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Redefining Leadership:

**US Diplomatic Theatre and the
Retreat from Multilateralism**

By

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9 January 2026

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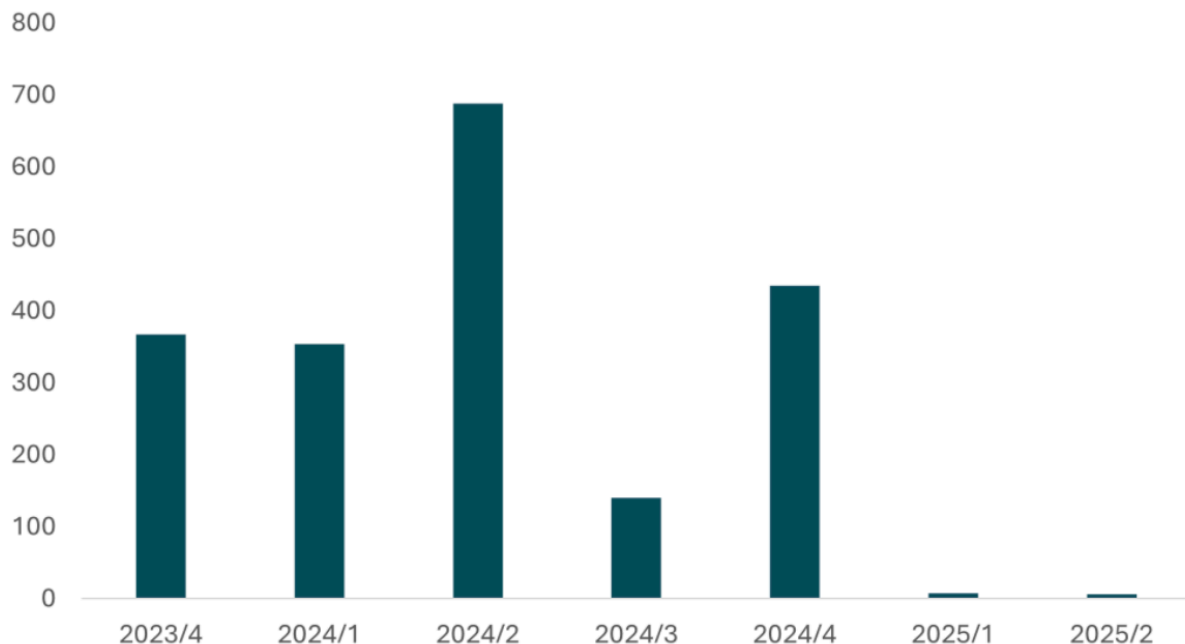
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Executive Summary

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- ✦ US foreign policy has undergone swift changes since the beginning of the Trump administration, prioritising “America First”, and leading to a reduced engagement in multilateral institutions and diplomatic signalling of these new strategic priorities.
- ✦ A new form of climate scepticism has shaped part of this policy, resulting in dismantled climate programmes and reduced research funds, while engagement with key areas of economic necessity continues.
- ✦ The administration has targeted domestic and international programmes associated with social justice, diversity, and human rights, labelling them “woke” and “ideological”.
- ✦ US signalling and voting patterns at UN institutions has become more unpredictable, signalling shifts on key issues of global governance and international security, while potentially undermining the legitimacy of multilateral institutions, and creating an opening for rival regimes in Russia and China.
- ✦ Although the US is pulling back from many multilateral commitments, it continues to exert significant influence within multilateral institutions, recognizing its own need for continued competitiveness in a world that continues to move forward.

Key Picture: International Organizations Account, Outlays by Calendar Year Quarter (\$m), as of Q2 2025



Source: [USA Spending Gov](https://www.usaspending.gov)

Engagement with Issues and Institutions

Since the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States (US), the country's foreign policy has taken a fairly dramatic shift. This is not because such pivots were unexpected, as much as due to their speed and extent. The message is clear: America comes first, as underscored in the latest National Security Strategy (November 2025)¹. And yet, the administration also recognizes that the US needs the rest of the world; indeed will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The result of this dual reality is the Trump administration's sometimes outright shocking foreign policy, as it has unfolded over the past 12 months. The US has largely abandoned the United Nations (UN) multilateral architecture, eschewing partnerships on key global governance issues, most notably climate change and social justice. Not only is this reflected in its support for resolutions within the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council, but also its financial commitments to these and many other institutions. At the same time, its representatives have not been shy in using their veto power in the latter, to block undesirable resolutions; neither have they refrained from their right to diplomatic theatre, using negative votes and abstentions to signal the future of US-led multilateralism, or lack thereof.

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Climate Change

A movement of what is dubbed "New Denialism" has been brewing on the American political right for a few years, although its full-fledged adoption into policy only came at the beginning of 2025. Instead of denying the existence and effects of climate change, this new wave simply claims reduced severity of and responsibility for shifting weather patterns². For instance, in addition to ending many climate programmes at the federal level, the US President signed an executive order in April halting climate change policies at the state level³. Various federal departments, including the Department of Energy, and the Department of Defense, furthered this trend by supporting research into denialist themes (casting doubt on historical climate data)⁴ and cutting research programmes associated with climate change by up to 90% in the case of the DOD. The chief Pentagon Spokesperson stated, "eliminating woke climate change programs and initiatives inconsistent with our core warfighting mission"⁵, proving that climate change denialism also keeps step with disdain for the "woke" agenda and ideals of social justice.

Nevertheless, rhetoric paired with action suggests that US withdrawal from the climate neutral trajectory might not only impact the country economically, but is not in keeping with certain key American national interests. Although the US has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement and pulled funding from various international climate initiatives, it remains firmly engaged with international organisations on scientific research, energy, and telecommunications⁶. The fact of the matter is, economic growth and energy are intertwined with the issue of clean energy, a reality even the US cannot afford to ignore. US activities thus suggest behaviour that does not entirely accord with the inflamed rhetoric on this issue, and, to an extent, understandably so.

Social Justice and "Woke"

In addition to climate change, the Trump administration has made no secret of its disdain for the so-called "woke ideological agenda"⁷, ending domestic diversity programmes, cutting funding to international programmes of the same sort, and unleashing fiery rhetoric against social justice and human rights causes. According to a White House factsheet⁸ on the cuts made to "woke" programmes, among those affected are, for instance:

- Preschool development grants
- Obstacles to housing programmes
- The Community Development Financial Institutions Fund
- The National Science Foundation grants and "broadening participation" programmes
- Department of Justice grant programmes

- The Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Justice Program; and
- US Agency for International Development (USAID) foreign aid

Such programmes are called out for their promotion of “harmful” ideology, for practicing “racial discrimination”, and for their “partisan” backing⁹. In tandem, the US has been pulling out of UN bodies and international agreements, including the UN Relief and Works Agency for refugees in the Middle East (UNRWA)¹⁰ and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)¹¹, citing similar promotion of the “woke” agenda. On some level, these moves were not entirely unexpected, many of them having been made in the previous Trump administration¹². Critics point out, however, that important programmes helping to distribute vital knowledge, including in the medical field, are also under attack¹³. These attacks are part of a broader trend of anti-multilateralism adopted by the Trump administration.

The United Nations

Nowhere has the current US foreign policy trend been more apparent than within UN institutions. In the past year, the US has demonstrated an increasing unwillingness to cooperate with allies and partners on key governance and security issues, using its abstentions in the UNGA and veto power in the UNSC to send signals on major foreign policy shifts. Before drafting and voting to pass a resolution on the Gaza peace plan in November¹⁴, the US had vetoed two previous UNSC peace and ceasefire proposals in June¹⁵ and September¹⁶. Similarly, the US abstained from Ukraine peace resolutions of the International Labor Organization (ILO)¹⁷ and the World Trade Organization (WTO)¹⁸ respectively, in which Russian crimes against Ukraine’s sovereignty were condemned by European allies. A similar resolution condemning Russia in the UNGA was voted against by the US representative on the anniversary of the start of the war in Ukraine in February¹⁹.

These diplomatic signals may not seek to undermine UN legitimacy as a whole - in fact, during the 80th session of the UNGA, the US President delivered a speech pointing to the “tremendous potential” of the institution²⁰. However, the result of inconsistent support for the values of the organisation is beginning to be felt in the world of global governance, especially as rival nations, notably China and Russia, see an opening to reshape the way international relations are practiced.

United States and Multilateralism

Distancing and Withdrawal

The United States has demonstrated a decided distancing from many forms of multilateral engagement, choosing to focus inward. Whether this engenders negative responses, as in the case of its European allies, or moderately positive ones, as in the case of rival nations such as Russia and China, there is no denying that this new form of US isolationism will have an impact beyond its borders, as well as within them. Issues such as climate change, the global energy transition, and their implications on emerging technologies, notably increased use and development of artificial intelligence, will continue to plague the rest of the world, and the United States alike. Analysts at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace note, “the global clean energy transition will keep advancing regardless of U.S. policy, but the pace and quality of that transition will be affected by the role the United States plays.”²¹ On the one hand, much of the world will thus need to learn how to function without the direct support of the US. On the other, transition and further development will continue, whether or not the US chooses to be part of them. One thing is certain - there may be significant costs to its domestic ability and global prowess if it chooses to ignore them.

Continued Influence

A closer look suggests that policy makers within the US government are very much aware of this last point. Indeed, some suggest that the US is simply choosing to weaken multilateralism before forcing a reform of the global order²². Although such a long-term strategy remains unclear, the US has demonstrated a willingness to

continuously defend its interests within multilateral institutional frameworks, while using them to stage diplomatic theatre, keeping allies and adversaries on their toes. Indeed, the shake up of the UN institutional architecture created by US foreign policy alone demonstrates the latter's influence. In other words, the Trump administration is not abandoning the world of global governance; however, it certainly seeks to reshape it dramatically. More likely than not, many such changes could become permanent.

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