



**Statement before the
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency**

Hearing Title:

***“America Last: How Foreign Aid
Undermined U.S. Interests Around the
World”***

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Chairwoman Greene, Ranking Member Stansbury, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to share my views with you on this important topic. CSIS does not take policy positions. The views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my current employer or any former employers.

My main messages are:

1. U.S. foreign assistance continues to be a critical tool to advance U.S. interests and national security;
2. The damaging ways the administration has abruptly and collectively disabled U.S. tools of foreign assistance are counterproductive and undermining of Congress; and
3. Serious reforms require the engagement of Congress.

I have been a close observer of U.S. foreign assistance for more than 20 years, having served in multiple roles at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), as a humanitarian affairs intelligence analyst at the U.S. Department of State, and in non-governmental roles focused on U.S. foreign assistance reform and global development policies. My government service took place during the administrations of presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump.

U.S. foreign assistance as we know it originally grew out of a time of geostrategic competition early in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, when President Truman set out four priorities for U.S. foreign policy with the fourth one being “a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”¹ USAID, which was later established in 1961, and further shaped statutorily by Congress through the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998, has long had a conference room honoring Truman’s vision that is named the “Point IV” conference room. That room has served as the USAID headquarters’ primary venue for meetings of senior officials, swearing-in ceremonies, and other important occasions. That is because that fundamental mission of enlightened self-interest to harness U.S. leadership for “the improvement and growth” of poorer and more vulnerable countries has persisted. Over the years, the U.S. countered communism, spurred and spread the agricultural innovations of the Green Revolution, and enhanced the economic growth, governance, education, food security, and public health of people around the world while also saving lives and building partnerships – so much so that 11 of America’s 15 biggest trading partners were former recipients of U.S. foreign assistance.

The U.S. approach to assisting developing countries has also included the creation of some prominent initiatives. These include the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI) which have collectively saved more than 35 million

¹ President Harry S. Truman, “Inaugural Address,” National Archives: Harry S. Truman Library Museum, January 20, 1949, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address>.

lives over the past couple decades. They include the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which has pioneered the use of country compacts to enable longer-term infrastructure investment partnerships with promising country partners. They include the Feed the Future Initiative to address root causes of global hunger and poverty in countries committed to improving their own food security by equipping people with capabilities to feed themselves. They also include the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to further facilitate the ways private sector capital and skills can help developing countries. These programs are examples of U.S. global development efforts that independently and together make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous. They have also all been developed and executed with bipartisan U.S. political support through Congressional oversight and appropriations.

As we meet, U.S. foreign aid is experiencing a pivotal moment, and it is happening at a time of renewed geostrategic competition. The People's Republic of China, with more diplomatic posts than any country, is the top trading partner for more than 120 countries. It is also the largest single source of international development finance, through its Belt and Road Initiative, its South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, and other related efforts.² China has been vying with the U.S. for partnerships across the Global South, inking deals where it can. In ways that it might not have been able to even 15 years ago, China can fill soft power voids left by the U.S., including through telecommunications and infrastructure, like ports and roads, but also through vaccines and other aspects of healthcare, or leadership in the multilateral system.³

Other potential threats to U.S. security are also connected to developing countries and fragile states. ISIS could potentially resurge in the Middle East. Across the Sahelian belt in Africa, amid a wave of coups, Islamist militants and Russian influence are both spreading at the expense of American interests.⁴ On the eastern edge of Europe, Russian aggression may continue to grow unchecked. And in Colombia, the strife from neighboring Venezuela is spilling over to yield the worst violence in a generation.⁵

With that backdrop, the new administration's freezing of all foreign aid, the stop-work order, the suspension and firing of thousands of staff, and other related matters have become front page news stories with reverberations across our country and around the world. The administration has abruptly and collectively disabled U.S. tools of foreign assistance in a way that undermines our interests.

² Bradley C. Parks et al., "Chapter 1: Belt and Road Reconstruction—From Fire-Fighting to Future-Proofing," in *Belt and Road Reboot: Beijing's Bid to De-Risk Its Global Infrastructure Initiative* (Williamsburg, VA; AidData, William & Mary, 2023), 9.

³ Daniel F. Runde, "Enabling a Better Offer: How Does the West Counter Belt and Road?," CSIS, *Congressional Testimony*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/enabling-better-offer-how-does-west-counter-belt-and-road>.

⁴ Rachel Chason, "Crossroads of Conflict," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2025/africa-sahel/russian-terror-military-influence/>.

⁵ Julie Turkewitz, "How Venezuela Helps Fuel the Violence in Colombia," *New York Times*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/12/world/americas/venezuela-colombia-violence.html>.

The White House has said it is cutting programs that do not benefit Americans, but something larger is happening. The current dismantling *does* harmfully affect many programs that directly and indirectly benefit Americans: the current effort underway across U.S. foreign assistance is proverbially cutting off our nose to spite our face. This is evident in many ways, including the following examples:

- It is evident in hunger and food security efforts. The U.S. government has purchased more than \$2 billion in food aid annually from American farmers, and American farms supply more than 40 percent of the food aid USAID sends around the world. As a result of the foreign aid freeze and stop work order, rice, wheat, and soybeans are going to waste in transit and in ports.⁶ In Houston alone, hundreds of tons of American-grown wheat have been stranded. As a senior official with the American Farm Bureau Federation noted, “USAID plays a critical role in reducing hunger around the world while sourcing markets for the surplus foods America’s farmers and ranchers grow.”⁷ Concerns have also been voiced by other major farm industry groups like the U.S. Wheat Associates and USA Rice. Additionally, the current damage to the Feed the Future Program will stymie the creation of markets for U.S. agricultural products. The administration’s actions have also disabled the innovation labs connected to the Global Food Security Act. These partnerships, such as the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Peanut at the University of Georgia, are led by U.S. universities to tackle food production, storage, and processing challenges.⁸
- It is evident in health efforts. It is in the interest of Americans for our foreign aid to prevent outbreaks of infectious diseases from spreading before reaching our shores, but U.S. funded early detection and treatment for deadly diseases like Ebola, or Tanzania’s outbreak of Marburg hemorrhagic fever, have sputtered to a standstill.
- It is evident in programming focused on other transnational concerns ranging from conflict and corruption to migration and the trafficking of people and drugs. For example, the shuttering of U.S. foreign aid programs to support the long-term settlement of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia is projected by government officials to spur even more destabilizing migration that could reach our borders.⁹

⁶ Daniel Wu, “Gutting USAID threatens billions of dollars for U.S. farms, businesses,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/02/06/trump-usaid-money-american-farms/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “About Us,” Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Peanut, <https://ftfpeanutlab.caes.uga.edu/AboutUs.html>.

⁹ Stefano Pozzebon and Hira Humayun, “They fled repression in Venezuela. They may migrate again due to the US foreign aid freeze,” CNN, February 13, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/13/americas/venezuela-migrants-colombia-cali-aid-freeze-intl-latam/index.html>.

- It is also evident in the drastic loss of expertise within USAID and the collapsed morale of the skeletal staff that remain. These will prevent the U.S. government from doing important things Congress and the American people want it to do. Given the complexity and scope of challenges the U.S. faces around the world, cutting the highly trained staff of our principal aid agency from more than 10,000 to a few hundred is self-defeating.
- It is additionally evident in a process that is supposedly focused on efficiency and effectiveness but instead is causing the U.S. government to be tied up in court cases that may drag on for years and prove costly in connection to abrogated contracts and potential violations of administrative and labor laws.

These losses are entirely unnecessary, even if, or perhaps especially if, you believe in the need for reforms. It is critically important to be able to differentiate between waste and congressionally appropriated projects that may reflect different policy priorities. Waste is the food rotting in ports, and the purchased medicines that cannot be distributed. It is the cutting of programs and firing of people that then, in turn, prevents the administration from being able to meet its own foreign policy goals to protect and advance American interests. A serious review by the administration would maintain congressionally mandated and appropriated capabilities even as an assessment is carried out to align foreign assistance programs with the priorities of the administration.

It is worth noting that reforms are important, and continuous reform is a good thing in a fast-changing world. There are effective ways to do it, and those generally involve the administration working hand-in-glove with Congress. The presidential initiatives and the establishment of new agencies highlighted earlier, from PEPFAR and MCC to the DFC, are all examples of critically important reforms. There have also been many other types of helpful reforms in recent years, including:

- congressionally-driven transparency pushes that resulted in the data now available on ForeignAssistance.gov,
- internal streamlining efforts to reduce lags and bureaucratic red tape,
- consolidations like the merging of the Food for Peace office with the Offices of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance to create the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance during the last Trump administration, and
- better use of innovation, technology, and partnerships with the private sector.

Regardless of the specific nature of future reforms, the U.S. government will need an oversight approach to programming that includes the following elements:

1. A congressional notification process by which key congressional committees can pause or halt projects for bipartisan review before the government obligates resources.

2. Implementing partners should undergo financial and internal audits, submit detailed work plans and quarterly reports on expenditures to ensure spending of taxpayer funding is reviewed through the lifecycle of any project.
3. In highly insecure contexts, implement further counterterror vetting of key program staff against classified counterterror databases to offer the highest level of assurance that partners are vetted before U.S. dollars are spent.
4. Empower an inspector general to conduct audits, investigations, and fraud awareness briefings, and offer concrete recommendations to improve program practices and oversight to identify, prevent, and punish any proven misuse of taxpayer funding.
5. Since no series of safeguards will achieve a 100 percent success rate, empower the relevant government aid agency to halt any programming at the first sign of large-scale waste, fraud, or diversion.

The issue before the committee today is that these are precisely the safeguards that have already been in place at USAID. The cadre of dedicated employees across the organization to effectively implement this oversight has just been gutted. By destroying this system of oversight, the administration has done more to undermine the ability to effectively implement programs than any specific project failures critics of foreign aid may choose to highlight.

Every U.S. administration since World War II has wanted to shape foreign aid in line with its goals, but hollowing out and strangling the system into extinction through executive actions is akin to unilaterally disarming at a time of mounting geopolitical competition for partnerships globally. Throwing away our toolbox does not make us safer or well-positioned to influence the world for the better.

We should all care about foreign aid. We should care enough to make it better, not kill it. Congress has a critical role to play.

Thank you.