

Why Germany should bolster security beyond defense amidst Trump's global impact

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IN A NUTSHELL

- The Trump administration's impact on global security is not limited to military and defense. Rather, the U.S. withdrawal from development and democracy support poses a threat to human security, sustainable peace, and, in the end, German security interest. This needs to be mitigated with substantial political will and financial backing by Germany and the EU.
- Investing in mechanisms that address root causes for conflict and instability comes down to smart policymaking. Not doing so will impair security and expose Europe to greater risks, becoming less manageable and compounding over time.
- As a major global donor of development assistance, Germany should take a leading role by shaping and resourcing the creation of a less vulnerable and more sustainable global system of international cooperation, centering feminist and DEI approaches.
- Germany should strengthen multilateral platforms and build new alliances beyond the EU with like-minded countries and civil society organizations in order to build back better.
- An EU emergency funding program has to be installed, allowing resources to reach critical grassroots and women-led civil society organizations in a fast and flexible manner. When negotiating future financial frameworks on national and EU-level, Germany should equally prioritize non-military investments to security.

Within its first three months in office, the new Trump administration has caused an upheaval for global peace and security, effectively dismantling the post-World War II international order. The EU and Ukraine have been antagonized, the transatlantic security alliance disrupted, and multilateral institutions and frameworks weakened – all set against the backdrop of an ever more aggressively positioned Russia and a global rise of authoritarianism. The context rightly calls for a reckoning with Germany's security policy. However, while Berlin, Brussels, and other European capitals are bolstering their defense capabilities, the almost complete U.S. withdrawal from global development and democracy support has not nearly been met with the same political vigor.

Yet it is crucial to understand the scope of Trump administration's impact on global peace and security beyond just defense; its decision on ↪ January 20 to first freeze and then cut the overwhelming majority of its foreign assistance programming has led to an unfolding global crisis of development, human rights, and civic space. If not mitigated with substantial political will and financial backing, this will not only put socio-political gains achieved over the past decades at risk, but also fuel violent conflicts around the globe.

REIMAGINING SECURITY AFTER THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL

In order to highlight the Trump administration's impact on peace and security beyond stereotypical framings of *hard versus soft security*, the following analysis is guided by feminist thinking, which means it is looking at systemic causes for and structural approaches to preventing conflict and insecurity. It challenges the prevalent notion of security, reflects on power structures and agency, and critically assesses the distribution of resources.

SECURITY EXTENDS BEYOND DEFENSE AND THE MILITARY REALM – POLICIES SHOULD TOO.

The almost complete U.S. retreat from development aid challenges peace and security globally. Core elements of human security, from equality over health to climate resilience, are at risk of backsliding. Beyond the humanitarian sector, ↪ human rights and democracy programming is among the thematic areas most affected, while the complete defunding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) activities might be most disruptive. All of this compounds to severely undermining non-military elements to peace and security, ranging from democracy promotion or civilian peacebuilding to conflict prevention. Yet, precisely those elements address inequality and other structural drivers of conflict and insecurity. However, German and European reactions to U.S.' actions have largely focused on bolstering military capabilities while neglecting how non-military components are essential to ↪ German and European security in the long-term.

Zooming in on the drastic impact of the DEI defunding makes this very tangible; the defunding affects gender transformational work, women's rights or inclusion projects, and even other cross-cutting priorities such as environmental justice. In effect, many programs addressing conflict-related sexual violence, economic or political empowerment, equal participation, or access to resources, will cease to exist, putting decades of political and societal gains at risk. This dangerously plays into a global pushback against gender equality and social justice, which are ↪ proven key factors for peace, stability, and economic development.

Another example are internet freedom and digital rights as overarching priorities enabling digital civic spaces, political and economic freedoms, and rights. It is a sphere

that has been hit by funding cuts, while the internet freedom community has been at the forefront of countering misinformation and disinformation worldwide – a risk identified as a top global risk for the second year in a row by the →WEF Global Risks Report 2025. This trend is exacerbated by big U.S. tech companies cutting down on their fact-checking programs at the same time and it compounds with the U.S. cuts severely →affecting democratic resilience programs, including within the EU.

CIVIL SOCIETY ON THE BRINK: HOW THE GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY CRISIS THREATENS (HUMAN) SECURITY

In countries affected by conflicts or crises, Germany relies on collaborating with civil society to advance peace and prevent conflict. In repressive contexts, civic expertise is crucial as source of information to conduct foresight, shape policies and programming, or work toward international accountability. The worldwide →trend of backsliding democracies underlines the importance of vivid civic spaces for democracy globally.

Yet →72% to →over 90% of civil society organizations globally have been severely affected by the U.S. funding freeze. It has directly and indirectly →further limited an already →closing civic space on a global scale, due to backlash in domestic and global contexts, and strategic uncertainty in combination with existential organizational challenges. An →overwhelming majority of organizations have not been able to identify new funding sources, and most organizations had to lay off or furlough staff. Moreover, the harmful impact extends to individuals and civic actors on the forefront of human rights or peace initiatives who have been put at great personal risk while support systems, from psycho-social support to →physical safe spaces, have collapsed.

The defunding of *DEI* programming has disproportionately hit →structurally excluded communities and actors, both directly through dried up resources and indirectly by censoring or self-censoring its actors. These dynamics exacerbate the marginalization of those perspectives and render inclusive approaches to conflict resolution even more challenging. Yet, it is diverse and inclusive processes that produce →longer lasting and more stable results. It is often local and grassroots initiatives driven by women who contribute to locally owned and civilian-led conflict prevention or resolution. The described effects will further limit their agency. On a bigger scale, this will fuel a trend of power play and nation states brokering stability, disregarding the needs of civilians affected by conflict, with examples ranging from Ukraine to Palestine.

PRIORITIZING DEFENSE SPENDING WITHOUT INVESTING IN DEVELOPMENT WILL HAVE DESTABILIZING EFFECTS

Global development assistance stands at a pivotal moment. The U.S. used to dominate international aid, contributing →approximately 40% of global development spending. This has created a dangerous systemic vulnerability, as the world experiences destabilization of the international development framework due to shifting U.S. priorities. Moreover, the timing is particularly troubling, because current trends suggest fiscal constraints around defense-centric approaches across Europe. Many European governments, including →Germany, have already implemented →steep cuts in development assistance, humanitarian aid, and diplomacy over the past years. Events in the past months, however, have accelerated this dynamic and fueled a pronounced framing around national interest and military spending. The Netherlands, for example, reduced →NGO funding by over 70% and →ended gender equality funding altogether, framing it as taking a “Netherlands first” approach. The UK cut aid spending by →40%, explicitly redirecting funds from non-military security to →defense spending.

In Germany, the →coalition treaty of the new government refers to a historic context and threat level and describes the goal of German foreign and security policy as living in peace, freedom, and security. But the treaty defines deterrence and defense capability as guiding principle to achieve this. And while they may be part of mitigating the threat level, a sole focus on defense disregarding development spending will be insufficient.

While an amendment of the constitution has practically secured future defense spending, including cyber defense, civil protection, and support for states attacked in violation of international law, future investments into diplomacy and development, such as civil society funding and democracy support, are subject to scrutiny. The coalition agreement already points to the necessity to reasonably reduce the quota for official development assistance (ODA quota) in light of scarce financial resources. Given the urgency and volatility of the current situation, this risks adding more political uncertainty and fueling the challenges for global civic space as described above.

NAVIGATING THE VOID: PRIORITIES IN THE WAKE OF THE U.S. RETREAT FROM GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

The substantial reduction in the U.S. foreign assistance has created a critical void in non-military investments in peace and security. As the U.S.' withdrawal proceeds, Germany faces a strategic choice. Nevertheless, even at times of scarce resources, investing in security cannot be limited to bolstering defense spending. To the contrary, investing in mechanisms that address root causes for conflict and instability comes down to smart policymaking. Not doing so will impair security and expose Europe to greater risks, becoming less manageable and compounding over time. While it will hardly be possible to fully compensate for the U.S. retreat, both immediate and strategic actions and choices are required to mitigate the harmful impacts and work toward systemic changes at the same time.

Importantly, **urgent emergency programming** is needed to address immediate harm. Existing emergency funding instruments are small-scale and not adequate to the scope and volatility of the situation. Thus, additional flexible, quick-to-deploy funding should consider individual and organizational needs to protect women and human rights defenders globally, especially where support structures are crumbling, to preserve critical organizations, capabilities, and networks. Special emphasis should be put on those structurally excluded communities that are disproportionately affected by DEI defunding. This emergency scheme could be structured as an EU emergency funding instrument, but include partnering with like-minded countries beyond the EU like the UK, Norway, Switzerland, and Canada, to increase impact and avoid duplicating structures. It may build on existing mechanisms like the ↪ EU Trust Funds or bolstering the ↪ UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund. The ↪ French Feminist Diplomacy Fund may serve as a good practice example.

At the same time, long-term strategic responses that work toward structural changes should be developed – guided by feminist thinking and informed by critical recommendations by feminist civil society around the globe. Those include:

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A RECKONING WITH THE REALIZATION THAT DEFENSE-ONLY APPROACHES ULTIMATELY UNDERMINE SECURITY.

Germany should regard democracy and human rights support as necessary investments into security. Concretely, these should be considered as priorities when negotiating financial frameworks for the years to come, i.e. for a new federal budget, but also looking at EU level and the ↪ road to the next EU multiannual financial framework. This also includes a commitment to intersectional justice as a cross-cutting priority and component of addressing inequality as a fundamental cause of conflict and insecurity. Doing so could strengthen support for partners at different levels of agency, starting with crucial local and regional conflict resolution and judicial mechanisms, on top of much needed international law and judicial instruments.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO BUILD BACK BETTER.

This starts with strengthening global civil society as partners and experts. Priorities and a long-term structured approach responding to this crisis of global civic space should be developed in partnership with global civil society. In addition, Germany would be well-advised to maintain multilateral platforms, strengthen existing and build new alliances with like-minded countries, such as Spain, France, Colombia, Chile, or South Africa, to uphold mechanisms for multilateral cooperation on the global funding crisis. This can include funding specific convenings, such as the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville in June 2025. It could also be an opportunity to revive – or at least not retreat from – the Feminist Foreign Policy Plus (FFP+) group, which operates largely at UN-level as a platform for countries with feminist-inspired policies. Complementary to multilateral spaces, exploring alliances beyond national contexts could be another option. Partnerships with actors at city and sub-national level might create unexpected synergies, regional platforms, and new alliances.

FUNDING STRUCTURES THAT ARE BASED ON FEMINIST LEARNINGS AND PRINCIPLES.

A German response should be based on intersectionality, and double down on investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Gender equality, diversity and inclusion remain the highest impact factors for sustainable peace and development. Investing in these priorities is as much a human rights obligation as it is strategic, smart, and resource efficient. With the guidelines for feminist foreign policy and the strategy for feminist development policy, the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation have acknowledged the need to develop funding instruments funding from feminist perspectives, including gender budgeting goals regarding gender aware and gender transformative budgeting goals. The incoming government should build on critical learnings and newly developed practices – which hold true despite ↔ shifting political positioning of governing parties.

BUILDING ON COMMITMENTS AND ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY.

Germany has been the second-largest donor for development and, given U.S.' cuts, may soon take the lead globally. This carries a responsibility to build on past commitments. At this critical juncture, it is essential not to exacerbate political uncertainty, or the erosion of resources and governmental partners. Any reduction or major restructuring of humanitarian or stabilization programs between the BMZ and the Federal Foreign Office would likely shift focus to navigating domestic administrative challenges, rather than addressing international needs. Now is not the time for German foreign assistance programming to be inward-focused. Similarly, reducing the German ODA-quota would ultimately harm German and European security interests.

**CRITICALLY REFLECTING ON
GLOBAL ASYMMETRIES.**

While these recommendations provide a starting point for preserving global civic space as a crucial element to peace and security, these steps should be accompanied by a critical reflection on the asymmetries within the global order. Feminist funds, particularly those based in or operating within the Global South, call for using this destructive moment as an opportunity to rebuild differently—moving beyond a postcolonial aid system that reinforces dependencies and vulnerabilities. Germany could support such a process by providing resources for ⇒ convenings that facilitate conceptualization and the building of civic alliances. At bi- and multilateral level, intersectional justice could guide the development of different relationships with countries in the Global South, which in turn could also safeguard strategic interests of Germany and Europe.