

Vice Presidents and Foreign Policy: Kamala Harris's World View

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In August, Senator Kamala Harris (D-California) made history as the first woman of color to formally accept the Democratic nomination for vice president during an equally historic virtual Democratic National Convention. In her speech, Harris, the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, told the uniquely American story of how her parents met— on a march for justice during the 1960s Civil Rights movement in Oakland, California. Sixty years later, Harris, herself, has become a leading voice for civil rights and racial justice in the Senate and on the presidential campaign trail.

As the nation prepares for another round of debates— this time between vice presidential candidates Mike Pence and Kamala Harris— it is important to reflect on the evolution of the vice president's role in U.S. domestic and foreign policy and how an epoch-making woman of color, like Harris, might carry out her responsibilities. Kamala Harris' upbringing and experiences as an African American and South Asian woman will undoubtedly shape her vice presidency, especially in the context of foreign policy and national security. Her role on the Senate Intelligence Committee and previous experiences as a prosecutor may also influence the

international portfolio that a future President Joe Biden would assign to her, from addressing foreign interference of U.S. elections to promoting the rule of law around the world.

The Role of the Vice President in Foreign Policy

The integral role of the vice president in foreign policy matters began in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the United States absorbed the critical responsibility of rebuilding post-war Europe and became a global hegemon. In 1949, President Harry Truman signed legislation that made the vice president a statutory member of the National Security Council, a powerful committee responsible for managing the foreign policy bureaucracy.¹ Later, in the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter passed a broad set of reforms that granted vice presidents, beginning with Walter Mondale,² much of the power and prestige that they enjoy in the 21st century. This includes unfettered access to intelligence briefings and invitations to foreign policy meetings with the national security advisor, secretary of defense, and secretary of state.³

Since the Carter Administration reforms, U.S. vice presidents have taken on various responsibilities in the international sphere. Throughout the 1980s, Vice President George H.W. Bush, a former CIA director and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, made dozens of international trips as one of President Reagan's leading advisors on foreign policy and national security issues. Vice President Al Gore was a lead negotiator for the Clinton Administration's arms control efforts and helped secure international agreements on climate change. Vice President Dick Cheney had significant influence over President George W. Bush's national security policies, encouraging the appointments of his closest colleagues and ensuring that his office participated in every level of the national security process. Many argue that Cheney's tenure represented the apex of vice presidential power.⁴ A former ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vice President Joe Biden was a strategic partner in President Barack Obama's diplomacy efforts, meeting with leaders of countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Georgia during times of crisis.⁵

Vice presidents' increasingly prominent role in U.S. national security and diplomacy efforts are critical for those with aspirations to run for president in the age of globalization. With the 2020 elections merely weeks away, journalists and foreign policy experts have begun to speculate the foreign policy and national security issues that a Vice President Kamala Harris may prioritize.

¹ Masters, Jonathan. "The U.S. Vice President and Foreign Policy," *Council on Foreign Relations*. Last modified August 4, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/US-vice-president-and-foreign-policy>.

² Witcover, Jules. *The American Vice Presidency: From Irrelevance to Power* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2014), 435.

³ Masters, Jonathan.

⁴ Masters, Jonathan.

⁵ Witcover, Jules. 504-505.

Her personal story as a first generation American, professional experience as an Attorney General, and representative to a state that has suffered enormously from the consequences of climate change will likely influence the issues with which she is tasked.

Immigration

As a daughter of Jamaican- and Indian-born parents with a progressive immigration record, Harris is likely to lead the Biden Administration's effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform through Congress. Since September 11, 2001, conservative leaders in the federal government have considered immigration a leading threat to national security. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, the Bush Administration established the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to bridge the gaps between the U.S. intelligence community and border enforcement and other immigration agencies.⁶ However, the Trump Administration's policies to target low-risk unauthorized migrants and asylum seekers have been counterproductive for DHS national security missions, which include disaster response, cyber security, protection against weapons of mass destruction, and general policy and planning.⁷

From 2017 to 2019, Senator Harris sponsored 10 immigration-related bills in response to a series of Trump Administration policies that targeted unaccompanied minors and their sponsors, punished asylum seekers, and expanded detention facilities.⁸ As a presidential candidate, Harris was adamant about her support for Dreamers and their parents. On the campaign trail, she announced, "As president, while I fight for Congress to pass 21st century immigration reform, I won't wait. I'll take action to lift barriers Dreamers face to pursuing legal status and put them on a meaningful path to citizenship. These young people are just as American as I am, and they deserve a president who will fight for them from day one."⁹ Furthermore, Senator Harris, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, has regularly grilled DHS secretaries and acting secretaries for their violations of the constitutional rights of immigrants and U.S. citizens.

U.S. Intelligence and Foreign Interference of Elections

As a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Harris has had access to the nation's top secrets and played an influential role in the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016

⁶ Pope, Amy. "Immigration and U.S. National Security: The State of Play Since 9/11." *Migration Policy Institute*. (2020): 1.

⁷ Pope, Amy. 2.

⁸ "Advanced Search for Legislation." *Govtrack*.
<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/browse?sponsor=412678&subject=6206>.

⁹ Merica, Dan. "Kamala Harris unveils immigration plan to expand deferred action, use executive action to provide pathway to citizenship" *CNN*. Last modified June 12, 2019.
<https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/12/politics/kamala-harris-immigration-plan/index.html>.

presidential election. Both Democratic and Republican colleagues on the committee praised her performance, calling the Senator a highly skilled interrogator.¹⁰ Harris has made the safeguard of U.S. elections a top priority in Congress. In April 2020, after the Intelligence Committee released the fourth volume of the bipartisan Russia report, Harris issued a press release stating, “The facts are indisputable. Republicans and Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee agree that Russia interfered in our 2016 presidential election and did so to help Donald Trump. Given that we are in another election year, we must do everything in our power to protect our election system and ensure it is free from foreign interference and domestic voter suppression.”¹¹

Harris has demonstrated her commitment to election security in Congress by sponsoring legislation like the *Protecting American Votes and Elections (PAVE) Act*. The 2019 bill aimed to protect American elections from foreign interference by requiring voter-verifiable paper ballots, mandating audits of election results, and establishing new cybersecurity standards for all federal elections.¹² On the campaign trail, Harris declared that, “The best and smartest way to conduct voting [is] paper ballots. Because Russia can’t hack a piece of paper.”¹³ Unlike the Trump Pence Administration, a Biden Harris Administration would read intelligence briefings and restore the White House’s relationship with the American intelligence community to counter any foreign threats to our democracy and our elections. Furthermore, in April, amid growing health and safety concerns during the COVID-19 crisis, Senator Harris introduced the *VoteSafe Act*, which would expand vote-by-mail, early in-person voting, and provide guidelines to polling stations on COVID-19 preparedness for the November 2020 elections.¹⁴

Climate Crisis

As the Democratic senator to California, a state that has experienced the disastrous consequences of climate change, a Vice President Harris would likely lead the Biden Administration’s epoch-making transition to clean energy, with a focus on environmental justice.

¹⁰ “Kamala Harris Has Thrived On The Senate's Most Secretive Committee. Even Republicans Say So.” *Buzzfeed News*. Last modified August 8, 2019.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmaloop/kamala-harris-intelligence-committee-russia-republicans-2020>.

¹¹ Kamala D. Harris, U.S. Senator for California. “Harris Statement on New Senate Intelligence Committee Report.”

Press Release, April 21, 2020.

<https://www.harris.senate.gov/news/press-releases/harris-statement-on-new-senate-intelligence-committee-report->

¹² S.1472 - Protecting American Votes and Elections Act of 2019. *Congress.Gov*.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1472/text>.

¹³ Marks, Joseph. “The Cybersecurity 202: Kamala Harris brings record of fighting for election security to the Democratic ticket.” *Washington Post*. Last modified August 13, 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/12/cybersecurity-202-kamala-harris-brings-record-fighting-election-security-democratic-ticket/>.

¹⁴ S.3725 - VoteSafe Act of 2020. *Congress.Gov*.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3725?s=1&r=3>.

Over the last decade, Harris has seen her state of California endure rising sea levels, longer heat waves, increased air pollution, extreme droughts, and devastating wildfires. As one of the most biologically diverse regions in the world, California's climate crisis will have adverse effects on the state's plant and wildlife habitats and on the United States' agricultural industry altogether.¹⁵ If these trends continue, California and states across the country will suffer an insurmountable loss of life and unforeseen economic damage by the end of the century. That is why as presidential candidate, Harris pledged to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement to "demonstrate to the international community that the U.S. is deeply committed to global climate action."¹⁶

Harris is prepared to tackle the issues of climate change and environmental racism. Although environmentalists have criticized Harris for falsely claiming she sued ExxonMobil over its climate denial when she was California's attorney general (only New York and Massachusetts AGs did), in Congress, Senator Harris was an original co-sponsor in the Green New Deal, a plan to curb global warming greenhouse gas emissions while guaranteeing new high-paying jobs in the clean energy industries.¹⁷ On August 6, just days before Joe Biden tapped Kamala Harris to be his running mate, the Senator, with Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14), introduced the *Climate Equity Act*, which would center frontline communities of climate change, often low-income communities of color, in the federal government's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁸ Harris has championed environmental justice legislation in Congress, from the *Climate Equity Act* to other clean water and clean air legislation, like the *Water Justice Act*¹⁹ and *Clean School Bus Act*,²⁰ which specifically addresses the health and safety of low-income and environmentally at-risk communities. Moreover, Biden's \$2 trillion "Plan to Secure Environmental Justice and Equitable Opportunity in a Clean Energy Future" reveals that he and his running mate are compatible in their environmental goals for the country.²¹

Democracy and Rule of Law

¹⁵ "Climate Change Impacts in California." *State of California Department of Justice Office of the Attorney General*.

<https://oag.ca.gov/environment/impact>.

¹⁶ "Where Democrats Stand: Climate Change." *Washington Post*.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/policy-2020/climate-change/rejoining-paris-climate-agreement/>.

¹⁷ Firedman, Lisa. "With the Biden-Harris Ticket, Environmental Justice Is a Focus." *New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/climate/kamala-harris-environmental-justice.html>.

¹⁸ Kamala D. Harris, U.S. Senator for California. "Harris, Ocasio-Cortez Introduce Landmark Legislation to Empower Frontline Communities." Press Release, August 6, 2020.

<https://www.harris.senate.gov/news/press-releases/harris-ocasio-cortez-introduce-landmark-legislation-to-empower-frontline-communities>.

¹⁹ S.2466 - Water Justice Act. *Congress.Gov*. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2466>.

²⁰ S.1750 - Clean School Bus Act of 2019. *Congress.Gov*.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1750>.

²¹ "THE BIDEN PLAN TO SECURE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND EQUITABLE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY." *Biden for President*. <https://joebiden.com/environmental-justice-plan/>.

As a presidential candidate, Harris vowed to defend democracy and human rights at home and abroad. She is one of Trump's staunchest critics, claiming the President, himself, is the greatest national security threat to the United States. She has denounced President Trump for his unusual embrace of foreign dictators, like North Korea's Kim Jong Un and Russia's Vladimir Putin, two leaders who have posed serious threats to the United States' national security and democracy.²² During her campaign, Harris also pledged to confront Russian aggression by supporting Ukraine and Georgia in their fight against the Kremlin's illegal occupation of their territory.²³ "Unlike the current occupant of the White House, I will consistently stand up to Putin in defense of democratic values, human rights, and the international rule of law," Harris told the Council on Foreign Relations.²⁴

In the Senate, Harris voted to block arm sales to Saudi Arabia in response to the government's brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, an American resident. She also voted to end the United States' support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which the Trump Administration vetoed.²⁵ Senator Harris has been very outspoken about China's human rights abuses in Hong Kong and toward Uyghur Muslims, cosponsoring legislation like the *Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019*²⁶ and the *Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020*, which both promise to impose sanctions on foreign individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses.²⁷ However, Harris' unconditional support for Israel,²⁸ a government that has a record of human rights violations against Palestinians, have led to criticism from progressives in the Democratic Party, though she has expressed support for a two-state solution and the need for the U.S. to be a constructive partner in a brokered peace deal.

Conclusion

²² "Kamala Harris on Foreign Policy." *On the Issues*.

https://www.ontheissues.org/2020/Kamala_Harris_Foreign_Policy.htm.

²³ "The Presidential Candidates on Russian Aggression Against Ukraine." *Council on Foreign Relations*. July 30, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/article/presidential-candidates-russian-aggression-against-ukraine>.

²⁴ "The Presidential Candidates on Russian Aggression Against Ukraine."

²⁵ "The Presidential Candidates on Saudi Arabia." *Council on Foreign Relations*. July 30, 2019.

<https://www.cfr.org/article/presidential-candidates-saudi-arabia>.

²⁶ S.1838 - Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019. *Congress.Gov*.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1838/cosponsors?searchResultViewType=expanded>.

²⁷ S.3744 - Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020. *Congress.Gov*.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3744/cosponsors?searchResultViewType=expanded>.

²⁸ Jansen, Bart. "Kamala Harris vows support for Israel and protection against Iran" *USA Today*. Last modified August 26, 2020.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/08/26/kamala-harris-vows-support-israel-protection-against-iran/5638966002/>.

In a 2019 interview with the Council on Foreign Relations, Harris stated that “The greatest U.S. foreign policy accomplishment has been the post-war community of international institutions, laws and democratic nations we helped to build.”²⁹ Harris believes that the network of trusted partners and allies that the U.S. has cultivated over the last 75 years has been critical in the nation’s peace and prosperity. As vice president, Harris would commit to restoring the United States global reputation and re-establish its leadership role in the world. The Biden-Harris campaign also understands that the United States has a global responsibility in addressing COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and rising authoritarianism. As internationalists, they would prioritize diplomacy, human rights, and the democratic principles that would restore America’s credibility as the leader of the free world.

²⁹ “Candidates Answer CFR's Questions: Kamala Harris.” *Council on Foreign Relations*. August 21, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/article/kamala-harris>.