

How will Trump and Biden differ on top foreign policy issues?

By Atlantic Council experts

OPINION

There's been a lot of talk about the style. But what about the substance? During Thursday night's debate between US President Joe Biden and former president Donald Trump, the two men drew sharp contrasts on their approaches to wars in the Middle East and Ukraine and climate and energy policies. Atlantic Council asked its experts to assess the most significant exchanges, what they revealed about the policy differences (or lack thereof) between the candidates, and the potential consequences for the United States' partners.

Three conclusions about Mideast to draw

First, the debate proved that it's time once again to start taking Trump seriously, if not literally, as the odds may have just increased that he will return to office. Trump has a clear message: Hamas and Iran would not have attacked Israel if he had been president, and if he is re-elected, he will not put any constraints on Israel's efforts to "finish the job" in Gaza. Biden, Trump argues, is caught in half-measures that don't satisfy either side, which is what he meant by calling Biden a "bad Palestinian". Taking Trump seriously requires the Democratic political and foreign policy communities — including those who have protested against the Biden administration's approach to the war — to recognize that this message will likely resonate with more Americans than they would prefer. Second, the debate likely strengthened Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hand in his efforts to remain in office. Over the decades, Netanyahu repeatedly has proved his deftness in managing both party and coalition politics. Following the largest security failure in Israeli history on October 7, Netanyahu's strategy to avoid his cabinet's collapse has been to urge those in his coalition to give him through the end of the Knesset session (July 28) and then to hold on until the outcome of the US election, since a potential Trump victory would reduce Washington's pressure on Netanyahu and thus the strains on the coalition. That argument is now clearly more persuasive. Moreover, Netanyahu will feel emboldened in his strategy of publicly arguing with Biden, which resonates with the far right of his coalition, and is now much more likely to reinforce much of Trump's underlying message when he speaks in front of Congress on July 24 — all of which will be received warmly by Republicans. Trump hasn't forgotten his own frustrations with Netanyahu, but that will be rationalized as a problem for future Bibi, not present Bibi.

Third, the debate may have increased the likelihood of Israel launching a war against Hezbollah. For many in Israel, including a not-insubstantial proportion of the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF's) leadership, the core lesson of October 7 is that they can no longer permit the existence of any well-armed adversary on Israel's borders. Some advocated internally for Israel to strike Hezbollah on October 11 and continue to do so today. Meanwhile, one of the most powerful political challenges for Netanyahu is how to manage the demands of the tens of thousands of Israelis who have had to flee their homes in the north under daily attack from Hezbollah. Israel has raised the volume



Pro-Palestinian supporters protest, demanding a radical change in the US establishment and a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, on June 27, 2024, in Atlanta, Georgia, where the presidential debate took place.
 ● OCTAVIO JONES/GETTY IMAGES

on its threats in recent weeks, both publicly and behind closed doors, which in part is intended to incentivize Hezbollah to agree to the deal being negotiated by the Biden administration to halt the violence along the border and de-link Israel's conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. Netanyahu is temperamentally risk-averse, so launching a war against Hezbollah while fighting continues in Gaza and tensions are rising in the West Bank would normally be considered uncharacteristic for him. But many in Israel will interpret Trump's unconditioned support for Israel "finishing the job" against Hamas as also a green light to do the same against Hezbollah. Moreover, I worry that the conventional wisdom in Israel risks overestimating the probability of the rosier war scenarios and underestimating the risk of a wider, more devastating war that would threaten Israeli population centers. Notwithstanding the potential for unintentional escalation of the kind that triggered the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006, I still think it more likely that a wider war won't break out before the US election — a scenario that the Biden administration is actively working to avoid. But Netanyahu is well aware that Israel previously launched Operation Cast Lead during the "lame duck" period at the end of the George W. Bush administration. Given the message Trump delivered during the debate, one wonders if Netanyahu might begin weighing the potential advantages of

launching a new war against Hezbollah if Trump is elected but before he takes office.

—William F. Wechsler is the senior director of Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council. His most recent US government position was deputy assistant secretary of defense for special operations and combating terrorism.

View from Jerusalem

Many people set their alarm clocks for an early wake-up call on Friday morning in Israel, where major networks broadcast the US presidential debate live. Interest in the spectacle among Israelis was palpable — and understandable. Washington's influence is deeply embedded within the core of almost every hot-button issue currently on Israel's agenda: the protracted Israeli military campaign in Gaza, the negotiations to free captives from Hamas captivity, the attempt to resolve tensions with Hezbollah over the Israel-Lebanon border, the drive to thwart Iran's alleged ambitions to acquire a nuclear-weapons capability, and the effort to formalize ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration continues to play a pivotal role on all of these fields and others. Against that backdrop, the prospect of a lame-duck presidency in the United States — an increasingly likely possibility, amid mounting calls within the Democratic Party for Biden to with-

draw his candidacy — injects another dose of dangerous instability into the already hobbled decision-making process of Netanyahu's cabinet. Barring unforeseen circumstances, the remaining months until January 20, 2025, when the next US president will be inaugurated, will feature a critical US-Israel relationship in which the leaders of both countries are mired in profound crisis, consumed with electoral politics and nursing mutual grievances. Cooperation between their nations will suffer as a result of this toxic dynamic.

Biden and Netanyahu, both weakened, increasingly will be tempted to try to gain leverage in their discussions by appealing to each other's domestic audience. For Netanyahu, who considers himself a master of US politics, July 24 — the date on which he is scheduled to address a joint session of Congress — will provide an instructive bellwether of his intentions. His previous appearance in that venue, in 2015, antagonized Barack Obama's White House and intensified perceptions of Israel as a partisan cause. A repeat of that performance could restore Netanyahu to Trump's good graces but would undoubtedly worsen his predicament with the incumbent US president. With the coming US election still up for grabs, and since power may yet again shift between Democrats and Republicans, it would be wise for the Israeli prime minister to tailor his words so that majorities of both US political parties can con-

tinue to advocate for a close relationship with Israel.

—Shalom Lipner is a nonresident senior fellow at the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative of the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs. He previously served seven consecutive Israeli premiers over a quarter-century at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem.

An anticlimactic climate discussion

During Thursday's debate, the candidates zeroed in on kitchen table issues, such as the cost of living, unemployment, and immigration, along with international priorities in Ukraine and the Middle East. But the largely unmentioned implications of the changing climate and energy insecurity have an outsized impact on all of these issues — and they demand policy leadership from the United States.

Record heat and droughts drive migration and geopolitical tensions; extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change, cause higher energy costs and destroy housing and critical infrastructure; and high temperatures pose a number of health risks. Moreover, US energy policy plays a major role in helping Europe stand up to supply blackmail from Russia and the United States address its overreliance on Chinese supply chains.

When asked how the candidates plan to address the climate crisis, Biden only briefly mentioned his biggest achievement in this area, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act: "I've passed the most extensive... climate change legislation in history," he said.

Trump posted a screenshot of his climate and energy talking points ahead of the debate, but he did not voice most of them on the stage. The former president did mention wanting "immaculate clean water" and "absolutely clean air" and how much the Paris climate accord costs the United States, while pointing to insufficient action on climate from China and Russia. He defended his decision to leave the accord during his first term, but stopped short during the debate of committing to leave it again. Staying in the climate accord gives the United States the most leverage in putting more pressure on other polluters and ensuring fair burden-sharing in reducing carbon emissions.

Given that the candidates avoided disclosing their climate and energy strategies on Thursday night, the moderators of the next debate should push for direct answers that give voters a clearer view of what Biden 2.0 climate ambition would entail and how Trump's all-of-the-above energy and deregulation approach can align with emissions reductions. While climate change may fade into the background as the animating issue for many US voters, its implications for every aspect of society remain salient. Although they approach these issues from very different angles, both candidates have an opportunity to make significant progress on reducing pollution and accelerating decarbonization, and the voters deserve to know what their strategies to do so will be.

—Olga Khakova is the deputy director for European energy security at the Atlantic Council's Global Energy Center.

The full article first appeared on The Atlantic Council.



Deb Moore of Saco, Maine, reacts to a comment by Republican presidential candidate former president Donald Trump during the presidential debate with President Joe Biden, during a watch party in South Portland, Maine, on June 27, 2024.
 ● ROBERT F. BUKATY/AP