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The United States' withdrawal from international organizations: a wake-up call to reform the international system

Auteur

Céline Kauffmann
Chief Programmes Officer

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Announced on 6 January, the United States' withdrawal from 66 international organisations is yet another blow to an international cooperation system already weakened in many respects. This calls for necessary reforms to prevent multilateralism from sinking further into crisis.

The withdrawal of the United States: a play in (at least) four acts

The United States was already picky in its involvement in international organizations¹ and critical of “the bureaucratic drift” before Donald Trump. Nevertheless, 2025 marks a radicalization of this position through brutal decisions that unfolded in four stages.

Act One: February 2025. The US federal government issues [Executive Order 14199](#), instructing the Secretary of State to conduct “a review of all international intergovernmental organisations of which the United States is a

member and to which it provides funding or other support, as well as all conventions and treaties to which the United States is a party, to determine which organisations, conventions and treaties are contrary to the interests of the United States and whether such organisations, conventions or treaties can be reformed". The executive order, which follows shortly after the country's [withdrawal from the World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#), also confirms the withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East. It also calls for a review of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), from which the country officially withdraws on 22 July 2025.

Act Two: April 2025. The [Secretary of the Treasury](#) confirms that the United States will remain in the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but under certain conditions: refocusing activities around mandates stripped of climate, gender and social issues for the IMF; technological neutrality and a return to investment in fossil fuels for the [WB](#). At the same time, between January and July, the federal government dismantles the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and brings its responsibilities back to the Department of State.

Act Three: August 2025. A government [statement](#) cuts funding for development aid programmes (\$3.2 billion), the democracy fund (\$322 million), and contributions to a number of peacekeeping activities (\$838 million) on the grounds that they are contrary to American values and interests. This list also comprises a \$521 million reduction in the State Department's contribution to international organisations (IOs), including the Pan American Health Organisation, UNESCO, the Colombo Plan Council for Technical Cooperation, the International Tropical Timber Organisation, and the Pan American Institute of Geography and History.

Act IV: January 2026. A presidential decree issued in response to Decree 14199 announces the [withdrawal](#) of the United States from 31 United Nations 'organisations' and 35 non-UN IOs, as participation in these bodies is considered contrary to its interests. It should be noted that the President reserves the right to take further action based on the Secretary of State's review (not yet made public).

A hodgepodge list that reaffirms the Trump administration's position, with harmful consequences for the multilateral system

Commentators have been quick to point out the heterogeneity of the list presented by President Trump². What seems certain is the US administration's desire to send a strong and unsurprising signal about its withdrawal from a multilateral system that the country helped to establish. If proof were needed, the tone has been set early this year: soft power is giving way to a resolutely confrontational strategy. Beyond the experts' disputes over the feasibility and reversibility of the decisions (notably the legal vacuum surrounding the withdrawal from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC]),³ the impact is likely to be long-lasting.

The selected organizations reinforce the President's repeated messages that international forums dedicated to the environment and climate change, gender and development, particularly health and education, promote values and interests contrary to those of the United States. The list also confirms the break with institutions that served as bridges to developing economies (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Regional Economic Commissions)—a recognition that the world has changed and that a number of countries are now seen as competitors. But the United States remains where its economic interests are at stake, notably in the World Trade Organisation and the International Maritime Organisation.

The financial impact on the functioning of the affected IOs might be significant, given that the United Nations budget itself will fall by 7% in 2026⁴. Until now, the US has been a major contributor to multilateralism in general, and in

particular to institutions in the fields of health (the largest contributor to the WHO, accounting for 20% of the budget in 2022 and 2023) and climate (with a possible budget shortfall of around 22% for the UNFCCC and the IPCC)⁵. While the withdrawals announced between January 2025 and January 2026 would only represent 4% of the United States' contribution to IOs in 2023, this budget has plummeted since 2023 and could be further reduced by a factor of four in 2026 compared to 2024.⁶

Beyond the financial aspects, the issue is also one of the ripple effects that the United States' behaviour may cause. Although its withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement has not been followed up on for the moment, the signal that a country can pick and choose in multilateralism whatever suits its needs and interests creates a major risk for the multilateral system. For while the US has chosen to remain in a large number of international organizations, it does so on its own terms, as Scott Bessent's letter foreshadows, and as the recent exemption of the US from Pillar 2 of the OECD's multinational tax mechanism⁷ and the unilateral decision not to invite South Africa to the G20 confirm.⁸ This sets dangerous precedents; how long before others follow suit?

Is this enough of a wake-up call for the multilateral system?

While the US brutal and unilateral approach is damaging, it should not obscure the reality that the multilateral system is in need of reform. This system has been built over the years through the multiplication of forums,⁹ resulting in increasing complexity in international architecture and law, overlapping mandates due to the convergence of agendas (climate, health, etc.) without any real progress in coordination, all against a backdrop of a funding crisis, with public funds being a limited source of support for a growing number of entities.

Countries, which form the essential foundation of a system that remains mostly intergovernmental in its functioning, are benefiting from a gradually more inclusive system ([IDDRI, 2025a](#)), but face major challenges in terms of their capacity (human, technical and financial) to invest in so many institutions. The consensus-based decision-making process, widely used within intergovernmental organizations, is increasingly questioned as it often leads to deadlock and a preference for soft over hard law.¹⁰ As a consequence, organisations' instruments weaken, and become more declarative than action-oriented, reinforcing the implementation gaps that are already at the centre of discussions in certain forums (see, in particular, the priorities of climate COP30—[IDDRI, 2025b](#)).

How can this cycle be broken, which calls into question both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the existing system? Can the gradual reforms currently underway—the Pact for the Future and the UN80 reform (seeking greater efficiency, reducing overlapping mandates, etc.)¹¹ or the discussions within the G20 on the Bretton Woods institutions—address these challenges? For if one thing is clear, it is that only international cooperation can respond to the global challenges facing countries. However, the significant inertia of the system might undermine the necessary reforms.

IDDRI will focus on advancing these reforms in the coming years, through its new strategic project ([IDDRI, 2026](#)) and various levers for change.

Firstly, although multilateralism is in poor shape, **international cooperation** is not dead yet—but its champions are to be found elsewhere. This is why it is important to closely monitor trends and signals in order to identify emerging initiatives and forums beyond intergovernmental organizations and traditional leaderships.

Secondly, it is time to place greater emphasis on the **implementation** of existing rules, their monitoring and evaluation to improve their effectiveness, rather than on the development of new rules (except in 'new' areas where there is a significant need for regulation, such as plastics pollution).

Secondly, the existing multilateral system must **break out of its silos**. Better coordination of existing forums whose agendas support sustainable development—whether sectoral or cross-cutting—is necessary for a systemic approach to the challenges we are currently facing. This requires joint work programmes and joint assessments in light of the overall objectives that must underpin concerted action.

It also means that the institutions in charge of financing (development banks and international financial institutions) must reconnect with global issues, particularly institutions with common objectives and rules, such as the UN and others. Today, there is a sharp divide between the two worlds, linked in part to different modes of governance and decision-making. Bridges must be built.

Now is the time for IOs and their member countries to take stock of the challenge. Beyond the US crisis of international leadership, we are indeed witnessing a crisis of intergovernmental multilateralism. This is an urgent matter that should be addressed by the G7 under incoming French presidency and the Indian presidency of the BRICS, among others.

1

They were already not party to either the Convention on the Law of the Sea or the Convention on Biological Diversity.

2

[Has the U.S. really "Withdrawn" from 66 International Organisations? A 2-Minute International Law Explainer](#)

3

[Quitting and Rejoining Global Climate Agreements: What's at Stake for the United States](#) and [Can Trump Exit a UN Climate Treaty? Constitution Is Silent.](#) - Heatmap News

4

[General Assembly approves \\$3.45 billion regular budget for 2026 | United Nations](#)

5

[Paul Watkinson | LinkedIn](#)

6

[U.S. Contributions to International Organisations - United States Department of State](#)

7

[Treasury Secures Agreement to Exempt U.S.-Headquartered Companies from Biden Global Tax Plan | U.S. Department of the Treasury](#)

8

[America Welcomes a New G20 - U.S. Embassy & Consulates in South Africa](#)

9

[International Regulatory Co-operation | OECD](#)

10

Ibid.

11

UN80 Initiative: What is it – and why is it important for the world? | UN Info