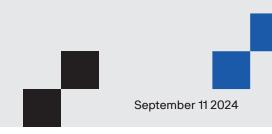## Perspectives

The Harris-Trump presidential debate and the PRC

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Elena Collinson

Elena Collinson is head of analysis at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).

The opening 15 minutes of the first and potentially only US presidential debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former president Donald Trump hosted by ABC News on September 11 2024 saw a brief head-to-head on US policy on the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The PRC did not feature again during the rest of the debate aside from once, tangentially, as Trump favourably repeated an observation by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán that Beijing was 'afraid' of Trump. No substantive question on the PRC was posed by the ABC News hosts, who directed foreign policy discussion towards the candidates' positions on Israel-Palestine and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

'China' was mentioned nine times during the entirety of the 90-minute debate, down from the scant 14 mentions during the June 28 debate between the Democratic Party's former presumptive nominee, Joe Biden, and Trump.

Yet the skirmish, short-lived as it was, highlighted three things about the presidential candidates, their election campaigns and the PRC.

One, while the US presidential election has not been and will not be fought on PRC policy, the Democrats are particularly cognisant of a need to be perceived by the electorate as tough, if not tougher, on the PRC.

According to a May 2024 Pew Research Center survey, 81 percent of US adults hold an unfavourable view of the PRC, with 50 percent labelling it a competitor and 42 percent labelling it an enemy.

During the airing of the presidential debate, a television ad by the Protecting America Initiative[1] ran in seven battleground states – Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, Pennyslvania and Wisconsin – taking aim at Harris and her running mate Tim Walz's PRC track record and charging Harris and Biden with having 'opened the door to Communist China'. The same organisation will be hosting Trump at an event focusing on 'the Chinese Communist Party's growing threat to America's food supply and how to help our agriculture community combat this threat' in Pennsylvania on September 23.

It was against this backdrop that Harris sought to outflank Trump on PRC policy during the debate. She stated that Trump had 'sold us out' to Beijing 'when a policy about China should be in making sure the United States of America wins the competition for the 21st century.' Tapping into continuing negative, emotive sentiment regarding the PRC and responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic, Harris took particular aim at the former president thanking President Xi Jinping 'for what he did during COVID... [W]hen we know that Xi was responsible for lacking and not giving us transparency about the origins of COVID.'

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1   An organisation describing itself as 'a coalition of concerned American citizens and public policy experts who are committed to stopping Chinese influence in the states.' See Protecting America Initiative, accessed September 11 2024 <https://www.protectingamericainitiative.com/>.

Two, there is a broad consistency in Harris' perspective on how the US ought to approach relations with the PRC, flowing on not just from the Biden administration's approach but from views she had expressed as newly minted senator for California.

During the debate, Harris criticised Trump for 'selling American [advanced computer] chips to China to help them improve and modernise their military'.

In 2018, in one of her first forays into US PRC policy, Senator Harris joined a bipartisan group of 26 senators to urge then-Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, Commerce Secretary Ross and US Trade Representative Lighthizer, to urge the Trump administration 'to reject any proposal to soften restrictions on the transfer to China of US-made military technologies and advanced dual-use technologies, including semiconductors.'

In 2022, Biden passed CHIPS and Science Act which was explicitly directed at countering the PRC in the science and technology sector.

Three, while both candidates embrace economic protectionism, the degrees to which they do so, and the main focal points of such protectionism differ. Trump favours heavy tariffs across the board, with the severest directed at the PRC, while Harris specifically emphasises targeted restrictions against Beijing.

Trump did not disavow his recent proposal to impose tariffs of 10 percent or 20 percent on foreign imports across the board, with additional duties of 60 percent to 100 percent on the PRC. Harris indicated she would continue the current administration's strategy of deploying targeted restrictions on the PRC in concert with US allies and partners, with a particular focus on artificial intelligence and quantum computing. The Biden administration has built on Trump's original tariffs regime, imposing more tariffs on the PRC in the critical minerals sector.

While there are broad strokes emerging, with only 55 days left until the election policy detail on the bilateral relationship that has the most far-reaching global implications remains light on both sides. One thing, however, remains certain, regardless of who occupies the Oval Office – competition will remain the baseline for Washington's approach to relations with Beijing.

Author

Elena Collinson is Manager, Research Analysis at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).

She is principal author of the *Australia-China monthly wrap-up* (previously the *Australia-China relations monthly summary*) launched in 2018. Her work has been published in *The National Interest*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Guardian*, the *South China Morning Post*, *The Diplomat*, *The Conversation*, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*, the Australian Institute of International Affairs' *Australian Outlook*, and the Council on Foreign Relations' *Asia Unbound* amongst other outlets, and she has contributed chapters to edited volumes. She is a lawyer admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and has previously held research and project positions in Australian departmental, ministerial and Senate offices, at state and federal levels.