

# America First: Foreign Aid in the Trump Administration

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**Abstract:** The US has led the way building the international development cooperation system and been the largest single donor for the last seven decades. Foreign aid has gone through different phases during the post-World War II period and remains an important geopolitical and geo-economic tool for 21st century USA. The Bush and Obama administrations, despite different nuances in terms of discourse and aid practices, invested in reforms to modernise aid programmes, increased funding for USAID, and created new global health, food security, and climate change programmes. Contrary to the historical trend, the Trump administration submitted budget requisitions characterised by a 30% reduction for State Department and USAID allocations. It is noteworthy that the Trump administration questioned the costs of global leadership, criticised international organizations and the sectoral allocation of funds, and made threats of cuts in aid to countries that opposed Washington's interests. The purpose of this article is to understand how the strategy of 'America First' changed the strategic tripod of defence, diplomacy, and development, by analysing changes in US foreign aid in terms of available resources, recipient countries, aid modalities, and multilateral engagement.

**Key words:** foreign aid; international cooperation; development; United States; Trump.

## Introduction

This article seeks to understand how the Trump administration (2017-2021) structured its foreign aid agenda by identifying changes and continuities vis-à-vis the contemporary dynamics of American foreign policy. It considers the extent to which the America First strategy altered the guidelines and the agenda of American foreign aid, based on the combination of principles and motivations, identification of the main international challenges, and the reframing of bilateral and multilateral relationship patterns.

Foreign aid comprises a series of economic, political and military cooperation mechanisms with the express goal to promote international stability and development. In practice, it constitutes a foreign policy tool that serves multiple purposes, from reputation building, a commitment to humanitarianism, and the provision of global public

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goods, to securing commercial and diplomatic interests (Veen 2011: 10). States' motivations to provide international assistance are thus distributed on a continuum between solidarity and interest that is inserted into a complex field of normative disputes around practices and modalities of engagement, influenced by both domestic and international economic and political dimensions (Milani 2018).

For Lancaster (2007), the US's main motivations for foreign aid involves diplomatic and development objectives, bringing about a multifaceted portfolio guided both by external demands and by Washington's strategic determinants. In this sense, foreign aid has historically served the purposes of strengthening alliances, rewarding desirable behaviours, and ensuring the US's presence in relevant scenarios (Lancaster and Van Dusen 2005: 13).

In the post-World War II period, foreign aid helped to contain communism and maintain the US's political and economic sphere of influence in a scenario of bipolar competition and decolonisation, thereby consolidating the strategy of financial assistance for building economic and social infrastructure and sending humanitarian or military aid to dozens of third-world countries (Mateo 2019: 135). With the end of the Cold War, major objectives include promoting democratic governance, mitigating climate problems, mediating conflicts, and managing post-conflict transitions, as well as fighting against international terrorism in the 2000s (Picard and Buss 2009: 8). External aid thus conforms to the structural component of US foreign policy since the mid-20th Century.

In parallel with the correlation between foreign aid and US foreign policy and security objectives, it is important to consider the domestic determinants that affect agenda design and decision-making in formulating foreign aid. Milner and Tingley (2015) emphasize the importance of ideological components and the political-party game, including the budget process and consequently the incidence of lobbying in Congress, for the definition of US foreign aid policy. Here we adopt the framework proposed by Lancaster (2007: 18-23) that refers to four elements of the domestic scenario that affect foreign aid: ideas, interests, institutions, and bureaucracies.

Thus, we will seek to identify the changes processed in the ideational framework of foreign aid during the Trump administration: what worldviews and principles guide the construction of the agenda and the justifications underlying the policies adopted. This aspect is captured through strategic documents – the National Security Strategy (2017), the Strategic Plan (2018-2022) and the USAID Policy Framework (2019) – as well as official statements from the representatives of the presidency that criticise aid programmes in previous administrations and that emphasise the expectation of reciprocity from recipients of aid and the importance of accountability to American citizens.

In the field of political institutions and the interests that affect the decision-making process, it is worth noting the distance between the Trump administration's proposals and the maintenance of historical patterns of aid guaranteed by the American legislature that enjoy broad support from interest groups, i.e., civil society organisations, activist networks, and sectors of the traditional bureaucracy.

The Trump administration repeatedly sought to reduce the foreign aid budget and encountered clear resistance in both houses of Congress, particularly in the budget

and international policy committees that did not sign off the proposed cuts to diplomatic activities and international assistance. These aspects were analysed through the Congressional Budget Justification – Foreign Operations and the aggregate American foreign aid data displayed in the interactive tool known as the Foreign Aid Explorer (FAE). The four years of the Trump administration were particularly illustrative of the importance of domestic interests and institutional dynamics in the definition of American foreign aid (Milner and Tingley 2010), as they led to a mismatch between the executive and the legislature that contrasted with the convergence achieved in recent decades.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks provided new motivation for Washington's commitments to development cooperation, humanitarian relief, security assistance (including military aid), and massive reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. During the Bush II and Obama administrations, the valuation of foreign aid as part of the strategic tripod (defence, diplomacy and development) took place with the support of Congress and civil society interest groups, culminating in a budget jump of US\$16 billion to US\$50 billion (FAE 2020).

It is also noteworthy the Trump administration's attempt to reduce foreign aid bureaucratic scope in proposing to reshape the organizational structure of aid programs into just two major portfolios: economic assistance and humanitarian aid. Such a move would reduce the complexity and budgetary freedom in the composition of the portfolio available to the bureaucracies involved in the provision of US international assistance. As a counterpoint, it is worth remembering the important bureaucratic reforms carried out since 2005, which ensured greater cohesion in the relationship between the Department of State (USDS) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as stimulating the creation of new presidential initiatives – such as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation during the Bush administration and the Feed the Future, Global Health Initiative and the Global Climate Change Initiative during the Obama administration (Mateo 2017).

Budget limits and the low profile of foreign aid during the Trump administration called into question the central role that the US had played in the international development cooperation system since the mid-20th century. It is therefore of interest to learn how the process of stagnation of investments in foreign aid and the limits of the US leadership as the largest provider of bilateral and multilateral assistance were also able to influence the broader context of wear and tear on US foreign policy.

The article will seek to map the symbolic, political, and material structures arranged in the aid agenda during the Trump administration, in the context of a foreign policy characterised by selective engagement, competition, and revisionism. It, ultimately, investigates whether the Trump administration represented only a brief hiatus in the recent history of US foreign aid, which appears to be the case since the Biden presidency has given signals in terms of the strategical resizing and budgetary allocations to international aid through USAID and cooperation programmes for key partners.

## The logic of America First and foreign aid under Trump

The topic of foreign aid got little exposure during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. In regard to foreign policy, the emphasis was precisely on revisionism – rethinking the agreements and the costs of maintaining the US role in international politics by putting the interests of the 'ordinary citizen' first. As a result of the nationalist approach characterised by the political slogan 'America First', the classic elements of international cooperation began to be questioned, such as financial contributions to international organisations, in the light of short-term and predominantly domestic interests. With development cooperation it was no different, as in his campaign Trump mentioned that the US should 'stop sending aid to countries that hate us.'

Of all Trump's official statements regarding international aid, perhaps the most striking took place during the UN General Assembly in September 2018, when he confirmed his revisionist approach to this foreign policy agenda:

The United States is the world's largest giver in the world, by far, of foreign aid. But few give anything to us. That is why we are taking a hard look at US foreign assistance. That will be headed up by secretary of state Mike Pompeo. 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. (Trump 2018a)

The strategy of favouring 'patriotism' over 'globalism' is clear – the costs associated with an expanded foreign policy are not proportional to the gains in terms of national interest, such as prosperity and security, for instance. This mention of foreign aid came in the context of the reaction of the UN General Assembly, supported by several countries receiving foreign aid from the USA,<sup>1</sup> to the move of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December 2017. In his 2018 State of the Union speech, Trump reinforced his view that foreign aid should only benefit American allies:

In 2016, American taxpayers generously sent those same countries more than \$20 billion in aid. That is why, tonight, I am asking Congress to pass legislation to help ensure American foreign assistance dollars always serve American interests, and only go to friends of America, not enemies of America. (Trump 2018b)

Several times, Trump and senior officials reaffirmed this new 'selective' context of foreign aid employment in US foreign policy, focusing on the idea of reciprocity. Nikki Haley, then US envoy to the UN, affirmed that the new priority would be to 'ensure that our foreign assistance dollars – the most generous in the world – always serve American interests, and we look forward to helping him see that the American people are no longer taken for granted.' This was the reaction of Trump's foreign policy not only with regard to

foreign aid, but with regard to financial contributions to international organisations such as NATO and the UN. Haley also insisted that despite Washington's generous contribution to the maintenance of the UN budget, which amounts to 22% of current contributions, its members voted with the US only 31% of the time (Gehrke 2018).

The Trump administration tried, repeatedly, to limit contributions to those international organisations 'whose missions substantially advance U.S. foreign policy interests [making] reductions to other organizations and programs whose results are unclear or whose work does not directly affect our national security interests' (CBJ 2021: 40). Budget requisitions proposed by the executive under Trump provided for cuts of one-third to contributions to the UN, including peace operations, in addition to widespread cuts in international cooperation and aid programmes.

Andrew Natsios, former director of USAID, warned of the excessive tactical instrumentalisation and transactional character of Trump's approach to foreign aid:

President Trump has used foreign assistance in negotiations with countries to achieve other outcomes: That is, as a tool of diplomacy to induce non-developmental outcomes. For the most part this has been with punitive rather than positive incentives. These transactional uses of aid have little to do with development and have been counterproductive historically. (Natsios 2020: 113)

In short, the expectation placed on foreign aid was that it should lead to 'payback' – preferably palpable and immediate. As a result, aid took on a contingent character – many experts and officials from the bureaucracy linked to development cooperation at USAID, USDS and other agencies expressed apprehension in the face of threats to cut funds for programmes and recipient countries that 'did not live up to the expectations' of the White House.

An exemplary case was Trump's response to migratory pressure from Central America in the form of the 'caravan' from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala that passed through Mexico on its way to the USA. Trump's immediate reaction was to treat the situation as a 'national emergency' by putting the Army and Border Patrol in place to prevent the caravan from entering the country and to threaten to cut off foreign aid to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Indeed, in early 2019, Trump ordered the reallocation of US\$370 million in foreign assistance to Central America that had been approved in the fiscal year 2018 budget and the suspension of US\$180 million approved in fiscal year 2017 (Wroughton and Zengerle 2019). The idea was to punish El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala for not 'doing enough' to curb irregular immigration to the US. According to USDS spokesman Morgan Ortagus, the USA 'will not provide new funds for programs in those countries until we are satisfied that the Northern Triangle governments are taking concrete actions to reduce the number of migrants coming to the U.S. border' (Sevastopulo, Williams and Webber 2019).

It is also important to assess how foreign aid was formally incorporated into foreign policy strategies in the Trump administration by reference to the main documents

prepared by the presidency. The National Security Strategy (NSS) was renewed by the White House in December 2017 and provided scant clarity in regard to the role of aid in foreign policy, especially when compared to documents from previous administrations. The selectivity aspect, mentioned earlier, appears clearly in Trump's NSS:

The United States will prioritize programs that empower reform minded governments, people, and civil society. As the United States designs its efforts, inputs from local actors improve the likelihood of enduring solutions, reduce costs, and increase accountability to the American taxpayer. (National Security Strategy 2017: 40)

This selectivity goes back to the need to ensure a clearer association between dollars spent on aid and a return in terms of security and trade to the US. According to Zaremba, it is about accommodation to the protectionist logic of the America First concept and scepticism about the globalisation model and international development cooperation: 'The assistance will most likely go to countries that can help the US protect itself against terrorism and those countries that provide commercial benefits to the US economy' (2019: 40).

For Thier and Alexander (2019), the populist bias of the Trump administration framed foreign aid as a zero-sum game, in which investments in development abroad would mean a loss in the domestic field, and a blow to the nationalist-patriotic project. Thus, they reinforced the widespread perception that the government spends a significant part of the federal budget on foreign aid. While surveys reveal that the American public in general estimates that 20% of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid, it in fact comprises a mere 1% of government spending. Similarly, 59% of the population believes that the federal government spends too much on foreign aid (Kull 2017).

Additionally, 'Make America Great Again' – themed discourse seeks to describe a world of competition and threats, as prescribed by the National Security Strategy (2017: 2): 'China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity'. The document entitled 'An America First National Security Strategy' describes the purely instrumental value of aid: 'US development assistance must support America's national interests' (National Security Strategy 2017, p.39) e 'States that prosper and nations that transition from recipients of development assistance to trading partners offer economic opportunities for American businesses. And stability reduces threats that target Americans at home' (National Security Strategy 2017: 45).

The tone is different from those presented in past administrations, in which the very definition of national interest is correlated with support for development, justice, and world peace. During the Bush II administration, for example, the 2002 and 2006 NSSs mention that the US has a moral duty to fight against hunger and poverty. During the Obama presidency, NSS 2015 made an open commitment to sustainable development goals and 'common global issues' such as gender inequality and climate change (Ingram 2017).

In fact, in the two previous administrations, there had been both a notion of 'mission' associated with foreign aid (in particular humanitarian and development aid), as

well as a broader conception of the national interest itself – one in which stability, prosperity and democracy (traditional foreign aid objectives) were conceived as inseparable from American security. In spite of differing emphases on what the focus of US international engagement should be – the war on terror under Bush II and the recomposition of US leadership under Obama – in both cases, foreign aid was described as a central instrument to the so-called ‘3D framework’: diplomacy, defence, and development (Mateo 2017: 61-66).

Another difference that stood out in the strategic documents published by the Trump administration was the framing of international assistance not as an end in itself, but as a temporary resource for recipient countries: ‘effective foreign assistance programs should reach their natural endpoint’. The repeatedly highlighted example was the Marshall Plan, an economic recovery programme that gave rise to stable and reliable partners in western Europe (National Security Strategy 2017: 38).

This was the keynote of the Strategic Plan 2018-2022 (guide document for USDS and USAID) which began with: ‘Our ultimate goal is a future in which foreign assistance is no longer needed’. The document elaborated on old themes of international aid (and in this did not differ from previous documents): challenges linked to violence and instability, displacement and mass migration, strengthening governance, democracy and human rights, disaster support and humanitarian crises, and health assistance, especially child, maternal, and AIDS health programmes (U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development 2018).

Similarly, the USAID Policy Framework of 2019 included the heading ‘Ending the need for Foreign Assistance’ and built a metaphor constantly reiterated by Mark A. Green, USAID director between 2017 and 2020: the ‘journey to self-reliance’. In the wake of the Trump administration’s reframing of foreign aid, the idea was that aid should be temporary and that countries should be able to ‘walk on their own two feet’. Here, an important paradox appears, as the document and Green’s speeches reinforced a traditional view of development aid (focused on recipient needs, long-term agendas, and results), while the White House demanded that aid be focused on ‘American interests’ strictly delimited and with the expectation of return in the short term, as represented in the idea of ‘balanced engagement and principled realism’ from NSS 2017.

Still within the scope of the USAID Policy Framework, it is worth highlighting the aforementioned 3D strategy, in an attempt to integrate foreign aid efforts to the core of the national interest:

In an era with intensifying competition among global powers, USAID’s assistance is a powerful tool—a complement to our defense and diplomacy—to protect Americans and advance U.S. security and prosperity. When we work with societies to help them safeguard liberties, forestall conflict, accelerate growth, and respond to disasters on their own, we enjoy greater security and economic opportunity in the United States. (United States Agency for International Development 2019: 16)

Both in the Strategic Plan, as in the USAID Policy Framework, there is a new emphasis on engagement with the private sector, highlighting the role of initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation<sup>2</sup>. This issue became central with the Better Utilisation of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, which was approved in October 2018 and gave rise to the US International Development Finance Corporation (USDFC).

The USDFC was created to be a federal foreign aid agency focused on financing private development projects. It absorbed the Development Credit Authority (of USAID) with the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), which also had its investment portfolio doubled from US\$30 billion to US\$60 billion by the BUILD Act. OPIC is a federal agency that aims to provide an alternative to business financing (loans, loan guarantees and political risk insurance) in developing economies. As we will see later, the availability of additional resources to ‘finance development’ was valued by the Trump administration, especially in view of the large growth of Chinese foreign aid in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Another important document for the understanding of the strategic delimitation of foreign aid is the statement by the Secretary of State that precedes the delivery of the Congressional Budget Justification (CBJ) which presents the Executive’s foreign operations budget request for the consideration of the House and the Senate in each fiscal year (FY). The table below summarises the priorities laid down by former Secretaries of State Rex Tillerson (CBJ-FY2018 and CBJ-FY2019) and Mike Pompeo (CBJ-FY2020 and CBJ-FY2021) and indicate an important change vis-à-vis the evolution of the Trump administration’s foreign policy.

Table 1. Strategic objectives in the CBJ

FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021
Defending U.S. National Security	Protecting America’s security at home and abroad	Supporting U.S. friends and allies	Advancing U.S. national security and economic interests and prioritizing global strategic challenges, including countering Chinese, Russian, and Iranian influence
Asserting U.S. leadership	Renewing America’s competitive advantage for sustainable economic growth and job creation	Winning the great power competition	Supporting strategic partners and allies, including Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Colombia
Fostering U.S. economic interests	Promoting American leadership through balanced engagement	Promoting a “journey to self-reliance” for developing countries	Enhancing commitment to long-term development
Ensuring accountability to U.S. taxpayers	Ensuring accountability to U.S. taxpayers	Sharing the burden of international security and development with more partners	Strengthening key areas of U.S. leadership, to include global health and humanitarian assistance

Source: prepared by the author based on the CBJ.

What stands out in time is the level of precision in the delimitation of strategic objectives. In the first cycle, basic issues such as leadership, security and economic interests were reaffirmed, with emphasis on the notion of accountability – directly related to the attempt to bring about the ‘withering on the vine’ of the USDS and USAID accounts. The reference to the common citizen who pays taxes is part of the prioritisation of domestic interests over international ones in the well-known anti-globalist critique of America First-ism.

In the second cycle, the relationship between domestic and international is also noted by the commitment to development being associated with the creation of jobs at home. Furthermore, the reader can already detect the rewriting of the international context, which is described no longer in terms of cooperation, but of competition – in a way that demands a commitment, even if selective, capable of maintaining the American leadership role.

It is, however, in the third cycle (with CBJ-FY2020) that we find a more noticeable change in tone, when, along with support for allies, there is also the need to share the costs of security and development with them. This is Trump’s repeated ‘demands’ for a greater contribution from others in funding regional and international organisations. In this sense, the case of NATO is exemplary. Since its inauguration, the Trump administration has demanded that its transatlantic allies increase their contributions to the organisation and their defence expenditures – as ‘[t]his is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States [...]’ (BBC 2017).

In Pompeo’s speech, which opens the document, the aforementioned ‘journey to self-sufficiency’ (which insists on the contingent and temporary nature of foreign aid) and competition with regional powers also appear. In the following cycle (with CBJ-FY2021), the scope of the strategic challenges becomes even clearer – namely the need to contain the regional and global expansion of China, Russia, or Iran.

The Trump administration sought to reshape foreign aid to Eastern Europe and Central Asia through the Countering Malign Kremlin Influence policy framework launched in July 2019. This guideline provided for new efforts to promote democracy and deliver economic aid to such ‘frontline states’ such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (Runde 2020). The highlight, however, was the escalation of the confrontationalist tone mobilised against China, from the trade war to the various accusations during the course of the pandemic with the so-called ‘China virus.’

The idea of ‘Chinese containment’ goes beyond the attempt to control the narrative in the face of the health crisis, the trade war, or even the military reconfiguration in Southeast Asia, as it also extended to the field of foreign aid. This is because Chinese ‘south-south development cooperation’ has brought, in recent years, billion-dollar investments to the developing world, through initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, with a regional dimension, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with a truly global dimension.

In the previous Obama administration, the priority was to try to bring China into cooperation schemes through, for example, the memorandum of understanding signed

in 2015 that stipulated cooperation in the promotion of development, specifically in areas such as food security, health, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief. The two countries even worked together on the creation of the African Union Centre for Disease Control. During the Trump administration, by contrast, foreign aid was framed as an element of competition – as an alternative to the ‘outstretched hand’ of Beijing to developing countries.

For Trump administration strategists, the BRI was an unwelcome reaction to the ‘Asian pivot’ strategy launched by the Obama administration in 2011 – which then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called ‘America’s Pacific Century.’ On the one hand, Trump abandoned the regional approach represented, among others, by the Trans-Pacific Partnership, preferring a bilateral approach to Asian allies. On the other hand, there was a clear willingness to innovate in foreign aid with the creation of the USDFC, which would offset the importance of the BRI, although without being able to inject the same amount of resources available in the BRI investment partnerships.

Recognising that China now occupied spaces formerly under American influence, Jim Richardson, coordinator of the USAID Transformation Task Team under the Trump administration, set out his apprehension regarding the risks of Chinese foreign aid: ‘to roll back transparency, to roll back governance reforms, to leverage unsustainable debt onto our partners, that’s not success [...]’ (cited in Igoe 2018). For Ray Washburne, then president of OPIC, it was not about the quantity, but the quality of the aid offered: ‘The Chinese have thrown 1 trillion [dollars] at this. We are not trying to match them dollar-for-dollar’ (cited in Bases 2018).

Former USAID director Mark Green also said that American aid is an important alternative to Chinese aid, which he said would offer an ‘authoritarian approach’ and predatory lending masquerading as cooperation, pushing developing countries into unsustainable levels of indebtedness. The US would, in turn, offer an aid option based on ‘good principles’ for true development: ‘Our approach – the American approach – on the other hand, moves countries from being recipients, to partners, to fellow donors. It’s based upon the notion of a hand up, not a handout, and it helps position countries to grasp their own future’ (cited in Igoe 2019).

For many experts, it was precisely this confrontational approach to China that allowed for some value being accorded to foreign aid under the Trump administration, otherwise under threat since his inauguration. For Glenn Thrush (2018): ‘The president’s shift has less to do with a sudden embrace of foreign aid than a desire to block Beijing’s plan for economic, technological and political dominance.’ An example of this was the launch of the ‘Growth in the Americas’ initiative (*América Cresce* in Spanish) of December 2019, which aimed to leverage investments in infrastructure (especially energy and transport) in Latin America and the Caribbean, and can be interpreted as a reaction to the broad adherence of countries in the region to the Chinese BRI.

By 2021, fourteen Latin American and Caribbean countries<sup>3</sup> had joined the US initiative, in contrast to the 19 in the process of BRI negotiations. According to the researcher R. Evan Ellis: ‘The US wants to leverage private sector investment to bring prosperity and – through transparency and good governance – show that it is a better and more

sustainable option for the region than China's sometimes predatory practices' (cited in Youkee 2020).

Criticising the projects led by Chinese state-owned companies in the areas of energy and mining (especially in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Argentina), *América Cresce* did not present itself as a real alternative to the BRI in terms of the level of expected investments or even the level of governance and environmental sustainability promised. As discussed below, the impetus of competition with China was not able to significantly leverage the resources available for foreign aid from the USA, whether in Latin America or in other regions of the globe.

## **In between Foggy Bottom and Capitol Hill: the volume and allocation of foreign aid**

To understand the Trump administration's foreign aid policy, it is also necessary to look at the arm-twisting that took place between the executive and the legislature during the budget allocation process. That's because, from the beginning of his term, President Trump recommended significant cuts, on average of 30%, to foreign affairs (which includes diplomatic and international assistance efforts). Every Congressional Budget Justification of the fiscal years 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 elicited a double negative, one from the Senate and one the House, to the amounts presented and the attempts to change the existing structure of the programmes by merging portfolios and budgets to limit military, economic, and humanitarian aid.

In other words, the levels approved at the Capitol ended up being higher than the amounts requested by the executive, which constituted a break in the historical trend, since in the Bush II and Obama administrations, the amounts requested in the CBJ exceeded the budget effectively approved in Congress. According to Representative Nita Lowey (D-NY), a member of the House Appropriations and Foreign Affairs committees, it was necessary to safeguard the role of foreign aid in order 'that unexpected events do not trigger the conditioning of aid thereby leaving intended beneficiaries to ensure vulnerable, [providing] greater distinction between short-term diplomatic and political initiatives and long-term investments in development' (cited in Saldinger 2020a).

The resistance of the American legislature is representative, therefore, of ongoing political support for diplomatic activities in general and foreign assistance in particular. Traditional Congressmembers, linked to both parties, defended the maintenance of funding levels for USDS and USAID activities, and had the support of civil society, represented by networks of activists and think tanks such as the Modernization of Foreign Assistance Network, the US Global Leadership Coalition (USGLC), the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the Brookings Institution and the Centre for Global Development, to name the most influential.

This is, in effect, a coalition of diverse interest groups – including experts, humanitarian NGOs, religious leaders, businesspeople and even the military – working in advocacy and lobbying on Capitol Hill in defence of bipartisan support for foreign aid and

promoting international development (Tama 2019). This advocacy coalition, led mainly by the USGLC, was particularly active in pushing for the maintenance of aid spending during the four years of the Trump administration.

John Glenn, president of the USGLC, stated that in the first nine months of 2017, congressmen and senators were contacted 900,000 times, through letters, emails, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings (Tama 2019). By mobilising different narratives, from national security to moral commitment to humanitarian assistance, the coalition drummed up support among Republican and Democratic members of Congress, with rare exceptions such as Libertarian Senator Rand Paul (R-KY).

For Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair: ‘If [those] draconian budget were enacted, it would weaken our security and leadership around the world [...] Congress will again reject this proposal in resounding bipartisan fashion’ (USHR 2020). In a Republican-majority Senate, the budget bill passed for fiscal 2018, bipartisan resistance was clearly manifest in the report: ‘The administration’s apparent doctrine of retreat, which also includes distancing the United States from collective and multilateral dispute resolution frameworks, serves only to weaken America’s standing in the world’ (Kheel 2017).

The table below reveals the variation in approved resource levels for external assistance (actual), which, thanks to the activism of legislators, did not reduce the budget volume as demanded by the USDS (requested).

Table 2. Budget of Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (in billions of dollars)

	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021
Requested	56.41	51.96	55.01	54.83	60.21	40.21	41.66	43.10	44.12
Actual	51.91	50.89	54.39	54.52	59.78	54.18	54.38	57.21	70.98
Difference	-8.0%	-2.1%	-1.1%	-0,6%	-0.7%	+34.7%	+30.5%	+32.7%	+60.9%

Source: Gill, Lawson, and Morgenstern 2021: 2.

The Trump administration submitted its first budget request for foreign policy activities (CBJ-FY2018) to Congress in May 2017. In addition to a 27% reduction to expenditure on diplomatic activities in the USDS, the document proposed a 31% budget cut for Foreign Operations (mostly made up of contributions to international organisations and foreign aid, both economic and military), in addition to a 42% cut for ‘contingency operations’ – in relation to the values approved for fiscal year 2017. The proposal thus included a reduction in the budget for diplomatic security, contributions to international organisations and peace operations, foreign aid programmes, and educational and cultural exchange (Epstein, Lawson and Gill 2018).

The dramatic reduction in funds suggested by the Trump presidency scared analysts and generated much criticism among diplomats and congressmen. It is certainly a break with the history of requisitions via the CBJ in the preceding decade, during which the budget grew steadily and what was requested by the executive always exceeded what was

approved by the legislature. Although the document involves a series of activities related to US foreign policy, in this article the focus is the analysis of the main potential changes regarding the funds destined to international assistance, contained in the Foreign Operations Accounts (humanitarian, food, economic and military aid).

Perhaps the most significant cut in this CBJ was that of funds for humanitarian aid (which, if approved, would suffer a 44% reduction), including the elimination of the food aid programme Food for Peace (P.L.480), and of voluntary contributions to international organisations (including various United Nations entities such as UNICEF, UNDP and UN Women) contained in the International Organizations & Programs (IO&P) account. In CBJ-FY2018, the top recipients represented little change the historical picture of countries served by American aid, which, given the budget cut, would mean an even greater concentration of funds sent to certain recipients (such as Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Afghanistan) and certain regions (Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa).

In practice, the prioritised foreign aid accounts (with 70% of the budget) were the humanitarian, global health, and security sectors (although with retractions of 26%, 44% and 24%, respectively, compared to fiscal year 2017). Even within these areas, the cuts would be significant: counterterrorism (-36%), counternarcotics (-25%), rule of law and human rights (-48%), education (-50%), trade and investment (-16%), agriculture (-41%), environment (-71%), and Disaster Readiness (-45%), to name the most relevant (Epstein, Lawson and Gill 2018: 20).

Another novelty proposed by Trump's first CBJ was a reorganisation of bilateral aid programmes, which were combined into a single fund, called the Economic Support and Development Fund (ESDF). In other words, traditional accounts would be eliminated – Development Assistance (DA), the Economic Support Fund (ESF), Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (AEECA), and the Democracy Fund – in favour of the ESDF, which would start 2018 with a budget reduced by 40%. With this, there would also be a suspension of aid to 38 countries that had received funds through the DA, ESF, and AEECA accounts in previous years. Another proposed structural change concerned the elimination of independent institutions funded by the Foreign Operations account, such as the Inter-American Foundation, the US-Africa Development Foundation (both established in the 1970s as instruments for regional development promotion), as well as the OPIC and the Trade and Development Agency. The latter two would be encompassed by the new USDFC proposed under the BUILD Act.

However, both recommendations to cut and reorganise portfolios and funds were rejected by Congress. After passing through the Senate and the House, the bill that approved the budget for USDS and USAID in fiscal year 2018 was signed in March 2018.<sup>4</sup> The Foreign Operations account was allocated a total budget of US\$40 billion – a 4% reduction from the previous fiscal year's budget and 40% more than requested by the Trump administration. This figure included US\$7.84 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), equivalent to 21% of the total.

At the end of the appropriation process, bilateral aid decreased by 12% and multilateral aid by 11%, with humanitarian and food aid increasing by 15% each. The

appropriations law raised the general levels of funds for foreign aid but did not earmark much of it. Some exceptions were the allocation of aid to Central America (US\$600 million through the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America), to Ukraine (US\$421 million), Colombia (US\$391 million), the West Bank/Gaza Strip (US\$258 million) and the creation of the ISIS Relief and Recovery Fund (US\$500 million), among the most important of them (Epstein, Lawson and Gill 2018: 13-15).

In later cycles, the process was similar: the 2019 and 2020 CBJs contained proposals for significant budget reductions, both in general and for foreign aid, and insisted on structural reforms involving the elimination of certain accounts, requests that were subsequently denied by Congress. The CBJ-FY2019 suggested a total budget of US\$41.86 billion, that is, a 22.7% reduction from the levels approved in the previous cycle (FY2018-enacted).

The appropriations law signed in February 2019<sup>5</sup> set a total budget of US\$54.38 billion for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, which equated to a modest 0.3% growth over the previous fiscal year and 30% more than requested by the Trump administration. For international assistance, the CBJ provided US\$28.6 billion (a 28% decrease), and the US Congress approved US\$37.92 billion. The document also insisted on the merger of bilateral aid in the ESDF account, private aid in the USDFC, the elimination of the Inter-American and African Foundations, and the prioritisation of programmes in the areas of security, health, and humanitarian assistance.

For fiscal year 2020, the CBJ proposed a total of US\$42.72 billion – with an increase of 2.5% compared to CBJ-FY2019, but a decrease of 21% compared to the approved budget (FY2019-enacted). For the Foreign Operations section, a total of US\$29.01 billion was requested – with an increase of 1.5% compared to CBJ-FY2019, but a decrease of 24% compared to the approved budget (FY2019-enacted). Total foreign aid (including food aid that passes through another account, linked to the Department of Agriculture) would be cut by 27%, with emphasis on the 18% reduction in multilateral aid.

It is interesting to note that, in addition to the creation of the ESDF, the CBJ-FY2020 also proposed the creation of a unitary humanitarian account which would replace the old International Disaster Assistance, Migration and Refugee Assistance, Food for Peace, and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance. The Trump administration's justification for its account mergers into the International Humanitarian Assistance (IHA) was to maximise asset management: 'The Budget also more broadly consolidates our fragmented and outdated overseas humanitarian programming, implementation, and oversight of all implementers into one account and in a new bureau at USAID' (CBJ-FY2020: 75).

In the CBJ for the fiscal year 2021, the executive forwarded a request for US\$44.12 billion, representing a 3% increase on the FY2020-request, but 24% below the levels effectively appropriated by Congress for this year. Along with widespread cuts in Foreign Operations, there is an attempt to reduce the budget for international assistance by 25.7% (with an estimated budget of US\$30.09 billion). The significant cut would mainly affect global health programmes (-37.5%), contributions to peace operations (-36.6%), multilateral aid (-28.9%) and humanitarian aid (-28.3%, including the accounts of food aid).

As described in the table below, the only exception to the widespread cuts proposal was the export promotion axis, with growth of over 1,000 percent in fiscal year 2021. US\$711.20 million was requisitioned for the Export-Import Bank and an additional US\$496 million for the US Development Finance Corporation.

Table 3. Foreign Operations (by type, FY2019–FY2021)

Type	FY2019 Actual	FY2020 Enacted	FY2021 Requested	% change, FY20 enacted to FY21 requested
USAID Administration	1.67	1.76	1.59	-9.5%
Global Health Programs	8.87	9.53	6.00	-37.1%
Non-Health Development Assistance (includes Treasury TA, excludes ind. agencies)	8.10	8.13	6.15	-24.3%
Humanitarian Assistance	7.82	8.74	6.27	-28.3%
Independent Agencies	1.37	1.47	1.21	-17.9%
Security Assistance	9.15	9.01	1.48	-14.2%
Multilateral Assistance	1.85	2.08	1.48	-28.9%
Export Promotion	-0.16	-0.02	-0.34	1379.3%
Foreign Operations Total	40.39	40.70	30.09	-26.1%

Source: Gill, Lawson, and Morgenstern 2020: 12.

The budget proposals considered throughout 2020 in the House and Senate presented contrasting priorities. Representatives strengthened requisitions for global health, with a forecast of US\$10 billion for emergency COVID-19 funding, as well as contributions to the WHO and the UN Population Fund (including support for family planning programs). The Senate requisitioned funds commensurate with the requirement for the USDFC (US\$821 million), while the House requisitioned only US\$311 million. Amid a truncated decision-making process, marked by stoppages and negotiations for supplementary funds, the budget law for the fiscal year was eventually signed on 27 December 2020 (Saldinger 2020b).

By the end of Trump’s term in office, Congress had approved a total of US\$62.7 billion for the International Affairs Budget – including US\$49.4 billion in regular budget funds, US\$8 billion in OCO, and US\$5.3 billion in emergency funds (in response to the COVID-19 pandemic). This represented a 1.5% increase over the budget approved in fiscal year 2020, and 29% (US\$12.7 billion) over the Trump administration’s requisition (US Global Leadership Coalition 2020). Additionally, the appropriations law secured increased assistance in the area of global health, which was allocated US\$9.02 billion, plus an additional US\$4 million in emergency funds for GAVI, maintaining contribution standards to the Global Fund and other health cooperation accounts.

For the fourth year in a row, the willingness of congressmen to support historic levels of investment in foreign aid was maintained, as stated by Conor Savoy, executive director of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network:

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle understand the seriousness of stable and carefully planned funding for American investments abroad, so they will likely ignore the President's requests and craft a serious budget. In the meantime, American development implementers are spending scarce time and energy planning out a budget scenario that will not happen. (MFAN 2020)

In terms of aid allocation trends, the most notable is the maintenance of general levels to the main recipients. This is the case for Israel, Egypt, and Jordan (large recipients of military aid) and Afghanistan, which has received a large amount since the beginning of the reconstruction process. Trump's requisition would still maintain the geographic concentration of 70% to 75% directed to the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa and would increase aid directed to the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia regions (which can be read as a reaction to the influence of the China and Russia in these regions). The comparative table below demonstrates the low margin of variation, according to the requisitions made by the Trump executive.

Table 4. Largest aid recipients (in millions of dollars)

FY2018 (requisitioned)		FY2019 (requisitioned)		FY2020 (requisitioned)		FY2020 (requisitioned)	
Israel	3,100	Israel	3,300	Israel	3,300	Israel	3,300
Egypt	1,381	Egypt	1,381	Egypt	1,400	Egypt	1,400
Jordan	1,000	Jordan	1,275	Jordan	1,300	Jordan	1,300
Afghanistan	782.8	Afghanistan	633	Afghanistan	532.8	Nigeria	742.1
Kenya	639.4	Kenya	624	Nigeria	431.8	Mozambique	456.5
Tanzania	535.3	Tanzania	553	Uganda	415.5	Colombia	412.9
Nigeria	419.1	Uganda	461	Mozambique	403.5	Afghanistan	371.8
Uganda	436.4	Zambia	440	Kenya	383.8	Kenya	330.4
Zambia	428.9	Nigeria	352	Zambia	364.9	Tanzania	328.7
Iraq	347.9	Pakistan	336	Tanzania	348.4	Ukraine	316.9

Source: The author with data from the CRS.

## Perspectives for the future

As discussed, during the Trump administration, foreign aid not only ceased to have political support from the White House, but also became subject to attacks in the form of attempt to lower budget levels and bureaucratic autonomy with the 'simplification' of accounts and freezes to hiring and appointments at USAID (Regilme Jr 2022: 15). The institutional framework, especially with the role of Congress (reinforced by the active presence of civil society interest groups) were the anchor that guaranteed stability to American foreign aid.

The arrival of Joe Biden in the White House gave clear signs of the resumption of the role of foreign aid – which would make the four years of the Trump presidency a brief hiatus in the history of Washington’s involvement in the international development cooperation system. During his campaign, Biden highlighted the importance of recovering the US’s international leadership role, reaffirming traditional alliances, and multilateralism. The replacement of Trump’s ‘America First’ approach by Biden’s ‘America is Back’ indicates the resumption of a liberal internationalist strategy, which, since the post-World War II period, has framed foreign aid as a central instrument of US hegemonic leadership on the international stage. In a USDS address, Biden (2021) reaffirmed:

Investing in our diplomacy isn’t something we do just because it’s the right thing to do for the world. We do it in order to live in peace, security, and prosperity. We do it because it’s in our own naked self-interest. When we strengthen our alliances, we amplify our power as well as our ability to disrupt threats before they can reach our shores. When we invest in economic development of countries, we create new markets for our products and reduce the likelihood of instability, violence, and mass migrations. When we strengthen health systems in far regions of the world, we reduce the risk of future pandemics that can threaten our people and our economy [...].

An important signal came with the appointment of Samantha Power to lead USAID. She is a high-profile leader with extensive experience in international politics, having been the US Ambassador to the UN during the Obama administration (2013-2017), in addition to stints at USDS and the National Security Council (2009-2013). In testimony before the Senate, Power said that USAID’s action must take place through four pillars: the pandemic; climate change; state failure and conflicts; and democratic backsliding. The Biden administration also secured a seat for Power on the main committee of the National Security Council, thereby raising USAID’s strategic importance in foreign policy and national security issues (Igoe 2021).

It is also worth mentioning that there have been signs of a resumption in the gradual growth in funding for foreign aid. The CBJ for fiscal year 2022 requested US\$58.5 billion for USDS and USAID, that is, more than 10% increase in relation to the amount for 2021 (enacted), in addition to the forecast of new hires for the international aid bureaucracy. According to the current Secretary of State, Antony Blinken (2021):

These resources will position us to advance the Administration’s foreign policy agenda on behalf of the American people. It also reflects the importance the Administration places on U.S. global leadership and the fact that diplomacy and development are vital tools for advancing U.S. interests.

The main elements highlighted by Blinken as objectives of international assistance are the climate crisis, illegal migration from Central America, the resumption of democracy promotion and humanitarian aid. It is also noted the resumption of the strategic profile of foreign aid in the dissemination of liberal values – ‘freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights’ – which in turn are fundamental for the administration of the international order, according to the tradition of US foreign policy.

The proposal provides for a 22% increase in USDS and USAID economic development programs, beating the US\$1.7 billion, including 35% increase for ESF and 16% for DA, plus US\$10 billion in humanitarian aid (6% more than fiscal year 2021). Another investment reinforced by the CBJ-FY22 is the US\$3.9 billion for global health programs, representing a 9% increase over the previous year, with US\$300 million in multilateral contributions (including the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator).

Some commitments significantly distance Biden’s foreign aid programme from that offered by Trump. This is the case of the increase in contributions to peacekeeping operations (US\$1.93 billion, doubling the US\$750 million in fiscal year 2021) and to international financial institutions (US\$2.7 billion mainly for multilateral development banks). Above all, the 230% increase in programmes focused on climate change, totalling US\$2.5 billion, of which the majority (about US\$1.7 billion) were for multilateral initiatives.

As elements of continuity, one can mention the requisition of US\$598 million for the USDFC that was inaugurated by Trump, an insignificant increase of only US\$29 million in relation to the amount approved in the previous cycle, and the maintenance of programs aimed at ‘female empowerment’ that were included in the Gender Equity and Equality Action (GEEA) fund.

Also noteworthy is the resumption of initiatives started under Barack Obama, with a new emphasis on contributions to Africa, with a sum of US\$7.6 billion in various lines of foreign aid, including initiatives PEPFAR, Prosper Africa and Power Africa. Likewise, the 70% increase in aid to Central America that would reach US\$861 million in 2022. This would be the first disbursement in a four-year period, US\$4 billion commitment to economic assistance, security and human rights, and anti-corruption and institutional strengthening for key recipients in the region: Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Another rescued element is the promotion of democracy, which should have increased by 18%, with US\$2.8 billion invested in ‘revitalising democratic values’ and building ‘good governance’ (Saldinger 2021). Also noteworthy is the US\$550 million earmarked for a new ‘refugee resettlement architecture in the US’ – in support of the expressed goal of admitting 125,000 refugees by 2022 (Collinson and Estes 2021).

In other words, the Biden presidency signals an important strategic and material recomposition, with the availability of funds and the hiring of personnel for USAID, in addition to the resumption of the commitment to traditional aid recipients (such as the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America) as well as international and multilateral development banks. In this scenario, the four years of the Trump administration seem to have configured a momentary gap of disinterest and disengagement with international development aid and cooperation.

## Final considerations

The United States has always had a prominent role in the international aid system, in the economic and humanitarian field, being the largest individual donor of official development assistance in the OECD. More than just a major source of resources, the US was also at the forefront of building the agenda for North-South foreign aid – from modernisation theory to contemporary debates on aid effectiveness. Through the influence of its epistemic community and privileged diplomatic position in international organisations and institutions of global governance, it has been able to shape ‘theories and good practices’ in this field.

Since the formulation of the Marshall Plan, in the post-World War II period, the American government conceived of foreign aid as an important tool for promoting its interests abroad. Thus, the inseparability between diplomatic and development promotion objectives in the different phases of US foreign aid is of salient importance. From the Cold War to the War on Terror, Washington’s official narrative sought to highlight the relevance of foreign assistance – on the one hand, in view of the moral commitment subscribed to in American exceptionalism, and on the other, in view of its instrumentality in the defence of the national interest. In the recent past, the Bush II and Obama administrations placed their bets on valuing foreign aid as a strategic instrument, increasing their budgetary standards and investing political capital in bureaucratic reform, thus consolidating a security-development nexus in the new context of challenges to US foreign policy in the 21st century. This article has sought to understand how the Trump administration shaped the foreign aid agenda by trying to curb historical trends and commitments.

When reviewing official pronouncements and strategic documents, one can see some inflections that accompany general trends in Trump’s foreign policy. The patriotism underlying ‘America First’ led to an emphasis on domestic returns on investments in international assistance – i.e., on the idea that aid should be directed towards strengthening American security and economy. ‘Short-termism’, in which aid should be limited to US-supporting countries (as in the UN votes), prevailed. Between 2017 and 2020, President Trump openly used foreign aid as a bargaining chip, constantly threatening cuts to those who do not live up to Washington’s expectations (as in the case of illegal immigration from Central America).

Especially since Pompeo’s appointment as Secretary of State, the delimitation of a competitive international scenario became clear, highlighting the role of rising powers such as Russia and China. With regard to foreign aid, the intention to compete with the Asian giant was exposed, offering an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative with the creation of the USDFC, and the reaffirmation of important values of American cooperation (its commitment to transparency, local demands, and structural reforms that would have a definitive impact on development). This, by the way, was the tone set by the former director of USAID, Mark Green, with the ‘journey to self-reliance’ – foreign aid as a temporary instrument in building resilient allies.

But, as identified in the CBJs review, this strategic delimitation clashes with the Trump administration's systematic attempt to reduce the volume of funds available for foreign aid. For the proposed budgets between 2018 and 2021, cuts of approximately 30% were requested for the USDS and USAID accounts, which would have led to the suspension (or dramatic reduction) of aid to dozens of recipients, for voluntary contributions to international organisations and multilateral aid, in addition to the elimination of entire programmes (such as Food for Peace and the Inter-American and African Development Foundations). What would remain, in this scenario, would be the concentration of aid to historical recipients, especially in the Middle East and Africa, such as Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania.

The proposed cuts did not materialise thanks to the legislature's insistence on maintaining budget levels as well as the old foreign aid accounts (restraining the proposed concentration on unitary accounts). In other words, over the four years of the Trump administration, tension was established between the executive and the legislature that held back the full realisation of the new selectivity that sought to direct aid exclusively to the 'friends of America'. In some way, the White House's revisionist impetus towards 'globalism' was also curbed, limiting its international commitments, including those linked to foreign aid.

By systematising the first political signals and material resources provided for foreign aid in the Biden administration, we tend to define the Trump phase as a brief hiatus in contemporary trends in US international assistance. This is because in the first year of Biden and Blinken's foreign policy, with Power at the helm of USAID, important dimensions of foreign aid were resumed, starting with the US 'responsibility narrative' with international development and the defence of liberal values globally. Thus, the importance of multilateral cooperation and foreign aid in the recovery of the profile of US global leadership is reaffirmed (through the promotion of democracy and humanitarian assistance, with an emphasis on global health and climate change), in addition to its instrumentality for the own economic growth and national security (as in the migration issue).

## Notes

- 1 In the General Assembly vote on December 21, 2018, a total of 128 countries declared the Trump administration's policy of recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel "null and void," with 9 votes in favour of the American decision and 35 abstentions.
- 2 The MCC was created in 2005 under the Bush II administration, creating an independent agency with an intermediate budget and focused on the selection of aid recipients according to their commitment to political and economic reforms, in order to stimulate the democratic model and the adoption of free market principles. Although in theory the Trump administration gave express support to the MCC, in practice, Sean Cairncross was only appointed CEO of MCC very late in the piece (879 days after Trump's inauguration).
- 3 The countries that joined America Cresce were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, Suriname, and Uruguay.
- 4 The budget was approved through the Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-141).
- 5 The budget was approved through the Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-6).

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## América Primeiro: ajuda externa na administração do Trump

**Resumo:** Os EUA têm liderado a construção do sistema internacional de cooperação para o desenvolvimento e têm sido o maior doador individual durante as últimas sete décadas. A ajuda externa passou por diferentes fases durante o período pós Segunda Guerra Mundial e continua a ser um importante instrumento geopolítico e geoeconômico para os EUA do século XXI. As administrações Bush e Obama, apesar das diferentes nuances em termos de discurso e práticas de ajuda, investiram em reformas para modernizar os programas de ajuda, aumentaram o financiamento para a USAID, e criaram novos programas globais de saúde, segurança alimentar, e alterações climáticas. Ao contrário da tendência histórica, a administração Trump apresentou requisições orçamentais caracterizadas por uma redução de 30% nas dotações do Departamento de Estado e da USAID. É de notar que a administração Trump questionou os custos da liderança global, criticou as organizações internacionais e a atribuição setorial de fundos, e fez ameaças de cortes na ajuda a países que se opunham aos interesses de Washington. O objetivo deste artigo é compreender como a estratégia de 'America First' mudou o tripé estratégico da defesa, diplomacia e desenvolvimento, analisando as mudanças na ajuda externa dos EUA em termos de recursos disponíveis, países beneficiários, modalidades de ajuda, e compromisso multilateral.

**Palavras-chave:** ajuda externa; cooperação internacional; desenvolvimento; Estados Unidos; Trump.

*Received on 26 August 2021 and approved for publication on 8 December 2022.*



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