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# United States Foreign Aid and Multilateralism Under the Trump Presidency

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**Abstract:** This article addresses two key questions concerning US foreign aid under the 45th US President, Donald Trump (2017–21): Did the Trump administration radically restructure the foreign aid apparatus of the US government amid the recent reemergence of China as a key state actor in international development and global governance? If so, how and under which conditions did the US, as the world's largest foreign aid donor, deal with the new challenges posed by the expanding global reach of Chinese foreign aid and diplomacy? The core objective here is to look back at the Trump administration, particularly in its role in the US foreign aid apparatus vis-à-vis the reemergence of China as a global power and the decline of US influence abroad. This article maintains that the dominance of the US in the international development sector was under serious threat from two principal challenges: (1) the lack of coherent and credible strategy from the Trump administration amid the rapidly increasing influence of China as an aid donor country; and the (2) the declining legitimacy of the US as a foreign aid donor due to the exclusionary and anti-globalization discourses of Trump vis-à-vis the perceived decline of American power.

**Keywords:** foreign aid, United States, Donald Trump, multilateralism, China

## 1 Introduction

Together with military power, a state's foreign assistance and official finance programs constitute one of the key instruments for expanding its sphere of influence beyond its claimed territorial borders. Indeed, donor states deploy foreign aid as a way to influence the domestic politics of recipient states in ways that benefit the giver (Gibler and Miller 2012; Morgenthau 1962; Regilme 2018a, 2018b). The dominance of the United States (US) in the international system has depended on a wide variety of tools, including its massive foreign aid apparatus that has

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aimed to stimulate socio-economic development outcomes abroad, while also seeking to promote American geostrategic interests in recipient countries and global governance. For instance, as the independent federal agency responsible for managing foreign assistance budget and programs and the world's largest international development agency, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID 2021a), in its latest annual report, maintained that around 50 billion USD was disbursed to state recipients worldwide in the year 2020. The USAID has been responsible for sponsoring development aid projects in almost 100 countries. Moreover, the US contributed in 2017 around 10 billion USD to the United Nations (UN), which constituted one-fifth of the intergovernmental organization's total budget and approximately one-fifth as well of the 50 billion USD annual total spending of the US government on foreign aid (Hillard and Schendruk 2019). In 2020, the US government provided 2.6 billion USD to the World Food Program and 2.6 billion USD to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, thereby highlighting the substantial scope of US involvement in key areas of global governance (USAID 2021).

Yet, the credibility of US commitment to foreign assistance and multilateralism appeared to be at risk, especially during the term of former US president Donald Trump (2017–21). This challenging episode in US foreign aid programs emerged from the global rise of nativism and right-wing anti-globalization movements, whereby “populist leaders both want to reduce aid and shift its purpose from helping the neediest abroad to more self-serving political and economic ends” (Thier and Alexander 2019, 4). In the US, President Donald Trump repeatedly threatened to cut substantial contributions to multilateral institutions, to withdraw from several international treaties, and to launch military attacks abroad without the support of the UN Security Council – all of which exhibited his “disinterest in the institutions and instruments that normally act as a forum for international cooperation” (Heermans 2017, 1076–77). Although the Trump presidency was not the first administration to advocate for significant reductions in aid and less emphasis on multilateralism, Trump's persistent discourses on “coercion instruments over diplomacy” were quite unprecedented for a post-Cold War era US president (Haar 2019, 1). Meanwhile, China, which is widely perceived as the foremost challenger to US dominance, remains determined in expanding its official finance programs in the Global South (Regilme and Hodzi 2021). While Trump persistently discredited multilateralism and foreign aid as instruments of American power, Chinese President Xi Jinping (2017, 26) offered an alternative view during his 2017 speech in Davos: “we should adhere to multilateralism to uphold the authority and efficacy of multilateral institutions.” As Chinese official finance activities abroad continue their expansion and Beijing's discourses that aim to strengthen its legitimacy in the international system become more persistent, the

Trump administration's performance on the foreign aid sector did not demonstrate a more credible alternative. Under the Trump presidency, the international development sector faced a sense of uncertainty due to the disinterest of the US government in upholding multilateral institutions and its foreign aid commitments amid an emerging era of populist nationalism (Breuninger 2018; Gramer and Lynch 2019; Harris, Gramer, and Tamkin 2017).

This article addresses two key questions concerning US foreign aid under the 45th US President, Donald Trump (2017–21): Did the Trump administration radically restructure the foreign aid apparatus of the US government amid the recent reemergence of China as a key state actor in international development and global governance? If so, how and under which conditions did the US, as the world's largest foreign aid donor, deal with the new challenges posed by the expanding global reach of Chinese foreign aid and diplomacy? I maintain that the dominance of the US in the international development sector was under serious threat from two principal challenges during the Trump presidency: (1) the lack of coherent and credible strategy from the Trump administration amid the rapidly increasing influence of China as an aid donor country and the (2) the declining legitimacy of the US as a foreign aid donor due to the exclusionary and anti-globalization discourses of Trump vis-à-vis the perceived decline of American power. The core objective here is to look back at the Trump administration, particularly in its role in the US foreign aid apparatus vis-à-vis the reemergence of China as a global power and the decline of US influence abroad.

In building those two aforementioned arguments, this article is structured into several parts. First, I provide a brief historical review of US foreign aid and highlight some of its core legitimizing discourses and notable political consequences to recipient countries. Second, I illustrate the patterns of ascendancy of China as an increasingly influential state actor in the international development sector and thereby maintain that such a new development provides some difficult challenges to maintaining American dominance in several key geographical areas of contestation. The third section of the article, meanwhile, analyzes the state of US foreign aid programs and the substantive discourses on international development under the Trump administration and illustrates their incoherence. In that section, I show that the persistently changing stance of the White House on foreign aid, the perceived decline of American power, and Trump's exclusionary political discourses jointly undermined the legitimacy of the US as a status quo dominant power. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications of the decreasing legitimacy of the US in international development and global governance and China's ascent as a likely alternative to providing a rival vision of development and good governance in aid recipient countries in the Global South.

## 2 United States and Foreign Strategic Assistance's Political Consequences

The origins of US foreign strategic assistance programs stem from compelling geostrategic interests (Lancaster 2007; Regilme and Hartmann 2018; Regilme and Hodzi 2021). After the Second World War, the US and the Soviet Union emerged as competitors for dominance in the international system, and the Marshall Plan thwarted the spread of communist influence of the Soviet Union (McBride 2018, 9). In a bid to contain Soviet Union's influence in western Europe, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall inaugurated the landmark American foreign assistance program in June 1947, when he launched the plan to rebuild war-torn Europe. In 1948, the US Congress passed the Economic Cooperation Act, which provided around 12 billion USD (around 100 billion USD in 2018) to what is now known as the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt war-torn Europe from the ashes of the Second World War (US State Department – Office of the Historian). More concretely, the Marshall Plan stimulated investment, financed the repairs of public infrastructure, augmented imports, restored financial stability, and liberalized the production of goods and prices (Eichengreen et al. 1992).

The US Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 serves as the legal basis of the current foreign aid bureaucracy and programming and considers foreign aid as the transfer of financial resources from the US government to a foreign entity (McBride 2018; US Government 1961). Amid the Cold War, the US FAA framed American aid programs in the context of development cooperation that should (1) alleviate the visible effects of poverty in the world; (2) enable poor states to attain equitable economic growth; (3) encourage economic development in societies civil and economic rights thrive; (4) integrate so-called developing countries into the market-oriented global economic system; (5) and promote good governance through addressing corruption (US Government 1961).

The political consequences of foreign aid programs in recipient countries as well as the broader international system are mixed and highly contentious (Pankaj 2005; Qian 2014). Supporters of foreign aid mainly argue that it promotes economic growth and socio-political development in the Global South, fosters goodwill, and improves bilateral relations among donors and recipients. For example, while autocratic recipient countries are likely to misuse foreign aid by diverting it to military, “foreign aid promotes economic development in democracies” through the strong public demands for revenue sharing non-autocratic systems (Kono and Montinola 2013). Foreign aid, under certain conditions, could promote democracy in recipient countries through technical assistance such as capacity building of democratic institutions, imposition of

political pressures on recipient governments, and the improvement of education quality and per capita incomes (Knack 2004).

In contrast, anti-foreign aid views suggest that improved growth and development, if there is such an improvement, emerged from local governance efforts and not from exogenous factors such as foreign aid (Maren 2009; Pankaj 2005; Riddell 2008). The latest quantitative economic evidence shows that “foreign aid is often determined by the objectives of donor countries rather than the needs of recipient countries” (Qian 2014, 1). As such, foreign aid represents a “kind of subtle neo-imperialism” because it “sustains un-equal relations between the developed and developing countries” (Pankaj 2016, 105). In some cases, donor countries instrumentalize foreign aid in ways that blatantly reinforce donor interests, through the linkage of aid with geostrategic considerations to the detriment of effectively addressing poverty (Brown 2016). While there seems to be inconclusive findings on how exactly foreign aid reinforces authoritarian regimes (Faust and Bader 2014), some recent comparative empirical studies suggest that US foreign aid induces state repression and deterioration in physical integrity rights situation in recipient countries (Regilme and Hartmann 2018; Regilme and Hodzi 2021; Regilme and Parisot 2017). Notably, particularly because of “amplification effect,” foreign assistance “amplifies recipients’ existing political-institutional orientations,” thereby making “dictatorships more dictatorial and democracies more democratic” (Dutta, Leeson, and Williamson 2013, 208). Thus, foreign aid’s political consequences are likely contingent on its interactions with the domestic conditions in recipient states.

Although economic and political development emerges from a wide variety of variables, the effectiveness of foreign aid requires a more careful look with its interaction with other domestic factors and varies depending on a case-by-case basis (Collodel and Kotze 2014). There is considerable scholarly consensus, however, that donor interests shape the goals and mechanisms of foreign aid provision (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Milner and Tingley 2010). Particularly in the cases of Trump’s predecessors, the Bush administration actively used foreign aid programs in rewarding allies for their support to the US-led global war on terror, while the Obama administration rewarded and encouraged recipient states to embrace democratization as well as human rights and to comply with the Millennium Development Goals (Gibler and Miller 2012). Those strategic interests reflect the presidential administration’s ideas, normative beliefs, and diagnostic assessments of how foreign aid could effectively project tangible American interests in the international system. As such, ideational aspects of foreign aid are often overlooked in the scholarly literature, yet they are important because “ideas about the goals and purposes of aid policy shape its formulation and implementation” (Van der Veen 2011, 2). Hence, understanding the state of US foreign aid under the Trump presidency – amid the emergence of China as a key challenger power –

requires an examination not only of the material aspects of foreign aid, but also the ideas and legitimating discourses of the Trump administration.

In the scholarly and policy literatures, the definition of foreign aid varies depending on the analytic motivations of a particular source in question. The USAID Greenbook, which provides the official and most comprehensive database of all aid disbursements of the US government, records all forms of military and economic aid, including official loans and grants given to independent states since 1945 until the present. Meanwhile, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines foreign aid as official development assistance (ODA), which refers to a state's official monetary disbursements that are aimed to stimulate economic development in developing countries, but excluding loans and credits with a military objective. Yet, a holistic understanding of foreign aid requires not only the examination of the actual monetary amounts but also its publicly stated purposes and legitimating discourses (Regilme 2018a, 2019, 2021). In this article, I use the broader and more holistic term called foreign strategic assistance in order to reflect my analytic interest in understanding the Trump administration's strategy (if there was one) on foreign aid as well as public discourses on the role of the US in global governance. In my empirical analysis, I emphasize both the ideational and material elements that constitute foreign strategic support of the US: discourses, ideas, and justifications as well as the intended and actual amounts of foreign aid vis-à-vis institutional restructuring of the foreign aid apparatus.

### 3 The Rise of China in International Development

In the past decade, China recorded an annual average growth rate of at least 6%, while the US registered approximately 3%. Having the largest population in the world with 1.3 billion people, the size of China's economy is the second largest in the world and the world's largest in purchasing price parity terms (World Bank 2018). While many countries in the Global North, especially the US, faced serious difficulties in stimulating the growth of their economies, China emerged as the biggest sole contributor to global economic growth since the 2008 financial crisis. This increasing economic power provides the Chinese state some key opportunities to promote its strategic interests abroad through the extensive provision of foreign aid, loans, and grants to other states (Hatton 2017; Jennings 2017; Long 2017). In fact, while China maintained its status as a net foreign aid recipient for several decades, Beijing started to contribute in 2007 to the International Development Association, which is the World Bank's lending unit, and it has been consistently expanding its foreign aid programs, especially in the Asia-Pacific (Wan 2018). China's ascent from being ranked 16th in 2001 to 6th in 2012 in its comparative

ranking to OECD donor countries reflects its impressive expansion of influence in the international development sector (Kitano and Harada 2016, 1058).

Chinese official finance demonstrates some unique features, when compared to the US foreign aid portfolio (Regilme and Hartmann 2018). Although the Chinese state does not publish a detailed, country-by-country data of its official finance activities, the US-based AidData project of the College of William and Mary deploys the use of innovative social science methods to uncover the extent of Chinese foreign aid (AidData 2019). In its latest reporting, the AidData covers a 15-year period (2000–14) of Chinese official finance investment activities in 140 states and territories worldwide. Those investments constitute almost 4300 projects amounting to the total committed value 350 billion USD.

Notably, Chinese official finance includes three key components. First, Chinese official development assistance (ODA), which is popularly known as foreign aid for development purposes, is generally less concessional than the similar program of the US government and other traditional state actors in the international development sector. Notably, only less than 25% of the ODA from China constitutes a grant element. Second, “other official flows” (OOF) refer to those funds that are non-concessional in terms and for commercial and trade purposes, with more than 25% the amount classified as a grant. Finally, there are also some funds classified as “vague official finance” (VOF), which are considered as officially originating from the Chinese state but there is not enough data concerning its concessional terms.

The AidData (2019) research reveals the pattern of remarkable increase in the total amounts of OOF and VOF, while ODA amounts only recorded marginal increases through the years 2000–14. In 2009, the Chinese state substantially increased its ODA and VOF from around 10 billion USD in 2008 to approximately 70 billion USD. Since 2008, the recorded ODA and VOF have been remarkably high at no less than 25 billion USD at any given year until 2014, compared to the average 10 billion USD beforehand. What could be the likely reasons for such an increase? First, in macroeconomic strategic terms, the Chinese state likely considered official finance abroad as an effective way to stimulate its own domestic economy (e.g., employment for Chinese nationals and state investments abroad) in the context of uncertainty posed by the global financial crisis. Second, in geostrategic terms, China likely used increased foreign assistance as a tool to combat the Obama administration’s foreign policy that aimed to curb the expansion of Beijing’s influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Because Chinese official finance is mostly non-concessional and primarily designed as a tool for promoting commercial and trade interests, it is likely that Beijing has been implementing its aid programs as “gambit to control smaller countries” (Jennings 2017, 1). According to the AidData (2019) project, 7 out the top



10 recipients of Chinese ODA are African countries, while the recipient states of Chinese OOF were located in various regions of the world (e.g., Russia, Pakistan, Angola, Laos, and Venezuela as the top five recipient states). Perhaps the most prominent project of Chinese official finance abroad is the “One Belt-One Road” (OBOR) initiative, which aims to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe with China through a “‘belt’ of overland corridors and a maritime ‘road’ of shipping lanes” (Kuo and Kommenda 2018, 1). Together with the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund, the OBOR is an ambitious project, which is often described as the Chinese Marshall Plan. The OBOR aims to stimulate the world economy through the provision of loaned funds for public infrastructure projects for almost 70 countries worldwide.

In contrast, the US-led Transpacific Partnership (TPP) was a defunct trade agreement that sought to cut tariffs, to set new standards in internet-based commerce, and to enforce more rigorously intellectual property rights and labor laws (McBride and Chatzky 2019; South China Morning Post 2019). Despite the Trump administration’s pullout from the TPP, eleven other Pacific-rim nations continued with what is now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP). While the TPP pertained to enforcing new standards and rules in global economic governance, the OBOR focused on infrastructure projects and economic connectivity that reinforce China’s bilateral relationship with a partner country. Although later on abandoned by the Trump administration, President Obama’s TPP could have been America’s most coherent response to China’s ambitious attempts to project its interest in the international development sector, if not the global order. The abandonment of the TPP and disinterest in multilateralism as well as humanitarian foreign aid invites challenger powers, particularly China, to fill the vacuum that the Trump presidency created.

While both the US and China have used their foreign aid programs to reinforce their perceived national interests, Washington has used official finance to maintain a US-led international system and to bolster its geostrategic and security aims in the context of the Cold War, and more recently, in the war on terror (Fleck and Kilby 2010; Regilme and Hartmann 2018). Beijing, on the other hand, has used official finance to cement its position as a “leader of the Global South, with a hands-off political approach, emphasizing reciprocity and solidarity with its foreign aid recipients” (Kilby 2017, ix). Notably, the AidData (2019) research group compares American and Chinese global financing activities covering the period 2000 until 2014. Accordingly, the US official finance amounted to almost 395 billion USD compared to China’s 354 billion USD. More than 90% of the American official finance constitutes development assistance (mostly grants), while Chinese official finance

includes a more even distribution of development grants, commercially-oriented loans, and unclassified official finance packages.

The theoretical arguments concerning the purported decline of American power might have some implications on understanding the current US–China rivalry in the international development sector. Some scholars argue that the rise of China does not threaten American interests because Beijing will eventually adapt and incrementally adjust to the norms of the liberal international order that the US has reinforced over the past decades (Ikenberry 2011). The implication of that view suggests that Chinese official finance, while it demonstrates some noticeable differences from Western aid, may still change and converge with the dominant norms in the international development sector. Meanwhile, another view states that the rise of China is structurally shaped to undermine violently the dominance of the US (Mearsheimer 2006). By implication, China’s recent emergence as one of the key actors in international development sector suggests that it may be determined to weaponize its official finance programs abroad as a potential tool for curbing US dominance in key geographical areas of contestation, particularly in Africa and East Asia.

Hence, what are the key challenges for US foreign policy concerning China’s ambitious official finance strategy abroad? First, in terms of the supply side of US foreign aid, Washington’s elites and foreign policy leaders face the serious challenge of dramatically increasing and revamping its official finance abroad in ways that could match the ambition and scope of Beijing’s programs. Another key challenge refers to the need to formulate a long-term and sustainable official finance program that could mutually benefit the US and its partner states as well as reinforce American interests worldwide. Second, in terms of the demand side of US foreign aid, the US government faces the challenge of balancing its commitment for both domestic public spending and official finance abroad, considering that effective and comprehensive welfare support services within the US have been in decline. Another key consideration pertains to the issue of legitimacy. US allies found it difficult to support any new US official finance program considering that the Trump administration’s discourses and changing policy stances signaled inconsistency in America’s commitment to international development. Fourth, China’s OBOR initiative, which are mostly official loans, is likely to trigger a sense of dependency and debt distress among recipient countries in the Global South. Rather than fostering debt sustainability, which many Western donor countries prefer considering their various multilateral systems of accountability and control, Chinese aid strategy poses a different challenge for recipient countries. Indeed, Beijing’s OBOR is likely to make very poor countries “face a significantly increased risk of a sovereign debt default if planned BRI projects are implemented in an expeditious manner and financed with sovereign loans or guarantees” (Hurley,

Morris, and Portelance 2018, 5). Canada-based Center for Global Development, an independent development policy think tank, identified eight Global South countries that are likely to face debt default due to the nature and scope of its bilateral loan agreement with China: Djibouti, The Maldives, Laos, Montenegro, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. For that reason, the US government is given the option to reinforce multilateral aid-giving initiatives with India, Japan, and the European Union in a bid to provide a foreign aid packages that are less likely to make recipient countries debt-ridden (Chatzky and McBride 2020). Finally, with the aim of increasing its legitimacy in development aid sector, the US government is pressured to make its foreign strategic assistance programs more responsive to the long-term development needs of recipient countries without making them over-dependent on foreign loans and grants. In doing so, national governments in the Global South are increasingly being pressured to rethink its bilateral relations with China, especially that an increasing number of recipient countries in South America, Asia, and Africa have been questioning the consequences of increased reliance on Beijing's official finance initiatives (Ferchen 2020). For example, Myanmar has been intensifying its development cooperation with the US and Japan, while the opposition politicians and critics in the Philippines have been pushing the Duterte administration to severely constrain Chinese loans and grants. Meanwhile, the Brazilian government criticized China's strategy because of the latter's trade reliance on importing only raw materials and agricultural produce from its partner countries (in exchange for loans), rather than high-skilled services and finished products that could be highly profitable for partner countries (Ferchen 2020). In addition, the controversial Hambantota port agreement in Sri Lanka – in which its government eventually had to sell one of its ports to Beijing in order to settle the loan that emerged from the construction costs – reinforces serious concerns that Chinese-funded loans for public infrastructure are harmful to the long-term development aims of recipient countries (Ferchen 2020; Lo 2019).

## 4 Foreign Strategic Assistance During the Trump Presidency

During the Trump presidency, the US foreign strategic assistance suffered from the lack of consistent and credible political support from the White House (Breuninger 2018). More concretely, the White House sent confusing, ambivalent, and contradictory signals concerning President Trump's policy (or lack thereof) concerning foreign aid (Breuninger 2018; Gramer and Lynch 2019; The Borgen Project 2018; Thrush 2018). Trump's ambivalent attitude toward the role of US foreign aid in

reinforcing American interests abroad is not surprising. In fact, his political discourses during the presidential campaign foreshadowed a presidency that could focus on so-called domestic issues rather than global governance, unless foreign engagements abroad clearly and directly benefit Americans. The New York-based Council of Foreign Relations succinctly yet accurately characterized the Trump administration's lack of commitment to US foreign aid programs (Hillard and Shendruk 2019, 9):

President Trump's 2019 budget proposal would take a knife to several UN bodies, slashing foreign aid contributions and zeroing out the United States' voluntary payments to many UN entities, including UNICEF and UNDP. The administration has also voiced support for limiting aid to member states who vote against U.S. interests at the United Nations. But it is unclear how many of the president's proposals will survive the federal budget process.

The Trump administration's discourses suggested ambivalence if not outright rejection of the importance of humanitarian foreign aid and multilateral institutions. The Trump administration argued that foreign aid has been "spent wastefully or funneled to ineffective and inefficient programs in international organizations including the United Nations" (Gramer and Colum 2019, 3). To rectify such a perceived problem, the Trump administration maintained that funds from foreign aid programs must be redirected towards domestic investments (Gramer and Colum 2019, 3). In a speech to the UN General Assembly on September 2018, Trump rejected the values that underpin humanitarian foreign aid and multilateral cooperation (Trump and Ward 2018, 55–56):

America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. Around the world, responsible nations must defend against threats to sovereignty not just from global governance, but also from other, new forms of coercion and domination.

Yet, the legitimacy of American power – particularly because of the Trump administration's lack of commitment on US foreign aid programs – appeared to be at serious risk (Regilme 2019, 101). During the Trump presidency, a compelling long-term strategy on foreign assistance programs remained unclear. As such, Trump's rhetorical strategy during his inauguration address focused on the theme of "America First." That theme suggested a foreign policy discourse that embraced a non-interventionist and blatantly nationalist stance. During the presidential campaign, "foreign aid was not a key issue... even though it is well positioned to be cut as part of any budgetary retrenchment" (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2017, 72). Trump's foreign policy discourses suggested a sense of ambivalence, particularly because "at time he criticized aid, preferring that funds be spent at home,

but at other times, he highlighted its importance for strategic and humanitarian purposes” (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2017, 73).

In his 2017 National Security Strategy, Trump introduced his notion of “peace through strength” (Haar 2019). In policy terms, that meant the US federal budget for diplomacy would be reduced, while the military and defense budget would be dramatically increased. Specifically, Trump advocated for the planned reduction of 17.3 billion USD in the State Department’s budget, which also included the 700 million USD worth of cuts for socio-economic development aid for key South American countries, and for the dramatic increase of 54 billion USD for the Defense Department. While the Xi administration in China recognized the importance of soft power and military capabilities in projecting its interests, the Trump administration’s desire to reduce US diplomatic apparatus to a minimum potentially constrained Washington’s abilities to contain Beijing’s increasing influence in the international system.

Yet, the White House appeared to be determined in using foreign aid as a form of reward to countries sympathetic and directly beneficial to US interests. Whereas previous presidencies had given US humanitarian aid both to allies and adversaries, albeit with varying types and amounts, the Trump administration systematically skewed foreign aid provision mostly to allies, with the expectation that such assistance would immediately yield benefits for the US. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2018, Trump articulated his vision of a supposedly transformed US foreign aid program (Toosi 2019, 7):

We will examine what is working, what is not working, and whether the countries who receive our dollars and our protection also have our interests at heart... Moving forward, we are only going to give foreign aid to those who respect us and, frankly, are our friends.

This blatant instrumentalization of foreign aid came from the diagnosis that American interests have not been seriously considered in aid disbursements. As the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley (2019, 9) asserted, US “foreign aid policies are stuck in the past and often operate on auto-pilot without considering the conduct of the countries who receive our aid.” Haley referred to the case of South Africa, which has been one of the largest recipients of US foreign aid that was primarily allocated for the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Despite the longstanding provision of US aid that was believed to alleviate the welfare of millions of South African citizens, Haley (2019, 12) underscored that the South African government has voted “against the U.S. position at the United Nations 82% of the time – among the worst in the world” and has been “an extremely hostile voice against many critical U.S. interests.” Haley’s pronouncements reflected the broader pattern in Trump’s foreign policy that, in effect, considered “as if Africa was irrelevant, even

crudely insulting the region,” considering that “his rejection of the Paris Climate Agreement and membership in the World Health Organization translated into significant loss of money destined to help African countries,” not to mention that Trump “was the first US president this century not to visit Africa” (Khan et al. 2021, 11).

In redress of what appeared to be a historically imprudent allocation strategy of foreign aid, the Trump administration sought to restructure the official finance strategy of the US government in ways that could undercut China’s attempt for expanding its geostrategic dominance. Despite its ambivalent and inconsistent discourses towards aid, Trump, “with little fanfare” signed on 5 October 2018 the BUILD Act (Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development), which “created a new foreign aid agency – the United States International Development Finance Corporation [DFC] – and gave it authority to provide \$60 billion in loans, loan guarantees and insurance to companies willing to do business in developing nations” (Thrush 2018, 2). This policy initiative, as envisioned by Trump at that time, aimed to “reform and strengthen U.S. development finance capabilities into a new federal agency to help address development challenges and foreign policy priorities of the United States” (OPIC 2019a, 1). As a new federal agency that the Biden presidency eventually inherited, the DFC has consolidated the OPIC (Overseas Private Investment Corporation), which was established in 1971 to finance and assist American businesses to gain foothold in new markets, and the USAID’s Development Credit Authority. Although widely considered as less ambitious than China’s OBOR, the DFC promises a 60 billion USD investment cap together with more stringent accountability mechanisms, technical assistance for development finance programs, closer cooperation with the State Department and the USAID, and the prioritization of low-income countries for development finance (OPIC 2019b, 6–10). During the first year of the Biden presidency, however, the DFC presented itself as “an economically viable form of private sector-led investment, offering a robust alternative to state-directed investment which often leaves countries saddled with debt”; rather than replacing foreign aid, the DFC “complements the work of U.S. Government aid programs” (DFC 2021, 13–14).

The BUILD Act does not necessarily suggest for Trump a sudden shift toward unconditional regard for foreign strategic assistance but instead a last-minute realization of the need to hinder Beijing’s increasing influence in the international development sector. As the eventual predecessor of OPIC, the DFC is remarkable because Trump slated the OPIC, along with 61 other federal agencies, for elimination, particularly in the first year of his tenure (Runde and Bandura 2018, 15). Whereas the China’s OBOR relies on a state-to-state based official finance and lending, the DFC – through the BUILD ACT – relies on market-based tools that foster cooperation of US corporate entities and US foreign strategic assistance bureaucracy

in stimulating socio-economic development in low-income countries (Runde and Bandura 2018). This reliance on market-based orientation for thwarting China's ambitious geostrategic expansion is reflected in US State Secretary Michael Pompeo's (2018, 1) remarks:

The BUILD Act implements President Trump's vision for our development finance institutions. We are enabling them to mobilize private sector investment to accelerate development and move societies forward. The Act provides opportunities for American companies to compete overseas and create jobs here at home, a critical component of the President's national economic strategy. BUILD strengthens the U.S. government's development finance capacity, offering a better alternative to state-directed investments and advancing our foreign policy goals.

Notably, US domestic public support for humanitarian foreign aid did not reflect Trump's ambivalent foreign policy (Kull 2017). Besides, various "public opinion surveys on alliances, trade, and immigration all reveal public sentiment shifting away from Trump's stated positions" (Drezner 2019, 729). In the 2016 poll conducted by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs, almost 65% of those surveyed expressed their approval for maintaining America's active participation in world affairs (Kull 2017, 1–2). That same survey also suggested that Trump's repudiation of "globalism" is unpopular, considering that only 2 out of 10 survey respondents agreed with the statement that "the U.S. should use its power to make the world be the way that best serves U.S. interests and values" (Kull 2017, 2). Although the Trump administration advocated for a dramatically reduced development aid in the Global South, 8 in 10 of surveyed Americans in the Chicago Council of Global Affairs 2016 poll support US-funded humanitarian assistance, while 2 in 3 Americans agree that the government should provide "aid that helps needy countries develop their economies" (Kull 2017, 4). The recent surveys from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs have demonstrated substantial American interest in reducing US budget on foreign economic and military aid, but the survey respondents have considerably overestimated the actual US spending on those policy areas (Kafura 2018, 2). Nevertheless, surveyed respondents in the 2018 iteration of the Chicago survey demonstrate overwhelming support for certain forms of US assistance in promoting democracy abroad, including technical assistance to countries holding their first elections, electoral monitoring assistance, capacity-building assistance to civil society groups, or even withholding some aid to pressure countries to pursue democratization.

In addition, the Trump administration demonstrated inconsistency in its discursive policy stance on foreign aid (The Borgen Project, 2018). In terms of institutional continuity, in early May 2017, the Trump administration appointed Mark Green as the top executive official of the USAID, whereby Republican and

Democratic legislators supported Green's bid for his long track record in international development sector. That move somehow signaled that the Trump presidency, while calling for aid reductions, may had been committed to sensible yet effective foreign aid strategy. Yet, that sense of optimism later on dwindled in late May 2017, when the White House published its 2018 budget proposal that called for 33% cuts in the regular budget of the Department of State and the USAID and for institutional reorganization in the diplomatic apparatus (Office of the President of the United States/Office of Management and Budget 2018). Another example of the Trump administration's lack of commitment to active US diplomacy abroad pertains to the time when US State Secretary Rex Tillerson ordered an unexpected hiring freeze, which surprisingly halted the deployment of 97 applicants in the pre-employment stage for foreign placements by the USAID. In December 2017, Trump made foreign aid its blatant tool for international bargaining by threatening countries that voted for the UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Trump's decision to acknowledge officially Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

In early 2018, the Trump administration withheld 65 million USD from the UN Relief and Works Agency due to complaints of organizational inefficiencies, while threatening to halt the important humanitarian assistance of the organization. At that time, Trump blatantly threatened to stop foreign aid to the Pakistani government for its apparent inability to curb terrorism and to maintain regional security. By cutting foreign aid to Pakistan, which is a key ally in US counterterrorism efforts in South Asia, the Trump administration faced the risk of undermining US geostrategic interests in the region without presenting a clear and compelling alternative strategy for improving the effectiveness of its aid programs therein. This decision by the Trump administration was likely pushed by US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley (2019, 7–8), who emphasized that several aid recipient countries have been sidelining US interests and advocacies within the UN:

In 2017, Pakistan received nearly \$1 billion in U.S. foreign aid, the sixth most of any country. Much of the aid went to the Pakistani military. Some went for road, highway and energy projects to assist the Pakistani people. It is more than fair to ask what the U.S. gets in return for our generosity. On all key votes at the UN, Pakistan opposed the American position 76 percent of the time. Much more troubling, Pakistan also has a long history of harboring terrorists who have killed U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

In April 2019, the State Department confirmed its intention to implement Trump's "repeated threats to end U.S. foreign assistance programs with El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras," without providing a clear plan of which programs would be affected (Mohammed, Zengerle, and Cowan 2019, 1). This plan to eliminate foreign aid to Central America potentially undermined US interest of reducing crimes and political violence in the region, in a way that could slow migration



flows. As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy affirmed the importance of such aid because it was intended “to address the causes of migration – reduce poverty, violence, gangs, improve rule of law, and reform justice systems,” and the plan to eliminate such aid was akin to “shooting ourselves in the foot to cut off the assistance” (Mohammed, Zengerle, and Cowan 2019, 20).

The Trump administration’s determination to cut funding for foreign aid was halted by a strong bipartisan opposition from Congress, which argues that the cuts would undermine “national security and US foreign policy objectives” (Hansler and Westwood 2019, 9). In the 2019 budget proposal, the Trump administration called for a 26% reduction in the budgets of the State Department and the USAID, which showed the administration’s commitment to substantially limit the institutional size and manpower of the US foreign strategic assistance apparatus. Those proposed cuts, although not realized, likely undermined the trust of beneficiaries of UN programs, including its work on human rights promotion projects, peace-keeping activities, and other humanitarian programs. On September 2019, the Trump administration, however, eventually dropped its plan of cutting four billion USD worth of funds for the State Department and the USAID (Hansler and Westwood 2019). As such, “over the course of his presidency, Trump has repeatedly called for slashing funding by over 20%, only to have the idea rejected by Congress” (Cohen 2020). In particular, the Trump administration thrice attempted to reduce USAID budgets, exerted two other attempts to cancel the aid funding that Congress already allocated, commissioned a problematic aid review that blatantly reclassified nations as allies and adversaries, undermined the legitimacy of multilateralism and development assistance, and caused “a combination of high-level vacancies and highly-controversial appointments to political positions within US foreign aid agencies” (Igoe 2020a, 2). The Trump presidency undermined women’s reproductive rights and access to family planning domestically and globally, as “he reinstated and massively expanded the Global Gag Rule, restricting \$8.8 billion in U.S. foreign aid funding for international health programs that provide or even mention abortion,” while cancelling US contributions to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) that gives contraception and pregnancy health care to poor women in at least 150 nations (Bassett 2018, 2). However, the budget allocated for foreign aid and contributions to international organizations remained almost at the same level recorded during the Obama administration (Campbell 2018, 2).

During its final year, the Trump presidency demonstrated misplaced priorities by focusing instead on the public image of foreign aid rather than expanding its coverage to countries ravaged by the increased socio-economic turmoil amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In early December 2020, Trump approved an executive order

that mandated all US foreign aid to be rebranded, thereby commanding all 22 federal agencies that provide US aid abroad “to use a common logo on their packaging” (Lee 2020, 2). This choice of logo was to be made by Trump within 30 days, but the order was not eventually implemented most likely because of strong resistance from key veterans of the US aid establishment. For example, Stephanie Bluma, a former high-ranking USAID official, opposed the order in ways that resonated quite well with many other foreign aid bureaucrats: “USAID has 60 years of equity out there. It is a well-known brand in the places that USAID works. So I think messing with that particular brand without doing thorough research, yeah, I do think that could do harm” (Igoe 2020b, 3). During the last few weeks of his term, the Trump presidency requested Congress to cut “\$4 billion in funding for GAVI, a public-private partnership promoting vaccination in low-income countries” – a policy move that generated “more criticism of the president’s approach to global health efforts in general and the Covid pandemic in particular” (Emma, Lippman, and McGraw 2021, 2). Before relinquishing his presidential powers on January 2021, the Trump administration pressured Congress to cut 16.6 billion USD foreign aid and diplomatic funding, which was aimed to paralyze “development assistance, global health programs for both the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, migration and refugee assistance, educational and cultural exchange programs, and funding for international military education and training” (Gramer 2021, 6–7). None of those initiatives for budget cuts eventually prospered, as resistance within Congress and the foreign aid bureaucracy proved to be effective.

Despite being one of the world’s largest economies and the biggest aid donor measured in absolute amounts, the US ranks as one of the lowest among high-income countries when its aid is measured as a percentage of the gross national income (GNI) (Donor Tracker 2020). Although the UN called for governments of rich countries to provide foreign aid that is worth at least 0.7% of their GNI, the US only provided aid in 2018 valued at a mere 0.17% of its GNI. That percentage is so much lower than three largest donors based on that measure: Sweden (1.04%), followed by Luxembourg (0.98%) and Norway (0.94%). Notwithstanding the share of foreign aid compared to the very large economic size of the US, many Americans remain convinced that the federal government has been overspending on international aid and development. Indeed, based on the 2016 YouGov research, 51% of US respondents affirm that their government spends excessive levels of foreign aid, in contrast to 9% of the total number of respondents who urge the US government to provide more assistance to economically impoverished countries (Moore 2016). Notably, the YouGov research reports that among Republican respondents, 68% remain convinced of the excessive spending on US foreign aid, while only 42% among Democrats. Thus, considering its populist motivations, the Trump administration’s anti-foreign aid rhetoric likely emerged because of the

apparent lack of domestic public within Republican and Democrat constituencies. Although the rhetoric might not have triggered actual and considerable aid reductions, Trump aimed to consolidate his support base and appeal to anti-aid advocates within and beyond the Republican Party.

Reviewing the four years of the Trump administration's discourses and policy actions towards foreign aid reveals several key insights. First, Trump did not articulate a compelling long-term strategy for revamping its US foreign aid security apparatus, despite the planned establishment of the DFC through the BUILD Act. Trump's eventual support for the BUILD Act, which represented huge investments from the federal budget, likely emerged from strong bipartisan push from Congress and other powerful stakeholders within Washington DC who were determined to undercut China's expansion efforts through the OBOR. Second, Trump's policy discourses, which condemned multilateralism and humanitarian-based foreign aid, undermined the effectiveness of intergovernmental organizations in its provision of global public goods and the credibility of US foreign policy in general. Such a deterioration in US credibility in the international system galvanized rising powers such as Russia and China to project their national interests in a more flexible manner (David 2017; Regilme and Parisot 2017). Third, despite its bold political discourses that discarded multilateralism and foreign aid, the Trump administration remained constrained in building long-term institutions and bureaucratic transformations that could have reflected his nativist and right-wing anti-globalization ideology. As International Relations scholar Daniel Drezner (2019, 723) accurately noted, the Trump administration "has succeeded more in the enervation of existing institutions dedicated to liberal internationalism than in the creation of populist alternatives," and "through a mixture of intention and incompetence," it "has succeeded in weakening foreign policy bureaucracies." As such, Trump's failure to embed his ideological predispositions in foreign policy could be attributed to the strong domestic political pressures including the domestic public's support for continued US engagement abroad as well as strong bipartisan opposition from Congress.

Trump's policy record on foreign aid has engendered an uncertain future for the dominance of the US in the international development sector, notwithstanding a nascent Biden presidency that is avowedly supportive of multilateralism and activist US foreign policy in global governance. That is precisely because a compelling and well-funded foreign aid strategy constitutes a quintessential tool for maintaining, if not reinforcing, US influence in various world-regions that are now being highly contested by reemerging powers such as China. Beijing is likely to continue in expanding its sphere of influence in the international development sector, especially with the tarnished and unpredictable state of US foreign policy strategy after the Trump presidency. Second, there is a danger that the current US

allies could blatantly hedge, if not totally shift, their foreign policy stance away from American interests, amid China's ambitious expansion in official finance. That is likely to be the case when one considers the Pew Research Center survey, which show that 70% among the survey respondents from 25 countries expressed that they did not have confidence in the Trump administration (Wike et al. 2018). While that survey finding reflected the declining legitimacy of the US at the international level, many domestic stakeholders in the US political establishment, both from the left and right of the political spectrum, have said that American power is in decline (Ho-Fung 2018, 40; Regilme 2019, 158). Although the 2021 Pew Research Center survey of respondents from 16 countries "finds a significant uptick in ratings for the U.S., with strong support for Biden and several of his major policy initiatives," the large majority expressed serious concerns about the sustainability and predictability of the American domestic politics (Wike et al. 2021).

## 5 Conclusions

In this article, I analytically reviewed some of the key challenges of US foreign strategic assistance programs amid the emergence of China as a powerful donor country and the persistent disinterest of the Trump administration in multilateral cooperation. I demonstrated how the Trump administration substantially undermined the credibility and the foundational legitimization discourses of US foreign strategic assistance programs. His administration's attempts to cut substantial amounts of foreign aid were constrained by Republican and Democratic Members of Congress who believe that foreign strategic assistance serves as a key instrument of promoting US interests abroad and in various global governance issues. The Trump administration did not formulate a credible and coherent narrative that could have bolstered the legitimacy of its foreign strategic assistance programs amid China's increasing instrumentalization of official finance to sideline US and Western interests in the Global South.

The current administration of President Joe Biden has vowed to undo the reputational damage that the preceding administration did upon US legitimacy in global governance. In terms of foreign aid, the Biden administration has thus far elevated the prominence of the USAID as a key institutional instrument of America's global diplomacy strategy. Specifically, the Biden administration nominated Samantha Power as the 19th USAID administrator. It is perhaps the first time in recent history that a high-profile public figure such as Samantha Power (a former journalist, the UN ambassador under the Obama administration, and a former human rights professor at Harvard) will lead the foreign aid agency of the world's biggest donor state in terms of absolute amounts. Aside from the appointment of

Power, President Biden also made the USAID administrator position eligible for a permanent seat in the powerful National Security Council's (NSC) Principals Committee, thereby demonstrating the new administration's commitment that the promotion of national security requires effective leveraging of non-militaristic instruments such as foreign aid and diplomacy. In her roles at the USAID and the NSC, Power is responsible for orchestrating US actions abroad concerning the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, conflict and humanitarian problems, and democratic recession (USAID 2021b, 1). This is a remarkable feat to the extent that non-traditional security issues (e.g. global public health, democratic backsliding, climate change) have been recognized as core American interests that constitute the mandate of the powerful NSC.

Yet, the challenge for the new administration's foreign aid strategy should not stop at the level of notable leadership appointments; rather, the future of US foreign aid strategy requires a coherent strategy that deals with major global governance challenges such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of autocratic regimes. Most importantly, a foreign assistance strategy that guarantees the political agency and material well-being of the most vulnerable people in recipient countries should constitute a key priority in the planning and implementation of foreign aid programs of both the US as the status quo power as well as reemerging powers, including China. At its best, foreign aid could be a short term and immediate solution to some of the worst humanitarian disasters and crises in the Global South. The international development sector, however, rests on problematic foundations underwritten by hierarchical and stratified socio-economic relations between and within nation-states (Regilme 2021). As such, the future of foreign aid scholarship and praxis must seriously consider how principles of global distributive justice and political equality can be fully realized both in the rules of and policy actions in global governance; in that scenario, a world order built on foreign aid becomes obsolete.

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