

# Trump's Bid To Transform International Relations May Succeed



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03-24-2025 ~ *Eliminating bureaucracy and abandoning the world order that the U.S. helped build may allow Trump to recalibrate foreign policy, at the cost of global stability.*

Since returning to office in January 2025, Donald Trump has aggressively pursued a radical reshaping of U.S. foreign policy. In early March, the State Department [terminated foreign assistance programs](#) supporting political opposition and regime change in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, deeming them no longer in the U.S. "national interest." Trump also [reversed the Biden administration's agreement with Cuba](#), after it released 553 prisoners, to ease sanctions on the country.

In February, the government issued an executive order [dissolving the Inter-American Foundation](#), which had long promoted economic and community-led development in Latin America.

The African Development Foundation is also slated to be eliminated under the executive order, while AFRICOM, the U.S. military command for Africa, [could be next](#). Trump's sweeping cuts [extend to](#) global initiatives like the [United States Institute of Peace](#) (USIP), the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and [U.S. support for political prisoners](#)

worldwide.

Facing a [divided opposition](#), a largely compliant GOP, and key loyalists in power, Trump's teardown of the foreign policy establishment is well underway. In place of the U.S.-led multilateral order, he is embracing a blunt, America First, transactional approach to international affairs centered on military threats, economic coercion through tariffs and sanctions, and stricter immigration policies—stripped of the usual lip service to human rights.

One of Trump's first priorities has been a more aggressive crackdown on unauthorized migration. Weeks into his term, his administration began [transferring undocumented immigrants](#) to Guantanamo Bay, and while migrant and advocacy groups challenged this action, in March a federal judge "expressed doubts toward those challenging the federal policy," according to a New York Times [article](#). Now, alleged Venezuelan gang members are [being sent to El Salvador](#) under a detention agreement with Trump ally El Salvador President Nayib Bukele, while Panama, Costa Rica, and Honduras have also agreed to accept third-party nationals, [under the pressure of tariffs being imposed and other economic measures](#).

Trump is also seeking greater control over strategic infrastructure abroad. In March, a consortium led by U.S. firm Blackrock [acquired both Panama Canal ports](#) in a \$19 billion deal, underscoring the role of the private sector in realizing his goals. Chinese state-run media [criticized the Hong Kong-based seller](#), and labeled the move as "[economic coercion](#)." With Chinese entities removed from the canal, Trump has increasingly [hinted at possible military action](#) to secure even broader control over the Panama Canal. In his first term, Trump [floated the idea](#) of sending private military companies to Venezuela to topple President Nicolás Maduro, a tactic that could resurface.

Tensions with NATO allies have played out publicly, undermining the transatlantic alliance that has been a crucial component of the U.S.-led global order, with Trump [wielding tariffs](#) and even threats of [annexation](#) to pressure partners. Trump is also using U.S. aid as leverage to highlight the dependence of partner countries, like [shutting off intelligence-sharing](#) and [military aid](#) to Ukraine, one of the several pressure tactics used to push Kyiv toward peace talks with Russia. Elon Musk, in turn, briefly hinted at [disabling Starlink services](#) in Ukraine, vital for the country's military communications, before walking back his comments.

This pattern of signaling intent is common among Trump allies—before the March 14 executive order was issued to force Voice of America to shut down, Musk [publicly called for its closure](#) in February.

To continue with his overhaul, Trump must dismantle much of the entrenched civil service and foreign policy bureaucracy, which he struggled with [during his first term](#). Career officials, including some Republicans [like John McCain](#), [resisted his agenda](#) through leaks, delays, and policy changes. Their efforts were complemented by the GOP's disdain for the civil service, which has [shifted increasingly left](#) in recent decades. In the final months of his first term, Trump issued [Schedule F](#), an executive order reclassifying certain career positions as political appointments, making them easier to dismiss, before Biden rescinded the order when he took office in January 2021.

Dismantling a decades-old political apparatus is no simple feat. Since World War II, Washington has built a vast ecosystem of NGOs, think tanks, and development agencies that shape U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy. Even after 9/11, as President George W. Bush leaned heavily on hard power with the launch of the Global War on Terrorism, his administration also introduced initiatives like the [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief](#) (PEPFAR), the [Millennium Challenge Corporation](#) (MCC), and the [President's Malaria Initiative](#) (PMI), to maintain international goodwill while waging unpopular wars.

These programs, alongside organizations like the Peace Corps, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, and others mentioned previously, were all repurposed by various administrations, awarded lucrative contracts, and had close ties to policymakers. Over time, a revolving door of agencies, contractors, and policymakers has reinforced and expanded this system, consolidating funding and influence.

[Until 2006](#), USAID's website openly stated, "The principal beneficiary of America's foreign assistance programs has always been the United States," with nearly 80 percent of USAID contracts and grants flowing to U.S. firms. [By 2018](#), of the [\\$48 billion](#) in official development assistance (ODA), 21 percent went to governments, 20 percent to nonprofit organizations, 34 percent to multilateral organizations, and 25 percent elsewhere.

Despite reaching nearly \$80 billion [in 2023](#) under the Biden administration, ODA

still accounted for just 1.17 percent of the federal budget. Trump's efforts to undermine ODA may not just be limited to cutting its spending but also extend to dismantling the core institutions that have driven American foreign policy for decades. Now, in his second term, his purge of the civil service is far more aggressive. After labeling institutions like USIP and the Inter-American Foundation as politicized and [aligned with Democratic priorities](#), Trump has made it harder for Democrats to justify billions of dollars for projects abroad—especially given longstanding concerns over ODA's efficiency.

[In 2015](#), the acting deputy inspector general flagged USAID's "chronic, systemic weaknesses," citing poor oversight, weak risk management, and human capital issues. By 2017, as Trump intensified scrutiny, the Carnegie Endowment reported that USAID "[lacked programmatic focus](#)" and found both the State Department and USAID were overstretched, with little evaluation of their effectiveness. Aid often went to corrupt governments, was too small to make an impact, and failed to give Washington meaningful leverage.

USIP, originally designed for conflict resolution when introduced in 1984, has increasingly been viewed by critics as a [vehicle for nation-building](#). Similarly, AFRICOM, established in 2007 to promote U.S. national security interests in Africa, [has turned its focus toward counterterrorism](#), with limited results. Aid recipients also face restrictions, [often required](#) to purchase goods and services from donor countries like the United States.

Other areas of ODA, such as global media outreach, promote a more traditional approach favored by Democrats and established foreign policy experts, have also lost their strategic edge as rival powers have undercut their effectiveness. U.S.-backed media outlets like Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty have [seen their influence wane](#) amid competition from alternative international networks like Al Jazeera, RT, and China's state-run media. These competitors have reshaped the global information sphere, while decentralized information and social media platforms have proven more effective at reaching audiences.

Meanwhile, [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI) has demonstrated the effectiveness of direct infrastructure development investment, offering countries tangible benefits in exchange for strategic concessions, such as port access for Chinese ships. [Russia](#) and [Israel](#), in contrast, have shown how unilateral military force can be used to advance foreign policy objectives.

Trump views America's lingering military and economic dominance as key tools for reasserting U.S. power in a changing global order. His more aggressive military stance and mercantilist economic approach prioritize coercion over multilateralism, seeking immediate and concrete gains in the national interest. While previous administrations invested in steady economic and diplomatic maneuvering, Trump's strategy emphasizes swift tariffs, threats, and direct pressure to drive markets and provoke immediate reactions—an approach unpalatable to the ingrained culture of the current foreign policy bureaucracy.

If successful in reshaping American foreign policy, Trump will force a departure from Washington's historical promotion of free trade. Former presidents like Bill Clinton, Bush, and Barack Obama all reduced tariffs, while Biden eased some with the EU he [raised them on China](#). Trump's global tariff increases and trade wars will have far-reaching implications, signaling the potential end of the U.S. as a faithful consumer market, challenging the dollar's status as the world's reserve currency, and questioning its commitment to protecting global sea lanes.

[American democracy promotion](#), never a consistent priority, is now without even rhetorical commitment. While the U.S. has long backed autocrats, Trump's acceptance of strongman rule extends to adversaries. His recent characterization of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [as a dictator](#) while avoiding such language for Russian President Vladimir Putin shows a deliberate loosening of ideological constraints.

Additionally, the U.S. has long been averse to international law, refusing to ratify the [International Criminal Court](#) and the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#). Yet, it has traditionally played a central role in upholding basic global legal frameworks, with Europe often supporting its efforts. Now shunning Europe, Washington's [acceptance of border changes](#) by Russia and Israel signals a growing respect for force, whether from allies or adversaries. China, Iran, and others are taking note, and may soon strongly mirror the U.S.'s use of economic and political pressure, reducing the autonomy of smaller countries.

Trump's ongoing dismantling of the foreign policy establishment does not indicate an American retreat from global affairs, but rather a radical overhaul. Washington is shedding the post-World War II and post-Cold War neoliberal order it created, characterized by multilateralism, in favor of a more confrontational, transactional approach based on unilateral strength. The erosion of institutions is another mark

of the end of America's "[unipolar moment](#)" and a return to a more volatile and unpredictable era of global affairs.

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