

U.S. Withdrawal from Multilateral Institutions: Implications for the Global Order

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The global governance system is changing significantly. The system built around institutions like the United Nations, the Bretton Woods organizations, and other specialized agencies is no longer working as it once did. While American leadership was instrumental, the institutional frameworks that emerged were ultimately grounded in a wider post-war multilateral consensus. For a long time, these organizations depended heavily on the United States for funding, and leadership. As a result, global priorities often reflected U.S. interests. After the Cold War, and under the influence of liberal ideas, international organizations became a core part of the liberal international order. They shared responsibility with governments for global security, development, humanitarian response, and climate action. Even so, state participation in these institutions has never been fully stable. Countries have left international organizations at different times for political and strategic reasons. In this context, withdrawal from an international organization means that a member state chooses to leave and ends all legal and contractual obligations. Withdrawal is not simply the opposite of joining. Several factors such as shared interests and democratic values influence why states join and also retreat from international organizations. However, different political and strategic calculations often shape the decision to leave as well².

Several countries from many regions and time periods have withdrawn from international organizations from time to time. Among them the United States has done so more often than any other country since 1945³. IO withdrawal in the United States is not confined to a single political

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² Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Public Support for Withdrawal from International Organizations: Experimental Evidence from the US," *The Review of International Organizations* 19, no. 4 (2024): 809–845.

³ Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Hello, Goodbye: When Do States Withdraw from International Organizations?" *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 2 (2019): 335–366.

party. Democratic administrations have withdrawn from international organizations nearly as often as Republican administrations in the post–World War II era. Historically, therefore, exiting IOs is not a new phenomenon in U.S. foreign policy. However, the scale, visibility, and rhetoric surrounding withdrawal intensified during the 2016–2020 Trump administration^{4 5}. This period is described as a distinct “withdrawal doctrine” in U.S. foreign policy⁶. During this period, the United States formally left several international organizations. It also threatened to leave many others. Withdrawal also became a regular topic in domestic political debate. Trump ran his election campaign indicating withdrawing from international agreements and organizations, arguing that they limited U.S. sovereignty. This rhetoric continued throughout his first term. The administration portrayed these withdrawals as a way to reclaim U.S. sovereignty and rebalance the responsibilities it carries in the international system.



Source: The Real News Network

Recent U.S. withdrawals from major international organizations change the views of how the United States navigates the global cooperation at this time. The 2025 executive order that ordered

⁴ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://academic.oup.com/book/33586>.

⁵ Daniel W. Drezner, *The Toddler in Chief: What Donald Trump Teaches Us about the Modern Presidency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/T/bo51128380.html>.

⁶ Richard Haass, “Trump’s Foreign Policy Doctrine? The Withdrawal Doctrine,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/27/trumps-foreign-policy-doctrine-withdrawal-doctrine/>.

a full review of U.S. involvement in international organizations, followed by decisions to leave or suspend support for several UN agencies and global initiatives, suggests a shift toward selective multilateralism, where the U.S. participates strategically rather than comprehensively. When the global leader and largest financial supporter of the multilateral system pulls back, the impact goes far beyond single institutions. These organizations struggle to function effectively, face funding shortages, and lose the ability to act together. At the same time, it also weakens the trust in rules-based international cooperation. This raises serious questions about how long the liberal international order can last and what the future of global governance will look like. The effects on the global order are most visible in areas such as climate governance, humanitarian aid, public health, and human rights. In these fields, multilateral institutions play a vital role in coordination. The US's actions also change the balance of influence within these systems. Against this background, this commentary explores how U.S. withdrawal from multilateral institutions affects their performance and legitimacy. It also considers what these changes mean for the future of global governance and the stability of the current international order.

Erosion of Global Governance

Withdrawal from international institutions is not unique to the United States; many states disengage when organizations no longer align with national interests. Such exits vary widely from temporary funding cuts to permanent treaty withdrawals, therefore, their effects differ across issue areas. U.S. withdrawal, however, carries far greater weight. As the largest funder and a key political actor, U.S. disengagement creates funding shortfalls, leadership gaps, and legitimacy concerns that institutions struggle to absorb. The problem is not withdrawal itself, but the cumulative impact of repeated and highly visible U.S. exits.

The U.S. decision to leave many multilateral institutions is not just a shift in diplomatic style. It is deliberately moving away from the system that has supported global governance since World War II. Over time, these choices have added up. The United States stopped engaging with the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO, ended funding for UNRWA, reintroduced broad bans on participation in bodies labeled as anti-Israel or ideological, and withdrew from key treaties such as the UNFCCC and the WHO. Together, these actions are more than short-term or transactional policy changes. They weaken the shared norms, funding, and institutional practices that make

collective action possible on global issues such as human rights, public health, and climate change.⁷ These short-term political arguments hide the more serious, long-term impacts on multilateral norms and institutions. These actions degrade the authority of international law, hollow out humanitarian capacity, and accelerate a fragmentation of the global order that will ultimately make the United States poorer, less secure, and less able to shape outcomes it once cared about.

Politically, these withdrawals damage the moral foundation of international institutions. Multilateral bodies gain much of their legitimacy from the participation, and often the leadership, of powerful states. When the United States leaves institutions, it weakens their legitimacy in the eyes of both domestic audiences and international partners. The US follows an aggressive approach toward institutions that shape global norms with its withdrawal trend which appears to show a complete disregard for the international community. This stance is not neutral. It sends a message that respect for international norms depends on domestic political priorities. It weakens U.S.'s the credibility as a global leader. This inconsistency makes it harder for the U.S. to assert leadership on human rights and humanitarian issues⁸.

⁷ *Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations*, The White House, February 4, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-and-ending-funding-to-certain-united-nations-organizations-and-reviewing-united-states-support-to-all-international-organizations/>.

⁸ Ellen Knickmeyer, "Secretary of State Rubio Says Purge of USAID Programs Complete, with 83% of Agency's Programs Gone," *AP News*, March 11, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-musk-rubio-usaid-foreign-aid-bf442d62af67918a6fc5eee839074601>.



Source: Reuters

The legal and normative costs become even clearer when the United States leaves core treaties. By exiting the Paris process through withdrawal from the UNFCCC, the United States removes itself from the forum where key rules, standards, and financing arrangements are decided⁹. Without U.S. involvement, global climate talks lose a key source of technical expertise and financial support¹⁰. The economic consequences add to the normative damage. By blocking appointments to the WTO Appellate Body and letting the dispute settlement system weaken, the administration has created legal uncertainty in global trade¹¹. The global trade now faces uncertain tariff rules and a weaker system for resolving trade disputes. This adds to the growing trend of economic fragmentation already appearing in the global trading system. Countries respond by building alternative trade arrangements, such as closer EU–CPTPP links, stronger partnerships in Asia, or deeper

⁹ *Executive Order 14162: Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements*, **Federal Register** 90, no. 19 (January 30, 2025): 8455–8457, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/30/2025-02010/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements>.

¹⁰ Jasper Ward and Valerie Volcovici, “Trump Withdraws US from Dozens of International and UN Entities,” *Reuters*, January 8, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-signs-proclamation-withdrawing-international-organizations-white-house-2026-01-07/>.

¹¹ Henrik Horn and Petros C. Mavroidis, “Why the US and the WTO Should Part Ways,” *VoxEU*, June 25, 2025, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/why-us-and-wto-should-part-ways>.

cooperation within BRICS. As trade rules weaken, costs increase, and markets become more divided which disrupts a stable and predictable global trading system¹².

Fragmentation, Humanitarian Decline, and Shifting Power

Cuts in aid and funding for global public goods make the situation worse. For many years, U.S. funding has supported the budgets of the WHO, UN humanitarian agencies, climate funds, and development programs. Large reductions in U.S. support, including an estimated \$60 billion in canceled foreign aid contracts, do more than shift costs to others. They reduce the ability of these organizations to operate in fragile settings where such resources often save lives¹³. The World Health Organization, for instance, lost key financing; health programs, vaccination campaigns, and



Source: Project HOPE

¹² Won-Ho Kim, "US Tariff Policy and a Transformation of Global Trade Architecture," Asia Economic Community Forum 2025 (August 22, 2025), Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, <http://asiaecommunity.org/files/2025/08/20/Round%20Table%20wonho%20kim.pdf>.

¹³ Jacob Katz Cogan, "President Trump Begins Second Term by Withdrawing the United States from International Agreements and Institutions and Contravening U.S. International Legal Obligations," *American Journal of International Law* (AJIL) Contemporary Practice of the United States, published online April 25, 2025, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/president-trump-begins-second-term-by-withdrawing-the-united-states-from-international-agreements-and-institutions-and-contravening-us-international-legal-obligations/31706905568737ED82A44E3FFFE48D7D>.

epidemic responses face immediate gaps¹⁴. As a result, NGOs and UN agencies will have to scale back their work. This leads to real human costs, including higher death rates, more illness, and greater displacement.

Security cooperation, one of the few areas where multilateralism clearly serves practical interests, also suffers under this policy. U.S. withdrawal from post-9/11 counterterrorism forums and cyber and intelligence-sharing groups weakens platforms for sharing best practices and building capacity. These forums once expanded U.S. influence at relatively low cost¹⁵. Cybersecurity cooperation suffers when the United States removes itself from multilateral standards-setting, information sharing, and technical support networks¹⁶. The result is a more dangerous security environment. Allies struggle to coordinate responses, interoperability declines, and cross-border threats such as terrorism, cybercrime, and piracy become harder to address. Even smaller and technical bodies play an important role. Extradition arrangements, maritime cooperation agreements, and legal and technical forums help create shared rules that reduce risk and friction. Leaving these frameworks shrinks the tools available for collective action.

¹⁴ Stephen Olaide Aremu et al., “The United States Withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), Its Implications for Global Health Governance,” *Globalization and Health* 21 (2025): Article 48, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12992-025-01137-0>.

¹⁵ Michael Jacobson and Matthew Levitt, “Why the United States Must Maintain Its International Counterterrorism Leadership Role,” *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute, January 14, 2026, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-united-states-must-maintain-its-international-counterterrorism-leadership-role>.

¹⁶ Casey Bjorn, “Flash Report: U.S. Directive to Withdraw from Global Cybersecurity Organizations,” *Flash Report*, January 16, 2026, <https://www.zerofox.com/intelligence/flash-report-u-s-directive-to-withdraw-from-global-cybersecurity-organizations/>.



Source: United Nations

From a humanitarian point of view, these withdrawals are both morally troubling and strategically harmful. Cuts to UNFPA, USAID, and other development agencies quickly lead to fewer vaccines, less food aid, and weaker reproductive health services. The consequences are not abstract. They include millions of unintended pregnancies, thousands of preventable maternal deaths, and, according to some estimates, more than 22 million avoidable deaths by 2030¹⁷. These human costs should not be reduced to numbers in policy debates¹⁸. The ethical issue is clear. Policies that weaken life-saving assistance are not neutral budget decisions. They are choices that place vulnerable people at risk. From a strategic point of view, reducing humanitarian support also weakens U.S. soft power. It creates space for other states that are willing to invest in aid, infrastructure, and visibility to gain influence in the Global South.

¹⁷ Andrea Shalal, "US and European Aid Cuts Could Result in 22.6 Million Deaths Worldwide, Study Finds," Reuters, November 17, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-european-aid-cuts-could-result-226-million-deaths-worldwide-study-finds-2025-11-17/>.

¹⁸ "United States Withdrawal from 66 International Organizations: A New Step in a Disengagement Initiated in 2025," Focus2030, January 13, 2026, <https://focus2030.org/en/united-states-withdrawal-from-66-international-organizations-a-new-step-in-a-disengagement-initiated-in-2025/>.

The combined impact on global governance is growing fragmentation and a shift in who sets the rules. When the United States steps back, other actors move in to fill the gaps. China's push for greater influence in UNESCO after earlier U.S. withdrawals shows this pattern clearly. U.S. retreat gives other global powers the chance to shape global norms and standards¹⁹. The concern goes beyond the spread of alternative political models; it also involves the rise of competing standards that could weaken consistency in global rule-making. This raises costs and increases geopolitical tension. Multilateralism, already flawed, becomes less inclusive. Cooperation breaks into separate groupings where strategic interests, rather than shared principles, decide who belongs.

Conclusion

U.S. withdrawals reflect a destabilizing effect on global order. These moves weaken international law and multilateral institutions at a time when the world urgently needs coordinated action. Pandemics, climate change, cyber threats, and refugee movements do not stop at national borders. The effects are both immediate and long term. In the short term, budgets shrink, programs are cut, and dispute settlement systems weaken. Rebuilding this system will not be easy. It will require a return to principled engagement, steady funding, and acceptance of the compromises that come with multilateral cooperation. The alternative scenario is a fragmented global order where norms lose their universality and cooperation becomes largely transactional. It points to a more divided global order where norms depend on convenience and cooperation becomes purely transactional. When the United States no longer respects the rules and norms it helped create, other countries are likely to follow the same path. As this behavior spreads, the international system risks sliding into disorder and instability. This is a political choice, but its consequences are real. The erosion of institutions and norms can trigger economic, humanitarian, and security crises. Ultimately, the erosion of these institutions has the greatest impact on vulnerable groups that rely on multilateral mechanisms for aid and protection.

¹⁹ Christina Cottiero and Stephan Haggard, "Here We Go Again: The U.S. Withdrawal from UNESCO," *Global Policy at a Glance* (blog), August 6, 2025, University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, <https://ucigcc.org/blog/here-we-go-again-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-unesco/>.

