Working Paper

National Security Best Buys in Foreign Assistance

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Introduction

Under the Biden administration, the United States obligated approximately $86 billion in foreign assistance in fiscal year (FY) 2024 across 203 countries.[1] That figure is now under acute pressure. Executive Order 14169, issued by President Donald Trump on Jan. 20, 2025, initiated a sweeping reassessment of U.S. foreign aid, and early estimates suggest FY 2025 obligations have fallen to roughly $19.4 billion, a reduction of more than 75%.[2] Traditional U.S. allies have followed: The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Switzerland have each announced significant cuts to their own assistance portfolios.

Proponents of U.S. foreign assistance have long made the case that foreign assistance is not just about altruism toward the world; it is, in fact, the primary instrument of soft power and meaningfully advances national security interests. This moment of retrenchment has forced several questions: What does foreign assistance actually buy in terms of national security interests, and what types of foreign assistance advance these objectives?

These questions are not new. Since the Marshall Plan helped rebuild and stabilize European economies after World War II — and foreign assistance was institutionalized through the creation of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) under President John F. Kennedy in 1961 — U.S. assistance has served as a central instrument of statecraft: aiming to stabilize fragile states, counter adversaries, shape public perceptions, and strength military, economic, and political alliances. During the Cold War, it served as a bulwark against Soviet expansion across Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. After Sept. 11, 2001, in addition to military action and counterterrorism measures, it became the dominant tool of stabilization in fragile states from Iraq to Afghanistan. Through the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), launched in 2003, it demonstrated that health assistance could generate soft power returns unmatched by almost any other form of engagement. In each era, the strategic rationale shifted, but the underlying premise held that U.S. assistance advances U.S. interests.

Proponents have historically advanced two broad justifications: a humanitarian case grounded in U.S. altruism and values, and an instrumental case centered on foreign assistance across sectors (security, development, health) that produces stability and, in turn, serves national interests. Both rationales have shaped decades of policy. Yet, neither has been fully examined in a systematic, evidence-based way that links specific forms of assistance to measurable strategic outcomes.

The humanitarian or moral case for foreign assistance — that the United States, as the world's wealthiest democracy, bears a responsibility to reduce poverty and human suffering and that Americans wish to be seen as altruists — is neither dismissed nor debated here. The authors assert that it is in fact strategic as well to be seen as upholding American values. This working paper instead asks a narrower and more demanding set of questions: Which forms of U.S. foreign assistance have, in practice, yielded measurable returns against specific national security interests, and under what conditions does that return materialize?

To answer it, this paper draws on three sources of evidence.

1. Review of the existing empirical literature on foreign aid and strategic influence, spanning public opinion research, security force assistance studies, great-power competition analyses, and behavioral studies of political actors and public responses to donor activity.
2. Original, structured interviews with a bipartisan group of senior national security, diplomatic, defense, and development officials with deep experience across priority U.S. theaters, including the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.
3. Review of recent public opinion polling from key aid-recipient countries, offering an empirical lens through which to assess claims about soft power and legitimacy returns.

The case for foreign assistance as an instrument of national security has too often rested on assertion rather than evidence. This paper attempts to provide the latter. To be clear — while national security and U.S. interest are important lens to evaluate the utility of foreign assistance — they are not the only ones. Assistance that is an expression of American values, such as humanitarian aid or global health, has been a hallmark of U.S. assistance since the end of World War II and pays its own dividends.

Defining the Strategic Rationale

The strategic rationale favoring investments in foreign assistance centers around three broad purposes. The first is containing and pushing back adversaries. During the Cold War era, assistance — including cultural, informational, and material forms — served as a bulwark against Soviet expansion, countering Soviet efforts to acquire political influence, resource control, and ideological dominance across Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Today as the Russian Federation struggles to maintain dominance as a superpower, that rationale has shifted and centers primarily on counter-China arguments for foreign assistance.

The second purpose is stabilization against subnational threats, which became the dominant use of foreign assistance from 9/11 onward. Assistance to fragile states such as Iraq and Libya was aimed not at countering a rival power but at preventing fragmentation that would harm U.S. allies and economic interests, as a failed partner state being seen as directly contrary to U.S. interests. This purpose has had bipartisan support and is reflected in the Global Fragility Act, authorizing legislation passed by Congress in 2019.[3] Colombia and Peru were cited as examples where stabilization was the goal; a combination of security and development assistance was intended to address internal instability, mitigate drivers of conflict, and implement counternarcotic efforts.[4]

The third rationale is humanitarian and moral in nature: the view that, as a wealthy nation, the United States has an obligation to alleviate human suffering when possible, independent of stabilization or geopolitical objectives. Several interviewees emphasized that this rationale should stand on its own merits rather than be justified primarily through national security arguments. At the same time, humanitarian assistance can generate secondary benefits for the United States by demonstrating American values and generosity and, in some circumstances, creating goodwill toward the United States among affected populations.

Existing Evidence on Public Opinion and Legitimacy Returns

A review of the literature and public opinion data suggests that foreign assistance can strengthen perceptions of U.S. legitimacy and goodwill, particularly when its benefits are visible, clearly attributed to the United States, and not overwhelmed by broader political grievances or unpopular U.S. policies. Recent polling across key aid-recipient countries shows strong regional variation in U.S. favorability. In sub-Saharan Africa, approval is high and broadly consistent with sustained U.S. engagement with 75% in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and 59% in Kenya, while nearly one-third of Kenyans credited the U.S. as the leading source of COVID-19 pandemic assistance.[5] This is expected, given large volumes of U.S. assistance primarily through PEPFAR and other U.S. signature global health programs such as the President's Malaria Initiative and COVID-19 vaccination programs.

In Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines record approval ratings of 63–67%.[6] For example, Bangladesh receives more U.S. assistance than either Cambodia or Vietnam — approximately $572 million in total — in 2024, but records lower approval at 45%.[7] In the Middle East, geopolitical grievances dominate public attitudes regardless of assistance levels, with Jordan at 25% approval and Lebanon at 37%, despite Jordan being one of the biggest recipients of U.S. foreign assistance in the world. In 2024, the U.S. government reported $1.8 billion in obligations to the country.[8]

For decades, proponents of foreign assistance have made the case that these investments benefit national security and advance foreign policy interests. This working paper argues that foreign assistance can in fact yield meaningful strategic returns in national security, but under key conditions. Consistent with the literature, returns are strongest when assistance is visible and clearly attributed to the United States, targeted to recipient priorities rather than diffuse objectives, and sustained over time. Health assistance — notably PEPFAR — consistently generates the highest soft-power returns because recipients directly experience and attribute its benefits.[9] Security force assistance produces durable alignment with top political officials when it embeds partner militaries in U.S. doctrine and institutions.[10] A critical vulnerability across sectors is misattribution: recipients frequently fail to identify the United States as the source of assistance, forfeiting the soft-power return entirely.[11] The U.S. democratic identity provides a legitimacy advantage with foreign publics, but those benefits are diminished when aid is invisible, misattributed, or perceived as coercive.[12]

To test these claims against practitioner experience, the authors conducted structured interviews with national security experts from multiple administrations who have served in high levels across the U.S. government to explore this question. Interviewees were intentionally selected to reflect bipartisan, senior-level experience across diplomatic, defense, and development institutions, with deep regional expertise in priority U.S. theaters. Collectively, they bring experience from the Middle East, including Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf states; Africa, including the DRC, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, and the Sahel; Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Burma, and the broader region; and Latin America, including Mexico and Guatemala. Their professional backgrounds span diplomatic leadership and ambassadorial roles, defense and military operations, intelligence and national security, foreign assistance budgeting and policy, and development programming, including experience within the USAID.

The structured interviews provided significant insight and depth on these questions based on practitioners' real-world experiences and examples of when foreign assistance was used as leverage to achieve a foreign policy objective or yielded returns in the national security realm.

Before beginning the interview process, a definition of "national security" needed to be established. To that end, the authors identified seven key foreign policy and national security interests and investigated whether and which types of foreign assistance had a positive impact on these objectives. These interests were defined as follows:

1. Promoting defense and intelligence cooperation.
2. Increasing influence and access to government power brokers and heads of state.
3. Countering Chinese influence.
4. Strengthening democracy and governance.
5. Advancing economic and trade interests.
6. Improving legitimacy and positive perceptions.
7. Securing votes at the U.N. Security Council and General Assembly.

Table 1 — Mapping US Interests, Assistance Instruments, and Strategic Returns

National Interest	Type of Assistance/Sector	Strategic Return (Direct/Indirect)	Comment
Promoting Defense and Intelligence Cooperation	Defense and security assistance, military training, liaison officers, joint exercises, and PEPFAR/global health programs	Access, interoperability, intelligence-sharing, and operational alignment	Most consistently supported return across interviews
Increasing Influence and Access to Government Power Brokers and Heads of State	Security assistance, direct budget support, global health, MCC compacts, and education and exchanges programs	High-level access, diplomatic leverage, and relationship-building	Strongest when assistance is large, sustained, and tied to recipient priority needs
Improving Legitimacy and Positive Perceptions	PEPFAR, humanitarian aid, disaster response, and education and exchanges programs	Goodwill, favorability, cultural affinity, and positive attribution	Strongest when assistance is visible, personal, and clearly attributed to the United States
Advancing Economic and Trade Interests	MCC, DFC, USTDA, ESF, trade capacity-building, education, agriculture, and anti-corruption	Market access, improved investment climate, and reduced business risk	Most credible when linked to recipient economic priorities and U.S. commercial interests
Countering Chinese Influence	Little to no ability to directly compete with Chinese offers of assistance Infrastructure, financing, digital systems, budget support, sovereign loan guarantees may be competitive if structured correctly but are used infrequently as US foreign assistance tools	Inconclusive	U.S. tools are often slower and less flexible than Chinese offers. U.S. assistance can be a separate, but not an alternative, means to influence and develop alliances with other countries
Strengthening Democracy and Governance	Democracy programming, civil society, independent media, anti-corruption, rule of law, and transparency	Inconclusive	Democracy programming's ability to advance democracy is greatly contested Civic space, accountability, and relationships with future leaders are benefits of this kind of programming Further research is needed
Securing Votes at the U.N. Security Council and General Assembly	Bilateral aid, multilateral contributions, and peacekeeping support	Inconclusive	Aid rarely guarantees voting alignment, though U.S. funding can shape U.N. operations and leadership

Source: Authors' analysis of literature and interviews.

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between each interest, the forms of assistance most relevant to it, and the type of return identified through interviews and the broader evidence base.

Promoting Defense and Intelligence Cooperation

As expected, U.S. security sector assistance through Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, and other types of defense assistance unequivocally strengthened defense and intelligence cooperation with the recipient countries. Defense and intelligence assistance yields some of the most significant returns on foreign assistance investment, particularly when a country perceives itself as facing external threats and turns to the U.S. as its primary security partner. For example, after breaking from Soviet dependency, Egypt beginning under President Anwar Sadat's tenure became almost entirely reliant on U.S. military assistance through FMF. In the following decades, this relationship granted the U.S. substantial privileges, including special passage rights through the Suez Canal for naval convoys, blanket overflight clearances, and efforts to sustain the Israel-Egypt peace.[13]

In addition to the provision of military and security hardware, joint training, exercises, and hosting foreign military and civilian officers at U.S. war colleges were often overlooked but vital means to building practical interoperability and trust on intelligence and defense cooperation. In general, both the training and the provision of defense articles and hardware led to increased cooperation on these issues around the world. Military liaison officers were a particularly effective instrument of defense and intelligence cooperation, creating ongoing opportunities for host-country military training and broad capacity development. For example, the U.S.-Israel relationship on security cooperation is categorically unique: a fully integrated defense and intelligence partnership on issues ranging from missile defense interoperability to joint hostage search operations. This type of direct cooperation that the U.S. military conducts with foreign military counterparts has not been a key feature of how the U.S. has typically provided assistance to technical international ministries in development sectors, such as agriculture and education, with the exception of health.

One interviewee emphasized that the benefits of security assistance increasingly flow in both directions. U.S. support to Ukraine, for example, has provided American defense planners and military personnel with invaluable insights into the evolution of drone warfare, battlefield adaptation, and the integration of emerging technologies into modern conflict. In this sense, security assistance can function not only as a means of building partner capacity, but also as an investment in U.S. learning and preparedness

At times, other types of foreign assistance also led to increased cooperation and goodwill on defense cooperation. PEPFAR support for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment to military officers in high endemic African countries at the height of the epidemic was very well received. In East Africa, where health conditions were severe, the work of Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and PEPFAR in ensuring that military personnel had access to quality healthcare generated significant goodwill, illustrating how health-based assistance can yield defense cooperation returns.[14]

Involving the U.S. military in humanitarian crisis response on military-to-military cooperation for a humanitarian purpose can build deeper relationships, trust, and interoperability. For example, the U.S. military supported USAID's humanitarian response to the Pakistan floods in 2022, earthquake in Türkiye and Syria in 2023, and the crises in Gaza in 2024. These responses entailed military cooperation and at least, in some of the cases, generated deeper relationships and ties that carry over into other areas of defense interests.

In another example, U.S. diplomacy leveraged the promise of increased humanitarian and eventual reconstruction assistance as an incentive to promote stability and peacebuilding during a time of active conflict between the DRC and Rwanda during the Biden administration, as a means to incentivize both countries — at the level of their heads of state — to come to the table and negotiate a ceasefire and a framework toward peace. The prospect of increased foreign assistance helped promote better relationships with the U.S. with respect to intelligence sharing, returning to the Luanda process for peacebuilding, and provided access to both heads of state.[15]

One official cited a project in Lebanon, during 1998–2000, where the United States was able to undermine Hezbollah influence with inexpensive water purification systems for small rural villages. The condition for the system's implementation was that local councils had to exclude Hezbollah. While a literature review suggests that the extent to which USAID assistance in Southern Lebanon countered Hezbollah is debatable, the former official shared that, in this specific instance, the U.S. ultimately received credit and temporarily helped undermine Hezbollah's influence in controlled municipal councils.[16]

U.S. foreign assistance helped Jordan secure its border with Syria by providing equipment, command infrastructure, and training. The program — largely led by the State Department — strengthened Jordan's ability to independently manage its border, boosting both operational capacity and confidence in its sovereignty.

Increasing Influence and Access to Government Power Brokers and Heads of State

By and large, foreign assistance, both military and economic, helps to improve access to high levels of governments including at the head of state level. More broadly, traditional development assistance tends to foster engagement with technical ministries — particularly health, agriculture, and education — and program-implementing officials. While these relationships can be valuable and enduring, they do not always translate into access to the senior political decision-makers who ultimately shape national policy. By contrast, military engagement and long-term educational exchanges often build relationships with future political and military leaders that can translate into access at the highest levels of government over time. Educational exchanges and scholarships, such as the Fulbright Program and State Department scholarships have significant long-term impact on positive perceptions of the U.S. Many government officials worldwide previously studied in the U.S. or participated in U.S. exchange programs. These kinds of programs have been one of the most effective long-term influence tools for U.S. soft power.

However, there are examples where economic and health assistance have opened doors to the most senior levels of government. Interviewees frequently cited Jordan as a case where substantial U.S. military and economic support, particularly direct budget support, has provided American officials with unique access and influence across the government. Interviewees also noted that direct budget support and sovereign loan guarantees are among the most valued forms of U.S. assistance because they align closely with recipient government priorities, yet they have been used relatively infrequently in recent years.

Tanzania provides another rich example of U.S. global health programs cementing diplomatic relationships at the head of state level. During the time of President Jakaya Kikwete and President George W. Bush, health assistance targeting malaria and HIV opened doors at the highest levels of government. The diplomatic staging of President Bush's visit to Tanzania — and all the efforts supporting President Kikwete's moment on the world stage — was cited as a significant influence-building event. The Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact investments in roads, energy, and the maritime cable linking Zanzibar to the mainland, as well as transportation and airport upgrades on Mafia Island, generated particular pride among Tanzanians and were noted as the largest MCC compact to date at the time.

Countering Chinese Influence

Practitioners from both parties broadly agreed that the U.S. foreign assistance tool kit is not "fit for purpose" with respect to countering Chinese influence. Several national security officials noted that foreign assistance combined with high-level diplomacy, at times, gave the U.S. leverage in persuading countries not to sign with Huawei or other Chinese telecommunications and information technology infrastructure. Others were more skeptical, emphasizing that U.S. ambassadors rarely succeed by presenting countries with a stark choice of "going with us, or with them." As a practical matter, for countries with few alternatives — needing essentials, for instance, such as funding for a power grid or water purification — they will simply go wherever assistance is available.

Interviewees identified three recurring features of Chinese engagement that help explain its appeal in many contexts: speed, responsiveness to partner priorities, and the ability to deploy financing at scale. First, U.S. assistance instruments are often too slow and procedurally cumbersome to compete with Chinese offers head-to-head. The State Department — and previously USAID — lack the ability to move quickly and experience bureaucratic delays. The multiple layers of the U.S. assistance process, each of which provides an opportunity for delay or rejection, can undermine the U.S.' ability to respond in a timely fashion and create openings for China and Russia to step in with faster, less encumbered offers. One interviewee cited Tunisia, where the government requested computers and technical training to support the internal operations of their intelligence training. Although Congress had established the Countering the PRC Malign Influence Fund in 2023 through an earmark and the fund was available in principle, China had already built the physical facility.[17] Bureaucratic timelines meant that nine months had elapsed in deliberations and approvals, by which point the opportunity to make a timely, meaningful impact had passed. The inability to react quickly undermined what could have been an effective counter-China engagement.

Second, China is often more responsive to immediate political and economic demand. Interviewees described similar dynamics in Africa, where Chinese assistance and investment were seen "increasingly market-responsive and more nimble than the U.S." and more closely tied to visible job creation or infrastructure delivery. In Tanzania, for example, the U.S. made little headway in persuading officials to decline Chinese assistance and investment, where China was already deeply embedded. Tanzanians understood what they were and were not getting from China as well as the United States. Their decisions reflected a pragmatic acceptance of Chinese engagement rather than a preference for it. African countries have young, fast-growing populations with urgent demands, and U.S. assistance is not primarily designed for immediate payoff.

Third, China deploys state-owned financing for infrastructure and resource extraction across Africa and Latin America at a scale and speed that the U.S. government mechanisms, whether at State Department or formerly through USAID or U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), cannot readily match. While U.S. private lenders are present in many of these regions, the U.S. government itself rarely provides the direct lending or loan guarantees needed to compete. Here again, the potential for sovereign loan guarantees — though potentially financially risky — can be a powerful tool for the U.S. to compete with the People's Republic of China.

Fourth, China's approach — building stadiums, hospitals, and other visible infrastructure — has a high immediate impact even when their quality, sustainability, and long-term value are contested. The United States has supported infrastructure and reconstruction projects as well. While many examples exist, the United States has often struggled with brick-and-mortar investments that require specialized technical expertise, staffing, maintenance, and long-term sustainment. Interviewees pointed to the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian as an example of the visibility gap: While a U.S. Disaster Assistance Response Team provided life-saving support, China's highly visible delivery of cell phones generated a larger public relations boost.

The point is not that Chinese assistance is inherently more valuable, or that U.S. assistance is not valued by partner countries on its own merits. Rather, the United States often fails to dissuade countries from declining Chinese assistance via a better counteroffer or struggles to convert the value of its assistance into visible strategic credit. U.S. economic growth programs, agricultural assistance, and basic food and global health programs built genuine public goodwill, as reflected in the public opinion polling data from Africa cited above.

When governments face urgent infrastructure, financing, or development needs, the perceived quality and transparency of U.S. engagement do not always outweigh China's ability to deliver quickly and at scale. U.S. influence and financing within international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), together with tools from the DFC and U.S. Trade Representative's office, can shore up U.S. standing as a higher-quality and more transparent alternative to China in classical economic assistance; the key is demonstrating fewer strings attached and better terms than Chinese competitors, which existing models of U.S. assistance have often struggled to do.

Several interviewees argued that if competing with China is an explicit policy objective, U.S. sponsored financing instruments — principally through the DFC, sovereign loan guarantees, and trade agreements — need to be competitive with what China offers. It is not sufficient to state U.S. assistance is values-based, and therefore countries should choose the U.S. when no comparative alternative is available. Faster financing mechanisms, sovereign loan guarantees, Department of the Treasury technical support, trade tools, and other flexible instruments may be necessary if the United States intends to compete more directly in this space.[18]

Strengthening Democracy and Governance

U.S. foreign policy across administrations has long held an objective to advance democracy around the world, both as an expression of values but also as a means for security with the oft-cited axiom that democracies have, by and large, historically not engaged in war with one another. However, the extent to which U.S. funded democracy programming has materially advanced this objective has garnered polarizing opinions across the national security and foreign policy spectrum. For example, many argue that U.S. investments in democracy have not yielded any changes to foreign government policy or helped those governments become "more democratic." A full evidence-based review of whether democracy programming advanced the cause of democracy is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the debate around this question is notable.

Counterarguments to this view are that these investments are long term and the assumption that the U.S. can accelerate other countries through a political evolution that took Americans generations to navigate is shortsighted. Setting expectations or criteria too high — particularly when conditioning assistance on democratic transformation — can turn assistance into a binary, all-or-nothing decision and generate little progress when conditions fall short. This approach can also limit the U.S. diplomatically. Progress — even when not considered sufficient and not trending readily in the desired direction — on democracy or corruption issues should be recognized as genuinely valuable.

Proponents also argued democracy and governance programming as among the most important instruments available to support counter-China efforts, precisely because these initiatives represent values tied to the U.S. rather than China: a commitment to transparency, rule of law, and accountability. Civil society support in Cambodia was cited as a concrete example. Interviewees also noted that adversaries use illicit financing to buy influence, making democracy and governance programming a critical counterweight.[19]

Other proponents of democracy and human rights assistance argued that these investments serve an important long-term strategic purpose beyond their immediate programmatic objectives. In addition to supporting civil society, independent media, and democratic institutions, they help the United States build relationships with political actors outside of incumbent governments, including opposition leaders who may eventually assume positions of national leadership.

This is one reason democracy assistance is structured differently from many other forms of foreign assistance is that much of its delivery occurs through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and similar organizations that operate independently of the U.S. government. Interviewees viewed this separation as a feature rather than a shortcoming. This approach allows the United States to maintain productive relationships with sitting governments while simultaneously engaging a broader range of political and civic actors. Several noted that today's civil society leaders, journalists, and opposition figures often become tomorrow's ministers, parliamentarians, and heads of state. From this perspective, democracy assistance is not simply about promoting democratic values but is also an investment in long-term relationships and future influence.

Advancing Economic and Trade Interests

Overall, interviewees expressed consensus on how foreign governments typically strive for more trade, financing, and investments, and how programs that are responsive to those economic motivations can serve as powerful incentives. In turn, those kinds of programs create better enabling environments and open markets to U.S. commercial interests. Programs through the Trade and Development Agency, DFC, MCC, and formerly USAID are assistance that countries desire, and supporting these economic ambitions can provide leverage on other diplomatic issues in addition to creating opportunities for U.S. commercial interests.

The links among traditional development programs that supported education, agriculture, livelihoods, and trade and investment capacity may be tenuous as a means to advance a national security objective. Yet, in theory, these kinds of assistance programs — when designed well — also have the potential to create economic stability and open markets for U.S. businesses, especially for critical industries that are tied to national security.

For example, the Lobito Corridor is a major infrastructure project centered on a railway line stretching from the port of Lobito in Angola through the DRC and into Zambia.[20] It is being developed as a key economic artery to connect landlocked mineral-rich regions to the Atlantic coast, enabling the export of critical minerals such as copper and cobalt. The U.S. and EU have invested heavily in the project as part of a broader strategy to develop African infrastructure and offer an alternative to Chinese-led development initiatives. Interviewees also pointed to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) as a promising framework for aligning development finance, trade, and strategic competition, although many argued it has yet to be resourced and implemented at sufficient scale.

Anti-corruption programs, although sensitive, can help to create stable environments and contribute to risk reduction for U.S. businesses that are considering investments in countries that have valuable resources but unstable business environments. For example, the U.S. is well behind China on access to critical minerals in Africa. According to a report from AidData, "China's efforts to gain more access to transition mining operations in specific countries, such as the DRC, have garnered much attention. Chinese-controlled cobalt exports reportedly account for approximately 51% of total cobalt exports from the DRC."[21] Also, evidence suggests that China's share of global cobalt mine production has increased from 2% to 14% as of 2019 data.[22]

In theory, governance and anti-corruption assistance that is effective in creating a better business environment supports dealmaking for an industry that is essential to U.S. national economic and security interests. This approach can also work in tandem with a package of development, economic, and security assistance that is structured to create incentives for countries to work with the United States, whether on critical mineral mining rights or access or use of strategic ports and bases. To date, however, as interviewees indicated, there is no demonstrated linkage between U.S. assistance programming of any type and greater U.S. ability to secure access to critical mineral assets.

Improving Legitimacy and Positive Perceptions

There is mixed evidence on whether foreign assistance had a positive impact on positive perceptions of the United States. As discussed above, review of polling data suggests that while PEPFAR, President's Malaria Initiative, and other signature U.S. global health and rapid onset humanitarian responses resulted in positive perceptions in Africa and somewhat in Asia, yet this trend did not continue in the Middle East.

For example, a hepatitis C treatment program in Egypt — where the U.S. worked to bring the cost of a revolutionary treatment from $84,000 down to $900 per course for a population with extremely high infection rates — was cited as an example of transformative humanitarian impact that nonetheless produced little significant attitude changes towards the United States. At the same time, interviewees still considered the program the right thing to do for both moral and workforce productivity reasons.[23]

In other cases, assistance has been well aligned with local needs but has not translated into strategic influence. In Egypt, technical and vocational education programs were designed around labor market demands and local economic priorities, but they did not meaningfully affect government policy or strengthen U.S. leverage in negotiations.

Family planning programs offer a useful example of the distinction between development success and strategic return. Such initiatives were strongly supported by Suzanne Mubarak, the first lady of Egypt from 1981–2011, and aligned closely with the Egyptian government's domestic priorities. The programs achieved measurable outcomes, including a significant reduction in population growth rates, and maintained bipartisan support in the United States for decades. Yet despite their effectiveness as development programs, they did not translate into greater leverage with the Egyptian government, improved leadership access, or broader strategic gains for the United States.

However, on a deeper level, there is a distinction between how people perceive U.S. policy versus the United States and American culture and people. Using the Middle East as an example — where U.S. policy toward Israel remains deeply unpopular across much of the Arab world — experts argued that foreign assistance is unlikely to alter public views of U.S. foreign policy. Educational exchanges and other people-to-people programs, however, can foster a lasting affinity toward the United States, its institutions, and its people. In other words, hostility toward U.S. policies does not necessarily equate to hostility toward the American people, culture, or institutions. For example, English-language programs for Palestinian students were cited as a concrete example by interviewees, as they generated enthusiasm and economic aspiration even among populations deeply critical of U.S. policy toward Israel.

A key tool that has been used sporadically over different administrations is the Ambassador's Fund. The Ambassador's Fund has been a discretionary fund for chiefs of mission to use for small, visible, and impactful projects that could be used locally, without Washington red tape and with quicker approval processes. The ability to deploy these kinds of funds immediately for high visibility, localized projects that foster U.S. engagement with the local population can yield high public diplomacy impact.

Securing Votes at the UN Security Council and General Assembly

National security officials agreed that, by and large, foreign assistance generally did not "buy" the United States votes at the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) or General Assembly (UNGA) in the near term, and countries tended to vote with their overall long-term alignment with the U.S. The only exception to this general rule was the voting patterns of Israel — historically the largest recipient of U.S. FMF — and small Pacific Island states such as Micronesia and states under the Compact of Free Association (COFA), as both were largely viewed as exceptions.

A report to Congress on “Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2024” shows states under COFA tended to vote alongside the U.S. consistently over 50% and Israel tended to vote alongside the United States at 89%.[24] Over the last five years, U.S. COFA funding ran roughly $150–180 million per year during FYs 2021–23 under the expiring second COFA term. In March 2024, President Joe Biden signed an amendment to the COFA agreement, committing $6.5 billion over 20 years during FYs 2024–43; these funds were allocated across the Federated States of Micronesia with $3.3 billion, the Marshall Islands with $2.3 billion, and Palau with $889 million.[25] Additionally, FY 2025 saw a considerable jump, with roughly $977 million made available, $825 million of which was already disbursed. Given this track record, the consensus view among most of this paper’s interviewees was that UNSC and UNGA voting behavior should not factor into U.S. policy decisions on foreign assistance.

When Assistance Falls Short of Strategic Return

While foreign assistance is not designed to undermine U.S. interests, certain types of programs have periodically produced unintended and counterproductive outcomes. In many cases, these failures stem from a mismatch between program design and local realities, weak implementation capacity, unrealistic expectations, or the absence of a clear connection to strategic objectives.

Large-scale infrastructure and reconstruction projects are important and highly visible investments that not only benefit the population but also demonstrate American generosity. However, they can pose significant risk, and traditionally, the U.S. government through USAID or the State Department has not been staffed with engineers or construction specialists and, thus, lacked the expertise to design and manage these kinds of complex, multiyear projects. As such, when large infrastructure and reconstruction projects have been undertaken, they have often struggled due to high expenses, difficulty tied to sustaining the project, or lack of local ownership.

Iraq and Afghanistan represent atypical foreign assistance environments, shaped by large-scale military interventions, stabilization objectives, and extraordinary resource flows. Nevertheless, these cases offer useful lessons regarding project design, sustainability, local ownership, and implementation capacity that remain relevant to large infrastructure and reconstruction efforts more broadly. The Basra Children’s Hospital backed by Laura Bush became emblematic of delays, cost overruns, and limited operational capacity, illustrating the risks associated with highly visible reconstruction projects.[26] Although the hospital remains in operation and still serves Iraqi patients today, the project underscores how implementation challenges, staffing constraints, and sustainability concerns can weaken the strategic return of otherwise valuable investments.[27]

Similar challenges emerged with the Ring Road in Afghanistan. First supported by the Soviet Union in the 1960s and later funded by other donors, including the United States, the road addressed a real national need by connecting communities, facilitating commerce, and enabling faster movement of U.S. and NATO forces and supplies across the country. At its peak, the project contributed to economic opportunity and helped extend government presence into previously isolated areas. However, implementation was uneven and incomplete, with portions of the road never fully constructed or sustained.

According to a report from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, USAID and the Department of Defense spent $2.8 billion road construction and repairs in Afghanistan from 2002–16, and also obligated another $150 million for capacity-building at the country's Ministry of Public Works.[28] Interviewees noted that reliance on outsourced labor rather than local workers reduced opportunities to build local economic capacity and ownership. They also remarked on how declining financial support and shifting U.S. strategic priorities further weakened sustained engagement, and gains proved difficult to maintain as security conditions deteriorated. At the same time, the Ring Road's continued importance is evident in the fact that successive Afghan governments, and now the Taliban-led leadership have continued to invest in completing and rehabilitating portions of the network, underscoring that the concept itself addressed a real national need even if execution fell short.[29]

Some initiatives struggled because their ambitions ran ahead of local institutional conditions. Financial-sector development requires more than the creation of formal rules or institutions; it depends on credible supervision, enforceable regulation, market infrastructure, and basic confidence in the rule of law. Afghanistan's financial-sector experience illustrates this risk. Through programs such as USAID's Economic Growth and Governance Initiative and related private-sector strengthening activities, U.S.-funded advisers supported banking supervision and economic governance at Da Afghanistan Bank.[30] Yet the 2010 Kabul Bank collapse — one of the largest corruption scandals of the post-2001 period — exposed the fragility of Afghanistan's financial governance and underscored the limits of building market institutions in an environment marked by weak oversight, corruption, insecurity, and limited enforcement capacity.

Some forms of assistance can also become counterproductive when they are not well aligned with local priorities or political realities. Programs that seek to export contemporary U.S. social or political priorities may be perceived as disconnected from local conditions, particularly in countries facing more immediate concerns such as security, corruption, food insecurity, economic collapse, or weak governance. Several interviewees specifically cited programming related to gender identity, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ issues as areas where U.S. assistance risked alienating local leaders and communities. In countries facing more immediate concerns such as cartel violence, human trafficking, corruption, food insecurity, or weak governance, these forms of assistance were sometimes viewed as disconnected from local priorities.

Democratization programs also carried risks in some contexts. In Egypt, for example, U.S.-supported civil society organizations were at times viewed by the government as dissident actors, creating friction with the host government and limiting the long-term effectiveness of those efforts.

Finally, even well-intentioned forms of assistance can produce unintended economic consequences. Programs that ship U.S. food directly into partner countries have in some cases disrupted local agricultural markets by making it more difficult for local farmers to compete. These examples illustrate that foreign assistance can fail not only when projects are poorly implemented, but also when they do not account for local economic conditions, institutional capacity, political realities, or the distinction between development outcomes and strategic returns.

The Role of Congress

While the U.S. administration in office will clearly shape foreign assistance and broader foreign policy priorities, Congress plays a dominant role in determining how foreign assistance resources are ultimately allocated, particularly through the appropriations process. Until the second Trump administration, congressional priorities — as reflected in funding levels and statutory directives — remained relatively consistent across administrations. These priorities have generally centered on military readiness, homeland defense, stability and conflict resolution, adversary counteraction, and strengthening of alliances and partnerships. At the sectoral level, Congress has consistently prioritized humanitarian crises, food insecurity, water security, security sector assistance, and global health.

One consequence of this consistency is that it has reinforced the United States' reputation as a reliable partner. While administrations may seek to alter funding levels or shift priorities through the president's budget request, congressional appropriations have historically provided continuity in key programs. Whether through FMF for partners in the Middle East or PEPFAR funding across Africa, congressional support has often ensured that major assistance commitments endured across administrations. This predictability has strengthened important relationships by allowing partner countries to plan in accordance with sustained U.S. engagement. Israel and Egypt, for example, have long relied on congressional support for military financing, while countries such as Tanzania and Kenya could similarly depend on continued PEPFAR funding.

That same consistency, however, can also reduce flexibility. Interviewees noted that congressional directives have at times constrained the executive branch's ability to adapt programs to changing conditions on the ground or to redirect resources toward emerging priorities. Responsibility for the successes and shortcomings of foreign assistance therefore does not rest solely with the executive branch. Congressional directives, earmarks, and country-specific funding requirements can also limit the executive branch's flexibility to adapt programs to changing conditions on the ground or redirect resources toward emerging priorities. Separately, congressional notification requirements, reporting mandates, pre-consultations, and funding holds can slow the movement of funds and delay implementation.

In some cases, these requirements have contributed to programs that were poorly suited to local conditions or that no longer reflected evolving circumstances. They can also delay the movement of funds and limit the government's ability to respond quickly to new opportunities or crises. Several interviewees argued that if the United States seeks to compete more effectively with the People's Republic of China by presenting timely alternatives to partner countries, reducing bureaucratic delays, and taking greater risk through more competitive financial offers to countries, these approaches will require attention from both Congress and the executive branch.

Looking ahead, interviewees emphasized the need for a broader conversation between the next administration and congressional leadership regarding priorities, authorities, and institutional design. Such a review could help ensure that foreign assistance remains responsive to changing global conditions while maintaining clarity about which U.S. interests foreign assistance can realistically advance.

Lessons for Policymakers

Across these sources, a consistent and conditional picture emerges. Specific forms of foreign assistance can yield meaningful strategic returns in specific interest areas:

1. Defense and intelligence cooperation.
2. Public legitimacy and perception.
3. Economic access for U.S. commercial interests.
4. Access to heads of state and senior levels of government.

However, not all forms of foreign assistance yield those results equally. And those returns are neither automatic nor guaranteed.

Certain kinds of assistance have demonstrable impacts across a range of interests including U.S. influence on governments and heads of state, defense cooperation, and U.S. standing in the world: for example, PEPFAR in sub-Saharan Africa; humanitarian and security sector assistance in Israel, Jordan, and Egypt; economic budget support in Jordan; and educational exchange and scholarship programs worldwide. People-to-people programs such as educational exchanges cultivate a generalized positive disposition toward the United States among foreign publics.

Economically, trade and development programs can generate improved commercial access to foreign markets and reduce risk exposures for U.S. businesses. The direct causal links of other kinds of development assistance on direct national security interests — particularly on the development side, such as those centered on education, agriculture, and economic livelihoods — are less apparent. However, this paper assesses that this kind of assistance can contribute to economic and social stability, which is important for U.S. economic and trade interests.

As expected, security sector foreign assistance expands U.S. military access and interoperability with partner militaries, enhancing the U.S.' ability to project force. It also creates openings for U.S. intelligence services to gain greater insight into foreign countries. However, global health and humanitarian assistance — when engaged alongside the U.S. and foreign militaries through mil-to-mil cooperative projects — also enhance U.S. defense cooperation.

The design and implementation of foreign assistance projects matter; they need to be responsive to local realities, clearly identified as American contributions, and produce tangible outcomes. When well designed and implemented, the strategic returns of foreign assistance are well-documented and significant. When those conditions are absent, even generously funded programs have failed to produce influence, access, or alignment. Where assistance has been poorly matched to local realities, ideologically driven, or disconnected from institutional capacity, it has at times actively undermined U.S. credibility. Looking ahead, several interviewees argued that the United States should move beyond siloed approaches to development, trade, and infrastructure by pursuing integrated initiatives that connect digital infrastructure, physical connectivity, and commercial engagement. Rather than treating these as separate policy domains, such efforts should be viewed as mutually reinforcing components of a broader strategy to strengthen economic resilience and deepen strategic partnerships.

At the same time, the extent to which foreign assistance advances other U.S. interests remains contested in three areas: advancing democracy, securing votes at the U.N., and countering China's influence. Policymakers should therefore be clear-eyed about exactly what foreign assistance buys and what it does not.

In the case of democracy assistance, foreign assistance may not "buy" democracy. However, it can yield incremental gains by opening space for democratic actors, building relationships with future leaders who may currently sit in the opposition, and distinguishing the U.S. approach from the more transactional model associated with the People's Republic of China.

When it comes to the U.N., foreign assistance may have little influence on member state voting behavior, which tends to rely on traditional diplomatic alliances and a country's perception of its own national interests. However, U.S. financial contributions to U.N. agencies, peacekeeping missions, and operations buy influence on how the U.N. conducts humanitarian or peacekeeping operations. The U.S. ability to exert influence — through both diplomatic means and funding — over U.N. operations is critically important in global crisis situations. For example, during both the West Africa (2014–15) and DRC (2019–20) Ebola crises, the United States was heavily involved in influencing all aspects of the U.N. operations, including coordination, field operations and leadership appointments.

While inherently riskier, foreign assistance through direct financial support — meaning MCC compacts, direct budget support, DFC deals, and sovereign loan guarantees — yields dividends across multiple national security interests and should be expanded. Sovereign loan guarantees and direct budget support are highly coveted forms of U.S. assistance but are rarely used by the United States due to high financial risk. MCC compacts and financing deals from the DFC are also highly valued by countries. These forms of assistance are particularly powerful because they create a multiplier effect, attracting additional private sector financing and foreign investment into a country.

Countering China's influence presents perhaps the clearest example of the limits of the current U.S. foreign assistance architecture. Interviewees broadly agreed that the existing toolkit is not fit for purpose if the objective is to compete directly with Chinese financing and infrastructure offers. Countries facing urgent development and infrastructure needs rarely reject Chinese assistance simply because the United States prefers that they do. In many cases, the United States lacks the instruments to provide a timely and competitive alternative. Policymakers should therefore decide whether they are prepared to compete through more robust economic tools — including highly subsidized financing, infrastructure projects, direct budget support, and sovereign loan guarantees — or accept the limitations of the current model.

Conclusion

Although the effects of foreign assistance often appear geographically distant from everyday American life, many of its strategic and economic returns ultimately shape conditions that affect Americans directly. The Sept. 11 attacks demonstrated how instability, weak governance, and extremist networks abroad can generate far-reaching consequences at home. The subsequent creation of the Department of Homeland Security and other reforms reflected the scale of the U.S. response to those threats. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the same dynamic in a different form: Fragile health systems overseas can allow disease outbreaks to spread rapidly, with devastating human and economic consequences inside the United States. Recent outbreaks and emerging threats, including Ebola in Central Africa and travel-linked cases of other infectious diseases, underscore the continuing importance of disease surveillance, laboratory capacity, and rapid-response systems beyond U.S. borders. Foreign assistance in areas such as security cooperation, state capacity, and global health should therefore be understood, in part, as a preventative investment designed to reduce the likelihood of far costlier crises in the future.

The economic returns are also more direct than is commonly understood. Security assistance programs such as FMF are often used to purchase U.S.-manufactured defense equipment, training, and services, reinforcing the American defense industrial base while deepening long-term military partnerships. Other forms of assistance flow through U.S.-based contractors, universities, labs, logistics providers, and implementing organizations. Beyond these direct economic effects, foreign assistance helps shape the rules, institutions, infrastructure, and relationships that determine whether American firms can compete in foreign markets and whether the United States remains a preferred partner in strategically important regions.

The central finding of this study is not that all foreign assistance advances U.S. national security interests. Nor can all U.S. national security interests be advanced through foreign assistance. Indeed, not all assistance should be justified on national security grounds. Rather, the evidence suggests that specific forms of assistance produce strategic returns under identifiable conditions. At the same time, assistance does not automatically advance U.S. interests. Several interviewees cautioned that assistance, particularly in the security sector, can undermine objectives when delivered through institutions influenced by hostile actors or competing political interests. Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon were frequently cited as cases requiring particular caution, where assistance intended to strengthen state institutions at times risked benefiting actors working at cross-purposes with the United States.

The foreign assistance “best buys” from a national security perspective include the following: global health programs, including PEPFAR, PMI, and pandemic preparedness and response; defense and security assistance; economic assistance tools such as direct budget support, sovereign loan guarantees, DFC financing, and MCC programs; educational exchanges and scholarships; and humanitarian assistance.

However, this paper’s findings have important caveats. First, the design, implementation, and context within which programs are administered or assistance provided matter; it should be U.S. branded, responsive to needs, and consistent across administrations to promote strategic returns. Second, the extent to which national security objectives are advanced should not be the primary goal of all forms of assistance, particularly global health and humanitarian assistance. The provision of global health and humanitarian assistance based on needs is an expression of values that is uniquely American in nature — in stark contrast to the largely transactional nature of assistance from the People’s Republic of China.

While global health and humanitarian assistance can yield ancillary benefits across a range of national security and economic interests, the primary purpose should remain needs- and values-based. Ultimately, the promotion of American values in the world, as expressed by U.S. foreign assistance, is a powerful tool of American soft power and in the national interest.

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Notes

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