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THE STRATEGIC REALIGNMENT OF US FOREIGN AID UNDER TRUMP'S SECOND ADMINISTRATION: IMPACTS ON GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, DIPLOMACY, AND POWER PROJECTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the strategic realignment of U.S. foreign aid under President Trump's second administration and its consequences. The research problem centers on whether an executive-driven shift toward narrowly defined national-interest objectives produces measurable strategic returns or instead undermines the institutional and normative foundations of American influence. The study's objectives are to assess impacts on multilateral governance, diplomacy, and power projection. The analysis is anchored in realist international-relations theory, which frames aid as an instrument of state power used to secure relative advantage. Methodologically, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design combining 48 purposively sampled key-informant interviews across policy, implementing, multilateral, recipient-country, and private-sector actors, together with desk

research of publicly available secondary materials. Findings indicate pronounced effects across three domains. First, global governance institutions experienced financing gaps, erosion of U.S. coalition leadership, and operational fragmentation. Second, diplomacy was marked by increased transactionalism, allied hedging, and opportunistic advances by rival donors. Third, aid was repurposed toward security and geoeconomic ends, yielding short-term tactical gains but weakening the soft power and embedded institutional presence that sustain long-term influence. The study concludes that, while the realignment aligns with realist incentives for immediate relative gains, it incurs systemic costs to coalition cohesion and normative authority. Policy implications call for protecting multilateral and humanitarian baselines while pursuing targeted strategic investments to reconcile short-term objectives with durable influence.

Keywords: Foreign Aid, Power, Realignment, Diplomacy, Governance.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid/ assistance remains a central instrument of statecraft. According to OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), foreign aid, also referred to as the official development assistance (ODA), is government-provided grants or concessional loans, delivered by public agencies to developing-country governments, International NGOs, or multilateral institutions, where i) the principal aim is to promote economic development and welfare, and ii) the terms are more generous than prevailing market finance (OECD, n.d.). Foreign aid has historically been one of the most important instruments through which states influence global affairs (Pham, 2025). Beyond its humanitarian appeal, foreign aid functions as a strategic tool that governments deploy to foster alliances, strengthen economic ties, and enhance their geopolitical influence. In this sense, aid embodies a dual logic: advancing developmental goals while simultaneously serving the foreign policy interests of donor states (Pham, 2025).

In 2024, ODA worldwide amounted to USD 212.1 billion, representing a 7.1% fall compared to the previous year, with a projected 9 to 17% drop in 2025 (OECD, 2025a, 2025b). The OECD (2025b) report also indicated that for the first time in nearly three decades, the US, the UK, France, and Germany all reduced their ODA contributions in 2024. These contractions signal more than temporary fiscal pressures and budgetary retrenchment; they reflect a

broader pattern of aid realignment. Foreign aid realignment denotes the deliberate reorientation of policies in scope, direction, and conditionality to align with evolving national interests and strategic priorities. It often involves redefining sectoral priorities, channeling fewer resources through multilateral institutions, and privileging bilateral relationships that promise immediate political or economic returns. At a systemic level, this trend underscores a mounting crisis within the global aid architecture. As Muggah and Salmon (2025) argue, the traditional donor-led model (hierarchical and rooted in post-war liberal ideals) is under strain from intensifying geopolitical rivalries, fiscal tightening, and the resurgence of nationalism.

The US remains one of the largest foreign aid donors. According to OECD (2025a), the US contributed approximately 30% of total ODA (USD 63.3 billion) in 2024. This scale of funding underscores Washington's enduring influence over both bilateral and multilateral aid flows at the global level. Table 1 below provides a snapshot of the US foreign aid.

Objectives	**Main Executing Agencies**	**Forms of US Foreign Aid**	**Main Aid Funding Categories**
1. Peace and Security 2. Humanitarian assistance 3. Investing in People 4. Economic Growth 5. Democratic and Just Governance	1. US Agency for International Development (USAID) 2. US Departments of the Treasury/Health and Human Services/State/ Defense 3. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) 4. Other Agencies like the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the Peace Corps	1. Direct Budget Support 2. Economic infrastructure 3. In-Kind Goods 4. Grants 5. Technical Assistance (Expertise and Training)	1. Bilateral Development 2. Military 3. Humanitarian 4. Political/Strategic 5. Non-Military Security 6. Multilateral Development

Source: Author (2025), adopted from Lawson & Morgenstern (2020).

The strategic realignment of US foreign aid under President Trump's second administration represents a sharp reorientation from multilateral development and humanitarian priorities toward narrowly defined national-interest objectives. Trump's "America First" doctrine approaches aid less as a global public good and more as a transactional instrument tethered directly to US economic and political gains. On his first day, the administration issued an executive order (January 20, 2025) initiating a 90-day review and pause of many foreign-assistance programs. (The White House, 2025). Practically, the realignment has featured freezes and stop-work orders on existing awards, proposals to rescind previously appropriated

aid, and plans to transfer or repurpose allocations toward “America First” priorities and security-focused investments (Kates et al.,2025; and Office of Management and Budget, 2025). In essence, these changes were framed as a rebalance to ensure assistance “advances American interests.” Consequently, strategic recalibration of aid (whether by redirecting funds, imposing new conditions, or prioritizing bilateral over multilateral frameworks) is not a uniquely American phenomenon but part of a broader global trend in which states increasingly view aid as an explicit tool of competition and leverage.

The literature on foreign aid is mature but thematically segmented. Empirical scholarship has examined conditionality, compliance, and aid effectiveness, showing that outcomes depend heavily on design, delivery modality, and recipient governance (Guillaumont et al., 2023). More recent work by scholars such as Pham (2025) has shifted toward the geopolitics of foreign aid allocation. Despite these advances, important gaps remain. Few studies have examined the effects of the US’s executive-driven realignments of aid policy on global governance institutions (GGIs), diplomacy, and power projection. Specifically, the problem lies in assessing whether or not aid realignment reinforces or accelerates the decline of US influence in the multipolar world.

The present study addresses these lacunae. This study has three specific objectives: i) To analyze the impacts of this realignment on global governance institutions, ii) To evaluate its effects on US diplomatic relations with both allies and rivals, and iii) To assess how aid realignment shapes US power projection in the context of rising multipolar competition. This study is significant for three reasons. First, it contributes to academic debates on aid and power by linking US foreign aid strategy to theories of realism. Second, it informs policy discussions, providing insights for US lawmakers and GGIs navigating an era of contested global aid architecture. Third, it holds practical relevance for aid-recipient countries, which must anticipate how shifts in US aid priorities affect their development trajectories and geopolitical alignments.

2.0 THEORETICAL GROUNDING

This study is anchored in the realist theory of international relations, which posits that states operate in an anarchic global system where survival, security, and power are paramount (Lebow, 2024). Realism assumes that states are rational actors motivated primarily by national interests, and that international institutions or norms hold limited authority when

weighed against the pursuit of strategic advantage (Sørensen et al., 2022). Applied to US foreign aid, realism underscores how strategic realignment reflects a recalibration of resources to advance specific geopolitical priorities. From a realist perspective, foreign aid is not an altruistic instrument but an extension of state power (Wood, 2024). Under Trump's "America First" doctrine, aid was redefined in transactional terms, contingent upon recipient compliance with US foreign policy objectives. This aligns with realist assumptions that weaker states depend on stronger powers and that such dependency can be leveraged for other strategic goals. According to Wood (2024), realism provides a framework for understanding how aid becomes a coercive mechanism rather than a developmental partnership. Trump's foreign aid policies epitomize the realist shift from collective problem-solving toward competitive positioning in a multipolar order.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent mixed methods design to analyze the strategic realignment of US foreign aid under Trump's second administration and its implications for global governance, diplomacy, and power projection. This design involved collecting qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously, analyzing them separately, and then merging the results. The study's primary data were collected through 48 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The 48 KIIs comprised 8 US federal-level policymakers (State and USAID), 3 congressional staffers (foreign-policy and appropriations committees), 4 US defense/security/interagency officials, 6 US mission/field officials (Ambassadors, USAID Mission Directors across regions), 8 recipient-country government officials (foreign affairs across regions), 3 regional organization representatives (AU, ASEAN, OAS), 4 multilateral organization representatives (UN agencies like WHO), 6 implementing partners and NGO/contractor leads (international and local), 6 Academics/think-tank experts on aid and geopolitics. The participants in the KIIs were selected through purposive sampling and stratified sampling techniques. Purposive sampling to ensure representation of the full policy cycle and diverse geographic impacts. Purposive, stratified recruitment selected informants by role (policy-maker, implementer, recipient official, multilateral/regional actor, academic, private sector) and by region (North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East/North Africa, Latin America & Caribbean, Indo-Pacific, Europe/Eurasia).

Secondary data complemented these insights, drawing from scholarly publications, government reports, and policy briefs. This triangulation strengthened the reliability and validity of findings by situating individual perceptions within broader policy and academic debates. The study applied content analysis to both primary and secondary data. This research adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing identifying information from transcripts and survey data. These measures safeguarded participant integrity while upholding academic rigor.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings on the strategic realignment of US foreign aid under President Trump's second administration and its consequences for i) global governance, ii) diplomacy, and iii) power projection.

4.1 Global Governance Institutions (GGIs)

GGIs are organizations, regimes, and mechanisms that coordinate international cooperation, set rules, and manage transnational challenges beyond the capacity of any single state. They include intergovernmental organizations (such as the UN), multilateral development banks (like the World Bank), regulatory bodies (like the International Monetary Fund), and treaty-based regimes, among others. The realignment of US foreign aid in Trump's second administration has several implications for GGIs. Of the 48 KIIs, 39 (81%) reported that the US's foreign aid realignments in Trump's second administration had introduced meaningful volatility into multilateral planning and partnerships. The study's respondents identified three interrelated institutional impacts: financing gaps (as per 21 respondents), erosion of US coalition leadership (as per 11 respondents), and operational fragmentation and burden-shifting (as per 7 respondents). Figure 1 below graphically shows the prevalence of these institutional impacts.

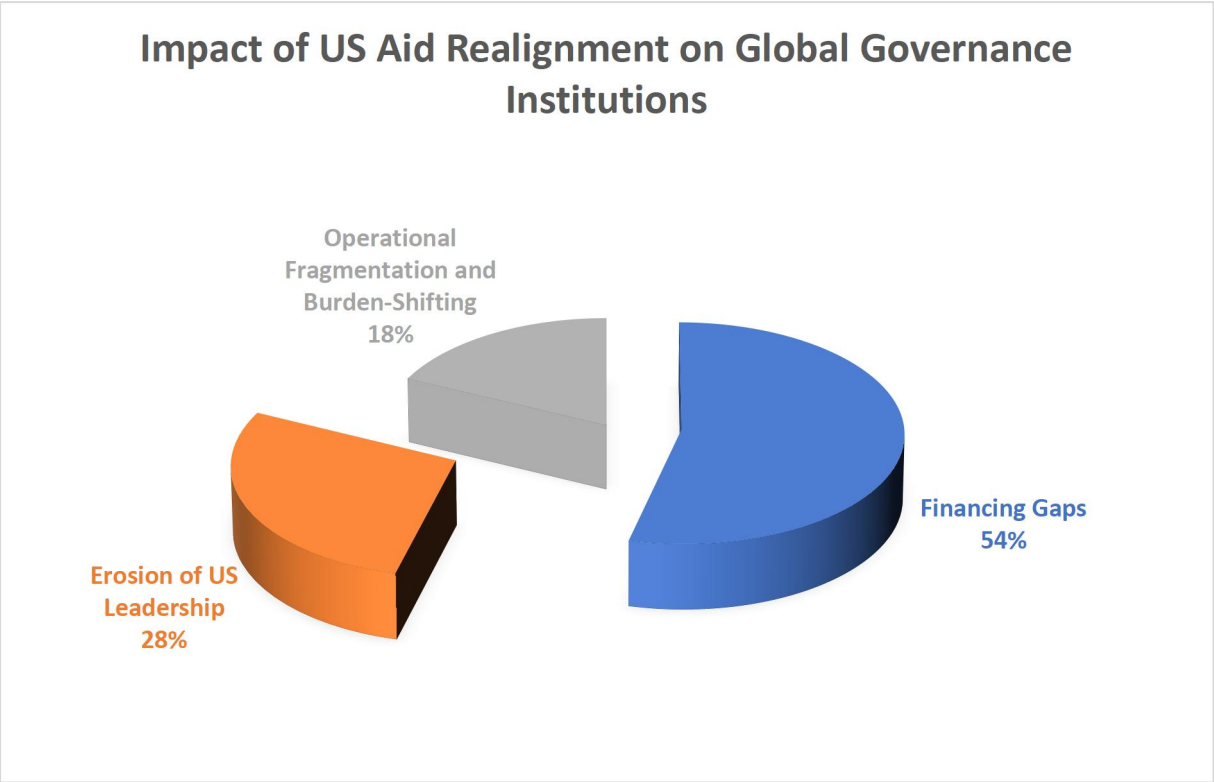

Figure 1: Impacts of US aid realignment on GGIs

Source: Author (2025)

4.1.1 Financing Gaps

21 key informants acknowledged that US aid realignment had disrupted financing streams for GGIs. Multilateral organizations such as the UN and its agencies, like the WHO, depend heavily on US contributions. Abrupt suspensions, sudden freezes, and reprogramming notices disrupt forward budgeting cycles of these GGIs. This created gaps that hindered long-term planning and undermined trust in US commitments. Lambardo (2025) also underscores this disruption, noting that the Trump administration recently announced the termination of approximately 211 awards to UN agencies. This study's informants emphasized that such withdrawals have left GGIs like the UN scrambling to secure alternative funding (KII12, 2025, KII40, 2025, and KII29, 2025). Several UN agencies are already facing massive job and budget cuts due to the reduced funding (Blackburn, 2025). Such financial gaps signal that American commitments to funding initiatives that address transitional challenges cannot be taken for granted.

4.1.2 Erosion of US Leadership

11 key informants noted that US aid realignment has resulted in the erosion of US leadership within GGIs. The US assistance has long been a linchpin of Washington's capacity to steer multilateral agendas and leadership across the UN system. However, a key informant aptly noted that;

By virtue of its donor weight, the US has been able to shape agency priorities and country plans—even where leadership posts are filled by the UN itself. However, with the declining funding, it will lose this leverage. (KII15, 2025)

The excerpt above aligns with Lambardo's (2025) warning that cuts to USAID and related funding erode this leverage amid China's incremental influence in GGIs like the IMF, World Bank, and the UN. Reduced contributions constrain Washington's ability to push reforms on executive boards, complicate efforts to align UN programming with US objectives, and weaken the practical use of UN instruments in peace operations. In short, funding retrenchment converts informal influence into diminished authority within institutions that historically amplified US policy goals. Instead, it centralizes aid program control in the State Department, shrinks or repurposes USAID functions, and increases selectivity and conditionality in bilateral relationships.

4.1.3 Operational Fragmentation and Burden-Shifting

According to 7 key informants, US aid realignment also produced fragmentation in GGIs at the operational level. Cuts to US-funded programs have forced implementing agencies and partner governments to seek patchwork solutions, shifting burdens onto smaller donors and regional organizations. A USAID field and implementing partner interviewees described a proliferation of small, targeted awards managed out of embassies rather than through coordinated multilateral channels. A USAID official observed that;

There is an increasing shift from pooled, programmatic funding to short-term, mission-driven contracts. This has raised transaction costs and reduced economies of scale for implementing organizations (KII06, 2025).

Viewed through the study's realist frame, these institutional impacts reflect the trade-offs of converting aid into an overt instrument of short-term geopolitical leverage: immediate strategic gains are attainable, but they carry systemic costs to the predictability, cohesion, and normative authority of GGIs. The findings suggest that sustained US influence over GGIs via aid may require preserving select multilateral channels to avoid long-term erosion of

institutional architectures that underpin US influence. The study's KIIs revealed two mechanisms driving institutional effects discussed in the subsections 4.1.1 to 4.1.3 above. The first mechanism is financial signaling. This is where abrupt budgetary changes alter expectations and constrain multilateral medium-term planning. The second mechanism pertains to policy conditionalities in aid realignments. This mechanism is where increased use of explicit bilateral conditions reshapes coalition behaviour and partner trust.

4.2 Diplomacy

36 of 48 KIIs reported that partner governments and allied donors recalibrated negotiation strategies and burden-sharing assumptions in response to increased US selectivity and conditionality. The KIIs pointed to three proximate outcomes, graphically presented in Figure 2 below: (1) credibility erosion among traditional allies, who increasingly conditioned cooperation on clearer, more binding assurances; (2) opportunistic advances by rivals, who offered less-conditional financing in vacuums created by paused US programs; and (3) greater transactionalism in bilateral diplomacy, with aid explicitly tethered to discrete security, resource, or migration objectives.

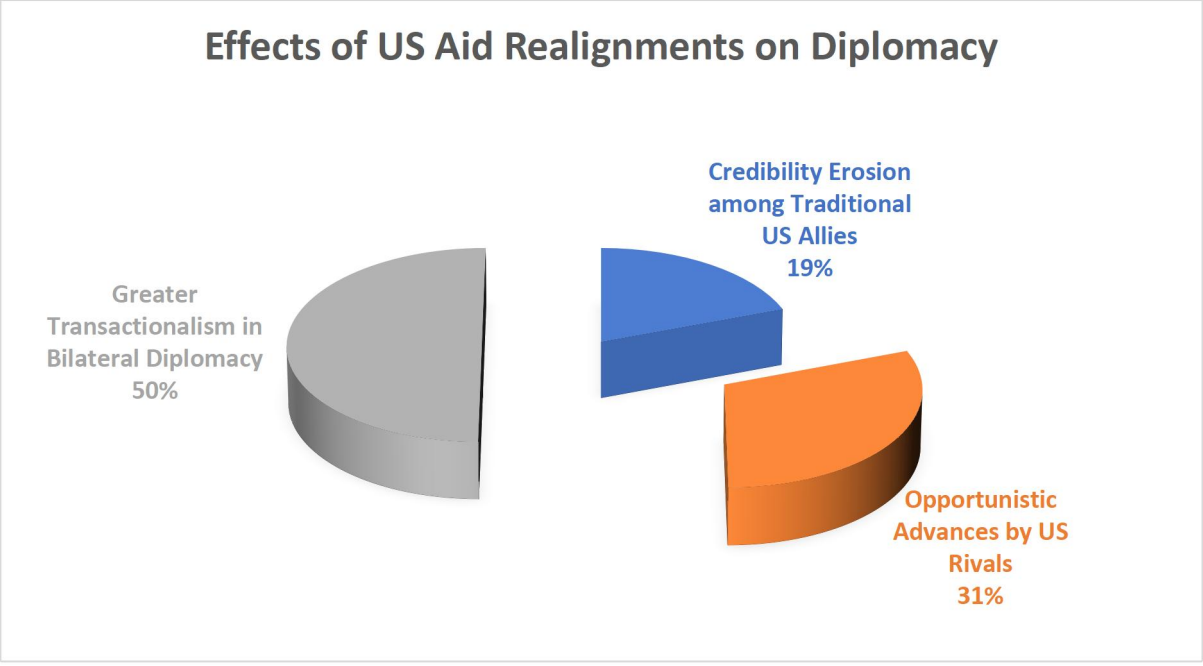

Figure 2: Effects of US Aid Realignments on Diplomacy

Source: Author (2025)

Among the 48 KIIs, the modal diplomatic response was greater transactionalism in bilateral diplomacy (18 respondents), followed by opportunistic advances by rivals (11) and credibility erosion among traditional allies (7). These frequencies reveal a pattern: the administration's

aid realignment most immediately reshaped the mechanics of bilateral engagement, while consequential secondary effects manifested in strategic competition and diminished allied trust. The prominence of transactionalism indicates that aid became more explicitly conditional and instrumentally tethered to discrete policy returns—migration cooperation, resource access, or security concessions—rather than to long-term programmatic goals. Practically, this produced faster, smaller bilateral packages managed at the embassy level, shortening negotiation cycles but reducing the institutional coordination that undergirds sustained partnerships. This finding aligns with literature showing that politicized aid reallocations reconfigure donor–recipient bargaining dynamics (Pham, 2025; Regilme & Hodzi, 2021).

Opportunistic advances by rivals emerged where U.S. retrenchment created immediate vacuums; 11 informants described competitors (notably China) stepping in with fewer conditional offers. A key informant from a recipient country official observed that;

Some aid recipient governments have adopted a more transactional, multi-vector diplomacy. These countries have opted for leveraging competition between donors to secure infrastructure, mineral-sector deals, or security cooperation on terms more favourable to host regimes (KII3, 2025).

This pattern is consistent with donor-competition studies: when one major provider withdraws or reprioritizes, others exploit the opening to deepen influence through visible infrastructure and expedited financing (Blair et al., 2022).

Although fewer interviewees flagged credibility erosion directly, its strategic salience is high. Even a modest number of allied concerns can compound over time: hedging behavior reduces coalition cohesion and complicates multilateral diplomacy. KIIs from multilateral and EU interlocutors emphasized that US conditioning complicated diplomatic messaging and constrained joint bargaining leverage in forums such as G7/G20 and climate negotiations (KII16, 2025, KII4, 2025, and KII27, 2025). In sum, the distribution of responses suggests a trade-off—transactional bilateral agility versus declining collective leverage and increased rival penetration—which carries important implications for coalition management, alliance reassurance, and the durability of U.S. diplomatic influence. Policymakers should therefore balance targeted bilateral instruments with predictable, multilateral commitments to mitigate these risks.

4.3 Power Projection

This study's KIIs and documentary analysis indicate that US aid realignment under Trump's second administration significantly alters the contours of American power projection. These impacts included being a force multiplier for security and military objectives (as per 21 key informants), an increase in geoeconomic influence (15 key informants), a decline in US soft power (8 key informants), and operational strain in sustaining US presence/influence in the Global South (4 key informants), as shown in Figure 3 below.

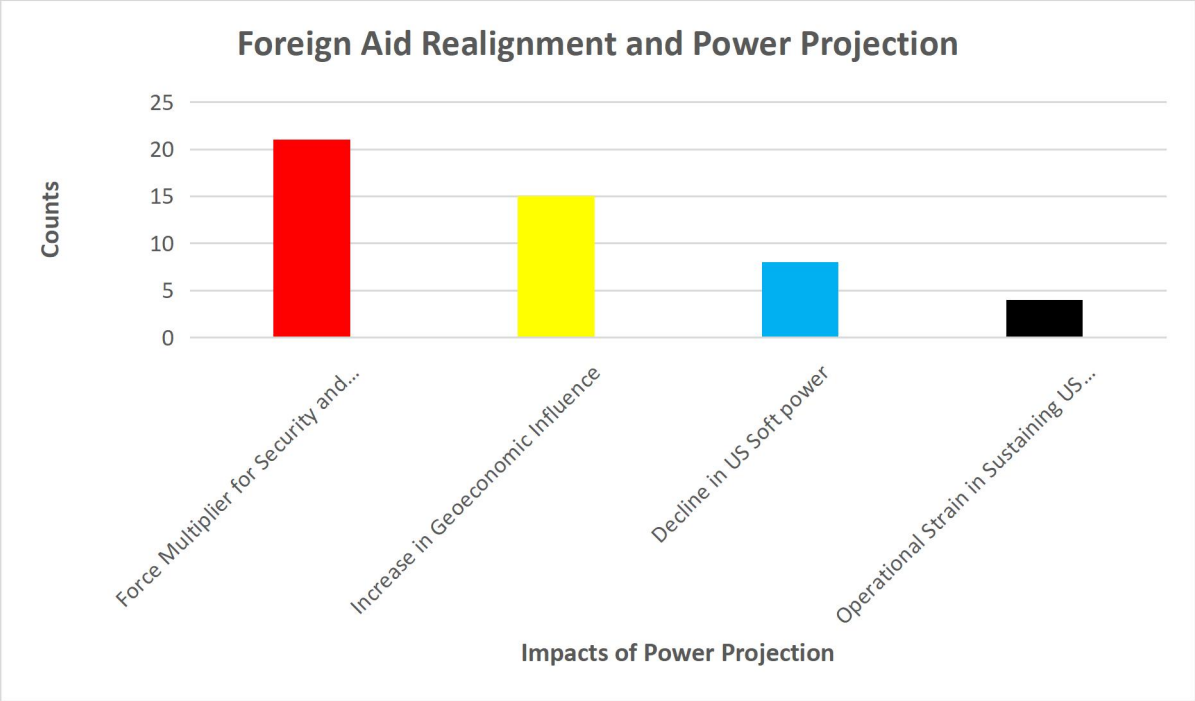

Figure 3: Foreign Aid Realignment and Power Projection

Source: Author (2025)

Out of the 48 respondents, 21 (43.7%) emphasized that aid increasingly served as a force multiplier for security and military objectives. Funding was redirected toward defense cooperation, counterterrorism initiatives, and strategic infrastructure that supported basing rights and military access in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East. As one senior defense-linked respondent noted;

Aid programs were repackaged as bargaining chips for access agreements. This was less about poverty alleviation and more about hard-power enablers. Funding is increasingly channeled to strategic allies in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East for security cooperation and infrastructure projects tied to US resource access. The Embassies have more discretion to push these bilateral deals. (KII18, 2025).

Another 15 respondents (31.2%) highlighted the growing use of aid to secure geoeconomic influence, particularly through targeted investments in critical minerals, energy corridors, and technology infrastructure. A trade specialist remarked:

Funds once earmarked for multilateral development were rerouted into projects that secured supply chains vital to US strategic industries (KII22, 2025).

The results demonstrate that the Trump-era realignment reasserted foreign aid as a hard-power instrument. The realignment strengthens the instrumental use of aid for immediate geopolitical leverage: smaller, mission-managed awards and targeted infrastructure/security projects increase US agility to reward partners, secure access to resources, and respond to short-term contingencies. Washington sought to reinforce its coercive and deterrent capacity in an increasingly contested global order by leveraging aid for military access and geoeconomic positioning. This is precisely the behavior predicted by realist accounts: states convert external transfers into tools of relative power maximization within an anarchic system (Sørensen et al., 2022).

The emphasis on aid as a strategic enabler aligns with scholarship highlighting the role of foreign aid in underpinning military alliances and securing forward deployments (Regilme & Hodzi, 2021). The Indo-Pacific cases, where aid facilitated base access and maritime security cooperation (KII18, 2025), exemplify how aid contributes directly to military projection. This resonates with Mearsheimer's emphasis on the use of material instruments to maximize relative power and secure compliance in an anarchic system (Tabak, 2025). Similarly, the focus on critical minerals and digital infrastructure reflects the realist imperative of denying strategic resources to rivals—a point underscored in research on geoeconomic statecraft (Farrell & Newman, 2025). By reallocating aid to priority regions and sectors, the US was able to secure tactical advantages (like access to strategic resources and diplomatic concessions) for its power projection.

US aid realignment carries costs. 8 respondents (16.7%) raised concerns that this reallocation eroded the soft-power dimension of US influence by weakening the structural bases of America's power projection. This is consistent with Lombardo's (2025) observation that aid realignment negatively impacts how the US is perceived across the globe. Informants' reports of rivals moving into U.S. vacuums align with the donor-competition literature: when a major provider retrenches, competitors—most notably China—can rapidly expand influence through discretionary financing and large infrastructure deals, thereby capitalizing on openings created by reduced Western engagement (Natsios, 2020).

According to Blair et al. (2022), strategic geostrategic returns may be offset by declining public and normative influence in recipient societies. Trump's second administration has terminated approximately 211 awards for humanitarian and development programs affiliated with various UN agencies (Lombardo, 2025). Such deprioritization of humanitarian and development aid undercuts the US soft-power foundations. Humanitarian and social-sector aid has long been viewed as tools for shaping values and perceptions. This has created reputational gaps that US competitors exploit. Nye (2023) argues that the projection of power depends not only on coercion and inducements but also on attraction. The KIIs highlight how transactional reallocation reduced the appeal of the US model, particularly in regions like Africa, where China expanded concessional loans and visible infrastructure projects to fill the vacuum (KII2, 2025, KII19, 2025, KII32, 2025, and KII41, 2025).

Finally, 4 respondents (8.3%) underscored operational strain, noting that aid realignments and retrenchment weaken America's sustained presence in regions like Africa and Latin America, thereby indirectly reducing its ability to maintain influence relative to China and Russia. The operational strain identified by implementers suggests a weakening of what Brooks and Wohlforth call "deep engagement"—the embedded networks, programs, and presence that sustain American hegemony beyond raw force (Friedman, 2022). Without these platforms, power projection risks becoming episodic and reactive rather than embedded and enduring. As one USAID implementer put it:

We lost visibility on the ground. Programs weren't just tools of development—they were platforms for sustained American presence and influence. Cutting them undermined that quietly powerful function" (KII38, 2025).

The excerpt above underscores that power projection is not solely about overt security or economic leverage (material aspects), but also about the enduring relational infrastructure that aid programs build over time.

The realist frame helps reconcile the mixed outcomes in power projection due to US aid realignment: increasing hard power and the fleeting soft power. Converting US aid into an instrument of immediate competitive advantage is rational under a short-horizon logic of relative gains, but it risks degrading the structural sources of influence (like coalition leadership, institutional reputation, and long-term normative sway) that sustain US power projection over multiple issue domains and time horizons. Consequently, the overreliance on transactional hard power emphasized in Trump's second administration undermines the sustainability of the already declining US hegemony in multipolar contexts. The US risks

ceding ground in the broader geopolitical competition where emerging powers like China and Russia combine material inducements with narratives of solidarity or non-conditionality in aid deployment.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the strategic realignment of US foreign aid under Trump's second administration and its implications for global governance, diplomacy, and power projection. The findings confirm that aid was redefined less as a developmental partnership and more as a transactional tool of statecraft aligned with the "America First" doctrine. The realignment has weakened US leadership in multilateral arenas by redirecting funds away from collective initiatives. This eroded predictability and created openings for rival powers to shape norms and institutions. In addition, aid realignment has increased the US's bilateral leverage in targeted diplomatic engagements. However, transactional conditionality has strained alliances and accelerated hedging behaviors among partners. On the power projection front, foreign aid realignment has become a more explicit enabler of US military access and geoeconomic positioning. Yet, the contraction of humanitarian and developmental programming has weakened soft power aspects of US influence across the world. Put differently, short-term realist gains arising from aid realignments risk hollowing the longer-term architectures (political, institutional, and normative) that enable sustained US advantage in an increasingly contested international order.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study makes the following recommendations;

1. The US should balance strategic aid investments in geoeconomic and security domains with baseline humanitarian and developmental commitments that preserve the reputational and embedded infrastructures of US power, especially in the Global South, where the US faces immense competition from emerging powers like the BRICS nations.
2. The US should ring-fence predictable multilateral and humanitarian funding. Adopt multi-year pledge commitments for core UN programs, create protected budget lines for life-saving humanitarian assistance, and limit the circumstances under which these accounts may be reprogrammed.

3. The UN and multilateral development banks should establish rapid gap-filling and contingency mechanisms. Create standing contingency trust funds and rapid-response windows with transparent activation criteria so that programs remain operational when a major donor's contributions fluctuate.

4. US allied donors and partners should create coordinated strategic pooled-fund instruments. Negotiate joint funds for shared geostrategic priorities governed by multilateral boards to distribute political risk while preserving coalition influence.

5. The US Congress should enhance oversight and mandate rigorous budget-tracing and evaluation. Enact reporting requirements for any major reprogramming (including rationale, beneficiaries, and sunset provisions), commission independent audits of reallocated funds, and require outcome-based monitoring and evaluation to compare geopolitical versus developmental returns.

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