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Flipping the table

Once a global leader, the US now obstructs the very goals it helped build — with global development falling victim to domestic politics

Development has always been an elite preoccupation. Politicians, policymakers and people in the broader foreign policy community intuitively understand that promoting prosperity and social development in poor countries is an act of enlightened self-interest. It spreads goodwill and ultimately makes the world a safer and more secure place, which benefits Americans too. They also know that the outlay is relatively small — for a tiny percentage of the overall budget, about one per cent, you can do big things.

The elite consensus has, for the last several decades, been bipartisan. Republicans and Democrats may differ in how they emphasise certain aspects of global development – Democrats tend to support reproductive health and environmental issues more than Republicans – but on the fundamental question of whether the United States should be a leader in global development, there was never a partisan dispute. Yes, some conservatives have always been isolationist, but their influence was marginal. Indeed, it was the Bush administration and a Republican Congress that oversaw the massive expansion of American leadership on global development, including PEPFAR, the Global Fund, the Presidential Malaria Initiative and the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

But over the first 100 days of the Trump administration, we have seen that bipartisan consensus evaporate — and with incredible speed.

Global development has suddenly become a partisan cause.

In one of his first moves in office, Trump swiftly dismantled USAID. Because this is an institution that houses programmes that so many Republicans have championed over the years, one would have expected a degree of bipartisan pushback — but there really was not. It was only Democrats who strenuously objected to this move. Republicans may tacitly

> support USAID, but they are not taking meaningful steps to stop the wholesale dismantling of the agency and, with it, American leadership on global development. Global development has suddenly become a partisan cause — subject largely now to the whims of partisan domestic politics in ways that it simply has not in recent past.

The point is that we can no longer rely on a broad bipartisan consensus to support American leadership in global development. That has been killed by the new political reality imposed by the Trump administration. Without that, American support for global development is extremely tenuous and may not ever return — at least to the levels we've seen in the past.

Multilateralism under attack

The Trump administration's attack on global development began in Washington, DC but soon spread to New York. Multilateral institutions in the development and humanitarian space are buckling from the sudden withholding of American funding. UN agencies are laying off people by the thousands as they contend with massive budget shortfalls. This is happening across nearly all UN agencies — the World Food Program (WFP) appears to be hit the hardest, a consequence of the fact that it gets a larger share of its funding from the US government than others. In April, the WFP said it was laying off about 6 000 people because it faces a 40 per cent budget shortfall — which is not coincidentally about the share of the WFP budget typically picked up by the United States. UNHCR, the IOM and many others are also laying off thousands of staff.

Beyond funding issues, there's another development at the UN that deserves attention. In March, during an otherwise innocuous meeting of the General Assembly in which it was voting to formally recognise an 'International Day of Peaceful Coexistence', a mid-level American diplomat stunned the Assembly hall by objecting to the resolution in question on the basis of the fact that it affirmed the Sustainable Development Goals. It's worth quoting this statement in full:

'Put simply, globalist endeavours like Agenda 2030 and the SDGs lost at the ballot box', said Counsellor for Economic and Social Affairs (ECOSOC) at the US Mission to the UN Edward Heartney, to a stunned General Assembly hall. 'Therefore, the United States rejects and denounces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the

Sustainable Development Goals, and it will no longer reaffirm them as a matter of course.'

Now, the most consequential country at the UN is routinely and deliberately objecting to references to the SDGs, which is tantamount to an attack on all the UN does in global development.

This is the United States taking direct aim at the organising principle of development at the United Nations. This statement is the diplomatic equivalent of ripping the foundation from a decade of work at the UN — not just walking away from the table, but flipping it over on the way out.

And we have seen in various UN forums – such as in April, at the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development – the US objecting to resolutions or blocking consensus because of some reference to the SDGs. The CSTD is a platform in which countries can strategise on the best ways to leverage science and technology to support the Sustainable Development Goals, which is particularly important for most of the developing world. The US gummed up the works, though, and blocked consensus because the text in question referenced the SDGs.

This is apparently Trump administration policy. Now, the most consequential country at the UN is routinely and deliberately objecting to references to the SDGs, which is tantamount to an attack on all the UN does in global development.

How can the UN and other countries respond?

So far, other countries have responded with resounding support for the SDGs, rejecting various American proposals to scrap references. When these proposals are put to a vote, they lose with overwhelming support — for example, the American proposal to scrap references to the SDGs in the General Assembly resolution establishing an International Day of Peaceful Coexistence lost with 162 votes in favour and three against (Argentina, Israel and the United States).

This united defence must hold. The alternative is a situation in which UN member states scrap routine affirmations of the SDGs — essentially taking the easy way out rather than succumbing to American pressure. Such an outcome would dilute the political salience of the SDGs as the UN's organising principle of global development and ultimately undermine the entire project of sustainable development.

Filling a giant funding gap left by the United States similarly demands a unified response from UN member states. In late April, The White House released a 'Skinny Budget' that sketched overall priorities without detailing specific cuts. But it signalled massive reductions in foreign aid, by about 80 per cent. When the full budget is released, the Republican-led House will likely rubber-stamp most of it. The Senate will offer some resistance. Reconciliation between House and Senate budgets will ultimately be led by the top Republicans and Democrats on the Appropriations Committees — just four people. Some programmes might be restored. Or not. Even restored programs could be undercut by a White House that refuses to fund them.

This uncertainty demands that other donors, particularly in Europe, recognise that the domestic political foundations of American leadership on global development have collapsed. Traditional donors must acknowledge a hard truth: the United States is not coming back to development leadership — at least not at the scale we've known. Even if a future administration reverses course, it won't fully undo the damage.



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