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Global Development Policy and the New World Disorder

The Trump Administration's Delivery of a High-Voltage Shockwave to Multilateral Norms, Institutional Commitments and Long-Standing Principles

Stephan Klingebiel & Andy Sumner

Summary

Global development policy is a particularly revealing field in which the Trump administration combines crude transactionalism with a high level of ideological commitment, namely an authoritarian libertarianism oriented toward elite interests. This is coupled with, at times, a chaotic absence of tactical or strategic coherence. With Trump's return to the White House in January 2025, a significant phase in international affairs, including global development policy, began.

This policy brief traces the evolution of the US approach to development cooperation and exposes how Trump's approach represents an overtly aggressive assault, delivering a high voltage shockwave to global sustainable development policy, undermining multilateral norms, institutional commitments and long-standing principles of international solidarity.

The United States (US) has played a decisive role in the conception and evolution of global development policy since the mid-20th century. From the establishment of the post-Second World War order onward, the US shaped the normative, political and organisational foundations of development cooperation, often setting agendas, defining standards, and providing leadership and personnel for key multilateral institutions. Early reconstruction efforts such as the Marshall Plan and the establishment of the World Bank embedded development within a broader framework of power politics, positioning aid as both a tool of reconstruction and geopolitical influence.

Since January 2025, US development cooperation has undergone a dramatic rupture. The administration rapidly withdrew from multilateral institutions, cut budgets, and de facto dissolved USAID, transferring residual functions to the State Department. This shift was accompanied by conspiracy narratives and an explicit rejection of multilateral norms, marking a sharp departure from previous Republican and Democratic approaches alike. The brief conceptualises this shift as the emergence of a "New Washington Dissensus": a model of transactional, nationalist development cooperation that treats aid as an instrument of power rather than a global public good. Under this paradigm, development engagement is ideologically conditional, hostile to climate and equity agendas, oriented toward migration control, and explicitly transactional.

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy (December 2025) is consistent with this in the sense that it frames an "America First" approach that narrows US priorities to "core, vital national interests" and places strong emphasis on Western Hemisphere preeminence via a stated "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. For global development, foreign assistance and development finance are thus instruments of strategic competition and commercial diplomacy. US agencies are mobilised to back US commercial positioning.

The consequences are dramatic and systemic. The US retreat has destabilised the global development architecture and intensified geopolitical fragmentation. For many countries in the Global South, this represents a watershed moment, creating both new room for manoeuvre and new dependencies as states pursue multi-alignment strategies amid intensifying great-power rivalry. At the same time, humanitarian impacts are severe. Overall, the brief concludes that development policy has entered a new phase, which is narrower, more instrumental and overtly geopolitical, and is reshaping not only US engagement but the future of global development policy itself.

The US as an initiator of global development policy

The US has played a decisive role in the conception and institutionalisation of development policy since the field's inception. The country shaped most of the programmatic, structural and political foundations, often setting the agenda and providing personnel to lead key institutions. The far-reaching decisions of the second Trump administration to dismantle US development policy cannot be understood without first examining this foundation.

This brief discusses the history of US global development policy and the pivot under Trump towards the "new Washington dissensus" of transactional nationalism alongside acting as a system disruptor.

A considerable portion of the normative and institutional foundations of development policy emerged in the post-war order. Reconstruction efforts after the Second World War are now regarded as proto-development policies and, from the outset, development was deployed as a tool of power politics (Lancaster, 2007; Morgenthau, 1949). The decision to establish the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development – today the core of the World Bank Group – was taken in July 1944 to finance reconstruction in war-ravaged regions; the US had a decisive influence and secured the Bank's headquarters in Washington. The European Recovery Programme (the Marshall Plan) launched in 1948 likewise assisted war-torn European states while simultaneously securing US influence over post-war Europe.

President Harry S Truman's inaugural address in 1949, better known as the Point IV programme, marked a milestone. It called for the US to support improvements in living conditions and economic growth in so-called "underdeveloped areas", chiefly through technical assistance and knowledge transfer (Paterson, 1972). A parallel aim was to win "hearts and minds" abroad, foreshadowing later notions of soft power (Nye, 2004) in development cooperation. Following incremental steps by the US and some Western European governments in the 1950s, decisive changes came in the early 1960s. In 1961, against the backdrop of the Cold War, the US created a more professional structure for assisting developing countries: President John F Kennedy consolidated existing national initiatives under the US Agency for International Development (USAID). In the same year the Federal Republic of Germany established the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation (from 1993 renamed "and Development") and West Germany's engagement was strongly influenced by US expectations that allies would help bind developing countries to the Western bloc (Bodemer, 1976).

The US was also important in the creation in 1961 of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The DAC, a body of relatively wealthy states, came to symbolise the traditional donor community. For over six decades the central norms and quality standards for development cooperation among Western donors have been negotiated within the DAC (Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025). Following UN Resolutions on this matter, the reporting process for official development assistance (ODA), public resources provided to developing countries or for multilateral organisations to administer on their behalf, was developed there.

Membership of the DAC has grown from eight states at its founding to 33 today. Former developing countries such as Spain, South Korea and several states that joined the European Union in and after 2004 sought DAC membership, while a growing group of OECD members, including Turkey, Mexico and Chile, have not joined, signalling a looser commitment to ODA norms. Despite this, the US succeeded in establishing the DAC as a rule-setting and coordinating body.

The influence of the US has extended well beyond institutions. For decades the country dominated international personnel decisions: it supplied the DAC chair until a rotating system was adopted in

1999 (Carey, 2021), provided every head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) until 1999, and, apart from one brief interim appointment, has supplied all World Bank presidents. Its position as the largest bilateral donor, its role in multilateral organisations and its intellectual leadership gave the US a programmatic pre-eminence. The international development discourse has been shaped by US conceptual and political priorities: the basic-needs approach and neoliberal structural-adjustment policies have their origins in US debates, and the securitisation of development after the attacks of 11 September 2001 cannot be understood without reference to the ensuing US military, civilian and development operations in Afghanistan. Other donors, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, followed these trends to varying degrees, and for many decades development paradigms within Western countries and major international organisations bore the stamp of the US.

The US as a donor up to January 2025

US leadership has been evident not only conceptually but also financially. In 2024 the US provided US$63.3 billion for development cooperation, or almost 30% of the total contributions of all DAC members (US$212.1 billion); Germany, with US$32.4 billion, was the second-largest donor and is likely to take the lead in future. Relative to national income, however, the US has long been a below-average donor: ODA amounted to only 0.22% of gross national income in 2024, compared with a DAC average of 0.33% and Germany's 0.67%.

The US government distinguished "foreign assistance" from ODA. While ODA adheres to DAC standards, the term "foreign assistance", defined in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, encompasses elements outside ODA, such as military aid, and functions as an overarching category in US budgeting (Haug et al., 2025).

US governments have often pursued a development policy distinct from European donors, who have also become much more self-interested in development cooperation in recent years (Keijzer, 2025). The US never fully accepted the OECD norm of untying aid and instead explicitly linked aid to national interests. Similarly, the US not only consistently failed to meet the UN target of allocating at least 0.7% of gross national income to development but never adopted it as a self-imposed commitment. US development policy traditionally placed strong emphasis on good governance, in particular the promotion of democracy and human rights, as well as on humanitarian assistance and health. The bulk of assistance was bilateral, which made it easier to pursue national interests.

US development cooperation evolved through several distinct phases. The table below summarises these phases, noting the prevailing political context, guiding paradigms and characteristic instruments.

Table 1: US development policy, 1945–2025

Period	Context	Guiding paradigms	Instruments/programmes
1945–1960	Early Cold War, decolonisation, Marshall Plan; Truman's Point IV programme	Modernisation, technology transfer, containment of communism	Technical assistance, building national administrations
1961–1970	Establishment of USAID (1961) via the Foreign Assistance Act; formalisation of development bureaucracy	Nation-building, modernisation, economic growth, alliances against communism	Large infrastructure and education projects; Peace Corps; Food for Peace
1970–1980	End of the Vietnam War, oil crisis, critiques of top-down modernisation	Poverty reduction, basic-needs approach, participatory development, human rights	Grassroots projects, support for NGOs, integrated rural development
1980–1990	Reagan era, debt crisis in the Global South, rise of neoliberal economics	Market liberalisation, privatisation, "good governance"	Structural adjustment programmes, democracy promotion
1990–2001	Post-Cold War, collapse of the Soviet Union, liberalisation of global governance	Democratisation, rule of law and market transformation, civil society	Political conditionality, capacity building, humanitarian assistance
2001–2010	11 September 2001, interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, discourse on "failed states"	Linkage of security and development, stabilisation of fragile states	Reconstruction programmes, good governance initiatives, counter-terrorism aid
2010–2018	Obama era, adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris climate agreement	Effectiveness and efficiency reforms, decentralisation, innovation	Local solutions, evidence-based management, public–private partnerships
2018–2025	Heightened geopolitical rivalry; Russia's invasion of Ukraine; Donald Trump's first (2017–2021) and second (from 2025) terms	Systemic competition with China; geopoliticisation; "America First"; reprioritisation to US interests; radical cuts to development cooperation; withdrawal from international agreements and organisations; 2025 National Security Strategy; Ukraine as the main recipient of ODA since February 2022 and significant US contribution until Trump's return to White House	Cuts to foreign assistance, expansion of private development finance; dissolution of USAID and transfer of residual functions to the State Department; establishment of the US International Development Finance Corporation (2019) focusing on investment rather than grants; retreat from multilateral funds

Source: Authors' elaboration (based on Klingebiel & Sumner, 2025)

By 2023, USAID was managing bilateral financing for roughly 130 countries, although bilateral aid from the US reached about 10% of all developing countries. The ten largest recipients of USAID-managed funds in 2023 were, in descending order, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria; over a longer period, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Jordan were consistently major recipients, underscoring the influence of US security priorities on aid allocation (Haug et al, 2025). Only about 10% of US ODA in 2023 took the form of core contributions to multilateral development activities, although this still represented large absolute sums. The US remained a central financier of the multilateral development banks and the UN development system, providing US$1.4 billion to the World Bank's International Development Association, US$1 billion to the Green Climate Fund and over US$800 million to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Before Donald Trump's second term, responsibility for development cooperation was distributed across 21 US institutions. USAID was by far the most important, accounting for around 62% of ODA and ODA-like expenditure in 2022. The State Department was responsible for roughly 16% and the Department of Health and Human Services for about 10% (OECD, 2022). From its founding in 1961 until its de facto dissolution (Bridgeman 2025), USAID was an independent government agency and a driving force of US development cooperation. Congress created, financed and oversaw the agency, but the USAID administrator operated under the direct authority and foreign-policy oversight of the Secretary of State. Administrators were political appointees who often played prominent roles domestically and internationally. The last administrator under President Joe Biden, Samantha Power, previously served as US ambassador to the United Nations. She emphasised human rights and democracy and advocated greater "localisation" of development cooperation, for example by contracting local actors. USAID was represented on the National Security Council, giving it a role in national security and foreign-policy decision-making (Tarnoff, 2015; Haug et al., 2025).

Development policy under Donald Trump since January 2025

The advent of Donald Trump's second presidency in early 2025 transformed not only US development policy but the entire international landscape of development cooperation (Klingebiel & Sumner (Eds.), 2025). The US withdrew rapidly from central multilateral structures and slashed budgets. By mid-2025 the Trump administration had effectively dissolved USAID and transferred its remaining activities to the State Department. Whether the administration could legally abolish USAID remains contested, since Congress created the agency. Under the leadership of Elon Musk, appointed as a special envoy, the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) drove the dissolution of USAID within weeks. Conspiracy narratives were instrumentalised to justify the dismantling (Moynihan & Zuppke, 2025; Stanley-Becker, 2025); Musk circulated disinformation that USAID had financed celebrity trips to Ukraine to boost President Zelensky's popularity and labelled the agency a "criminal organisation".

The Heritage Foundation's "Project 2025", which was a blueprint for a second Trump term, had not envisaged such radical dismantling (Klingebiel & Baumann, 2024). It proposed merely returning development funding to pre-COVID-19 levels and redefining priorities, but did not contemplate the abolition of the agency. The abrupt abandonment of development cooperation is all the more surprising given that Republican presidents have often expanded the agenda. For example, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), was launched under George W Bush and became a flagship global programme.

Donald Trump's second administration pursues a power-centric, anti-multilateral course characterised by crude transactionalism or a "New Washington Dissensus" (see Box 1). Global norms,

including those embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals, are portrayed as threats to US interests. The administration's withdrawal from international organisations (e.g. WHO), disregard for international law (often accompanied by military threats) and direct pressure on other states, exemplified by baseless accusations of genocide against South Africa, constitute a paradigm shift that privileges the maximisation of short-term power over the traditional balance between values and interests.

The impact of the second Trump administration was especially significant in the case of Ukraine (Bergmann, 2025). Following Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the country became by far the largest recipient of ODA. The US, together with the EU, played a central role in this regard. The dismantling of the US development cooperation approach therefore represented a crucial setback for Ukraine.

Further challenging multilateralism, President Trump's 7 January 2026 memorandum means US withdrawal from 66 international and UN bodies. The exits concentrate in climate and environment, development, and rights and equity, including UNFCCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, UN Women, and UNFPA. The policy shift is consistent with the "New Washington Dissensus" (See Box 1). The Trump administrations actions show how multilateral commitments are treated as contingent and reversible. In practice, it reduces US voice inside technical fora while opening space for other powers to set standards, finance priorities, and monitoring frameworks. For global south countries, the immediate effects are programmatic and fiscal, since a number of listed bodies deliver public goods and convening capacity. The wider effect is normative, widening the gap between SDG-era cooperation and a more transactional geopolitics. It also raises prospects imitation by others.

Box 1: The New Washington Dissensus

We describe the development policy shift of the second Trump Administration as the "New Washington Dissensus" (NWD), an example of a "nationalist conditionality regime" (Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025).

- Its first principle reframes development cooperation as a means to weaken rather than strengthen global cooperation. US ODA recipients must confirm that their programmes do not rely on international organisations such as the UN, reflecting an effort to delegitimise multilateralism and erode the authority of institutions seen as constraining US sovereignty. Development cooperation is thus repurposed to disrupt rules-based international governance and weaken multilateral norms.
- Second, the NWD embeds ideological vetting at the core of aid, requiring recipients to certify that they do not engage with "communist, socialist or totalitarian" actors or express "anti-American" views, making aid contingent on political loyalty rather than need or effectiveness.
- Third, development cooperation is instrumentalised for domestic migration control, with projects judged by their contribution to deterring irregular migration and strengthening borders.
- Fourth, climate action and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives are systematically excluded, rolling back prior commitments and disqualifying socially transformative work.
- Finally, aid is made explicitly transactional, required to deliver economic returns for the US through benefits to US industries and workers.

Overall, the NWD represents a clear rupture with multilateralist norms, combining defunding of global institutions, ideological conditionality, and the rejection of climate and equity agendas.

For many countries of the Global South this marks a watershed. The US retreat from the multilateral system creates space for strategic repositioning, especially for politically and economically strong developing and emerging countries that can expand South–South cooperation and forge closer ties with China or Russia. Yet this newfound room for manoeuvre comes with new dependencies, increasing geopolitical fragmentation and greater susceptibility to external influence. Actors in the Global South increasingly emphasise their independence through multi-alignment strategies, but many nevertheless find themselves drawn into emerging blocs. The global architecture of development cooperation has been profoundly destabilised. Some other donors appear inclined to follow the US example, while the UN is largely paralysed in many areas. The weakening of coordinating bodies such as the DAC undermines established principles of effectiveness and coherence, leading to financial shortfalls and a loss of legitimacy for the previously Western-oriented model of development cooperation.

The ruptures in the international development landscape have grave humanitarian consequences. Estimates suggest that cuts to US development budgets could result in up to 14 million additional deaths by 2030 (Medeiros Cavalcanti et al., 2024). Refugee camps in various regions have become severely underfunded since the cuts were implemented, with noticeable effects such as the exacerbation of conflict in Sudan. The new global constellation is altering power relations. Authoritarian regimes in the Global South view the US withdrawal as an opportunity to expand their freedom of action, while Western influence wanes. At the same time, the long-standing distinction between development and geopolitics is eroding. Development policy has never been neutral. It has always served political objectives. In a context of intensified systemic rivalry, the geopolitical dimension of development takes on renewed significance.

US direct and indirect influence is tangible in many ways. Longstanding policy norms such as framing development as a shared global endeavour, combining moral and strategic redistribution, and favouring multilateral coordination, are eroding. Against this backdrop, G7 and G20 working groups are increasingly focused on the global development "architecture". The G7 Development Ministers' Chair's Summary of October 2021 is unusually explicit, calling for reform of the "international aid architecture" to "reduce fragmentation and enhance coherence, effectiveness and impact", and stressing that reform must go beyond cost-cutting to include "targeted structural realignment, mandate streamlining, and enhanced efficiency". This is not merely technical language; it signals a political intent by the G7 to reshape how development cooperation is organised, coordinated and ultimately justified.

What of US development policy in the years ahead?

The disruptive role of a second Trump administration is likely to continue. His second term in office is causing considerable concern about the future of the liberal international order (Heinkelmann-Wild, 2025). Development policy is a particularly revealing field in which the Trump administration combines crude transactionalism with a high level of ideological commitment, namely an authoritarian libertarianism oriented toward elite interests, and, at times, a chaotic absence of tactical or strategic coherence.

The National Security Strategy published in early December 2025 signals the increasingly confrontational and aggressive manner in which the US government is challenging existing global governance structures and, in particular, former allies in Europe. This approach is comprehensive in scope, making it difficult to assume that this next level of disruption will not affect how previously like-minded Western countries position themselves in development discourse and development cooperation.

Whether the US will continue with an approach that the administration itself would label "develop-

ment cooperation" or "foreign aid" remains uncertain. What does seem clear, however, is that some form of "development infrastructure" is likely to persist, albeit with a renewed mandate focused narrowly on transactional objectives. What remains of US development engagement appears set to be channelled primarily through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the latter established under the first Trump administration (Hruby, 2025). Both institutions have been retained because they align closely with US geoeconomic priorities, including competition with China on infrastructure and the securing of critical mineral supply chains. The Trump administration's self-promotional, so-called "peacemaking", initiatives and related peace rhetoric may be combined with transactional activities aimed at securing access to minerals or achieving other direct gains; this is particularly evident in the administration's role with regard to Ukraine, the situation between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia.

Under White House guidance, MCC programmes are increasingly concentrated on areas where US strategic interests intersect with developing-country needs. A central pillar is critical minerals. MCC compacts now explicitly seek to facilitate US access to resources such as rare earth elements, lithium, cobalt and nickel. These are inputs essential for semiconductors, electric vehicles and defence technologies. One can envisage MCC compacts in resource-rich regions, such as Africa's Copperbelt or lithium-rich countries in Latin America, financing transport infrastructure, regulatory frameworks or power grids to support new mining projects, with the implicit understanding that these resources will feed global markets independent of Chinese control.

In parallel, the DFC has assumed a front-line role. Created in 2019 through the merger of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) with other programmes, the DFC provides loans, equity investments and insurance to private-sector projects abroad, with a mandate to catalyse investments aligned with US foreign policy objectives. Under the second Trump administration, the DFC has increasingly prioritised deals that advance US geoeconomic interests. This includes backing rare earth processing facilities and railway upgrades in Africa designed to accelerate the transport of copper and cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo, framed as diversification away from Chinese-controlled logistics. The DFC also remains active in infrastructure financing positioned as an alternative to Belt and Road loans, for example in telecom networks, ports or solar projects in Indo-Pacific countries where the US seeks to expand its influence.

A defining feature of DFC-supported projects is their requirement for a clear commercial logic, often involving US or local firms, combined with a strategic rationale. Together, the MCC and DFC form the backbone of what increasingly resembles a new paradigm of "development cooperation": narrower in scope, transaction-driven, and explicitly tied to US geostrategic competition and business interests.

European decision-makers, in particular, should articulate a clearer, timelier and more proactive counter-strategy. Maintaining an explicit and continued commitment to global sustainable development and to development policy as a relevant policy field remains a broadly consensual approach. European actors should use this as a clear selling point for their values and strategies, and as a starting point for building alliances with partners in the Global South and beyond, including Australia, Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand.

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