

Trump's Assault on Foreign Aid

Implications for International Development Cooperation

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Abstract

The United States of America has long been a leading force in international development cooperation, both politically and financially. However, the first weeks of the second Trump administration have called the traditional role of US foreign aid fundamentally into question. From a 90-day funding freeze to the withdrawal from United Nations (UN) bodies and the dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), measures taken by Trump and his team are not only having palpable repercussions on a wide range of humanitarian and development programmes, but they also point to more far-reaching implications. Against this backdrop, this paper presents the contours and discusses the global consequences of Trump's assault on US foreign aid, as of late February 2025. We outline the extant role of the United States as a donor in Section 2 and review the changes announced – and/or implemented – by the current US government in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the implications of US funding cuts for bilateral cooperation, while Section 5 focuses on repercussions on multilateral development work. Section 6 outlines three scenarios on how the ongoing changes in the United States might affect the field of international development. We discuss the possible ramifications of (a) a revamped US approach to foreign aid centring on crude national interests, (b) a US retreat that is at least partially offset by other providers and (c) a US retreat without other providers stepping in. Section 7 concludes by discussing the implications for dealing with the second Trump administration. We outline four recommendations that address stakeholders across the – increasingly outdated – donor–recipient divide: (1) refining development cooperation approaches, (2) strengthening the multilateral development system, (3) promoting Southern self-reliance and (4) fostering alliances beyond a Trump-led US government.

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Abbreviations

DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DEI	diversity, equity and inclusion
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EU	European Union
GNI	gross national income
HIV	human immunodeficiency viruses
IDA	International Development Association
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

Foreign aid has long been a cornerstone of how the United States of America engages with partners across the globe. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) as well as other government institutions – from the Department of State to the Peace Corps – have played a crucial role in the bilateral emergency assistance for, and development cooperation with, countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The United States has also been the largest donor to multilateral bodies, including the United Nations (UN) development system, multilateral development banks, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), funding both shorter-term humanitarian support and longer-term development work.

Against this backdrop, recent measures taken by the second Trump administration are set to have profound implications for both the United States and its partners. On 20 January 2025 – the day of his inauguration – Donald Trump announced a general 90-day freeze on US foreign aid. A few days later, his government sent out “stop-work” orders on extant foreign assistance schemes and paused new aid disbursements. Trump also issued executive orders announcing the US withdrawal from individual UN bodies and has allowed a group of unelected individuals – under a so-called Department of Government Efficiency led by Elon Musk – to effectively dismantle USAID.

Domestically, these measures not only undermine foreign aid as a policy field, but also signal that the US political system as such has come under threat. The destruction of state structures by an oligarchic elite is fundamentally changing US political culture well beyond USAID: Within the first four weeks following Trump’s second inauguration, more than 200,000 federal staff positions have been eliminated – from the Department of Education and the Department of the Interior to the Internal Revenue Service and the Centers for Disease Control (Roldan, 2025). Timothy Snyder (2025) has described these events as following the “logic of destruction”. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2025) consider it likely that, under Trump’s second administration, the United States will stop being a liberal democracy and instead meet the criteria of “competitive authoritarianism”, with US development policy as one of the first victims.

Importantly, Trump’s assault on foreign aid affects individuals, communities and countries across the globe. It undermines – or puts an end to – a wide range of US-led and US-sponsored bilateral and multilateral activities directed at addressing development and humanitarian challenges, from health provision to clean water distribution and support for civil society organisations. The current freeze and a – potentially permanent – significant reduction in US development spending are set to come with substantial implications for bilateral partners and the ability of multilateral bodies to fulfil their mandates. They thus affect broader concerns about sustainable development challenges, humanitarian crises and geopolitical competition well beyond US borders.

This paper presents the contours and discusses the global consequences of Trump’s assault on US foreign aid, as of late February 2025. We first outline the extant role of the United States as a donor (Section 2) and review the changes announced and implemented by Trump and his team (Section 3). We then discuss the implications of US funding cuts for bilateral cooperation (Section 4) and multilateral development work (Section 5). Against this backdrop, we outline different scenarios about the longer-term implications for the field of international development (Section 6) and put forward recommendations on how other stakeholders – including Germany and the European Union (EU) – might want to deal with the repercussions of the second Trump administration (Section 7).

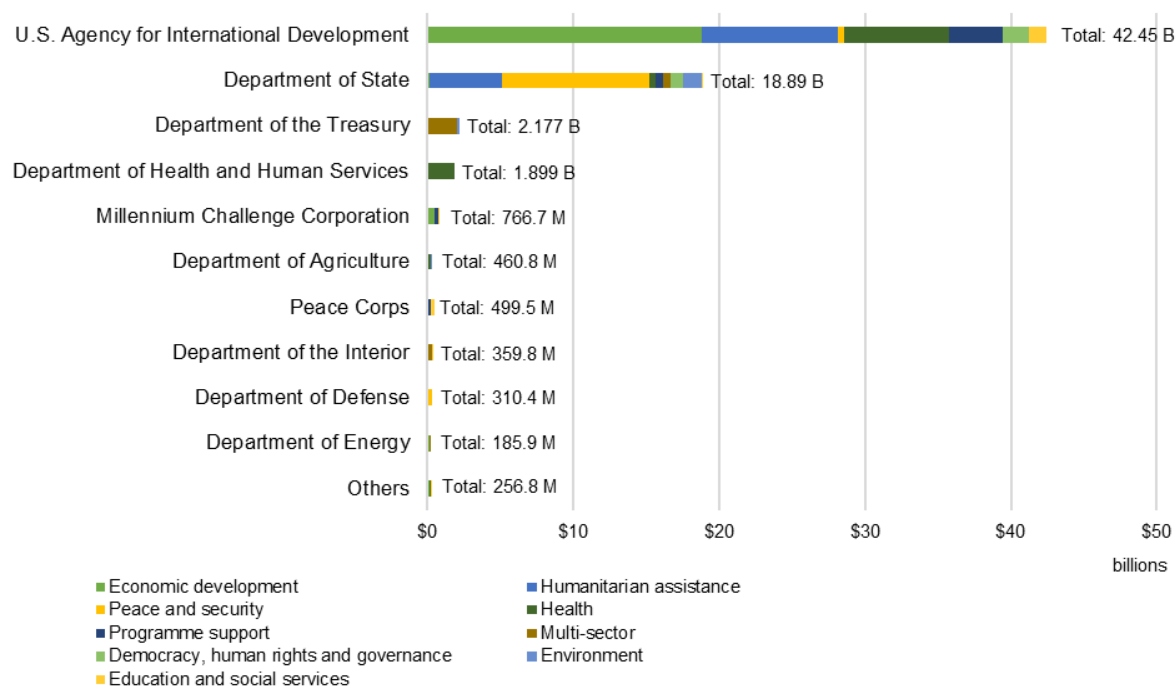
2 The United States as a donor

The United States has long been the leading force among Western donors. It played a fundamental role in crafting the very idea of international cooperation for development in the aftermath of the Second World War (Escobar, 2011; Lancaster, 2007). Institutionally, the US government was a key player in establishing the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD in 1961 as the most important Western forum for discussions about development cooperation and guardian of official development assistance (ODA) (Bracho, Carey, Hynes, Klingebiel, & Trzeciak-Duval, 2021). As the primary concept for how DAC members report their international development expenses, ODA refers to “flows to countries and territories on the DAC list of ODA recipients and to multilateral development institutions” that are “provided by official agencies”, concessional in character and focused on promoting “the economic development and welfare of developing countries” (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2025a). Over the decades, the US government has been instrumental in shaping DAC standards and rules as well as the broader discourse on foreign aid and aid (later development) effectiveness.

Key features of US donorship

Although the United States has always been the most important ODA provider in absolute terms (see below) and a crucial actor in DAC debates, it has also often sought to carve out a US-specific approach to development funding. For instance, the US government never fully accepted the OECD’s principle of “untying aid” as best practice and has underlined – more often and more visibly than many of its European counterparts – the link between foreign aid and national (economic) interests. In conceptual terms, the US government distinguishes between “foreign assistance” and ODA. Whereas ODA follows DAC principles (see above), foreign assistance is defined in accordance with the US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and includes certain elements not covered by ODA (such as military assistance) while excluding others (such as domestic refugee costs) (US Department of State, 2024). Foreign aid is used as an umbrella term for both.

Figure 1: US foreign assistance in 2023 (disbursement by government entity and type, in billion US\$)

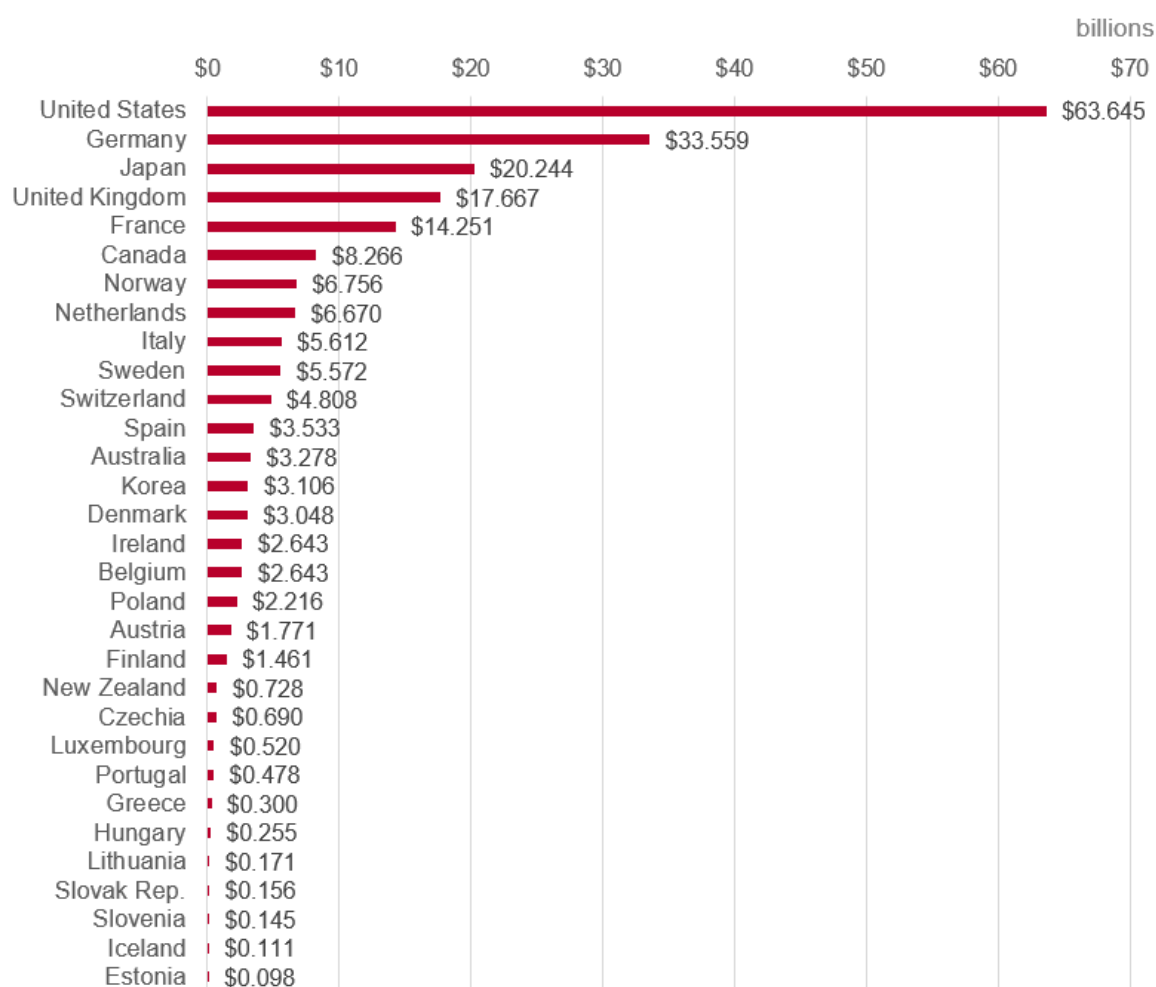


Source: Authors, based on Foreign Assistance (2024)

Across the US government, 21 federal government entities typically provide foreign assistance (Figure 1). USAID has traditionally been by far the most important provider among government agencies and – in 2023 – was in charge of around 62 per cent of the US government’s foreign assistance spending (Foreign Assistance, 2024). As Figure 1 shows, the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, and the Department of Health and Human Services are some of the other relevant providers within the US government.

Since its setup in 1961, USAID has been an independent government agency and a driving force in US development cooperation (Tarnoff, 2015). While the US Congress not only established the agency but also funds and oversees its programmes, the head of USAID – the Administrator – operates “under the direct authority and foreign policy guidance” of the Secretary of State (McCabe, 2025). USAID Administrators are political appointees and have often played highly visible roles at home and abroad. The last Administrator under the Biden administration, Samantha Power, for instance – who had also been the US Ambassador to the UN under the second Obama administration – promoted a vision of more inclusive and responsive global development (Miolene, 2025) and pushed towards “localizing” development cooperation. Under the guidance of the White House and the Department of State, USAID has traditionally been a member of the National Security Council, providing the agency with a seat at the table in key decision-making processes on national security and foreign policy questions.

Figure 2: Total ODA by DAC member country in 2023 (ODA grant equivalent, in billion US\$)

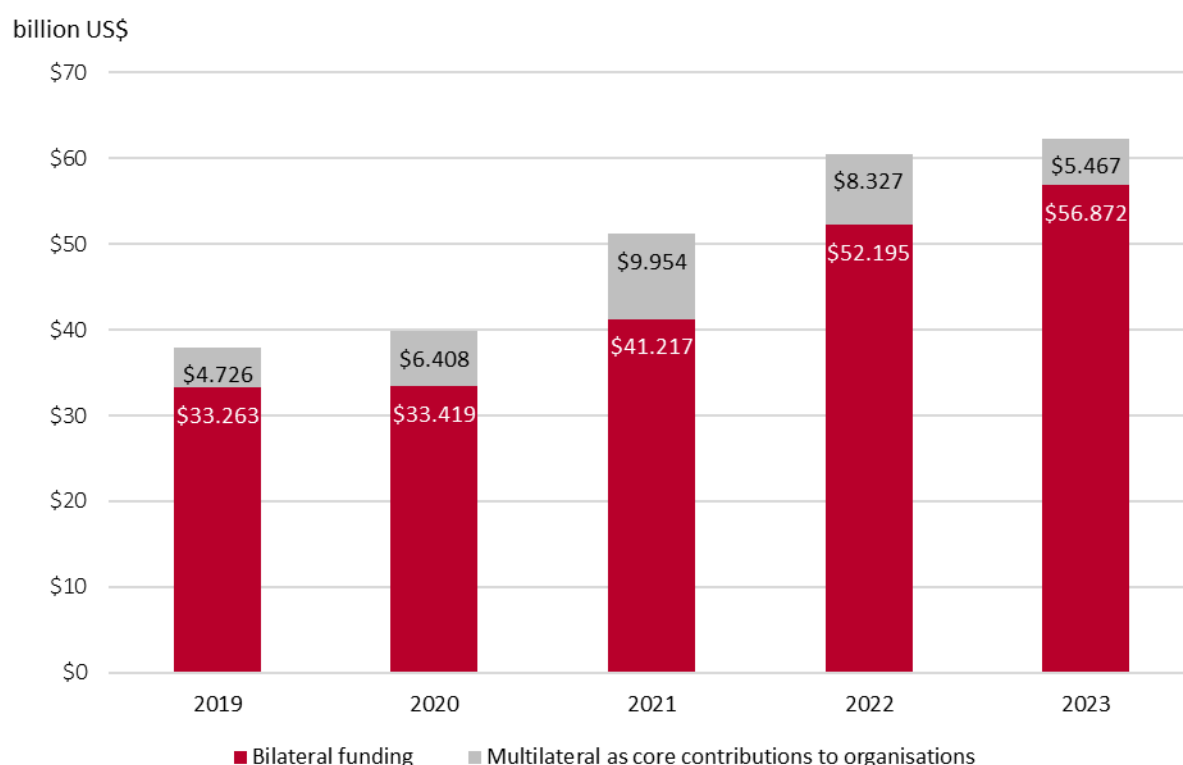


Source: Authors, based on OECD (2025b)

In terms of overall aid figures, the United States never fully subscribed to – and has never come close to reaching – the international target for donors to provide at least 0.7 per cent of their

gross national income (GNI) as ODA. As of 2023, the US government devoted 0.24 per cent of its GNI to ODA (OECD, 2024). Although this figure is well below the average of DAC members – they spent 0.37 per cent on average in 2023 – the United States has long been by far the largest DAC donor in absolute terms (Figure 2). In 2023, the US government spent a total of US\$64.69 billion (US\$63.50 billion as net disbursement) as ODA – almost double of what the second-largest provider, Germany, spent that year – making the United States a financial cornerstone of bilateral and multilateral development spending. In sectoral terms, the US government usually puts a strong emphasis on governance, humanitarian assistance and health (McCabe, 2025). The vast majority of US ODA is dedicated to bilateral cooperation. In 2023, only about 10 per cent of ODA provided by the US government was spent as core contributions to multilateral development work (Figure 3), even though this represents a substantial amount in absolute terms.

Figure 3: US ODA by channel (bilateral vs multilateral core), 2019-2023 (in billion US\$)



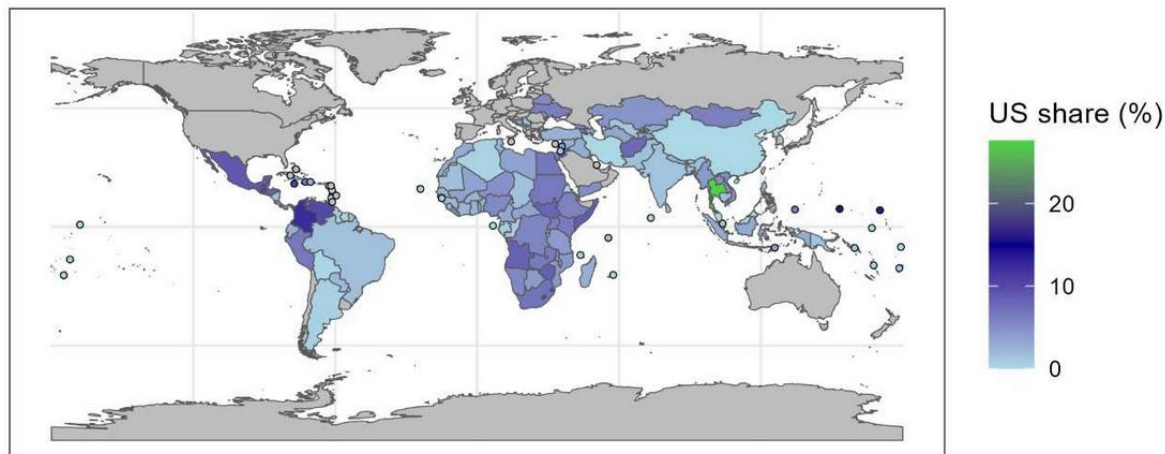
Source: Authors, based on OECD (2025c)

US funding for bilateral development cooperation

Bilateral funding channelled through USAID has covered about 130 countries. In 2023, the top 10 recipients of USAID-managed funds were, in descending order, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria (McCabe, 2025). Countries where US assistance accounted for more than 10 per cent of total ODA received in 2023 were Eswatini, Venezuela, Colombia, Jamaica, Guatemala, Thailand, Lesotho, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands (see Figure 4). Ukraine received an exceptionally large share of US ODA in 2022 and 2023, compared to global trends over the last decade. In 2023, Ukraine accounted for 18 per cent of US ODA (compared to a DAC average of 9.0 per cent). In 2022, the share was 15.3 per cent (DAC average: 8.3 per cent). Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Jordan have consistently ranked among the top recipients of US foreign assistance in recent years, reflecting the significant influence of US security priorities on foreign aid allocations. Between 2018 and 2022, the share of US ODA directed to low-income

countries ranged between 19 per cent (2022) and 28 per cent (2020), reflecting a fluctuating but overall considerable focus on the world's poorest regions.

Figure 4: Percentage of bilateral ODA provided by the United States relative to total ODA received (by recipient country, 2023)

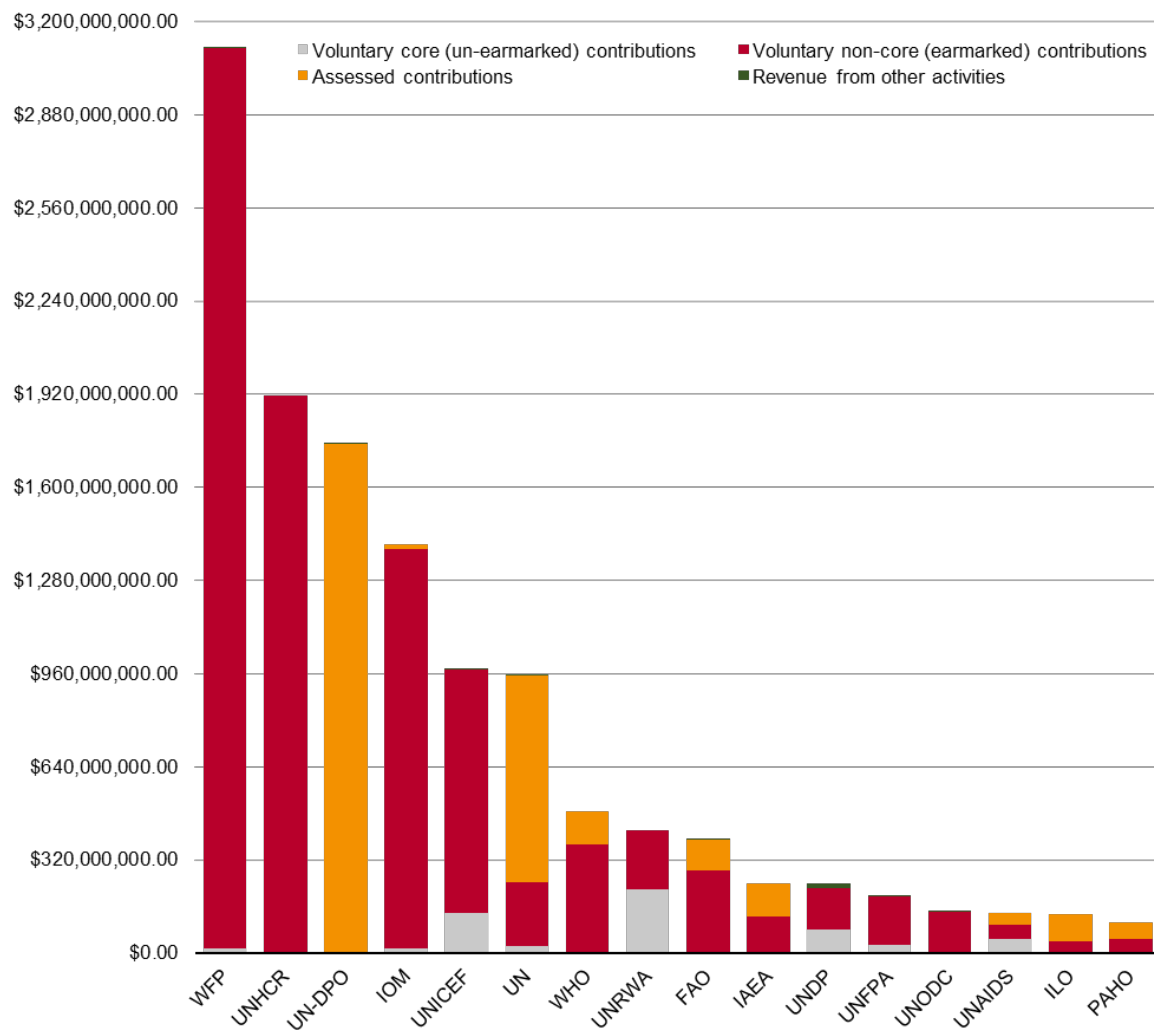


Source: Authors, based on OECD (2025d)

US funding for multilateral development work

The United States has also been a key funder of multilateral development banks, multi-stakeholder partnerships and the UN development system. In 2023, the US government provided more than US\$1.4 billion to the International Development Association (IDA) – the part of the World Bank Group providing loans with particularly extensive grant elements – as well as US\$1 billion to the Green Climate Fund and more than US\$800 million to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Foreign Assistance, 2024). The UN system received nearly US\$13 billion in US funding that year in the form of assessed and voluntary contributions (UNSCEB [UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination], 2025). The majority of US contributions to the UN system come as voluntary earmarked resources (see Figure 5). Within the US government, the bulk of UN contributions has usually been provided by the Department of State and USAID, with the former administering both assessed and voluntary contributions and the latter only voluntary resources (US Department of State, 2024). Among the main recipients of US contributions in 2023 in absolute terms were the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Table 1). The UN entity for which US contributions covered the largest share in relative terms was the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 45 per cent), followed by UNHCR (40.7 per cent), IOM (39.8 per cent) and WFP (34.1 per cent). The US government has also been the largest donor to the UN Resident Coordinator system, which has important country-level coordination functions for UN operations, with a total of US\$110 million in voluntary contributions since 2019 (US Mission to the United Nations, 2023).

Figure 5: US contributions to UN entities in 2023 (by funding modality)



Note: The graph displays all UN entities that received more than US\$ 100 million from the United States in 2023, all funding modalities combined.

Source: Authors, based on UNSCEB (2025)

Table 1: US contributions to UN entities in 2023 (in billion US\$)

Entity	US contribution	US share
WFP	3.1 billion	34
UNHCR	1.9 billion	41
IOM	1.4 billion	40
UNICEF	976 million	11
UN	953 million	19
WHO	487 million	15
UNRWA	422 million	28
FAO	391 million	16
IAEA	241 million	29
UNDP	241 million	4
UNFPA	199 million	12
UNODC	141 million	27
ILO	133 million	14
UNAIDS	99 million	45
UNEP	49 million	5
UNESCO	28 million	3
UN Women	18 million	3
UN-Habitat	4 million	2

Source: Authors, based on UNSCEB (2025)

3 Trump's assault on foreign aid

Although the first Trump administration (2017-2021) had questioned the status quo of US foreign aid, the initiated changes were less radical than in other policy areas and less pronounced than some observers had previously assumed (Klingebiel & Baumann, 2024). In particular, funding cuts turned out to be less fundamental than feared. This was at least partially due to successful resistance by Democrats and conservative politicians in Congress. They had not only highlighted that the share of the US national budget spent on international affairs – including ODA and other budget items such as general expenses for US embassies – was only between 1 and 1.5 per cent (1.2 per cent in the 2023 fiscal year, Desilver, 2025) but also warned against the adverse implications of reducing US foreign aid spending (Hill, 2023).

Emboldened by a stronger electoral victory than in 2016, the alliance between Trump and Musk, and a shift within the Republican party that brought Make America Great Again voices to the fore, the first weeks of Trump's second presidency saw a much more forceful approach to reshaping the US approach to foreign aid – much in the spirit of Project 2025, the ultra-conservative manifesto published by the Heritage Foundation in 2023 (Project 2025, 2023). In late January and early February 2025, Trump and his team took a series of decisions – some of which go even beyond the Project 2025 playbook – that are set to have far-reaching implications for development cooperation programmes and the field of international development writ large (see Figure 6 for a timeline of key events).

Starting on his first day in office, Trump issued a number of executive orders (White House, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c) that established a blanket freeze on US foreign aid and announced the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Trump also authorised the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, led by Musk, to de facto dismantle USAID. The agency was also stripped of its National Security Council seat before Marco Rubio, Trump's Secretary of State, was appointed Acting Administrator of USAID. Uncertainty and speculations regarding the operationalisation and implications of the foreign aid freeze persisted until a memo issued by Rubio on 25 January halted all existing and new grants, except for foreign military financing for Israel and Egypt and emergency food assistance. On 28 January, Rubio added a waiver for emergency humanitarian aid (US Department of State, 2025a).

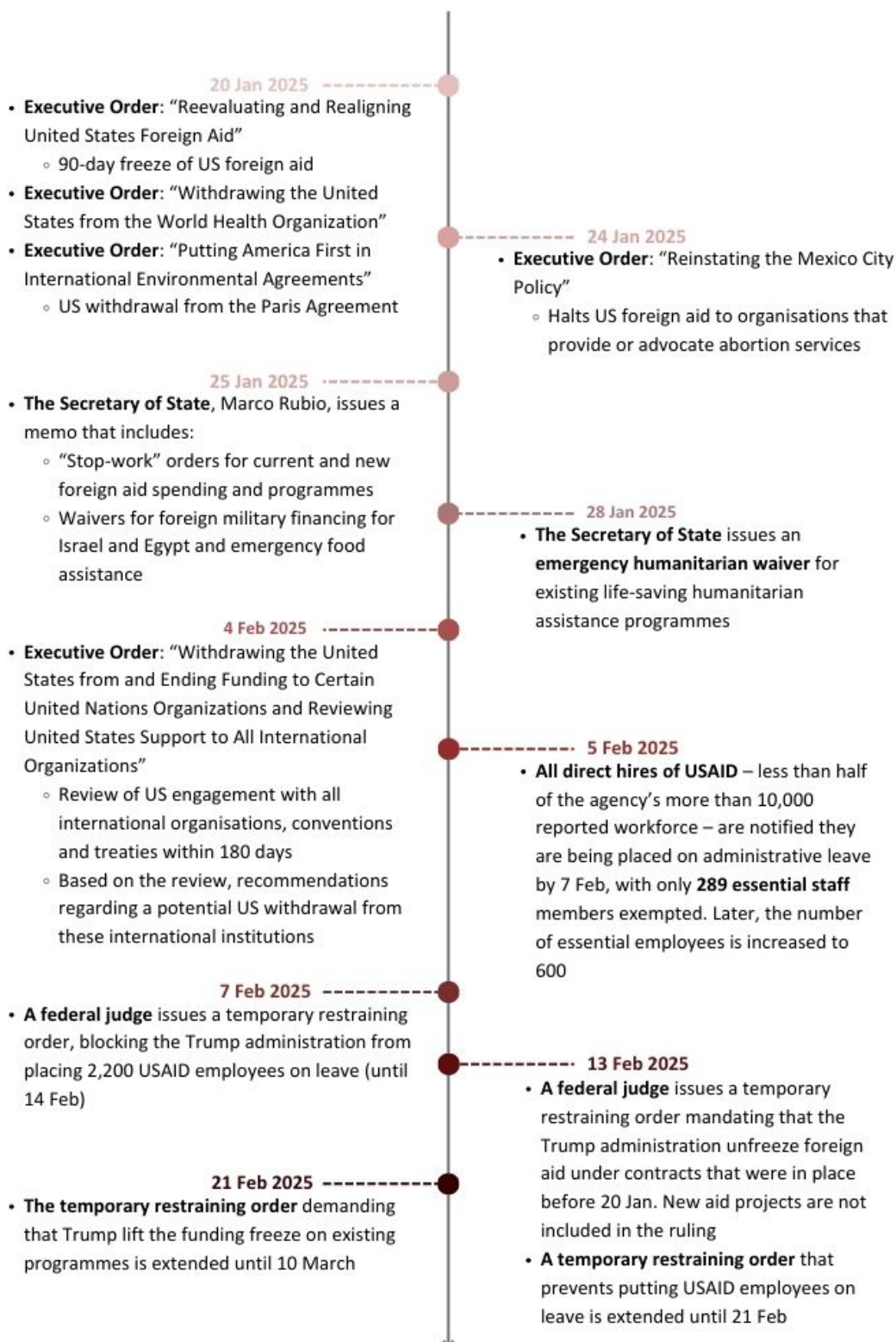
On 5 February, the Trump administration placed the entire USAID direct-hire staff on various types of leave by 7 February, except for 289 essential staff (a number that was later increased to 600). In response, lawsuits were filed, resulting in a ruling by a federal judge on 7 February that imposed a temporary restraining order on Trump's decision and prevented him from putting more than 2,000 USAID staff on leave until 14 February, a deadline later extended to 21 February. Another lawsuit on 11 February challenged the aid freeze, leading to a 13 February ruling that imposed a temporary restraining order on Trump's freeze of existing programmes but upheld the 90-day freeze on new aid projects. The order was later extended until 10 March.

As of late February, USAID offices remain closed after the Trump administration cancelled the agency's building lease, and its website has been shut down. Non-direct hires have been laid off and the status of direct hire personnel remains uncertain. So far, the waiver system that was supposed to safeguard life-saving aid has not been working well, undermining the delivery of this aid (Miolene & Saldinger, 2025). The Trump administration has also largely refused to comply with the original court order to unfreeze foreign aid, raising questions about whether their approach will change after the order's extension.

Despite its de facto dismantling, USAID still exists as an institution on paper, as neither Musk nor Trump have the legal authority to abolish it unilaterally. Full dissolution of the agency requires Congressional approval, and according to legal experts, even the unilateral reorganisation of USAID violates federal law (McCabe, 2025; Musumeci, Goodwin, & Griffiths, 2025). The Republican-controlled Congress has not taken any public action to reverse Trump's decision, although a Congressional hearing was held to discuss the funding freeze, with some Republicans presenting a less adversarial stance and arguing for the necessity of foreign aid, albeit in an adjusted Trump-aligned form (Saldinger, 2025). Ongoing lawsuits can take months, and if brought to the Supreme Court, they risk facing a Republican supermajority that is likely to side with the Trump administration (Makuch, 2025).

Alongside decisions on foreign aid spending and the future of USAID, Trump has issued other executive orders with implications for international development cooperation. Specifically, he reinstated the so-called Mexico City Policy, effectively blocking any funding to organisations that support abortions or provide related information. Additionally, on 4 February, Trump issued an executive order demanding a review of US support being given to all international organisations that the United States is a member of. He also withdrew the United States from – and ended funding to – the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the UN Human Rights Council. At the OECD, the US government has ceased to pay its contributions to the DAC and recalled the US DAC delegate, indicating an at least temporary US withdrawal from the primary ODA coordination forum.

Figure 6: Timeline of events since 20 January: US foreign aid freeze, dismantling of USAID and US withdrawal from UN entities (as of 21 February)



Source: Authors

4 Implications for bilateral development cooperation

As the vast majority of extant US foreign aid funds are dedicated to bilateral cooperation, this is where the current funding freeze – and imminent cuts – are and will be felt the hardest. Here we outline both sectoral and region-specific implications.

Sectoral implications

Disruptions and shifts in US foreign aid allocation patterns have both immediate and longer-term consequences for action targeting a wide range of global challenges. The United States has traditionally distributed its bilateral spending – including the funds channelled through USAID – across a wide range of sectors (see Figure 1). We focus on repercussions for three policy areas that have been of particular relevance for US foreign aid and/or are set to be particularly affected by the second Trump administration’s crackdown: health, democracy promotion and climate.

US support has been a backbone for action to address global *health* concerns, from disease spread to the development of vaccines and treatments. In 2022, 24 per cent of the United States’ total bilateral ODA was dedicated to health- and population-related projects, with USAID accounting for nearly 75 per cent of health-related foreign assistance in 2023. For some concerns – such as maternal and child health as well as tuberculosis – USAID was in charge of 100 per cent of bilateral assistance flows. The agency has also been the world’s largest donor of family planning assistance, with the budget of its family planning and reproductive health programme accounting for US\$608 million in 2023 (KFF, 2024). The current freeze and a long-term reduction of US foreign aid spending on health-related matters are thus set to leave an important gap in global assistance flows.

The health sector is where the US foreign aid freeze arguably has the most immediate and brutal implications. Experts have suggested that people “will die directly because of cuts in US funding” (Roxby, Mundasad, & Hughes, 2025), as the funding freeze has affected clinics treating tuberculosis patients and infrastructure for people living with HIV who rely on regular access to medicine. The emergency humanitarian waiver (see Section 3) was issued after the funding freeze, allowing the President’s Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to be partially restarted. However, some programmes, particularly those related to family planning and reproductive health, will remain unfunded due to the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy (see Section 3), posing an immediate risk to the lives of women and girls. Beyond the immediate repercussions, the funding freeze and potential reductions in US foreign aid could hinder global efforts to address non-communicable diseases such as cancer and diabetes, which have been becoming more common in lower-income countries. In an already resource-strained environment, these diseases risk being deprioritised, exacerbating long-term health challenges (Gawel, 2025).

Another field set to experience a significant blow is *democracy promotion*, a central concern of Western-led bilateral development cooperation to which USAID allocated almost \$2 billion in 2023 (Foreign Assistance, 2024). For those in favour of DAC donors funding processes in partner countries geared towards strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law, the current freeze – and then likely reduction or phase-out – of funding for democracy promotion initiatives undermines established partnerships that, particularly on governance-related questions, often rely on trust. It highlights that democracy promotion is no longer an integral part of US foreign policy and has important signalling effects for outside stakeholders. Other Western donors might follow suit and discontinue their democracy-focused work; anti-democratic forces across the globe might feel encouraged in their fight against inclusive and accountable institutions; and democratic movements – notably in settings targeted by internal or external authoritarian forces – will be deprived of the financial and organisational support they have long

relied on (Grimm, Freyburg, Leininger, Richter, & Wolff, 2025). In Moldova, for example, the US funding freeze has cut support for independent media right before the elections, and thus at a decisive political moment. Many networks and media in the country are funded by Russia, which has also been accused of interfering in the recent presidential elections in the country. Similarly, many independent Russian and Belarusian media and civil society organisations have lost US financial support, weakening their ability to counter the authoritarian regimes in their home countries (Shamiev, 2025).

USAID has also played an important role in channelling US funding to *climate*-related assistance for low- and middle-income countries, providing support for renewable energy sources, disaster resilience, water security and ecosystem support. Irrespective of the fate of USAID as an entity, the US government will likely discontinue all climate-related work. This will have serious longer-term consequences, as even a Democrat administration after Trump 2.0 would not only need to restore climate aid flows, administrative structures and in-house expertise, but also rely on Congress to again vote in favour of external climate support. USAID's climate strategy – rolled out under the Biden administration – had started with a country-level review of USAID activities to mainstream climate concerns and make sure that infrastructure would be ready to face more adverse climate conditions. USAID had also increased its focus on renewable energy sources, climate adaptation and conservation measures. Analyses highlight that USAID funding had “mobilized billions of dollars from the private sector, attracting investment from renewable energy developers and insurance companies that offer drought and flood coverage to vulnerable areas abroad” (Bittle, 2025). There are other areas, such as disaster resilience, where private investment is rare and public funds – including ODA – are vital for countries worldwide. Experts argue that the second Trump administration's opposition to these measures is short-sighted, as water insecurity and other climate-related challenges make “people desperate, and desperate people do desperate things [...] we're opening up a door through our potential lack of attention on [...] water security to violent extremist organizations, to China, to Russia, to other groups with different types of strings attached” (Walton, 2025).

Region-specific implications

In addition to sectoral implications, countries and regions across the globe are set to be affected differently by the current US funding freeze. Recipients for whom the US share in overall ODA flows in 2023 was particularly high (see Figure 4) include countries in Africa (Eswatini, Lesotho), Asia and the Pacific (Thailand, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands) and Latin America (Venezuela, Colombia, Jamaica, Guatemala). Additionally, USAID provided funding to least-developed countries such as South Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, the DRC and Ethiopia – countries where US resources have covered more than a fifth of total ODA, making them especially vulnerable to the effects of funding cuts (Mitchell & Hughes, 2015).

Overall, *Africa* is expected to be the most affected continent. A number of African countries already face major challenges, such as considerable debt levels, that undermine their capacities to adapt to US funding cuts. In 2022, the United States provided US\$15.2 billion to African countries, that is, 40.8 per cent of total ODA the continent received from DAC donors that year (Si, 2025). Ethiopia and the DRC were the top US recipients among African partners, receiving support for both humanitarian relief and longer-term development projects. In the DRC and South Sudan, where displacement levels are particularly elevated, the US funding freeze threatens access to basic needs and services, increasing the spread of diseases and food insecurity. Although waivers issued by the US Secretary of State could restore some funding – if applied and implemented (see Section 3) – humanitarian appeals for Africa are already critically underfunded (Payton, 2025). Hence, even a slight reduction in US assistance is likely to strain relief efforts on the ground and worsen conditions for vulnerable populations. Without alternative donors stepping in to fill the gap left by the United States, African governments will have to increase their borrowing to sustain life-saving programmes, exacerbating debt

repayment challenges and undermining economic stability. Across African countries, the health sector faces particularly severe consequences. In addition to undermining the continuity of HIV/AIDS programmes, funding cuts threaten efforts to combat malaria and tuberculosis, prevent outbreaks like Ebola, and improve maternal and child health care. Thousands of health workers have already been affected. In Kenya, an estimated 54,000 jobs are at stake as USAID-funded programmes shut down, while in Ethiopia, 5,000 health care employees have already been laid off (Mersie, 2025a).

Beyond Africa, the second most affected world region is Europe, primarily due to the significant US\$16.43 billion in aid allocated to *Ukraine* via USAID in 2023 (Foreign Assistance, 2024). Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, US funds have supported macroeconomic stability, energy infrastructure, Ukrainian farmers, civil society and public health. Apart from humanitarian relief, health remains a major concern, particularly in the territories liberated after occupation, such as parts of Mykolaiv region north of Kherson. USAID had supported health care workers in setting up clinics and distributing medicines – activities that have now been suspended due to the freeze. Additionally, the foreign aid assault in the United States has stalled initiatives focusing on local governance, anti-corruption, democracy-building and independent media – that is, programmes crucial for Ukraine's future development, its potential path to EU membership and efforts to counter Russia's influence (Kottasová & Kostenko, 2025). This aligns with a broader pattern in Trump's approach to war in Ukraine. As the Trump administration is not interested in strengthening Ukrainian democracy and capacity to resist Russia's military and information campaigns, it has recently initiated negotiations with Russia while excluding Ukraine and its European allies, thereby placing additional pressure on the Ukrainian government and empowering Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Countries across *Asia and the Pacific* are also set to be affected. Civil society and independent media in Southeast Asia – where democratic institutions are increasingly at risk – are set to be weakened, as 22 per cent of ODA to the region allocated to that sector since 2015 came from the United States. In the area of health, the United States provided 10 per cent of regional ODA in that period, funding critical programmes in nutrition and maternal and child health. Although HIV/AIDS programmes are eligible for waivers, they make up only 1 per cent of total health ODA in the region, leaving other initiatives underfunded (Dayant, 2025). USAID has also supported demining programmes in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In Vietnam, specifically, US funding helped remove the remnants of toxic substances used by the United States during the Vietnam War (Babst, 2025). As in other regions, the health sector in the Pacific is expected to be affected the most, with aid primarily supporting HIV/AIDS programmes and basic health services (Dayant, 2025). Additionally, the United States had funded climate programmes on resilience against climate crises and disasters, disaster preparedness and sustainable energy (Jackson, 2025). Beyond the direct impact on vulnerable populations and the damage to the image of the United States, the funding freeze creates an opening for China (see Section 6), which already has a strong presence in the region.

Latin America, in turn, has relied on US support for displaced populations, migrant integration and programmes for the prevention of sexual exploitation. Colombia, for example, where drug trafficking and armed groups pose major challenges, has been the largest recipient of USAID funds (US\$385 million in 2024). Among the most affected groups in Colombia are (Venezuelan) migrant populations, which now face greater exposure to organised crime and exploitation (Maisonnave, 2025). The suspension of US funding also threatens environmental efforts and Indigenous communities. Deforestation and illegal mining in Colombia are expected to increase with the loss of US funding (Peard, 2025). In Brazil, USAID's largest programme focused on protecting Amazon biodiversity as well as supporting Indigenous people and rural communities – all of which is now at risk (Malik, 2025). In Central America, USAID has supported efforts to tackle the root causes of US-bound migration. Defunding efforts aimed at reducing violence, improving economic opportunities and promoting good governance in Guatemala, Honduras

and El Salvador is set to contribute to increasing instability and thus migration flows, straining the entire region (Hendrix, 2025).

Finally, the United States itself also stands to face direct repercussions of the Trump administration's assault on foreign aid. The funding freeze not only puts thousands of jobs at risk but also has wider economic implications. USAID has collaborated extensively with numerous US businesses, contractors and NGOs. Among those affected the most are US farmers – a part of Trump's electoral base – who supply a substantial share (about 41 per cent in 2021) of the food aid distributed by USAID to recipient countries. Researchers who received their funding from USAID, including in the agriculture field, have been furloughed, causing studies and thus innovation in the sector to come to a halt ("Donald Trump's foreign-aid cuts", 2025; Wu, 2025).

5 Implications for multilateral development cooperation

Although only a smaller share of US foreign aid goes to multilateral institutions, in absolute terms the United States has been the single most important donor to multilateral development work. Cuts to US multilateral development spending – or a US withdrawal from multilateral development bodies – are thus set to have severe repercussions for the ability of multilateral organisations to deliver on their mandates (this is exacerbated by the fact that multilateral bodies, such as bilateral partners, had received no warning about the extent of imminent cuts).

When it comes to the World Bank – the core of the Western-dominated system of multilateral development banking – a US retreat is still deemed rather unlikely (Chase-Lubitz, 2025). Although Project 2025 suggested a complete overhaul of US engagement with the Bretton Woods Institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – the latter have played an important role in the exercise of US hegemonic power. The United States has long been not only the largest shareholder of the Bank – currently holding 17.5 per cent of shares – but (as the only country holding more than 15 per cent of shares) also the only veto power among its members. The World Bank has also been led by a US-appointed president since its creation. That said, the US government might well decide to reduce the contributions it provides or exercise more direct control over Bank-related processes. In fact, the first Trump administration decided to not transfer the full amount previously pledged to the IDA (part of the World Bank Group, see Section 2); and the latest US pledge to the IDA – made in late 2024 – still needs to be approved by Congress. Although this approval might face obstacles, it is deemed unlikely that Congress would support a complete US withdrawal from the Bank – not least because the "World Bank treaty states that the offices of the bank must be in the country that contributes the most" (Chase-Lubitz, 2025), meaning that a US withdrawal or considerable dilution of US shares would require the Bank to leave US territory.

The UN development system is in a considerably less comfortable position vis-à-vis US funding cuts or outright withdrawal. Many UN entities have traditionally received a substantive share of their budgets through US voluntary contributions (see Figure 5) and are set to be seriously affected, albeit unevenly. Although the emergency humanitarian waiver (see Section 3) has allowed organisations such as UNAIDS ("US aid funding cuts", 2025) and IOM (International Organization for Migration, 2025) to continue some of their US-sponsored services, it does not apply to "activities that involve abortions, family planning [...] gender or DEI [diversity, equity, inclusion] ideology programs, transgender surgeries, or other non-life saving assistance" (US Department of State, 2025a). For a number of affected multilateral bodies, it has also remained unclear how the waiver is supposed to be applied (Mersie, 2025b).

Trump's main targets across the UN system

Trump signed an executive order on 4 February calling for a review of US funding to and ties with different parts of the UN system (White House, 2025d, see Section 3). Building on the previous announcement of the US withdrawal from WHO and the Paris Agreement on climate change, this order announced the defunding of UNRWA – which had received more than 27 per cent of its overall revenues in 2023 from the US government – and a review of US membership in the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It also covered the decision to cut ties with the UN Human Rights Council, that is, not seeking election to the body, terminating the office of the US representative to the Council and halting funding.

Although so far no explicit decision has been taken regarding US contributions to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the Trump administration has reinstated the Mexico City Policy (see Section 3). Embraced by Republican US presidents for the last two decades, that policy prohibits the US government from funding organisations engaged in inter alia providing information about or advocating safe abortion. Hence, it is likely that UNFPA will see a significant reduction in US contributions or a complete withdrawal of US funds, which in 2023 comprised 12 per cent of its budget. Entities such as UN Women and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) are also at risk due to their mandated focus on gender and environment-related questions (Baumann, Haug, & Beisheim, 2025). Trump has already decided to withdraw US\$4 billion in pledged US contributions to the Green Climate Fund, which is the world largest climate funding mechanism (Mersie, 2025c).

Implications for the financial backbone of the UN system

So far, Trump has not introduced measures that would directly affect US assessed contributions payments, and thus the regular budgets of the UN and its specialised agencies. However, US financial contributions to the UN are under review, with Trump citing as reasons UN mismanagement, the organisation's alleged unfairness to the US government and preferable treatment of "bad" countries, as well as "wild disparities in levels of funding" that put the United States at a disadvantage (Fox News, 2025). As the US government tends to pay its assessed contributions with significant delays towards the end of each calendar year (Chen, 2024), it will only become evident in the second half of 2025 if Trump's return to the White House will indeed be accompanied by changes to assessed contributions payment practices (Baumann et al., 2025).

At this point, it remains unlikely that the Trump administration will withhold all of its obligatory contributions to the UN system. Comments made by Trump and Elise Stefanik – poised to be the next US Ambassador to UN headquarters in New York (US Foreign Relations Committee, 2025) – suggest that the second Trump administration does see strategic value in the UN. However, given the volatility of Trump's decision-making, this might change. A withdrawal or substantial reduction of assessed contributions would have significant consequences for the UN and its development pillar (Baumann et al., 2025). First, it would contribute to the already severe liquidity crisis at the UN Secretariat (UN Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly highlighted the dire financial situation of the organisation). Second, it would disrupt and severely undermine the system of UN membership fees as a – so far – rather stable backbone of UN funding (Haug, Gulrajani, & Weinlich, 2022), and thus challenge the financial foundation of UN multilateralism. Third, it would further widen the gap between the broad (and expanding) set of UN mandates and the severely limited resources provided by member states to address and fulfil them (Baumann & Haug, 2024a).

Implications for UN country-level operations

Both the current US funding freeze and potential reductions in US contributions over the long run (will) have substantive implications for UN country-level operations. Almost all UN

development entities receive (or used to receive) US funding – primarily voluntary contributions – via USAID. Hence, the unavailability of funding to multilateral bodies so far administered by USAID has severe consequences for the UN’s ability to implement programmes on the ground and deliver on the UN’s various mandates. UNFPA (“US funding pause”, 2025) and WFP (Lewis, Douglas, & Baertlein, 2025), for instance, have already suspended services funded by US grants.

As an immediate reaction to the US foreign aid freeze announced on 20 January, the UN conducted a confidential survey, seeking to evaluate the impact this suspension might have on the UN system (Lynch, 2025a). Nearly 20 UN entities confirmed that they had received stop-work orders on US-funded grants. Half of them reported to be experiencing a “severe” impact on their budgets and operations, while eight reported a “moderate” impact. Given their considerable relative dependence on US funding (see Section 2), UNAIDS and IOM are likely to feel the most pronounced consequences in their operations.

For those UN bodies where US contributions constitute a substantial portion of total funding, country-level work risks facing significant disruptions. Programmes could be – and have already been – interrupted or upended, undermining the ability to reach key deliverables and inadvertently reinforcing the Trump administration’s narrative about the organisation’s inefficiency and mismanagement. A less immediate but equally concerning implication could be the reaction of UN bodies to US cuts: They might decide to shift to activities that can showcase their effectiveness and efficiency in attempts to address US criticism and safeguard at least some funding, irrespective of negative consequences that such a shift would entail for longer-term sustainable results.

Importantly, funding cuts are set to affect UN bodies differently. The US funding freeze is already leading to restrictions on hiring, travel and procurement – from UNHCR (Borger & Roth, 2025) and WFP (Lynch, 2025b) to IOM (Lynch, 2025c) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (Chadwick, 2025) – which severely weaken the operational capacities of these entities. Due to the emergency humanitarian waiver (see Section 3), however, UNHCR might be less severely affected than IOM. From a longer-term perspective, political support from within the Trump administration might turn out to be another potential asset for UN bodies to secure their operational work. During her congressional hearing, Stefanik mentioned both WFP and UNICEF as benefitting “the American people directly” and referred to WFP as

a very successful program. It’s results focused. Its significant voluntary funding piece is a testament to that and the significant bipartisan support. And it is beneficial to America from a natural security perspective but also from an agricultural perspective, business manufacturing perspective and American workforce perspective. (Cited in Better World Campaign, 2025)

Overall, the budget shortfalls likely to be caused by these recent decisions are set to lead – or have already led – to noticeable disruptions in the operational work of UN development bodies on the ground. Vulnerable populations worldwide depend on UN programmes that receive US support for projects covering a wide range of issue areas, from health care to food security and humanitarian relief. Considering the overall weight of US contributions in the UN funding mix, UN representatives have stated that a significant decrease in US multilateral aid will affect millions of people, put lives in jeopardy and undermine sustainable development efforts, which are already significantly underfunded (“US funding pause”, 2025).

6 Longer-term implications of Trump's assault on foreign aid: three scenarios

From the immediate consequences of the current spending freeze to the withdrawal from multilateral organisations, the second Trump administration only needed a few days to shake up the development landscape in the United States, at the UN and across the globe. Although USAID was never without its critics and has faced calls for reform (Custer, Burgess, Horigoshi, & Mathew, 2023), Trump's assault is without precedent. Many are now wondering about the medium to long(er)-term implications of the ongoing dismantling of US foreign aid. To help us think through the potential contours of the United States' future engagement with international development cooperation and its consequences for multilateral bodies and countries across the globe, we outline three scenarios (Figure 7). Although they are not mutually exclusive – indeed, elements of all may unfold simultaneously or apply in different moments to different contexts – they provide references for gauging what international development under (and after) Trump's second presidency might look like.

Scenario 1: The United States reengages with a more limited and revamped approach to foreign aid.

Although the dismantling of USAID and its integration into the Department of State requires Congressional approval, the predominance of Trump supporters in Congress suggests that such approval would not be unlikely. While a de jure dissolution of USAID would likely coincide with a reduction in the overall volume of US foreign aid, the US could still re-emerge as a different kind of donor. Even more so than before, the remaining funds would be directed towards projects that are firmly aligned with US national interests. For Trump, this means that “[e]very dollar we spend, every program we fund, and every policy we pursue must be justified” with regard to whether they make the United States “safer”, “stronger” and/or “more prosperous” (US Department of State, 2025b). A general logic of this revamped approach would be that staying engaged makes it easier for the Trump administration to reshape selected multilateral entities from within – even if they are seen as inherently problematic entities – and make use of US funding weight to exercise unilateral pressure.

Emergency humanitarian waivers that were granted in late January and early February 2025 suggest that projects and programmes related to food aid, combating drug trafficking, repatriating third-country nationals and addressing health crises such as HIV/AIDS are more likely to see their funding protected or (partially) restored – and not for altruistic or developmental reasons. As US farmers play a crucial role in supplying food aid (see Section 4), it can be expected that the US food lobby will strongly support the continuation of overseas programmes that help them manage overproduction (Wong, Beras, Ritchey, & Concannon, 2025). Activities perceived to be in tension with the Trump administration's priorities, in turn – such as those related to DEI policies, family planning or support for the Palestinian population – are at risk of being completely defunded. Education programmes might also be affected, especially if they contain DEI elements.

For UN bodies, funding would be selectively restored based on the extent to which they are perceived as advancing national interests. Multilateral entities considered to be serving US priorities stand a better chance of receiving US funding, with Stefanik's praise of WFP and UNICEF during her Congressional hearing as a case in point (Lynch, 2025d, see Section 5). The cases of WFP and UNICEF also indicate that having US nationals in leadership roles is likely to provide an advantage when negotiating US funding contributions (although Trump is known to be rather adversarial to Cindy McCain, the current executive director of WFP). However, even these UN entities are already seeing the effects of Trump's policies. At a UNICEF Executive Board meeting in late January, the US representative was the only member

state diplomat to voice general criticism towards the organisation's approach to gender-related questions – embracing a narrative resembling that of the conservative Group of Friends of the Family (Gautam & Palm, 2021) – and confrontationally argued that the US government

cannot agree to country program documents that contain terms and concepts that conflict with U.S. policies as set out in President Trump's recent Executive Orders, especially when those concepts endanger the very mission of the organization [...] it is U.S. policy to recognize two sexes, male and female, and not to promote gender ideology. [...] It is particularly disturbing that this language is being used in UNICEF programming documents; children should be protected from this dangerous ideology and its possible results. (US Mission to the United Nations, 2025)

Beyond tensions over terminology and the focus of individual interventions, the reinstatement – and subsequently the level – of US contributions may be tied to the readiness of UN entities to engage in organisational reform processes that are aligned with US preferences. This would build on longstanding US criticism of the UN's ineffectiveness and inefficiency and the perceived unfairness of the US shouldering a major portion of UN budgets. As complaints about burgeoning UN spending are shared by many member states, this might provide opportunities for renegotiating how UN budgets should be managed. Although UN bodies will likely have to deal with smaller budgets and less autonomy, tough reforms might increase the likelihood of the US government staying engaged, both politically and financially.

Scenario 2: The United States retreats for good while other providers step in.

Among US foreign aid recipients – from Southern governments to civil society organisations and multilateral bodies – many hope that other providers will step in to at least partly fill the gap created by US disengagement. In the words of John Dramani Mahama, the president of Ghana: “As bridges are burning, new bridges are being formed” (quoted in Merrick, 2025). Given the broad scope and considerable scale of US foreign aid, however, it seems unlikely that other DAC donors are able and willing to immediately make up for the lack of US funds. This is primarily due to the sheer volume of US funding flows and the recent downward trend in ODA spending across a number of European donor countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Moreover, development cooperation programming is typically a long-term process. Most of this year's ODA flows are already allocated and not easily reprogrammable without incurring severe costs to other commitments and existing priorities, both sectoral and geographical. Consequently, although DAC donors might be willing to “take the US's place as lead provider in the most exposed countries” (Mitchell & Hughes, 2025) to address immediate concerns, large-scale ODA reallocations over the coming months appear unlikely. Over a medium to long(er) term, however, major DAC donors – including Germany and Japan – will have to take a more comprehensive US retreat into account when reviewing and adapting their ODA flows to bilateral and multilateral partners.

Beyond the DAC, many have been focusing on the implications of a US foreign aid retreat for Russia and, above all, the People's Republic of China. Indeed, if US investment in bilateral and multilateral development cooperation is a means to “compete against Russia's and China's anti-American posture and activities around the world” (Felbab-Brown, 2025), these two “systemic rivals” might gain the most from the dismantling of USAID, an overall reduction of foreign aid and a (maybe partial but palpable) US withdrawal from UN development work. Although Russia has significantly fewer resources than China to proactively fill the vacuum left by a US withdrawal, the Russian government has explicitly welcomed the dismantling of USAID (“Russia welcomes USAID cuts”, 2025).

Indeed, the current US foreign aid freeze plays directly into Putin's hands: Affected projects include energy infrastructure support in Ukraine and funding for independent media in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (Stern & Dixon, 2025). China, in turn, has already embraced a more proactive stance as a defender of multilateralism since Trump's return to the White House (Banjo, 2025). Although some see China – in contrast to Russia – as a potential candidate for working together with DAC donors to “increase assistance” and thus “prevent lives from being lost and fragile states from further destabilisation” (Mitchell & Hughes, 2025), it is unlikely that Chinese actors would directly intervene to resume frozen US activities. Although there are initial reports about China taking over in areas where the US freeze has led to abrupt halts in development projects, overall China may step in more selectively, positioning itself as being a more responsible partner than the United States in the eyes of recipients (Babst, 2025). Russia might also be able to expand its influence, not least by “selling its military services” in contexts where Western actors are retreating, such as in the Sahel, offering the Kremlin “a strategic opportunity to forge a broader network of potential allies” (Felbab-Brown, 2025).

At the multilateral level, UN development bodies will have to find alternative sources of funding to at least partially make up for US-related shortfalls, with China being one of the obvious candidates. The United States' (partial) disengagement or outright withdrawal from UN bodies undermines the idea of collective action and – together with the expansion of China's multilateral footprint (Haug, Foot, & Baumann, 2024) – seems to signal the advent of an approach to UN multilateralism that more openly centres on immediate national interests. This might somewhat resonate with Trump's take on multilateral cooperation (Haug, 2025), but it goes against established practices championed by a number of DAC donors and their Southern partners.

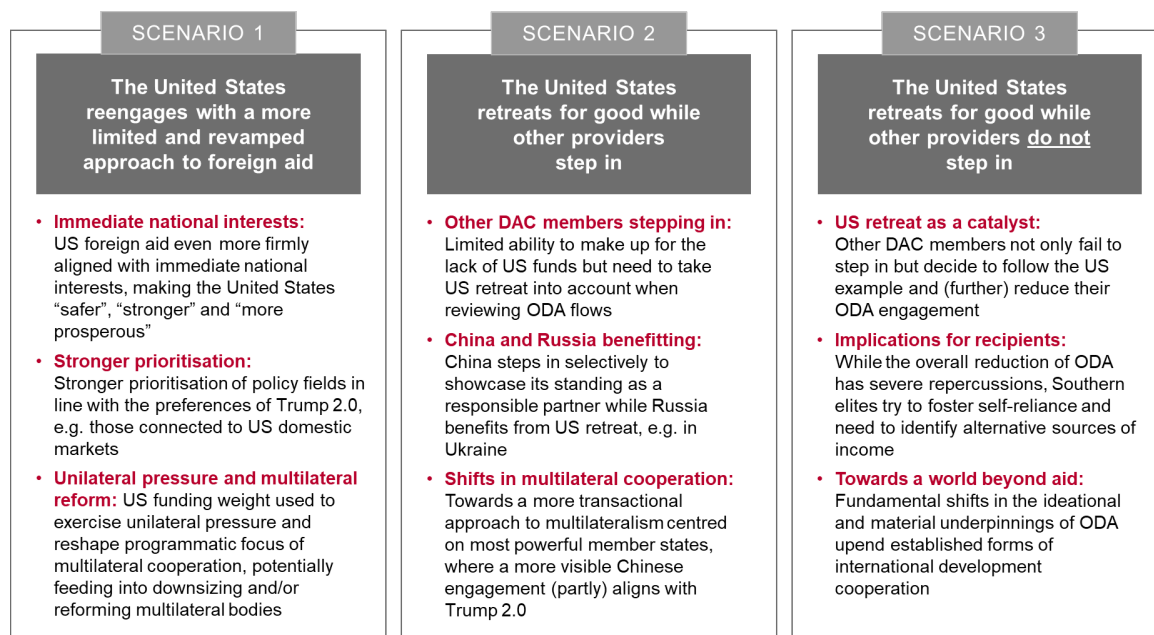
Scenario 3: The United States retreats for good while other providers do not step in.

If the United States was to substantially scale down its foreign aid without other donors stepping in, the consequences for bilateral and multilateral cooperation would be severe. Repercussions would be felt across sectors and world regions, as the discontinuation of US-sponsored programmes would contribute to social instability and the loss of human lives (see Sections 4 and 5). Other DAC members might follow suit, reducing overall ODA levels and undermining traditional cooperation partnerships. Recently announced cuts to the ODA budget in the United Kingdom are a case in point (Lay, 2025). Such a fundamental shift in established practices could act as a catalyst for a significant transformation in the field of international development, accelerating a transition towards a world beyond aid (Janus, Klingebiel, & Paulo, 2015). Partner countries would need to fundamentally reassess their dependency on foreign aid and other assistance flows. Although many have long argued that aid has often failed to address development challenges and instead reproduced unequal power relations (Moyo, 2010), the move “away from aid” (Calleja & Prizzon, 2019) is not (yet) reflected in ODA practices: So far, DAC donors and their partner countries have only limited experiences with “ODA exit strategies”, an exception being recipient countries that graduate to high-income status.

In political rhetoric, however, the paradigmatic shift away from aid is already underway. Southern countries have become more assertive in shaping global dialogue, including at the UN (Bauman, Novoselova, Surasky, & Schönrock, 2024), and seek to act more independently in a context of rising geopolitical tensions. Nigeria's vice-president, Kashim Shettima (News Agency of Nigeria, 2025), for instance, reacted to US foreign aid cuts by underlining that he believed in partnership and investment rather than dependency on foreign aid. Former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta emphasised that African leaders should not respond passively to the overnight freeze of US support. Instead, he has advocated for greater self-reliance, in which African nations focus on self-financed initiatives to take control of their own development (Taheri, 2025). The Jamaican prime minister, Andrew Holness, also underscored the necessity to reduce his country's reliance on aid while ensuring economic independence (Mohammed, 2025). The Rwandan president, Paul Kagame, went even further, publicly supporting Trump's plans to

reduce foreign aid and suggesting that African countries might “learn some lessons” from Trump’s approach (Madowo, 2025). Of course, these statements unfold in specific domestic contexts and, in the case of Kagame, are embedded in strategic and violent projects of expanding transnational influence (Maclean, 2025). A significant reduction of overall ODA levels would have severe implications across a number of Southern societies, affecting marginalised groups considerably more than domestic elites. Overall, a full-fledged US retreat from foreign aid followed by similar steps across DAC members would upend the ideational and material underpinnings of international development cooperation as we have come to know them.

Figure 7: Three scenarios: the United States and the future of international development cooperation



Source: Authors

7 Conclusion and recommendations

For foreign aid pundits and those accustomed to the extant development cooperation system, the weeks since Trump’s second inauguration as US president have brought fundamental upheaval. The Trump-led shift towards a more explicitly crude and interest-based approach to foreign aid – driven by hard-power considerations – will likely have wide-ranging consequences for international cooperation efforts. The public celebration of unfounded accusations against USAID and its employees – such as Musk referring to the agency as a “criminal organisation” – is often grotesque (Klingebiel, 2025). In its approach to international cooperation, the Trump administration demands unconditional acquiescence with its requests, with arbitrary – yet tangible – penalties for non-compliance. Accusations like those levelled against South Africa with regard to post-apartheid land reform policies and its legal actions against Israel over the war in Gaza provide illustrations (Jones, 2025).

Current political dynamics across traditional donor countries add to this general sense of change and uncertainty. Although the EU and its 27 member states are collectively the world’s largest ODA provider, most European donors are unable to step in and/or have themselves announced foreign assistance cuts. In addition to the technical challenges involved in taking over programmes previously funded by the United States, other DAC members are wary of domestic political dynamics in which struggling economies and populist voices demand prioritising

domestic spending over development support abroad. The European Commission, for instance, has been emphasising the promotion of European investment in infrastructure, with a stronger emphasis on geopolitical concerns and less space for human development and democracy promotion (Furness & Keijzer, 2022). Although there were examples of DAC donors stepping in during the first Trump administration – the Netherlands, for instance, launched a campaign that was joined by others to provide funding to family planning organisations that had lost access to US resources – there has not been a similar response this time around. In addition, the unprecedented scale and scope of the US foreign aid freeze makes it rather challenging for other providers to decide what to take up (and what not). Against the backdrop of complex geopolitical realities, fundamental changes in the US approach to foreign aid and limited reactions by other DAC donors might turn out to be yet another nail in the coffin of Western hegemony.

Back in the United States, Rubio has stated that dismantling USAID is “not about getting rid of foreign aid” altogether (Bittle, 2025) and has signalled his willingness to work with – rather than around – Congress on the future of the United States’ foreign aid profile (Anderson, 2025). Although there is currently less space for intra-Republican resistance against the dismantling of the US foreign aid apparatus than under Trump 1.0, there might still be ways for members of Congress to support foreign aid through bipartisan action (Tama, 2025).

Irrespective of any potential limitations to Trump’s assault on foreign aid, however, there is no simple recipe for how other DAC members – including Germany and the EU – should respond, also because current dynamics in the United States and their global consequences extend far beyond foreign aid and development policy. While refusing to act like helpless bystanders is crucial for a more proactive engagement, the numerous fires that the second Trump administration has been setting simultaneously leave little time for strategy. The following recommendations are intended to provide some basic guidance.

1. Reinvigorating development cooperation approaches

The shifting landscape can present an opportunity for DAC members – including Germany – to reassess and reinvigorate their understanding of and approach to development cooperation. Where have inherited practices made development cooperation too cumbersome? What fundamental reforms could strengthen the development policy system, in terms of both political leadership and implementation? In a context where OECD membership is expanding southwards, ODA might soon be one among several approaches to how OECD member states cooperate on development-related concerns (Sumner, Klingebiel, & Yusuf, 2025). A reassessment should start with the acknowledgement that other DAC members are unable to fill the funding vacuum left by the United States – even if the US government decides to partially reinstate its foreign aid flows – but move ahead regardless. Where selective compensatory funding is a political option for DAC governments – for example on health and climate change – it should be considered in direct dialogue with partner countries affected by the US freeze and/or withdrawal.

Overall, it is essential that DAC members refrain from further reducing development cooperation budgets: In line with recent US experiences, such a continued reduction would undermine their reputations and soft power, particularly among Southern partners. The European Commissioner in charge of development policy, for instance, has suggested that recent US actions are strengthening the EU’s position and legitimacy as an international cooperation actor (Sikela, 2025). Now DAC members need to make sure that such rhetoric is reflected in how their development cooperation practices respond to a retreating US government.

2. Strengthening the multilateral development system

For the multilateral development system, Trump 2.0 presents an unprecedented political and financial challenge. Some parts of the UN system will suffer disproportionately and require immediate support, notably from richer member states. Although research suggests that international bodies such as the UN – mature organisations with large memberships – tend to persist (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020), and that the unilateral retreat of member states can prompt the remaining members to double down on addressing collective action problems and push for institutional reforms (von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2024), a general US retreat would challenge the current setup of UN multilateralism. This is why member states need to strengthen UN funding structures to ensure that UN development entities can act more coherently and strategically in the face of future upheavals (caused by the US government or other stakeholders). Instead of further expanding their earmarking practices, for instance, member states should pivot to voluntary core contributions that provide UN bodies with more flexibility to spend resources under their mandates and manage income fluctuations (Baumann & Haug, 2024a). In light of fiscal pressures across the globe, member states could also identify key elements of the current multilateral development system – such as individual UN entities or joint funding schemes such as multi-donor trust funds – that they want to strategically focus on. In addition, an analysis of overlapping mandates could help identify options for merging (parts of) multilateral entities in order to streamline what is currently a rather fragmented system.

3. Promoting Southern self-reliance

Faced with mounting instability and/or a long-term reduction of ODA flows, Southern countries need to become more self-reliant financially. For this to happen, domestic challenges – from developing domestic capital markets to addressing tax avoidance and illicit financial flows – and their transnational enabling environments need to be addressed. Among other things, this requires strategic cooperation between Southern governments and DAC members. One element of a more comprehensive approach to domestic resource mobilisation, for instance, is a more inclusive international tax cooperation framework. Such a framework could create “a central lever for developing State capacity and maintaining macroeconomic stability, enabling governments to make required investments independent of external sources” (UN Conference on Trade and Development, 2024, p. 176). Over the last year, Southern governments have been successful in shifting the global debate about taxation from the OECD to the UN (Ganter, 2023). At the same time, however, for a joint – and more inclusive – global tax cooperation framework to operate meaningfully, Southern states require the engagement of (economically still more dominant) OECD countries. Without such support and effective cooperation, the transition to a post-aid world will be significantly more challenging for all actors involved.

4. Fostering alliances beyond Trump

The weeks since 20 January suggest that it might not be a good idea to rely on the Trump-led United States as the backbone and/or leader of international (development) cooperation. Instead, those committed to safeguarding and carefully reforming key elements of the current systems of bilateral and multilateral cooperation should expand and strengthen alliances that do not (overly) rely on Washington’s political and/or financial support. Financially, new sources and/or funding mechanisms are needed. Although some private actors – notably Bloomberg Philanthropies – have already signalled their willingness to step in with funding for some of the commitments the US government has retreated from (Volcovici, 2025), they will be neither able nor willing to provide the bulk of required resources. Together, OECD members and Southern partners could explore joint financing schemes in which all parties contribute, according to their preferences and abilities. Triangular cooperation offers insights into how such an arrangement could work (Haug, Cheng, & Trajber Waisbich, 2023), and the logic of “differentiated universality” – whereby states across the income spectrum contribute according to their fiscal

abilities (Haug, Gulrajani, & Weinlich, 2022) – offers a guiding principle for how international development work could be reformed (see Baumann & Haug, 2024b).

Politically, an increasingly multipolar context requires collaboration in line with the logic of multi-alignment, whereby states (and non-state actors) actively shape, rather than simply manage, partnerships across continental boundaries and other established divides. The EU, for instance, should proactively seek closer coordination with Japan, South Korea as well as the United Kingdom on ODA-related matters. At the UN, the Alliance for Multilateralism – set up by France and Germany under Trump 1.0 – could be revived, but this time with non-European partners in the driving seat that have promoted recent reform efforts at the UN, including Mexico and Singapore (Baumann et al., 2025). The “Joint declaration of intent by the coalition for an impactful United Nations Development System to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” put forward in early February on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2025) might be a fruitful starting point for such an endeavour. With Colombia, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Ireland, Morocco, Norway, Peru and the United Kingdom, this coalition brings together partners that are ready to support multilateral development work. Their combination of geographic representation – covering Africa, Latin America and Europe – as well as financial and political weight (with two UN Security Council veto powers, (sub)regional heavyweights and some of the leading DAC donors) reflects the logic of the atypical alliances required in the times of Trump 2.0.

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