

# Rethinking Global Responsibility: Moving Beyond U.S. Dominance in Humanitarian Aid to Collective International Engagement

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the changing contours of U.S. foreign policy dynamics, especially the strategic turn away from long-standing humanitarian aid provided now through USAID during the Trump administration. The U.S., traditionally, has operated as the world's nice guy—providing aid to stabilize the world order and promote soft power. Yet the paper challenges the savior-only model by proposing a new relationship that tilts the focus toward security cooperation, economic diplomacy, and multilateral partners. Utilizing qualitative policy analysis and descriptive case study research (in the form of the U.S. response to the Myanmar earthquake of 2025), the paper illustrates that a reduction in assistance does not necessarily undermine U.S. power. Instead, it opens the field to rising powers such as China to take their own, more global, development role, forcing a fundamental rethink of American strategy. In the end, the paper promotes a collaborative, accountable model where countries lead their own development and use their resources more efficiently.

## Keywords

Foreign Policy, Humanitarian Aid, Soft Power, Global Development, Security Cooperation, Multilateral Partnership

## 1. Introduction

### Contextualizing U.S. Soft Power

Soft power, as coined by Joseph Nye, involves a country's ability to direct others through the appeal of its culture, political ideas, and policies more than its military or financial inducement (Nye, 2004, p. 5). This type of influence is based on the legitimacy of a nation's culture, political values & foreign policies. For decades, the

United States has been a model of this kind of engagement, from spreading liberal democratic values, to encouraging cross-border cultural exchange, to—crucially—seeing foreign aid as an instrument of influence. Humanitarian aid via U.S. Agency for International Development has contributed to various forms of institution-building, post-conflict reconstruction, and economic development that have served both humanitarian and strategic ends (Lancaster, 2007, p. 45).

The idea of soft power has been criticized, however, for being the product of a Western perspective that does not take emerging and established powers with different norms into account. Certainly, academics such as Melissen (2005) have called for a more pluralistic comprehension of soft power in a world where China, Russia and Türkiye are now framing international development narratives via alternative aid models and public diplomacy. This pivot highlights the necessity to re-think U.S. soft power in a multipolar world.

### **Problem Statement**

This paper investigates what the strategic dislocation of U.S. foreign aid, especially under Trump, has done to the credibility and effectiveness of American soft power. The Trump-era “America First” foreign policy doctrine yielded proposed cuts to foreign aid, efforts to deconstruct USAID and a loosening of multilateral cooperation. These were departures from decades of U.S. commitment to global development and humanitarian leadership.

While soft power is heavily researched in international relations, for the most part, we examine its extension—cultural exchange, diplomacy, and aid giving. What has received less attention is how withdrawing that aid impacts a state’s global image and power, especially at a time of humanitarian crisis. The response to the 2025 Myanmar earthquake in the United States, where China provided substantial assistance while the U.S. made little contribution, shows how foreign aid decisions impact perceptions of global duty and legitimacy.

### **Research Focus and Contribution**

This paper inverts the usual soft power calculus: *How does a world leader look when they refuse to offer aid?* It considers where those choices lead in terms of how the world feels about leadership, morality, and trust itself beyond borders. Through an examination of U.S. foreign aid retrenchment and the attendant emergence of alternative donors, this article provides a timely reevaluation of soft power as a contested and performative construction—not a unilateral national asset.

### **Research Objectives**

- 1) To understand the key shifts in U.S. foreign aid policy under Trump, including de-prioritizing humanitarian assistance and now emphasizing bilateral, security-led relationships.
- 2) We reflect upon how this new approach might influence U.S. interactions with multilateral bodies and global development cooperation.
- 3) To analyze the increasingly important role of non-western donors like China, Russia, and Türkiye in global aid and soft power politics.
- 4) To examine ways in which the United States can reposition itself as a credi-

ble, synergetic partner in international development, supporting rather than undermining self-reliance in partner countries.

### **Thesis Statement**

This paper argues that the United States should redesign its approach to development, moving away from being the foremost global provider of aid and toward a selective, strategic approach focused on multilateral diplomacy and sustainable development. The loss of soft power is not an intrinsic outcome of giving aid—but rather its future efficacy is a function of how global opinion makers view credibility, consistency, and moral leadership in a world that is increasingly multipolar.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Soft Power, International Responsibility, and Strategic Development Aid in Multilateral Contexts**

This study utilizes a multi-faceted theoretical framework linking soft power, international responsibility, and the strategic use of development aid in multilateral diplomacy. Together, these intertwined paradigms provide a strong analytical foundation for explaining how states—and notably the United States—project power, achieve ethical results, and engage national interests through global governance-based foreign aid programs.

Joseph Nye's idea of soft power underpins this framework. The soft power of a state depends on its capacity to influence the preferences of others without coercing or commanding them (Nye, 2004, p. 5). In the digitalized, globalized world of today, soft power is more important than ever. Nye (2011), for example, in *The Future of Power*, emphasizes the role of non-state actors and transnational networks in soft power effects. Crucially, soft power is situational: it is molded by perceptions, by media narratives, and by the history that precedes it all.

However, overreliance on Nye obscures the full spectrum of how soft power is deployed and perceived globally. Scholars such as Craig Hayden (2012) and Jan Melissen (2005) argue that soft power must be situated within evolving contexts of public diplomacy and international political communication. Melissen critiques Nye's framework for being too U.S.-centric, calling for a broader understanding of how states—especially rising powers—use culture and communication as tools of influence.

In this respect, Hartig (2016) makes a strong argument for studying soft power in the context of China's Confucius Institutes. These institutions, though superficially cultural, are thoroughly geopolitical in strategy, showing that soft power is frequently state-managed and interest-led. For his part, Eytan Gilboa (2008) contends that public diplomacy theory must include media systems, audience cognition and elite communication.

These criticisms suggest a requirement to reconceptualize soft power as not an essentialist national characteristic, but an idea that is contested and performed. Mosse (2005) supports this performative dimension in development aid, arguing that aid initiatives often create legitimacy narratives as much as they solve prob-

lems. In essence, development assistance is a stage for states to perform credibility and benevolence, whether outcomes are successful.

Development aid is where geopolitical calculus and moral duty meet. While frequently couched in humanitarian terms, aid has always been an instrument of geopolitical strategy and soft power projection. The tension between these two perspectives is seen as central to contemporary aid systems (Lancaster, 2007; Browne, 2006). Aid itself alleviates physical want, but it also increases the presence and position of the donor. For instance, American initiatives such as PEPFAR and USAID's governance work have led to better public health and democratic systems and furthered U.S. soft power in strategic parts of the world.

Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategy of development aid and infrastructure finance through which mutual development is encouraged while simultaneously attaining economic and geopolitical benefits (Ferdinand, 2016a; Benabdallah, 2020). These examples exemplify what Mosse (2005) refers to as the symbolic role of development: aid as a performance that creates the legitimacy and narrative authority of its manifestation in international relations.

Further extending the framework, global governance scholars like Robert Keohane (2005) and Ruggie (1993) argue that soft power intersects with international responsibility. States that invest in multilateral frameworks and rule-based norms are seen as more legitimate and trusted actors. This perspective introduces ethical legitimacy as a component of soft power, especially in the eyes of Global South nations historically skeptical of Western interventionism.

This is supplemented by the doctrine of international responsibility, which, in turn, transforms the image of states from mere power-seeking entities into moral actors bound by global norms and human development goals. According to theories of global governance, states face dilemmas of collective action (e.g., transnational poverty, global pandemics, and climate change) that necessitate multilateral institutions to foster cooperative and rule-based solutions (Keohane, 2005; Ruggie, 1993). In a similar vein, this responsibility accentuates moral legitimacy, and scholars, such as Sen (1999) and Pogge (2002), contend that ethical rights to justice and development create normative power and reputational capital. Therefore, fulfilling international duties enhances a country's face in international circles.

Multinational organizations, the UN, the World Bank, and the OECD, among others—are vital arenas for state behavior and the use of soft power. By attending these forums, states demonstrate commitment to global norms, build strategic partnerships, and gain legitimacy (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). These are the institutions through which normative aspirations are converted into effective outcomes. For example, the EU has further consolidated its environmental leadership by integrating into global climate regime complexes (Oberthür & Roche Kelly, 2008).

Nevertheless, academics have warned about window-dressed multilateralism, where rhetorical posturing amounts to little more (Ruggie, 1993; Mawdsley, 2012). As Nye (2004) explains, credibility, or the relationship between declared

values and policy, is crucial in the success of soft power. Without it, diplomacy in other quarters runs the risk of ringing hollow and of losing impact that lasts longer.

By considering these multiple voices, this paper transcends Nye's original concept toward a more sturdy, globalised articulation of soft power. It relies on the fact that "power through attraction" is not neutral or universally applicable; rather, it is historically contingent, the product of politics and strategic narratives. The United States' soft power, then, needs to be conceptualized not simply in terms of values and policies, but also in the way in which these are perceived in the context of growing competition from alternative donors, such as China, Russia and Türkiye.

Spanning soft power theory, global ethics, and aid strategy, the framework reveals the fluid interrelations between values and interests at play in international politics. It makes for a less simplistic account of U.S. foreign aid (which doesn't simply rest on a dichotomous choice between the altruistic and the self-interested) but as a complex performance of ethical signaling, strategic maneuver, and the production of legitimacy in a global order coming soon.

### 3. Methodology and Case Study Justification

This article offers a qualitative, interpretivist analysis of the strategic logic guiding U.S. foreign aid retrenchment and its soft power implications. This themed collection pairs policy analysis with a case-based comparison on a speculative scenario: the 2025 Myanmar earthquake response. This fictional case is used as a new tool of analysis which permits us to speculate on future policy pathways and their symbolic implications. Although hypothetical, the scenario is assembled via reasonable extensions of present-day geopolitics and U.S. aid patterns as they mesh with established humanitarian bounce lines. This approach has numerous limitations and the methodology recognizes this: e.g., bias for affirmation, no empirical validation etc. The study addresses these sources of bias by triangulating constructed future-dated "evidence" (fake news reports, hypothetical official statements) with existing academic literature, historical analogues, policy documents and international media narratives.

Rather than aiming for the kind of causality demanded by strict empiricist methods, the paper takes a more discursive approach to soft power: one that sees it as performative and socially constructed—produced through policy decisions, interpretive narratives, and global images. Grounded in interpretivist approaches of Mosse (2005) and Hartig (2016), this approach does not look at development aid only as an additional material effect but also puts it into the wider perspective of being normative and symbolic practice. The concept of aid is then put forth as a site of struggle where legitimacy, leadership, and values are projected or contested and perhaps even corroded.

#### **Case Selection Rationale: The 2025 Myanmar Earthquake**

The U.S. response to the 2025 Myanmar earthquake provides a compelling lens through which to analyze the retraction of soft power. The event involved:

- A high-profile humanitarian disaster that typically invites global leadership;
- An opportunity for the U.S. to demonstrate moral authority and responsiveness;
- A visible contrast with China's rapid and expansive aid delivery in the same context.

China's \$137 million aid package—consisting of rescue teams, field hospitals, and emergency infrastructure help received significant international media attention and compliments from Myanmar's government (Anadolu, 2025). On the other hand, the response of the United States (\$2 m in the first instance) was by several measures limited and did not include the deployment of Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs), which are the usual USAID set of tools for major crises (Master, 2025; Development Aid, 2025).

This gap enables a critical evaluation of when absence and reduction or lag in humanitarian support may be regarded as the recoil of soft power leadership, in a region with a rising China confidently asserting its claims as a "responsible power".

#### **Operationalizing Soft Power Impact**

To evaluate soft power consequences, this paper looks at:

- **International media framing** of U.S. and Chinese responses (e.g., coverage in *AP News*, *Reuters*, *Nukta*, *Anadolu*),
- **Diplomatic signals** from recipient states (e.g., Myanmar's public statements or diplomatic alignments),
- **Global civil society discourse**, particularly critiques from watchdogs like Human Rights Watch and Development Aid,
- **Institutional actions**, such as Executive Order 14169, which paused 90% of U.S. foreign development programs.

Together, these indicators help map how foreign aid—or the lack thereof—affects a country's perceived legitimacy, trustworthiness, and normative leadership. This method allows the study to go beyond abstract theory and ground its analysis in a tangible, timely case of strategic foreign policy behavior.

## **4. The U.S. Foreign Aid Model: A Historical Perspective**

**The "Savior-Only" Paradigm:** The present paper argues against what we call the "savior-only model" of U.S. foreign aid—a framework in which humanitarian assistance is designed and enacted as a unilateral act of charity by a wealthy donor, with little to no acknowledgment or validation for the influence, voices, and needs of beneficiary collectives. In short, this model of aid was not a partnership in process but an outreach into the world—of American capacity and moral leadership, offering help like we were casting ourselves as rescuer and civilizer. This approach encourages centralized decision making, and all too frequently it uses humanitarian assistance as a tool of diplomacy (or worse, an ideological weapon cloaked in empathetic guise).

This model operates with historical precedent, such as the 1960s Alliance for Progress—an effort to counter communist influence in Latin America through USAID-

funded modernization programs. Although under the guise of development, in practice an Alliance structure modeled on savior-only programs with Washington-driven conditionalities and a geopolitical alignment. It too often allowed Latin American governments and communities to be treated like resort areas for play at home, not from friends at home. While the program promised partnership and reform its practice, as Natsios (2020, p. 105) suggests, largely solidified U.S. hegemony regarding its dominant worldview. After 9/11, this savior-only mentality took on ever darker hues, when USAID operations in Afghanistan and Iraq were largely subsumed by military objectives. From the outset, aid delivery, reconstruction, and governance reform were subsumed in U.S. counterinsurgency goals to combine humanitarian intervention with strategic self-interest (Runde 2020). Again, the focus was much less about that localist ownership and much more again on demonstrating American competence and values to be an attractive power—what is being discussed as savior-only.

**The Role of USAID and Humanitarian Leadership:** The Foreign Assistance Act, passed in 1961, created a host of new programs and institutions—including USAID (short for United States Agency for International Development), which was meant to institutionalize development assistance as a core instrument of U.S. foreign policy in the fight against communism during the Cold War (Natsios, 2020, pp. 102-104). Initially charged with “helping friendly countries to help themselves” through reducing poverty and increasing economic growth, USAID’s mission became more focused to extend American national security and ideological interests. Rooted in Cold War era programs such as the Alliance for Progress, the U.S. foreign aid program was not limited to helping but intended also to guide the politics of global alignment and alliance.

The post-9/11 world was another break point: USAID became more visible and engaged in conflict and post-conflict stages, mainly through Afghanistan and Iraq where aid was closely linked with military reconstruction. Thus, the merger of soft power language with hard power strategy fundamentally shifted humanitarian action towards being co-opted as a tactical aid in stabilization and counterterrorism (Runde, 2020).

**Foreign Aid as a Vehicle of Geopolitical Influence:** The Marshall Plan (1948) provides an iconic example of aid as a tool of foreign policy. In the end, a \$13 billion appropriation did not only reconstruct Western Europe, it also confirmed U.S. hegemony and stemmed further aggressive aspirations by Moscow (Runde, 2020; Ingram, 2025). During the Cold War, bilateral aid flows traditionally focused on countries considered to hold strategic value (Lancaster, 2007, pp. 48-50), rather than development parameters, with states such as Egypt, Pakistan and South Korea receiving greater amounts.

The soft power logic reached into the global health sphere as well, particularly in post-Cold War initiatives like PEPFAR. PEPFAR was a game-changer launched under President George W. Bush that helped save almost 20 million lives and, as Ambassador Andrew Natsios explains, also deepened American soft power across

all Sub-Saharan Africa (Natsios p112). Still even in these instances critics argue the savior-only stance has not yet truly shifted away, especially when program design and narrative framing continue to be dominated by external entities at the expense of local leadership and traditional knowledge systems.

**Strategic and Operational Constraints:** Even though U.S. foreign aid is strategically beneficial, it has faced lasting criticisms in three areas: the transactions costs and opportunity for corruption that complex bureaucratic structures introduce, U.S. politics and U.S.-based contractors are so dominant that field responsiveness is limited (Moss & Resnick, 2018, pp. 5-7). Domestic skepticism and budgetary pressures, especially under the Trump administration, added to the instability by eroding U.S. commitment predictability (Ingram 2025). Furthermore, the soft power effectiveness of aid is reduced when aid is seen as being self-interested. The legitimacy of soft power, as Browne (2006, pp. 102-104) and Nye (2004) claim, depends on the credible alignment of the donor's values and actions. Where that credibility is lost, so is influence.

## 5. The Trump Administration's Strategic Shift

**Recalibrating Foreign Assistance and Development Strategy:** U.S. foreign policy dramatically changed during the presidency of Donald Trump, with a sharp break from historically prevalent use of foreign aid as a means of promoting stability, development, and soft power run. The Trump administration prioritized national security and defense over humanitarian and development assistance, one piece of a larger ideological shift toward the "America First" doctrine. A key part of that "recalibration" involved cutting the combined budget of the U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) by 50 percent, from \$54.4 billion in 2025 to \$28.4 billion in fiscal year 2026 (Landay & Psaledakis, 2025).

Rational for such reductions to the budget were based on the administration's claim that foreign aid seldom provided real benefits to citizens in the U.S. Retreat of available resources to defense, border security, domestic infrastructure became guidance (Toosi, 2025). The Trump administration suggested cutting USAID altogether and folding its functions into the State Department. The merger aimed to streamline diplomatic operations and cut bureaucracy but was also a sign of decreased faith in multilateralism and international norms of development (Knickmeyer & Lee, 2025).

These administrative changes elicited concern from actors in the global health and humanitarian community. Programs like the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, long praised as saving millions of lives—especially in Sub-Saharan Africa—were left in limbo. Opponents contended that these cuts would incur grave threats to global health security and would dismantle decades of American leadership in disease prevention and control (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

**Nationalism and the "America First" Doctrine:** The administration's foreign

policy was framed around the “America First” doctrine that promoted national sovereignty, economic self-sufficiency and transnationalism in foreign engagement. Under this paradigm, foreign aid was reinvented as a fiscal liability rather than a geopolitical asset. The broader political ideology was part of a broader world trend with the rise of nationalism and populism, with the idea that U.S. foreign policy should result in direct, easily measured benefits to American taxpayers.

This ideology materialized in funding choices that transformed aid payments to countries with current strategic value—Israel, Saudi Arabia and Japan, for example—while de-prioritizing areas and interventions that used to enjoy support as a humanitarian obligation. Trump’s public language often depicted foreign assistance as “waste” and favored domestic investments in job creation, infrastructure, and immigration enforcement (Toosi, 2025). Such a reprioritization was a significant departure from the post-WWII consensus on the United States’ role as a moral leader by way of development and democracy promotion (Master, 2025).

It was a transition that was only accelerated by the administration’s brand of unilateralism. For example, the US shockingly rejected a UN resolution on Russia’s meddling in Ukraine (Amiri, 2025) and this led to a sense of separation from the conventional Western allies. This could be seen too in the U.S. pulling out of ground-breaking international accords like the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran Nuclear Deal, as a measure of self-glorification by Trump, essentially to signal to his base that he’s bringing home the bacon. These measures signaled a broader withdrawal from the multilateralism, which has characterized decades of U.S. foreign policy (Ikenberry, 2020).

**Impact on U.S. Global Influence and Strategic Posture:** The Trump administration’s refocusing of foreign aid and diplomacy had significant consequences for U.S. global influence. The United States has used foreign aid to project soft power historically for good reason—to reaffirm its position as a global moral leader, not just because it’s a kind thing to do. Yet the withdrawal of aid and commitment to multilateral agreements was a sign of waning influence when it came to shaping international norms and values.

By reducing contributions to international organizations, from the United Nations to the World Health Organization, and closing the State Department’s foreign development operation, USAID, Trump leaves voids to be filled by rival powers. China seizes that opportunity with its BRI with infrastructure investments to wield strategic influence around Africa, Asia, and Latin American (Ikenberry, 2020).

Added to that, the sudden pivot had also frayed ties with European nations and other traditional allies that have until now followed U.S. leadership on humanitarian and development projects. Limited U.S. commitment, as was the case in these domains, bred perceptions of unreliability, which translated into diplomatic opportunities for rising powers. Critics like Mastanduno (2019) argue this turn might speed the change to a multi-polar global structure in which the normative authority traditionally enjoyed by the U.S. is challenged by countries such as China

and Russia.

Despite these reservations—some analysts like [Amiri, \(2025\)](#) regard the administration’s rerouting of foreign policy as a pragmatic adjustment, rather than an abandonment of global leadership. In an era of power diffusion and renewed strategic competition, we might see the U.S. shift towards bilateral arrangements and pursuit of national interest, rather than multilateralism, because of evolving constraints of the changing international order. But, as others have pointed out, this turn inward could potentially erode the soft-power base the United States has long relied on to maintain its global preeminence ([Human Rights Watch, 2025](#)).

The strategic tilt of the Trump administration signaled a U-turn in America’s role in the world, prioritizing nationalism, transactional diplomacy and domestic focus over multilateralism and leadership on development. Even if this was an effective reflection of geopolitical realities, the long-term impact on U.S. influence, its global relationships and its moral authority are still a matter of heated debate.

## **6. Beyond Humanitarian Aid: The Reconceiving of Soft Power**

Nye maintains that soft power is based on a nation’s culture, political values and foreign policies as these are received as legitimate and morally authoritative. In the era of globalization, he argues that the role of soft power becomes even more significant, as global information flows can enhance or damage a country’s reputation internationally ([Nye, 2004](#); 5-6)

Although conventional foreign aid has always been a disbursement channel for soft power, in recent years the United States has branched out in the ways it engages the world. Prominent among these is the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), which began with 13 partner countries in May 2022. IPEF aims to build more resilient, sustainable, inclusive, fair economic systems, with a four-pillar approach: Trade, Supply Chains, Clean Economy and Fair Economy. Through the promotion of common economic norms and regional integration, IPEF reinforces U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific ([U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022](#)).

Security organizations like NATO are also instruments of soft power. While focused mainly on security, these alliance systems build common interests and trust through joint training and collaborative efforts in confronting global dangers. These joint undertakings also encourage a “sense of togetherness” as well as reiterating the normative underpinnings of inter-state cooperation.

Aside of typical diplomacy and aid, the U.S. has relied more on non-aid means to exert influence. Music as an Instrument of Peace and Democratic Values Cultural exchange programs, such as the Global Music Diplomacy Initiative, a program developed by the U.S. Department of State in collaboration with the Recording Academy, utilize music to foster peace and promote democratic principles. The American Music Mentorship Program and Fulbright-Kennedy Center Visiting Scholar Award enhance cultural exchange and international goodwill ([Enos, 2023](#)).

Another level of influence is technological cooperation. The Bureau of Cyber-

space and Digital Policy, the U.S. State Department agency that oversees international cyber diplomacy and advancing norms for an open internet (Axios, 2022). In addition, the American Spaces—cultural centers run by the U.S. State Department around the world—promote democratic ideals and civic engagement through educational programs and person-to-person diplomacy.

Combined, these efforts epitomize a new twist on U.S. strategy in which soft power goes beyond aid and uses culture, economic diplomacy and technology to ensure our global leadership continues.

## **7. The Rise of Alternative Donors: Contesting the Soft Power Landscape**

The retrenchment of U.S. foreign aid in recent years has created opportunities for alternative donors—most notably China and Russia—to expand their global influence. These states have increasingly framed their foreign assistance programs not only as tools for development, but also as mechanisms to project soft power and contest Western leadership in international norms and governance structures.

### **China: Development Diplomacy with Strategic Depth**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is the most outstanding represent of such policy attitude. Despite being launched in 2013, the BRI has provided infrastructure finance, technical assistance, and concessional loans to over 150 countries—largely in Africa, Southeast and South Asia and Latin America—amounting to commitments to invest more than \$1 trillion dollars (McBride et al., 2023; China Power Team, 2024). Unlike western donors of aid, China's aid is generally non-conditional, focusing on sovereignty, mutual benefit, and pragmatic cooperation. However, scholars caution that this model is not free of politics. Aid and financing are frequently tied to diplomatic recognition (e.g., of the One China Policy), and projects are structured to ensure long-term Chinese economic footholds (Benabdallah, 2020; Ferdinand, 2016b).

Chinese aid is part of its strategic soft power, especially when applied in times of global humanitarian emergencies. Indeed, following the 2025 Myanmar earthquake, China's rapid dispatch of medical teams and infrastructure assistance stood in stark contrast to a relatively small U.S. response, strengthening China's track record as a reliable and responsive partner. These interventions satisfy both moral and strategic aims, creating China's moral capital and furthering its influence in regional multilateral institutions such as ASEAN and the African Union.

### **Russia: Security-Linked Aid and Symbolic Humanitarianism**

Russia's foreign aid strategy is more narrowly focused but similarly political. Its assistance is typically focused on helping post-Soviet states, allies in the Middle East, and nations sympathetic to its geopolitical interests. Humanitarianism, in turn (and this is how the 2023 movement is understood), functions as a means to build bilateral relations, and as a venue to display Russia as the world-positive actor that it is (Abbasova, 2023).

Russian aid also reflects a **normative counter-narrative** to Western liberal in-

terventionism. By emphasizing cultural solidarity, traditional values, and resistance to Western conditionality, Russia promotes a vision of sovereignty and multipolarity in global development (Mawdsley, 2012; Bou Serhal & Alkhaja, 2024).

Russia may not be a financial behemoth like the U.S. or China, but it has built symbolic power by way of high-profile emergency response and media amplification on state-run platforms such as RT. In the process, Russia casts itself not only as a benefactor, but as a critic of what it sees as the hypocrisy and politicization of Western aid.

### **Comparing Donor Models: Contesting the Moral High Ground**

The rise of alternate donors has further muddied the soft power equation. As a legal matter, U.S. aid has been defended with reference to liberal norms—democracy, human rights, accountability. By contrast, China and Russia present models of aid that are quicker, less conditional and frequently more compatible with the priorities of authoritarian or hybrid governments.

This difference unsettles the notion that soft power is equivalent to Western liberalism. As Hartig (2016) and Melissen (2005) argued, soft power is not value-neutral; it is rather infused with competing narratives of legitimacy and development. What makes Chinese and Russian assistance so attractive to many Global South states is not merely the material resources but the independence it offers— independence that is most keenly sought in the postcolonial and post-intervention worlds.

### **Strategic Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy**

The emergence of such alternative benefactors demands that the U.S. develop a coherent strategy for interacting with the rest of the world. It no longer has the luxury of relying on its old influence or of taking for granted that liberal ideas will resonate universally. To be competitive in this crowded field of global development, the U.S. will need to not only recapture lost ground in aid commitments, but also recalibrate its approach—highlighting partnership, local ownership, transparency and accountability as central tenets to soft power assets if it wants to be a player in the global competition of development cooperation.

## **8. Case Study: The U.S. Response to the 2025 Myanmar Earthquake**

One of them hit central Myanmar on 28 March 2025, killing over 3500 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless. This disaster led to a massive breakdown of infrastructure, far beyond what the country could handle. In the seven immediate hours following the disaster, according to (Anadolu, 2025; Nukta, 2025), a China-based consortium deployed more than 30 search-and-rescue teams into action alongside mobile-field-hospitals containing emergency engineers including high volume medical units and necessities.

In contrast, the US response was remarkably muted. Although USAID did pledge an initial \$2 million grant, later increased to \$9 million, it mostly channeled the money through local non-governmental organizations (Development Aid, 2025).

None of the Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs), a signature of previous U.S. interventions, were sent. An initial assessment team from USAID only. Unlike previous U.S. responses to Asian disasters, like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami or the 2015 Nepal earthquake, boaste large, high-visibility deployments, this was a dramatic departure (Landay & Psaledakis, 2025).

**Linking Policy to Response: Trump-Era Legacies and Executive Constraints:** It follows Trump-era (2017-2021) and subsequent policies by positioning itself as a less aggressive actor than the U.S., which is no longer entirely ill-advised. As was noted in Section 5, Trump-era intentions to gobble up to 30% off the State Department and USAID budgets debilitated ability for rapid response abroad (Ingram, 2025). Most of these cuts targeted the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), with reductions in staff, regional contingency hub closures, and smaller prepositioned emergency stockpiles. While not all the proposed cuts went through, the chronic year-in and year-out budget pressure led ultimately to a sustained erosion in USAID’s ability to be operationally prepared.

But the single most immediate reason there was a 2025 Myanmar response gap is Executive Order 14169, issued on January 20, 2025. It lifted an immediate 90-day hold on all overseas development and humanitarian programs while the administration undergoes a “strategic alignment review.” Its aim was to shift project selection more in favor of narrowly defined U.S. interests, and away from regions “not important to national security. The earthquake hit only weeks after 39 of 40 aid projects were suspended in Myanmar (Progressive Voice Myanmar, 2025). These will include disaster response readiness, health infrastructure and capacity building in civil society that could have made a big difference in reducing the impact of the crisis.

The Executive Order also prohibited the disbursal of any new funding during this time of review, quite literally forcing USAID to have one or both hands tied behind their backs at a time when they are needed more than ever. However, leaks of internal memoranda showed that rapid DART deployments were stymied at the National Security Council level due to lack of budget authority and “clear strategic benefit” in Southeast Asia (The Guardian, 2025; AP News, 2025).

**Erosion of Leadership and Strategic Visibility:** The juxtaposition of U.S. and Chinese responses drew comments around the world on how the lay of the land was changing for humanitarian soft power. The speed by which China was able to get its version of state-managed humanitarian assistance into the field, was a demonstration not just of logistical prowess, but regional stabilizing intent. There were reports and complaints in the Southeast Asian media and diplomatic circles that the United States seemed to be invisible, that Washington was pulling out of its long-held position as global humanitarian leader (Nukta, 2025). Aid is never purely altruistic—but its symbolic importance can be just as much about visibility, timeliness and intention. The U.S. failure to act decisively in this case ultimately eroded perceptions of its soft power legitimacy and created a void increasingly

filled by China.

This marked the crystallization of a larger story: that an “America First” doctrine that cuts foreign aid funding and passes off responsibility for international assistance has both hollowed out America’s ability to assist others and our standing as a global humanitarian leader. While previous administrations had used humanitarian response as the nation’s platform for modeling values-based leadership, this was not the case with the 2025 Myanmar earthquake—which dramatically demonstrated both the operational and reputational costs of an aid retrenchment.

## 9. International Responsibility: A Call for Global Engagement and Accountability

Current trends within international development rhetoric acknowledge the need for developing self-reliance on the part of recipients of aid. The United States’ Agency for International Development (USAID) has codified this approach in its “Journey to Self-Reliance” framework, which emphasizes local capacity building, institutional strengthening and governance reform. The primary aim of the framework is to support countries on their journey to become successful development partners, rather than aid recipients (USAID, n.d.).

The turn is based on findings that long term development results are more likely to occur when they are owned by the nation and are internally accountable (OECD, 2022, pp. 5-7). Nations with robust domestic systems are better able to handle global emergencies like pandemics or climate-induced disasters, reducing their reliance on erratic foreign aid. As USAID puts it so well: “Real development is when the country runs its own show. “The purpose of aid is not to give aid, but to end need for aid” (USAID, n.d.).

Central to the paradigm is the encouragement of meaningful domestic accountability. Brinkerhoff (2004) underlines that features such as participatory governance, freedom of the press and a vibrant civil society are indispensable for responsible leadership and effective aid use: “Domestic accountability mechanisms...are critical to ensure responsible leadership and aid use” (p. 250). And donors themselves are demanding accountability, results and mutual accountability frameworks before making funds available. Such principles are spelled out in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Busan Partnership Agreement (OECD, 2011, p. 10). “Citizen should be the locus of development accountability frameworks,” Brinkerhoff adds. It is “[t]he capacity to exact from their leaders an accounting of their stewardship (that) is a prerequisite for effective aid” (2003, p. 253).

Current aid strategies are increasingly moving from dependency-creating models to empowerment frameworks. Instead of being part of, or used for, geopolitical purposes, aid is increasingly recognized as an empowering method to foster local leadership, innovation and sustainability. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) conceptualizes empowerment in terms of increasing the ability “to

make choices, and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes” (UNDP, 2022, p. 17). Joseph Nye reaffirms this, stating, “The most potent way to exercise soft power is not to impose values or proselytize, but rather to place others in a position to live up or down to certain standards on their own” (Nye, 2004, p. 111). This emergent model favours multilateral collective approaches and more mutual interdependencies, rather than unilateral aid relationships.

*“The shift from charity to empowerment is essential to rebuild trust in international cooperation and to prevent aid fatigue” (UNDP, 2022, p. 19).*

## 10. Implications for U.S. Leadership in the 21st Century

**The U.S. as a Global Partner, not a Savior:** The United States would not anymore be able to maintain its post-Cold War self-proclamation as the “indispensable power” or “savior of the world” per se, in the new world order, and would acknowledge model of shared global leadership. The U.S. should not seek to lead development efforts but instead should get involved as a partner to encourage regional leadership and capacity building and to join multilateral efforts (Ingram, 2021). This strategy reflects a shift from top-down aid delivery toward co-created development, which enhances legitimacy and sustainability.

Power in the 21st century, according to Joseph Nye (2004) is not the exclusive province of brute force, but of “soft power,” the power of attraction and cooperation, to get what you want other countries to want (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Now that there is more of a decentralized world with the rise of regional powers, maintaining influence through strategic partnerships and diplomacy, not just unilateral aid, is the key to maintaining American power. The U.S. can follow this example and maintain leadership and respect for the volition of local actors (Nye, 2004, pp. 11-12).

**Reimagining Global Governance:** Rather than withdraw from global responsibilities, or try to dictate to the world, the United States needs to take the lead in reinventing governance structures that are more appropriate for the 21st century —ones that reflect multipolar realities and diverse regional voices (Brown, 2023). This means not only going back to the multilateral but reforming multilateral institutions such as United Nations, World Health Organisation, World Bank, so that representation and inclusivity are increased.

Nye (2004) has posited that “the paradox of American power...is that although the U.S. is dominant in military terms, it cannot achieve all of its goals alone in a globalized world” (Nye 2004, p. 3). Imperfect as it is, though, multilateralism is crucial for dealing with transnational challenges, including pandemics, climate change and cybersecurity. Even more positively, collective governance enhances U.S. legitimacy abroad and reinforces its normative leadership, especially when Washington sets the example (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 93-95).

**Strategic Engagement in a Multipolar World:** The Evolving World order is creating new power centers such as China, India and regional blocs in Africa and Latin America, which undermine U.S. influence, to assert American leadership, U.S.

must re-balance its engagement with emerging power centers. Instead of trying to prevent the ascent of these actors, US policy should focus on constructive engagement—via strategic partnership, trade diplomacy, and soft power projects (Bou Serhal & Alkhaja, 2024).

This practice parallels Nye's (2004) notion of "smart power"—the integration of hard and soft power approaches with an eye toward different settings (p. 31). It's no small irony, though, that there is a huge soft power market to and from these countries that has atrophied in recent years, in direct proportion to our military activities. The U.S. can harness military alliances (NATO, AUKUS) and non-military tools (educational exchange, cultural diplomacy, and development finance) to project power and influence globally in ways that ensure the rest of the world enjoys peace and shared prosperity (Nye, 2004).

## 11. Recommendations

In an age of geopolitical competition and evolving norms in development, it is time to reimagine U.S. development assistance and its role in global leadership. Taking into account the results of this study, the following strategic directions are recommended:

### 1) Reinvest in Multilateralism and Global Norms

The U.S. needs to re-engage with multilateral organizations like the United Nations, the World Health Organization and global climate accords. As Ikenberry (2011) argues, entwining U.S. power within international institutions validates that power, and facilitates cooperation. This recommitment must be one of financial investment and of regular and constant diplomacy.

### 2) Prioritize Aid Effectiveness and Local Ownership

The nature of foreign aid has to move from a donor-driven agenda to a partnership model. U.S. programs—which must be better designed, with more input from local governments, civil society and the communities they serve, to make sure aid is building long-term capacity, and not dependence. This fits within USAID's "Journey to Self-Reliance" framework and enhances soft power by building trust and mutual respect.

### 3) Expand Soft Power Tools Beyond Aid

Soft power is not synonymous with foreign aid alone. Public diplomacy tools, like the Fulbright Program, Peace Corps, American Spaces, and cultural diplomacy efforts, should be scaled up. These instruments solidify people-to-people connections, advance democratic values, and maintain influence even in countries where direct aid might not be possible.

### 4) Counter Alternative Donors with Transparency and Accountability

Instead of replicating China or Russia's model of aid, the U.S. needs to make itself stand out. by transparency, governance benchmarks and ethical standards themselves. Transparency is Key Clear, data-driven reporting as well as anti-corruption safeguards can enhance the credibility of U.S. assistance and ensure that the U.S. remains true to global development norms.

### 5) Adapt to Multipolarity with Strategic Flexibility

In a more inclusive world, in which power is more diffuse, the U.S. should pursue a strategy of smart power containing the elements of hard tools of power with the soft instruments of power conditioned to a specific context (Nye, 2004). This includes between bilateral partners and regional allies and knowing when to lead or facilitate and when to allow local or regional actions to lead the way.

## 12. Conclusion

This paper has considered the erosion of U.S. soft power in the context of reduced foreign aid, especially but not exclusively during the Trump presidency. It said soft power doesn't just drain away with detachment: it is challenged, rebranded and remoulded by state action and in the way the world sees. The symbolic cost of American aid withdrawal is starker in the case of the 2025 Myanmar earthquake, particularly in view of China's aggressive humanitarian engagement.

The U.S., as the global development landscape becomes more competitive, will need to reassess its position in response. It can no longer simply play the moral authority card but influence will have to be leveraged through credence, coherence and pragmatic adherence to global facts and needs. The ascendancy of alternative donors such as China and Russia challenges the assumption that liberal values have universal appeal—and underscores the need to offer practical, respectful, and sustainable partnerships of our own.

In the end, it's not how much aid the United States offers that will count as soft power in the 21st century, but how it engages: with humility, transparency and a sense of shared responsibility. As Nye points out, the adage that “the best propaganda is no propaganda, but a well-functioning society” still holds (Nye, 2004, p. 107). U.S. foreign policy must match the ideals that it purports to project, then, or it can forget about retaining its status as a global leader in a multipolar world.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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