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Trump's 'America First' Agenda on the Move

The Trump administration on 25 January 2025 froze all foreign assistance funding programmes from the US State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The decision will have an impact on humanitarian aid, global health and military assistance programmes. Emergency food assistance and military financing for Israel and Egypt have been exempted. The administration stated that the freeze will be in place till a review is done of all foreign assistance programmes to ensure that they align with Trump's foreign policy agenda, which emphasises an 'America First' approach.

The US also initiated the process of withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change with President Trump signing an Executive Order (EO) to start the withdrawal process, citing potential economic damage and unfair burdens. Trump also signed an EO on his very first day in office withdrawing from the World Health Organisation (WHO). The order said the reasons for withdrawing were WHO's "mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic", "failure to adopt urgently needed reforms", "inability to demonstrate independence from the inappropriate political influence of WHO member states" and for continued demand of "unfairly onerous payments from the United States."

Trump also issued a memorandum outlining his 'America First Trade Policy', which aims to address perceived imbalances in trade relationships, particularly with China. The memorandum directed federal agencies to evaluate trade policies and propose measures to rectify trade deficits, including the possibility of imposing tariffs on imports from countries deemed to be engaging in unfair trade practices. While Canada, Mexico and China had been repeatedly warned that they would be hit with tariffs for a variety of reasons, Colombia was the first country which faced tariff sanctions of 25 per cent in retaliation for rejecting illegal immigrants deported by the Trump Administration.



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One of Trump's major poll planks related to curbing illegal immigration. Trump declared a national emergency at the border with Mexico, designating human trafficking cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations, tasked the military with border enforcement, shut down asylum and refugee admissions and ended birth right citizenship for American-born children of illegal migrants and children of parents on work, study and other temporary visas.

The international community has reacted with concern to the recent shifts in US foreign policy. The United Nations Secretary-General has called for the US to reconsider its freeze on foreign aid. The implications of Trump's foreign policy changes extend beyond immediate aid concerns. Western allies have reacted with consternation as the contours of Trump's isolationist foreign policy become clearer through his pronouncements and that of his top foreign policy officials.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, in the course of his nomination hearing in the Senate, stated that America had replaced "a foreign policy that served the national interest" with "one that served the 'liberal world order'" further stating that "the postwar global order is not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us." Rubio's statements reflect a broader strategy to realign U.S. foreign policy away from multilateral engagements and towards a more unilateral approach that emphasises direct benefits to the United States.

Analysts warn that a more isolationist US stance could embolden adversaries and destabilize regions that rely on American support for security and development. The potential withdrawal from international agreements could also undermine global efforts to address pressing issues such as climate change and public health.

These developments reflect a return to the 'America First' doctrine, which prioritises domestic concerns over international commitments. As the administration moves forward, the implications of these changes will likely resonate across the globe, affecting not only US relations with allies and adversaries but also the well-being of millions who depend on American support for humanitarian assistance and development.

The Trump Administration and North Korea

President Donald Trump, in an interview with Fox News on 23 January, stated that he will reach out to the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Trump's remarks increased the possibilities for a new round of 'summit diplomacy' between the United States and North Korea. Soon after taking oath as the 47th President of the United States on 20 January 2025, Trump acknowledged that North Korea is a "nuclear power". While his remarks have raised concerns in South Korea, Trump administration officials have played down any major shift in America's policy towards the North Korean nuclear weapons programme. On 29 January 2025, South Korean media reports noted that Trump would pursue "complete denuclearisation of North Korea".



The Kim Jong-un regime, meanwhile, has continued to bolster its nuclear and missile capabilities. Just two weeks ahead of Trump's inauguration, North Korea tested a hypersonic missile. According to North Korean media reports, Pyongyang tested a "new-type intermediate-range hypersonic ballistic missile" on 6 January 2025. Apparently, this North Korean hypersonic missile has the capability to fly at a speed twelve times that of sound, and could hit any target at a distance of 1,500 kilometres. It was reported that this missile was made up of advanced composite carbon fibre substance and has an improved guidance control mechanism.

Five days after Trump's inauguration, North Korea fired another advanced "sea (underwater)-to-surface strategic cruise guided weapons" on 25 January 2025. Later, on 29 January 2025, the North Korean media reported on the visit of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to a weapons-grade nuclear-material production site. Kim applauded the achievements made by the scientists, workers and technicians, and encouraged them to bolster "the nuclear shield of the country". The release of the photos by the North Korean regime regarding the visit of Kim Jong-un to the secret nuclear-material production base was probably a signal to the Trump administration that Pyongyang would not denuclearise and surrender its nuclear weapons capabilities.

The Trump administration will have to deal with North Korea in the backdrop of Pyongyang's growing military-technology collaboration with Moscow. According to reports, the North Korean regime has dispatched thousands of troops and tonnes of weapons to support Russia's war against Ukraine. In June 2024, North Korea and Russia established a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', which is a mutual defence treaty between these two countries. This agreement also has provisions for increased collaboration in the fields of nuclear and military technologies.

The former Biden administration had raised alarms over the possible transfer of advanced technologies from Russia to North Korea. As a response to the growing military engagement between Russia and North Korea, the Biden administration had enhanced cooperation with South Korea and Japan. Notably, the US, South Korea and Japan established a 'Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework' in 2024, and they undertook various trilateral military exercises.

Trump's remarks and his views on trade have caused apprehensions in Seoul. South Koreans are also concerned that a re-start of possible "direct diplomacy" with Kim Jong-un may lead to marginalisation of Seoul's security interests. The North Korean regime has, however, not as yet showed any enthusiasm for Trump's desire to begin negotiations with Pyongyang. According to some analysts, North Korea's closer military and economic ties with Russia has possibly dwindled Pyongyang's interest in responding to overtures from the Trump administration. The failure of North Korea's efforts for engagement with the first Trump administration has also probably led to pessimism in Pyongyang regarding the second Trump administration.

The relationship between the US and North Korea remains strained. The North Korean Foreign Ministry vehemently criticised the *Ssangmae* joint air exercise by the US and South Korea which took place during 21-24 January 2025 at the Wonju air force base in South Korea, calling it a "serious military provocation". In January 2025, North Korea also criticized Japan for establishing a full-time mission at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). According to a North Korean international security analyst, Japan has been enhancing its defence capabilities by buying weapons from the United States, and has been

strengthening its military partnership with the NATO, which has caused “new instability to the regional situation” in Asia-Pacific. Given the above dynamics, it appears that there would not be any significant geo-political shift in the Northeast Asian region under the second Donald Trump administration in the near future.

Regional Cooperation Grows to Tackle Online Scams in Southeast Asia

Online scamming in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China, has grown into a highly sophisticated transnational crime network, generating an estimated \$64 billion annually. This illicit industry thrives on a foundation of weak governance, systemic corruption, and the exploitation of advanced technologies. Recognizing the magnitude of this threat, six nations along the Mekong River — China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam — have intensified efforts to combat online scamming, human trafficking, and related transnational crimes.

Online scammers use forced labour at the core of their operations. Thousands of individuals are coerced into executing schemes that target victims worldwide. The profitability and scale of these operations are further amplified by their connections to powerful elites and their ability to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of digital and financial technology. Key hubs for these operations are scam compounds located in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos, which are often militarized and operate with the backing of influential societal figures and sometimes also include government and military officials. The criminal networks running these operations forge alliances with local elites, offering financial incentives and sharing profits to secure their protection. Such alliances make these enclaves virtually untouchable, enabling them to flourish even in the face of international scrutiny.

The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism (LMCM) held a meeting in January 2025 in Kunming, the capital of China’s Yunnan Province. Law enforcement authorities from the six member states, officials from the United Nations, and other regional agencies participated. The LMCM was established in 2016 to foster regional development. Its recent focus on addressing transnational crime highlights the acknowledgement of urgent need to deal with this issue.



The Kunming meeting marked a crucial step toward enhancing regional cooperation, launching targeted operations, and adopting stringent measures to dismantle criminal networks. One of the LMCM's primary goals is to combat

telecom fraud, a major driver of online scamming and its associated derivative crimes. This initiative is particularly critical given the alarming rise of industrial-scale scamming operations in the region. Poorly regulated areas in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have become epicentres of these activities, with scam compounds often embedded in special economic zones or other territories with limited oversight.

The effectiveness of these collaborative efforts is evident in operations like ‘Operation Seagull’, conducted from August to December 2024. This joint initiative led to the dismantling of 160 telecom fraud operations, the arrest of over 70,000 individuals, and the rescue of 160 victims. Such results underscore the scale of the problem and the need for sustained, coordinated action to address it.

Victims of online scams are often drawn in through fraudulent online advertisements promising lucrative employment opportunities. The exploitation extends beyond forced labourers. Millions of individuals worldwide suffer financial and emotional harm as scam targets, with some losing their life savings and experiencing severe psychological trauma. Cases of suicide have also been reported.

The military coup in Myanmar in 2021 exacerbated the issue, allowing scam operations and their associated enclaves to proliferate. Major hubs include Cambodian cities such as Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville, as well as the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos. These regions, characterized by weak governance and rampant corruption, provide an ideal environment for scam operations. Militarized compounds in these areas offer criminal networks protection and operational cover, further complicating efforts to disrupt their activities. According to a May 2024 report by the United States Institute of Peace, over 300,000 individuals are trafficked into forced labour in scam operations across Southeast Asia. This staggering figure is compounded by the lack of legal frameworks to combat forced labour in nearly 30 per cent of surveyed countries.

Trafficking networks have also adopted increasingly sophisticated methods, leveraging digital tools to shield their operations, launder proceeds, and evade detection. These tools allow criminal organizations to expand their reach and adapt to enforcement efforts, posing a growing threat to global security. Along with the Mekong River basin region, the Philippines has also been part of the proliferation of online scams. In the Philippines, the issue has escalated following the COVID-19 pandemic. These illicit operations often function alongside legal gambling businesses.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime is assisting regional countries in combating these criminal networks. Cooperation against online scamming and transnational crime networks in Southeast Asia also involves ASEAN-led initiatives but ASEAN's efforts to curb online scams are hindered by limited resources in key member states, along with slow consensus-driven decision-making. Fragmented coordination and legal gaps further enable transnational scam networks to thrive.