

# In his image: Trump's "America First" aid program takes shape

by Cameron Hill

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US President Donald Trump at the Salute to America Celebration on 3 July 2025 in Des Moines, Iowa

Photo Credit: *The White House/Daniel Torok*

Regardless of your view of US President Donald Trump, it is undeniable that his record of using his particular style of **personalist and populist politics** to bend the established norms, institutions and administrative machinery of the US state to his will has been much more successful during his second term than during his first. In doing so, **the lines between** US "national interests", broadly conceived, and Trump's own personal, financial and political interests, and those of his entourage, have become increasingly blurred. This has also been the case when it comes to the reshaping of America's approach to foreign aid. While aid is an area on which successive presidents have often attempted to place their stamp, in just a little over eight months Trump has up-ended America's development assistance programs in a manner not seen since their creation in the postwar era.

Readers will recall that this began in the immediate weeks after Trump's 20 January inauguration **with the "manufactured chaos"** of the Department of Government Efficiency's **stop-work order and spending freeze** on virtually all foreign aid disbursements, the termination of thousands of funding agreements and contracts, multiple court challenges by contractors, federal workers and advocacy groups, and the frenzied dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), a dismantling that relied on a **heavy dose of disinformation** and involved no meaningful oversight by the legislature.

The administration has since rescinded tens of billions of dollars in foreign aid that had been previously approved by Congress. In July, the Republican majority in Congress **agreed to the administration's request** to rescind around US\$7.9 billion in approved aid funding. In August, a further US\$4.9 billion in development assistance, democracy support and international peacekeeping funding **was unilaterally rescinded** by the White House. The president's **financial year 2026 budget request**, which has been stalled due to the ongoing government shutdown, proposes around another US\$20 billion in cuts to bilateral and multilateral development assistance programs relative to 2024 levels. Trump has **repeatedly threatened to use the**

shutdown to permanently end more congressionally-approved spending with which his administration disagrees. This may well result in more cuts to **an already denuded** State Department, which has inherited the responsibility for administering what is left of the former USAID's programs.

Amidst the chaos and the cuts, the Trump administration has announced several plans that illuminate some of the dimensions of a new "America First" foreign aid policy. In May, the administration announced that all remaining US bilateral economic and development assistance programs would be channelled through a new US\$2.9 billion **America First Opportunity Fund (A1OF)** that will "provide targeted support for enduring and emerging priorities to make America safer, stronger and more prosperous". Some of the declared priorities are bipartisan and longstanding, including efforts to counter China and other "near-peer rivals", support for allies like Jordan and Egypt, and funding for the South Pacific Tuna Treaty. However, **recent reporting** suggests that the A1OF would largely bypass Congress and would also be used to counter "Marxist, anti-American regimes" in Latin America, pursue the administration's "immigration priorities" in Africa, and facilitate critical-minerals deals with Greenland and Ukraine.

In September, Secretary of State Marco Rubio **launched the administration's** America First Global Health Strategy. Despite being a vocal supporter of generous US global health programs for most of his previous legislative career, Rubio now declares that these longstanding programs are "deeply broken", that the NGOs who support them have failed to transition them to governments, and that they have created a "culture of dependency". To address these alleged failures, the new strategy promises to avert future global disease outbreaks, outcompete China's infrastructure assistance, better integrate US health support with the priorities of partner governments, leverage private sector and faith-based organisations' contributions and improve integrated planning. It also aims to "use health foreign assistance funds to procure supplies from US companies, creating opportunity for those companies to grow their presence in emerging markets". The 2026 budget proposal strips over US\$6 billion from annual US global health funding compared to 2024 levels. In addition, the Trump administration is dismantling **key parts of the scientific and research infrastructure** upon which much previous US global health engagement had been based.

The Trump administration appears to be a fan of various forms of "blended finance", albeit with no clear articulation of its development purpose. A **proposed reauthorisation** of the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) would see this entity empowered to access a US\$3 billion revolving fund that would allow it to retain and reinvest its earnings free from Congressional approval and hold an enlarged balanced sheet of investments. While originally established to help

mobilise private investment in developing countries, the Trump proposal would expand the DFC's ability to invest in high-income countries where the president deems this to be in the "national security" or "foreign policy" interests of the US. It would also enlarge the DFC board to include the Secretary of Defence (now Secretary of War). The reauthorisation has been stalled by the current government shutdown.

Trump himself does not appear to be above explicitly using unorthodox sources of finance to interfere in the domestic politics of other countries. He has **recently stated** that his decision to provide a US\$20 billion bilateral currency bailout to debt-stricken Argentina is designed to help his longtime supporter and counterpart, President Javier Milei, in upcoming congressional mid-term elections and is conditional on the election outcome. Such an open admission obviously undercuts America's longstanding critique that China uses its development funding to shape favourable domestic political outcomes in client countries.

On the multilateral front, the administration's slashing or elimination of US funding to a range of UN health, development, climate and humanitarian agencies has been accompanied by a more assertive effort to impose its worldview on those international institutions in which it retains significant influence. In the case of the World Bank, this has seen **the US push back** on the Bank's efforts to increase its climate finance and align its portfolio with the Paris Agreement, argue for the elimination of the Bank's lending to China and change procurement regulations that are seen to favour Beijing. The Trump administration has also argued for the Bank to return to its "core mission" of poverty reduction and private sector-led development. At the International Maritime Organization, the administration has **successfully threatened states** that supported a modest levy on global maritime traffic in order to reduce carbon emissions from shipping with tariffs, visa restrictions and other punishments, resulting in a last-minute scuppering of the agreement.

The US is **reportedly now considering** expanding its "Mexico City policy" — which denies US bilateral funding to organisations that provide information, referrals and services for abortion — to encompass all multilateral agencies that it funds. The policy itself **may also be expanded** to include not only restrictions on the provision of sexual and reproductive health services but also restrictions on initiatives deemed by the Trump administration to promote "diversity, equity and inclusion" and "gender ideology".

While there are portions of this agenda that might be justified in terms of either a more "pragmatic" pursuit of objective US "national interests" or overdue reforms to unsustainable programs that have become too dependent on recurrent American funding, much of it is deeply ideological and is openly presented as such. Some of it

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is also alienating America's friends and emboldening its rivals, **including in the Pacific**. Like many other aspects of the US state, America's foreign aid is being reshaped in the image of one man and the domestic political movement that he singularly personifies.

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