

Discussion Article

The decline of US diplomacy – Implications for US global leadership

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Abstract

Diplomacy has been a cornerstone of US global leadership in the post-Cold War era. The Trump Administration has dismantled long-standing foreign policy institutions, sharply reduced foreign assistance, and shifted foreign policy decision-making toward the executive branch. At the same time, it has moved away from multilateralism in favour of a transactional foreign policy centred on personalised presidential diplomacy, bilateral deals, and the use of coercive economic measures. Together, these changes have weakened US global leadership. They have reduced American soft power, eroded global trust, undercut US influence in global norm setting, and diminished the country's ability to monitor and respond to global developments. Although the US continues to have unmatched military power and economic leverage, a sustained withdrawal from development assistance, public diplomacy and multilateral forums, especially on transnational challenges, is likely to accelerate competition over the future rules and norms of the international order. As China rapidly expands its global initiatives and India, Brazil and other BRICS countries press for reforms of international institutions, the liberal character of the global order will very much depend on how US allies and partners take up the reins in response to the US retreat.

Keywords

the United States, diplomacy, soft power, global leadership

Introduction

Diplomacy has been a cornerstone of US global leadership in the post-Cold War era. Through an extensive network of embassies, development agencies, and multilateral engagements, the United States built a formidable network of alliances, orchestrated collective responses to transnational challenges, and played a decisive role in shaping the norms and rules of the global order. Within days of the inauguration, the new Trump Administration moved swiftly to transform traditional US diplomacy, eliminating many key foreign policy institutions and suspending foreign assistance. Returning to an “America First” foreign policy, the changes were accompanied by a retreat from multilateral engagement and a return to bilateral transactional diplomacy privileging the use of coercive economic measures. These measures have eroded US soft power, one of the country’s greatest diplomatic strengths, leading to a decline in global trust and a reduced ability to shape international norms and respond to global developments. In response, partners and allies are recalibrating their foreign policies, and competitors are moving in to fill the vacuums left behind.

While similar shifts were attempted during the first Trump Administration, they were met with strong and largely successful Congressional and institutional resistance. They were also proposed via budgetary and management changes which were easily reversed by the subsequent Biden Administration. This time, the Administration has used executive orders, emergency declarations, and institutional closures to consolidate changes and shift foreign policy decision-making to the executive, with little Congressional pushback. And, with likely legislative proposals to codify the changes, the move away from the use of soft power is likely to last a long time. Even with subsequent administration policy reversals and efforts to reinvest in US diplomacy, rebuilding the basic infrastructure underlying soft power will take years. This loss of US leadership will have implications for the global order. What shifts take place will very much depend on how partners and allies take up the reins to protect global liberal norms and how aggressively competitors seek to fill the leadership void.

The dismantling of foreign policy institutions¹

Within days of being sworn in, President Trump signed a series of executive orders that began the rapid elimination of key government-funded foreign policy institutions which underpinned US soft power projection. Beginning with Executive Order 14169 (2025), the bulk of US foreign assistance was suspended for 90 days, most of the employees of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) were put on leave or dismissed, and the building was permanently closed (Favelle, Nehamas and Tate, 2025).

While waivers were issued to fund some life-saving programs following outside pressure and some court rulings disrupted portions of the freeze, the suspension of the payment system forced most assistance recipients and facilitators to stop programs and reduce staff. The consequences were global. (The Economist, 2025; United Nations, 2025.) The waiver process itself was chaotic: some organisations initially received waivers, followed by termination notices, subsequent reversals, and, in some cases,

1 In this article, the term “**US foreign policy institutions**” is used in a broad sense. It includes key governmental **agencies** responsible for diplomacy and national security (Department of State, the Department of Defense, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Security Council). It also includes **other agencies and foundations**, such as the US Agency for Global Media, the Inter-American Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy which advance American objectives abroad through targeted programs and assistance. Finally, the term extends to US government funded **policy organisations**, such as the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars tanks, which shape debate, provide expertise, and influence the formulation of policy

later notices that the reversals had been issued in error. By the end of February, approximately 10,000 USAID and other State Department foreign assistance activities had been terminated, representing 83 percent of USAID's programs (Foreign Policy for America, no date). Ukraine was particularly affected, losing \$1.4 billion (Sanderfur and Kenny, 2025). On July 1, the State Department took over remaining USAID programming.

The Administration then issued additional executive orders to dismantle the agencies and institutions that run development, media outreach, exchanges, and research programs funded by Congress. These included, among others, the Inter-American Foundation, the Africa Foundation, the US Institute for Peace, the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. These orders were followed, in most cases, with the immediate lockout of all employees and the cessation of all program payments. The closure of USAGM had immediate worldwide effects, as it largely ceased to provide news and information in 63 languages to an estimated 427 million people, primarily in countries with restricted or limited free press freedom (USAGM, 2025).

Many lawsuits have been filed against the executive orders, arguing that Congress established and funded the agencies and programs, and the President cannot cancel them. These lawsuits (Lawfare, no date) have, in a few cases, reinstated limited funding, programming, and employment. The bulk of the court cases are, however, still in process. To consolidate the deconstruction of these government-funded foreign policy institutions, the executive orders were followed by the Rescission Act of 2025, whereby the Administration proposed, and Congress agreed, to rescind \$7.7 billion in previous funding. While the Hill debate was vigorous, the only program saved from the cuts was PEPFAR, a George W. Bush legacy global program dedicated to fighting HIV/AIDS. The Act also included cuts to contributions to multinational organisations, including the UN, signalling the Administration's intent to shift away from multilateral engagement. Significantly, the Act effectively codified the elimination of Congressionally mandated programs and institutions via Executive Orders.

The Administration then put forward a draconian budget for FY2026 in the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill (SFOPS). It called for the elimination of funding for additional parts of the foreign policy establishment, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Asia Foundation, and the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, among others. It also provided for the elimination of contributions to UN agencies and the cessation of funding for multiple decades-old cultural and exchange programs. The budget also proposed a 47.1 percent cut in bilateral assistance and the replacement of other assistance programs by three smaller new funds: the American First Opportunity Fund, a Humanitarian Assistance Account, and an Emergency Fund. Finally, the Administration requested further rescissions and cancellations of previous authorisations. In total, the overall request represented a 79.3 percent cut in the foreign affairs budget from enacted FY2025 levels.

The budget is still being discussed. On January 14, 2026, the House of Representatives approved an appropriations package that included funding for SFOPS at a significantly higher level than the Administration's request but still resulting in an overall 22 percent cut from FY25 levels. The Senate has not passed an appropriations measure and the overall funding process has many more steps. Separately, the Administration is also looking to amend the legislation that governs the remaining foreign policy institutions to cement the structural shift away from soft power and to increase executive authority over foreign policy.

The Trump Administration has also taken steps to permanently reduce the size of the professional diplomatic corps, ensure its fealty to the President, and institutionalise greater political oversight over policy. Via Executive Order 14210 (2025) which mandated the reform of the diplomatic service,

the Department of State has been reorganised and professional personnel reduced. The employee union was eliminated, allowing the imposition of non-negotiated new hiring and promotion rules that call for measuring personal loyalty to the President's agenda (Heckman, 2025). Political oversight of foreign policy has increased via 1) the appointment of senior officials rather than Senate-approved appointees in key positions and the nomination of mostly political appointees as ambassadors; 2) the creation of a new permanent employment category for political appointees in policy positions. Lastly, the Administration has reduced the size of the National Security Council, the body, largely drawn from government foreign policy institutions, that advises the President on national security issues.

During the first Trump Administration, similar efforts were made to restructure foreign policy institutions. Proposals were made to place USAID within the Department of State and to eliminate smaller USG-funded development organisations. Each year, the Administration proposed severe cuts in the foreign assistance budget. Overall, these efforts, however, faced strong pushback from Congress, civil society organisations and national security experts, and most of the proposed changes were not implemented. This time, the Trump Administration is relying on executive orders and emergency declarations to make rapid changes and to expand presidential control over foreign policy institutions while preparing legislation to try to make these changes more permanent.

The return to a personalised, bilateral, transactional foreign policy

The dismantling of foreign policy institutions undergirding soft power and the lack of pushback from the US Congress have meant that foreign policy decision-making lies primarily with the President and a small group of Cabinet members and senior people. Operating with little transparency, controlled media access, and relatively unified messaging (at least among them), the team is carrying out foreign policy through transactional bilateral deals to advance American interests. Key strategies include the use of presidential emergency powers, a reliance on coercive economic measures, a retreat from multilateralism, and personalistic performative diplomacy.

Presidential Emergency Powers: President Trump has declared nine national emergencies, several of which have been used to carry out foreign policy actions that normally would require Congressional approval or extended regulatory reviews (Brennan Center, 2025). These include imposing tariffs on a wide array of countries and using the designation of drug cartels as terrorist organisations to use military force against traffickers. In addition, the President has issued proclamations to advance the Administration's foreign policy agenda, including imposing tariffs on specific products, suspending immigration via the southern border, and establishing an entry ban for citizens from certain countries. Multiple court cases have been filed against these actions. Of note is the Supreme Court decision on February 20, 2026 that the President did not have the statutory authority to impose tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).

Use of Coercive Measures: The Administration has shifted to using hard power tools, specifically coercive economic measures, to advance foreign policy. Illustrative cases include suspending visas to Colombian officials until Bogota agreed to accept the return of Colombian illegals from the United States; imposing "national security tariffs" on India to pressure it to stop buying Russian oil (Yerushalmy, 2025); threatening tariffs on countries that sell or provide oil to Cuba and threatening to take (unspecified) action against countries adopting the Net Zero Framework, which aims to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions from international shipping. The Administration is also expanding the scope of sanctions, targeting the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and other

ICC officials for issuing warrants for Israeli PM Netanyahu and imposing broader sanctions on ships and companies engaged in transporting Iranian oil.

Retreat from Multilateralism: The Trump Administration has withdrawn or plans to withdraw from several international agreements and multilateral organisations that were part of the network of US soft power. These include, among others, the Paris Agreement, the World Health Organization, the UN Human Rights Council, the Global Forum on Migration and Development and the Freedom and UNESCO. Together with proposed or enacted cuts to US contributions to the UN, the WTO, and other bodies, these steps reflect a deliberate disengagement from global institutions and initiatives focused on development, human rights, the environment, and health. The Trump Administration will henceforth engage primarily with the institutions that align more closely with its security and financial interests, such as the IAEA and the IMF.

Personalistic Performative Diplomacy: President Trump is a strong proponent of personalistic performative diplomacy. Intensive personal social media messaging accompanied by choreographed White House meetings in the Oval Office with visiting leaders in front of selected media and elaborate summits are used to demonstrate the President's authority and diplomatic ability to close deals and be a global peacemaker. Often, the event is structured to create performative asymmetry, focusing on the President's dominance in the exchange. While the Administration is not eschewing traditional behind-the-scenes negotiations, the public events have had limited results. The Alaska Summit between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in August 2025 is a case in point: the event was accompanied by ever-shifting Presidential messages on objectives, which caused much anxiety in Kyiv and EU capitals, leading to urgent follow-up visits to the White House. In the end, Putin made no concessions, and Ukraine, the US, and European allies reaffirmed their earlier positions.

While the style and strategies resemble those of the first Trump administration, the current approach relies on different mechanisms designed to cement policy priorities and permanently expand executive authority over foreign policy. In 2019, for example, the administration used a temporary measure to allow the executive to shift funds to build a wall along the border with Mexico. In contrast, the 2025 declaration of a trade deficit emergency seeks to permanently transfer tariff-setting authority from Congress to the President. Similarly, while the first Trump Administration relied on proclamations, administrative steps, and budgetary proposals to scale back US participation in multilateral organisations, the current Administration is pursuing institutional reorganisations, rescissions and likely legislative changes to make the withdrawals permanent. Finally, whereas in the first administration, coercive measures were largely used to extract concessions in bilateral negotiations, they are now being employed to shift foreign policy decision-making away from Congress to the executive.

Implications for US global leadership

The dismantling of US foreign policy institutions and a return to a presidentially driven, transactional foreign policy have weakened US global leadership by diminishing its soft power, reducing global trust, eroding US leadership in norm setting, and diminishing the country's ability to monitor and respond to global developments.

Diminished Soft Power

Soft power, or "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017) has been one of the strengths of US diplomacy, helping build strong alliances and coalitions, promoting liberal democratic values, and leading the world's global health and development agenda.

The US government has exercised such power through foreign assistance, media, and education, as well as cultural, health, and scientific programs. By dismantling USAGM, USAID, and other important institutions (the National Endowment of Democracy and the US Institute for Peace, among others), eliminating a large portion of State Department public diplomacy programs and suspending a number of visas for international students and researchers, the Administration is abandoning many important diplomatic tools. For decades USAID, along with other development institutions such as the US African Development Foundation and the Inter-American Foundation served as the primary channels for humanitarian and development assistance, helping build goodwill and projecting US values. Their elimination has disrupted long-standing partnerships with governments, civil society, and local communities and left a vacuum that will be filled by others, notably China.

In particular, the gutting of the US Agency for Global Media and the elimination of other USG-funded information programs managed by USAID and other institutions seriously weakens the ability of the US to effectively communicate its message, to build trust with foreign audiences, and to fight global misinformation/disinformation. The closure of USAID eliminated funding to thousands of journalists and hundreds of non-state news outlets and media-focused civil society organisations dedicated to strengthening independent media. In Ukraine alone, in 2023, USAID was the main donor to 9 out of 10 media outlets that rely on international aid (Fenster, 2025; Weimers, 2025). The EU has provided some short-term initial assistance but has indicated it cannot make up the entire shortfall. A few other governments have promised bilateral funding. But it is still unclear whether there will be any fuller commitment to support media in Eastern Europe. The end of US media initiatives is opening space not only for Russian and Chinese information operations but also for vested local oligarchic interests. China's global news networks, CGTN and Xinhua are already quickly expanding operations in parts of Africa (Clark, 2025).

Reduced global trust

The abrupt suspension of all US foreign assistance, the use of coercive tools, the personalised conduct of diplomacy and the retreat from multilateral engagement have undermined global confidence in America's reliability. This loss of trust damages America's standing as a global leader. Multinational alliances are now viewed through a transactional lens, assessed primarily in terms of their 'return on investment' (ROI) for the United States. As an example, to raise NATO's ROI for the US, President Trump pressed members to increase defence spending and shifted greater responsibility for supporting Ukraine onto Europe.

Conversely, multilateral institutions viewed as yielding low returns have faced sharp funding cuts. Combined with the arbitrary imposition of tariffs on key partners and ever-shifting Presidential positions towards rivals such as Russia and China, these moves have pushed allies to question the value of the US relationship. Many are recalibrating their foreign policies and strengthening ties with each other. Beyond governments, civil society and ordinary citizens abroad have also registered a decline in favourable views of the United States. Public opinion surveys show a notable decrease in the proportion of people who believe the United States will have an overall positive influence in world affairs or who have favourable views of the country (Jackson, 2025; Wike, 2025).

Erosion of US leadership in norm-setting

The Trump administration's actions will erode US influence in shaping international rules and norms. By retreating from cooperative frameworks, the US is ceding space to others to define the rules of the game. This retreat is particularly evident in international trade. The Trump Administration has

returned to a strategy of imposing tariffs unpredictably (Yeoli, 2025). While intended to rebalance trade in America's favour, the strategy has driven allies and partners to seek new trade relationships that reduce dependence on the United States. The European Union has now signed new trade agreements with Mercosur and India. Canada is reinforcing ties with both Europe and the Indo-Pacific to include a new trade understanding with China. The UK joined the CPTPP, and BRIC members are expanding trade and economic agreements among themselves. Even members of the Quad and AUKUS, while publicly affirming the importance of the security relationship with the US, are actively diversifying supply chains and investing in domestic industrial capacity. Whereas the Trump Administration believes the WTO system as disadvantageous to the US, most other countries, including China, continue to support its framework—though with calls for reform. This isolates the US in debates over the future of the global trading order (Wolff, 2025).

Beyond trade, the US retreat has implications for its leadership in development, global health and the environment. The loss of thousands of USAID programs will reduce the ability of the US to shape local policy environments and cultivate networks of leaders. The cutback in US commitments to global programs will undermine multilateral efforts to coordinate responses to crises, major diseases, and energy transitions. Initiatives such as Spain's Seville conference on financing for development and Brazil's proposal for a new Climate Change Council demonstrate how other countries are stepping into roles once occupied by Washington. The Trump Administration's pullback from human rights and democracy promotion will also have major effects on US influence on liberal norms. The almost total elimination of program funding, offices and teams focused on human rights and democracy promotion signals a shift away from the use of soft power. Without these institutional underpinnings, US influence will decline in debates over internet governance, digital surveillance, civil liberties, and political freedom. This will create space for others, most notably China and Russia, to more vigorously advance governance models that emphasise sovereignty over individual rights.

Reduced capacity to monitor and respond to global developments

The elimination of USAID and significant personnel reductions at the Department of State have sharply diminished the US global diplomatic presence. Cuts extend well beyond the professional foreign service corps to include thousands of career civil servants and locally employed staff, resulting in a sudden and substantial loss of institutional expertise. The absence of USAID officers in embassies across the Global South further weakens US capacity to monitor political and social developments, particularly outside national capitals. At the same time, the Administration has eliminated many recruitment and fellowship programs, which traditionally bring new talent into diplomacy, has imposed loyalty tests for promotions, and has expanded political oversight of foreign policy, factors that will reduce the number of applicants and lead to the departure of experienced professionals.

China, in contrast, is expanding its diplomatic presence, surpassing the US in the number of posts (274 vs 271) and in its footprint in key areas including Africa, East Asia, the Pacific Island Countries and Central Asia (Neelam and Sato, 2024). China also continues vigorously to place its nationals in permanent staff positions in many multilateral organisations. The US' almost complete exit from development assistance both opens opportunities and reduces the cost for rival nations to expand their influence. China is already looking for opportunities. In May 2025, it pledged \$500 million over 5 years to the WHO, making it now the largest country donor. And in Africa, where the Trump Administration is considering the elimination of US embassies, Russia is expanding its efforts to offer security assistance to obtain resource deals. Lastly, until the Department of State builds its own development staff and programs, the US will remain constrained in its ability to respond to international crises such as famine, pandemics, or natural disasters, for it has lost USAID's infrastructure. Ad hoc private partnerships or

military-led humanitarian operations do not have the networks or specialised expertise that USAID provided.

Conclusion

The trajectory of US diplomacy under the second Trump Administration marks a profound shift in how the US projects influence and is perceived globally. By dismantling longstanding foreign policy institutions and programs, eliminating most foreign assistance, privileging coercive economic tools, and retreating from multilateralism, the Administration has weakened the foundations of US soft power. Partners and allies are questioning the reliability of the US, and competitors are exploiting the vacuums left behind. Unlike in the first Trump term, the Administration is now taking steps to ensure the changes it is making become permanent through budget and other legislative proposals which permanently eliminate or transform foreign policy institutions, programs and networks. Even with potential judicial interventions and/or future policy rollbacks, the damage is likely to be long-term. The infrastructure that underpinned American soft power engagement has mostly vanished. A future Administration, fully committed to rebuilding soft power diplomatic engagement would need years to rebuild the lost institutional capacity.

The shift, therefore, may be more than a temporary disruption - it may be a turning point in US leadership in the post-Cold War order. Although the US continues to have unmatched military power and economic leverage, a long-term US absence in development, public diplomacy, and multilateral forums on critical transnational challenges is likely to accelerate the global competition for dominance in international order norm-making. With China accelerating the pace and number of its global initiatives and India, Brazil and other BRICS countries advancing reforms of international institutions, the liberal direction of the global order will very much depend on how allies and partners take up the reins in response to the US retreat. Much will also depend on how long they believe the retreat will last. Given that the Trump Administration has another three years to serve and given the uncertainties on the future course of US domestic political choices, it is likely that the absence of US soft power will be protracted.

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