doing anything wrong, Kamala Harris, being a woman of color, engages, is receptive, and displays genuine empathy for the plight of the Palestinians. Unlike Biden, who is a hardcore neoconservative, believing in the American primacy in global affairs, Kamala Harris has not been schooled in neoconservatism. She will be replacing the current foreign ministry staff, and her current staff, including her national security advisor, Phil Gordon, who is very good but has struggled to get through the barriers of the political consultancy that has a stifling grip on the party’s affairs.

### Potential for a Deal with Iran

Iraq War was a disaster for the United States. It significantly strengthened the Iranian hand in the region, enabling them to create their Shia crescent and launching them into a trajectory of ever-increasing influence in the region. There was some disagreement on whether the assassination of Hezbollah chief Nasrallah has made the situation worse, potentially further radicalizing the movement and further embittering the local population against the United States or has strategically weakened Iran by decapitating its crown jewel in the region (Hezbollah). With Pezeshkian as the new Iranian president, the old foreign ministry team negotiating the JCPOA has been resurrected, which provides an excellent opportunity for the West to engage with Iran. Both parties were close to reviving the JCPOA in early 2022, but the effort was sabotaged by the onset of the Russian War, after which President Putin tried to carve out a deal with Iran, circumventing the Western sanctions on Russia. Relations of Iran with Europe and the West, in general, deteriorated further when reports emerged of Iran supplying drones and, allegedly, even missiles, to Russia. Iran is vulnerable at this point, with its economy in tatters, currency tumbling, and domestic issues, including hijab, leading to several pockets of civil unrest. The

combination of vulnerability and a West-friendly government is fertile ground for securing a deal and establishing security in the region. The best chance of achieving this outcome is if Kamala Harris wins the election. However, Trump, with all his eccentricities and unpredictability, is fond of getting deals done and might surprise everyone by doing one with Iran too.

### **MIDDLE EASTERN VERSION OF OSCE**

Some experts thought that we need to have an equivalent of OSCE in the Middle East to create an architecture for diplomacy in the region that involves all the players actively engaged in the regional affairs – Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, UAE, along with the three superpowers – US, China, and Russia. Almost all of them are involved in nearly every conflict in the region – Yemen, Sudan, Libya, etc. – and by failing to recognize this reality, we are simply playing the game of whack-a-mole, leaving the region to suffer in a continuous state of chaos and conflict. There was a pushback from the other panelists to this idea because this would increase bureaucracy and redundancy without any significant benefit.

### **ARAB LEAGUE VERSUS GCC +2 GROUPING**

There was a near consensus that the Arab League has lost its significance and serves no purpose. While some argued the need to create a new formal entity that includes all the regional actors and external superpowers, others argued that GCC + 2 (Iran and Iraq) is the region's most relevant grouping that can engage with external actors similar to the ASEAN group. GCC + 2 grouping is also likely to be more effective, given the geographical proximity of all members and, most importantly, because Iran and Saudi Arabia are both in the group, which will ensure the most pressing issue for the region. WMD and nuclear proliferation can be addressed within the group.

### **DE-DOLLARIZATION AND MULTIPOLARITY**

If one goes beyond the rhetoric, there is a bipartisan consensus on the trade policies for the next administration. On the question of sanctions, there was an overwhelming consensus that the United States has overused sanctions, which has eroded the effectiveness of this political tool, driven the targeted countries to find workarounds, precipitated the beginning of de-dollarization, and incentivized countries to reduce their over-reliance on the US. The sanctions against Russia, in the context of the war with Ukraine, have largely failed. Another aspect of this economic power resented by other countries is the US' influence on the Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank, IMF, and World Trade Organization. There is a significant debate on the US approach to IMF conditionality and a considerable pushback from other countries. The viability of the WTO, whose dispute settlement mechanism was blocked earlier by Trump, is questionable, especially if Trump comes to power again. Trumpian economics is more reclusive and inward-looking, almost converse to that of Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who is keen to export his national interests. These rising economies, including India, Brazil, and South Africa, are eager to play a more assertive role in global diplomacy, hosting multilateral events like the G20 meetings. This contrast between Trump and the leaders of BRICS nations will likely translate into a more multipolar world under the Trump administration.

### **MULTILATERALISM**

Donald Trump has proven through his actions in his earlier presidency that he does not respect multilateralism; this is one area where there is a sharp contrast with Kamala Harris. Within a few months of his earlier presidency, Trump pulled out of the Paris Climate Change Accord, effectively ending the

careers of several US diplomats. He had threatened to withdraw from the WHO during a pandemic. On the other hand, Harris is more likely to work with like-minded countries through multilateral institutions to address the pressing global issues that require collective governance, such as AI, cybersecurity, climate change, etc.

Biden has most recently expressed willingness to address the need to reform the United Nations and the demands of India and the African continent for representation in the Security Council. More often than not, the United States desists from withdrawing from these multilateral institutions not because it values them but because it is wary of leaving a vacuum that China will likely step up to fill. Even in the Middle East, this will be the policy of the US. While they wish to reduce their engagement in the region, China's increasing economic interest in the area (it is the largest gas purchaser from Qatar now) will continue to draw the interest of the US in this region.

### **UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR**

While the Ukraine-Russia war is likely to end with a negotiated settlement, like all wars ultimately do, Trump has been very vocal about it. Biden (and thereafter Harris) is expected to continue supporting Zelensky to ensure that Ukraine has the maximum leverage possible before entering into negotiations with Russia. Following Biden's footsteps, Harris will continue to strengthen the NATO alliance. Trump has toned down his rhetoric against NATO and remarked that he only wants the members to start paying more. The rise of the far right in Europe is threatening the unconditional support of Europe for the war in Ukraine, with growing grievances among the European population on the rising costs of living, a consequence of the war with Russia, and increasing resentment toward the Ukrainian refugees.