

Essay

STRATEGIC DISENGAGEMENT & THE 'AMERICA FIRST' DOCTRINE

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INTRODUCTION

Under President Trump's 'America First' doctrine, the United States (US) has not left the global order; Washington has learned that the threat of leaving is sometimes more conducive than staying. The US is not simply withdrawing from multilateralism, it is increasingly bargaining through absence. It is re-pricing cooperation, reducing external constraints, and renegotiating the terms of global governance. Washington's recent behavior toward multilateral institutions is not an episodic withdrawal, it constitutes a strategic repertoire used to renegotiate the terms of international cooperation. Across different domains, from aid delivery to global public goods and international legal accountability, the US is increasingly signaling that its institutional participation is contingent, not durable. The immediate effects are disruption and uncertainty in the international system; the deeper consequence is a move toward conditional, opt-in multilateralism.

A FOUR-INSTRUMENT FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING US STRATEGIC DISENGAGEMENT

The US' strategic disengagement from multilateral institutions is less about withdrawing from the world than about repricing constraint: by deploying different instruments, it changes what multilateral institutions and partner states must pay – politically, financially, operationally – to keep the US engaged on existing terms, while expanding Washington's room to maneuver.

Existing research differentiates disengagement, which is deliberate and paced, from isolationism, which is not.¹ State behavior runs along a spectrum from criticism through obstruction and extortion to exit, and governments may combine these practices in nonlinear and dynamic ways.² The framework below conceptualizes four instruments along that spectrum. Each instrument recalibrates a distinct cost of constraint and alters the bargaining landscape between the US, multilateral institutions, and partner states.

Fiscal leverage & burden shifting

Arguably the most widely understood instrument is disengagement through fiscal leverage and burden shifting. Through this mechanism, the US threatens to withhold funding, reduce assessed contributions, or demand revised cost-sharing as the explicit price of continued engagement. The cost of constraining the US is direct. For other countries, US financial disengagement increases their fiscal burdens of participating in institutions and maintaining alliances and raises the opportunity costs of forward financial commitments which in turn constrain domestic appropriations. The bargaining

effect of US financial leverage is to shift negotiations toward transactional deal-making involving side-payments, institutional reforms, or partner concessions that deliberation alone could not secure.

This instrument is particularly effective where institutions are heavily US-funded and lack credible alternative revenue sources. In such cases, the threat of withdrawal is not merely symbolic but structurally disabling.³ The freeze and subsequent review of USAID disbursements and US demands for allies to increase their NATO defense spending exemplify fiscal leverage deployed simultaneously across humanitarian and security domains.

Delegitimization & sovereignty framing

Secondly, one of the portfolio's lowest-cost and often the very first instrument deployed is disengagement through delegitimization and sovereignty framing. This mechanism is inherently discursive whereby multilateral institutions and alliance commitments are publicly reframed as sources of unfair constraint. The government condemns the perceived free-riding of partners and criticizes deals for lacking adequate attention to US interests. At the same time, US participation is recoded as conditional and transactional rather than categorical and identity-defining. The cost of constraint it targets is not material but political: By pre-emptively conditioning audiences to view institutions as adversarial rather than constitutive, the instrument lowers the domestic political price of non-cooperation and increases the legitimacy of withholding support.⁴ Its bargaining effect is therefore preparatory: It does not in and of itself alter any commitment, but it opens the domestic political space in which tougher instruments become viable.

Sustained rhetoric by the US executive portraying the World Health Organization (WHO) as a vector of foreign influence⁵ and the World Trade Organization's (WTO) dispute-settlement system as structurally biased against the US⁶ illustrates this instrument at work. Last year, President Trump proclaimed that the withdrawal from over 30 UN organizations would "end American taxpayer funding and involvement in entities that advance globalist agendas", and were part of "putting America First on the global stage."⁷ While aimed at its domestic audience, the US rhetoric signals to international interlocutors that the terms of engagement can always be opened up for re-negotiation. It also reframes Washington's view of its own sovereignty across the global stage. Alleged biases and unfavorable conditions to the US are not only delegitimized but are framed as sovereignty concerns.

Undermining domestic institutions

Thirdly, disengagement occurs increasingly through the hollowing out of domestic institutions, and the repurposing and disruption of administrative mandates. Here, the

US targets the domestic infrastructure that makes compliance with international norms and multilateral institutions possible at all. This mechanism involves altering agency mandates, restructuring or defunding the implementing bodies through which multilateral commitments are carried out, and redirecting authority away from multilateral venues toward executive channels with fewer institutionalized constraints. The effect is a form of functional exit. Here, the US preserves formal treaty membership and avoids the diplomatic costs of withdrawal, all while systematically dismantling its bureaucratic capacity to uphold multilateral commitments – staffed expertise, data-sharing arrangements, procurement pipelines, and long-horizon planning cycles. Unlike obstruction, which can in principle be reversed by a change in political will, the hollowing out of agencies degrades human capital and institutional memory in ways that are slow and costly to rebuild.

At the system level, this instrument attacks the multilateral order's infrastructure of routine coordination. The reorganization of USAID, the drawdown of State Department personnel, and the restructuring of interagency coordination mechanisms for international climate and health commitments illustrate how administrative disruption can produce durable functional disengagement without a single formal act of withdrawal.

Institutional bypass & unilateral substitution

Lastly, through institutional bypass and unilateral substitution, the US can preserve its capacity for action outside the forums where its multilateral obligations would otherwise constrain it. This mechanism involves shifting problem-solving away from universal or rule-bound multilateral venues toward ad hoc coalitions or bilateral arrangements where the US can set terms more directly and where consensus requirements and diffused agenda control do not apply. The cost of constraint which is targeted is structural: By bypassing institutions, the US avoids consensus rules, mission creep, procedural delay, and requirement to accommodate divergent interests that characterize large multilateral institutions.

Taken together, these instruments of withdrawal – both formal and informal – are not deployed in strict sequence, nor do they operate in isolation. Moreover, the framework presented does not assume the instruments are without cost for the US, its allies, or multilateralism and the rules-based international order. For Washington, critics have argued that the accumulated price of structural US absence may exceed the cost of constraint that disengagement was designed to eliminate.⁸ That trade-off is not resolved by the framework, rather, it is made explicit.

WHEN BARGAINING-BY-ABSENCE WORKS – AND WHEN IT BACKFIRES

Withdrawal from multilateral institutions as a form of bargaining is not risk free. Strategic disengagement is a calculated gamble. Its effectiveness depends on whether

the US can convert its absence into concessions as opposed to causing thematic or wider self-isolation, affecting its influence, role, and relevance.

On the one hand, bargaining by absence tends to operate most effectively under the conditions of high dependence, low substitutability, and coalition discipline. When the targeted institution relies on the US for funding, capabilities, and legitimacy, and when other actors are incapable of filling the gap left by the US, the institution is more likely to make concessions. This constitutes a successful gamble where US withdrawal can be used as a tool to push for the reforms it champions.

For example, when the US withdrew from UNESCO in 1984, it contributed 25% of the agency's annual budget.⁹ Citing unrestrained budget growth and management issues,¹⁰ while simultaneously fearing its loss of influence following "Third World"¹¹ countries gaining a voting majority in the agency, Washington highlighted the need for a reassertion of US leadership in multilateral affairs, adequate US representation in secretariats, and a greater role of the private sector.¹² Leveraging its role as a financial heavyweight, the US was able to impose a legitimacy crisis on UNESCO. The US also benefited from low substitutability and coalition discipline. Rather than filling the financial vacuum left by the US, allies like the United Kingdom (UK) followed in its footsteps, and withdrew from UNESCO citing similar concerns of "inefficiency" and "over-politicisation".¹³ Ultimately, UNESCO imposed reforms, arguably caving to US demands by reducing its payroll from 4,000 to 2,000 employees to manage budgetary concerns and electing a secretariat willing to give into US concessions.¹⁴ The US consequently rejoined UNESCO in 2002.¹⁵

Yet, even when concessions are made, Washington has continued bargaining by absence, as in the most recent US withdrawal from UNESCO, scheduled to go into effect in December this year.¹⁶ In a 2025 press statement, the US cautioned against UNESCO's "globalist, ideological agenda" while underscoring how it is "at odds with our America First foreign policy."¹⁷ Yet, this time, UNESCO had prepared by offsetting US contributions to 8% so that the organization is "not considering any layoffs" in response to the US withdrawal.¹⁸ Evidently, the outcome and efficacy of strategic withdrawal is largely shaped by the conditions it operates within.

Disengagement tends to be ineffective under conditions of rapid substitution, accumulating reputation costs, and normative blowback. When others fill the gaps, the US' thematic bargaining power diminishes over time. Similarly, when withdrawal is frequent and unrestrained, reputational costs accumulate such that partners treat US commitments as unreliable. If they expect the US to withdraw, international organizations (IOs) and their member states become less willing to offer concessions and instead diversify partnerships to reduce dependency on US-anchored frameworks. Finally, through normative blowback, when a leading member like the US exits, rivals

can reframe the institution as flawed, illegitimate, and politicized to weaken its overall authority. Hence, US withdrawal becomes less valuable since the institution it is attempting to force concessions upon – and eventually potentially rejoin – suffers from a derogated status. Under these conditions, the US' coercive bargaining power shrivels, eroding the leverage of its absence.

Indeed, such logic is not only applicable in the context of established IOs but extends to emerging multilateral agreements as well. For example, in 2017, the US withdrew from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which aimed to strengthen trade relations with eleven US allies.¹⁹ President Trump articulated the need for better deals emphasizing US “financial well-being” and the preference towards “one-on-one (or bilateral)” relations.²⁰ However, the other eleven countries established the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) despite the absence of the US.²¹ The rapid substitution and the accumulating reputational damage to the US meant Washington was unable to nullify the trade agreement or extract major concessions through its withdrawal. Evidently, depending on structural conditions, perception by other stakeholders, and the extent of US influence, the success of bargaining by absence significantly varies.

CONSTRAINT AS THE CORE ISSUE: THE US & THE ICC

Avoiding international legal accountability

Of all the domains where US strategic disengagement manifests, international legal accountability provides one of the sharpest analytical lenses. Unlike the retrenchment debates surrounding NATO burden-sharing or multilateral development finance, the US posture toward the International Criminal Court (ICC) is inherently about constraint avoidance. The question here is not whether the Court is too expensive or inefficient, it is whether the US is willing to be bound by institutions whose authority it did not consent to, cannot veto, and cannot easily exit once engaged. This is the core tension that the ‘America First’ doctrine, in its various iterations, consistently resolves in favor of unilateralism.

The ICC case is analytically significant precisely because it disentangles general multilateral skepticism from a more principled form of resistance: the rejection of binding accountability mechanisms. Scholars have long noted that the US objection to the Court cuts deeper than institutional critique, preference, or questions of resource allocation.²² It is a claim about the fundamental architecture of the international order: that sovereign states, and particularly the most powerful among them, retain the right to define the outer limits of their own legal obligations.

The US is not alone in its non-membership – China and Russia also remain outside the Rome Statute that established the ICC – but the scale and active nature of US counter-pressure is without parallel. Throughout the Rome negotiations, the US maintained a hard line over the provision allowing the Court to exercise jurisdiction over crimes committed on the territory of member states, even when the accused is a citizen of a non-member country. Losing that argument shaped the entire subsequent trajectory of US engagement.

Deterring constraint

The US position on the ICC has not merely been disengagement. It has been an active, multi-instrument campaign to deter the Court's reach and redistribute accountability away from binding international mechanisms. This posture is qualitatively different from mere non-participation; it constitutes what this Essay terms 'counter-coercion' – the use of legal, economic, and diplomatic tools to discourage other actors from engaging with accountability mechanisms that the US finds constraining.

The legislative architecture of this campaign is well-documented. The George W. Bush administration 'unsigned' the Rome Statute on May 6, 2002, and Congress subsequently passed the American Servicemembers' Protection Act (ASPA), colloquially known as the 'Hague Invasion Act,' which authorizes the president to use "all means necessary and appropriate to bring about the release" of any US or allied personnel held by the ICC.²³ It also forbids the US government from providing support to the Court, cooperating with its requests, or granting military aid to any ICC state party.

Beyond legislative posturing, the Bush administration pursued a systematic campaign to restructure the bilateral legal landscape. The US actively pressured states to conclude 'Article 98 agreements,' also known as 'Bilateral Immunity Agreements' (BIAs), in which signatories promised not to surrender the other parties' nationals to the ICC without prior consent.²⁴ The US also threatened to cut off military and economic assistance to states that refused to sign. By 2006, despite sustained resistance from European Union member states (none of which signed BIAs) almost 100 such agreements had been concluded globally, representing what critics described as "part of a multi-pronged U.S. effort' to undermine the ICC by preventing countries from ratifying the Rome Statute or threatening to withdraw aid."²⁵

The Obama administration took a softer line and selectively engaged with the Court, particularly supporting ICC referrals concerning Sudan and Libya.²⁶ However, the Rome Statute was not ratified under Obama, and there was no reversal of the ASPA framework. The Trump administration's second term has reactivated and intensified measures to prevent US personnel or allied governments from being exposed to binding international adjudication. On February 6, 2025, President Trump signed Executive

Order 14203, declaring that the ICC “has engaged in illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel,” and invoking the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to authorize asset freezes, property restrictions, targeted sanctions, and entry bans against ICC officials and their family members.²⁷

Analytically, these actions represent the second of the four instruments described in the framework above, namely delegitimization and sovereignty reframing, through the executive order’s explicit characterization of the ICC as “illegitimate” and acting against US and allied interests. It becomes clear that Washington’s perception of the boundaries of its sovereignty does not end at its geographical borders but rather extend to its core interests abroad. The Hague Invasion Act – mobilizing all means necessary, including the use of force – illustrates how threats to US foreign policy interests can be perceived synonymously as threats to US sovereignty. The US also uses an additional instrument, institutional bypass, to exact its will through targeted sanctions that impose direct personal costs on ICC officials rather than engaging through multilateral or diplomatic channels.

Washington’s behavior *vis-à-vis* the ICC is an attempt to reshape the incentive structure of the institution itself with the US making participation in ICC proceedings involving Washington’s or allied interests personally and professionally costly for the Court’s officers. Human Rights Watch characterized the 2025 executive order as designed “not only to intimidate court officials and staff involved in the court’s critical investigations, but also to chill broader cooperation with the ICC, affecting the rights of victims globally.”²⁸

Renegotiating bindingness

The US stance on the ICC is not primarily about fiscal frugality or institutional inefficiency. It is about the renegotiation of bindingness itself, i.e. whether the US accepts that international institutions can generate obligations that persist independently of American political consent. This preference for controllable, discretionary accountability in contrast to the binding, universal accountability is the defining feature of the US’ stance on international law.

SYSTEM-LEVEL CONSEQUENCES: FROM DISRUPTION TO FRAGMENTATION

While the withdrawal from multilateral institutions is primarily being exercised by one country – the US – it is important to underscore how the consequences of strategic disengagement are inherently systemic. In the wake of bargaining by absence, micro-level changes snowball into macro-level shifts that disrupt, and ultimately fragment, how global governance operates. These system-level consequences can largely be char-

acterized by the structuring of operational discontinuity, reshaping of agendas, the fragmentation of the international system, and the shift away from universal norms.

Funding gaps & operational discontinuity

Firstly, the exit by the US, as the world's largest economy, from international organizations introduces budgetary gaps that make operational discontinuity structural. Multilateral institutions exercise functions and operations that require stable and predictable funding, notably through annual membership fees (assessed contributions) and voluntary contributions.²⁹ US withdrawal more often than not involves the loss of US funding, disrupting the predictable, constant financial support that IOs rely on to execute humanitarian operations, global health surveillance, climate coordination, and more. Following US funding cuts in 2025, the UN planned to slash global peace-keeping forces by 25%, resulting in the potential return of 14,000 personnel to their home countries.³⁰

Meanwhile, the US' withdrawal from the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) in February 2025 has contributed to the organization's claims of "widening funding gaps" leaving "millions at risk."³¹ A mere nine months after the US exit, UNHCR noted the "dire consequences" of a reduction by more than half of protective services for women and girls in Afghanistan, alongside the loss of 83,000 refugee shelters in Lebanon.³² In its 2026 Global Appeal, UNHCR acknowledged that "the Office [has] no choice but to narrow its footprint, cut or delay programmes, and reprioritize sharply"³³ in light of budgetary constraints. As a consequence of US funding cuts, multilateral institutions are having to adapt by shortening planning horizons and restraining the scope of their operations. This operational uncertainty ultimately becomes institutionalized, undermining collaborative efforts and long-term capacity.

Alternative actors & agenda diversification

When funding gaps emerge, so do other actors who seek to fill these voids. Funding volatility has vastly accelerated dependence on non-traditional sources including philanthropies, corporate partners, and charities. Yet alternative actors bring not only financial support, but their own strategic interests and preferences. Hence, as IOs look to other sources of funding, the second system-level consequence of the US' withdrawal is a potential diversification of donors who wield newfound power to reshape global agendas.

In light of the US' renewed exit from the WHO, the importance of financing from private actors such as the Gates Foundation, Rotary International, and the Susan Thompson Buffet Foundation has increased. The contributions from these diverse actors are not insignificant: the Gates Foundation single handedly provides over 13% of WHO's financial flows, more than any country or other actor.³⁴ Meanwhile, Rotary

International's monetary contributions are greater than those by Canada, India, and the UK.³⁵ As the International Journal of Health Policy and Management notes, this has the potential to shift agenda setting priorities with limited transparency, less inclusive governance, and potential conflict of interests. Indeed, by shifting decision-making power into the hands of select individuals or groups that represent a small section of the global 'elite', this paves the way for top-down solutions.³⁶

As obstruction and forum-shopping intensify across institutional domains, the architecture of global governance is undergoing a structural transformation that is both organizational and normative. The fragmentation of coordination venues and the erosion of universal compliance are not sequential but mutually constitutive: Institutional fragmentation creates the conditions under which norms become selectively binding, while the retreat from universal norms in turn accelerates fragmentation by removing the incentive to maintain costly, inclusive institutional memberships. Together, they mark a qualitative shift in the nature of the international order itself.

Club governance

At the organizational level, the proliferation of 'club governance' – understood as coalitions of the willing, bilateral compacts, and unilateral initiatives – is increasingly displacing the universal, rule-bound multilateralism characteristic of the post-Second World War settlement. This substitution logic operates through a twofold bargaining effect: strategic disengagement simultaneously weakens institutions' monopoly over coordination and raises partners' incentives to negotiate directly with the US, since states that rely exclusively on multilateral frameworks risk exclusion from US-led arrangements that may prove more consequential in practice.³⁷ The preference for security cooperation through ad hoc arrangements rather than NATO's integrated command structure, for example, reflect this substitution logic across defense.

The systemic consequences of this shift are uneven. While club governance can generate efficient outcomes in discrete, bounded contexts where a small number of powerful states share converging interests, its proliferation carries significant costs for the international order as a whole. The universal baseline that makes multilateralism predictable and inclusive erodes precisely because actors outside of the club lack the leverage to participate meaningfully in the bilateral or unilateral alternatives that replace multilateral frameworks.³⁸

The deepest consequence, however, is normative. Fragmentation does not merely reorganize the venues of cooperation, it transforms the foundational logic of compliance, moving it from rule-based predictability to negotiated participation. This is the defining feature of what may be termed conditional multilateralism. Here, the expectation of universality is replaced by a logic of opt-in compliance, in which norms do

not bind states by virtue of shared membership in an order governed by universal rules. Instead, norms are contingent on the strategic calculations of the most powerful actors within the system.

This shift operates through a cascade logic. Universal norms derive their binding force partly from their unconditional character and the assumption that they apply regardless of power asymmetries or bilateral relations. Once the most powerful states in the system begin to treat compliance as selective, other states recalibrate their own cost-benefit assessments accordingly. In response, the institutional ecosystem of global governance adapts by reducing its scope, weakening its commitments, and splintering into partly competing institutional orders.³⁹

CONCLUSION: FROM DISENGAGEMENT TO A NEW BARGAINING ORDER

This Essay has argued that the current US disengagement from multilateral institutions is neither episodic nor reducible to an ideological reflex. It is a coherent, if imperfect, strategic posture that deploys a portfolio of instruments to reprice the cost of constraint and renegotiate the rules of international cooperation on terms more favorable to the US.

The four-instrument framework presented here — fiscal leverage, delegitimization, administrative hollowing, and institutional bypass — illustrates that strategic disengagement operates across multiple registers simultaneously, and that its effects compound over time in ways that individual acts of withdrawal do not capture. The UNESCO and ICC cases together demonstrate the range of this posture: from bargaining over institutional reform to the more fundamental rejection of binding accountability itself. In each instance, the US is not simply opting out but actively reshaping the incentive structures that govern participation.

Yet the evidence also cautions against treating strategic disengagement as a reliably effective instrument. Its success is structurally contingent on the degree of institutional dependence, the availability of substitutes, and the reputational costs that accumulate with repeated use. Where conditions are unfavorable, as the CPTPP case illustrates, absence yields not concessions but adaptation by others, accelerating the very substitution and reputational erosion that diminishes US leverage over time.

At the system level, the consequences extend beyond any single institutional domain. Operational discontinuity, agenda diversification, and the fragmentation of universal norms are not incidental byproducts but structural outcomes of sustained disengagement. What remains unresolved is whether this transformation is reversible. The hollowing out of bureaucratic capacity, the erosion of institutional memory, and the

recalibration of partner expectations all generate path dependencies that constrain future re-engagement, regardless of the political will of any subsequent administration. Strategic disengagement may be designed as a bargaining tool, but its structural residue accumulates in ways that outlast the bargain it was deployed to win. The tension between the short-term logic of coercive leverage and the long-term costs of eroded institutional standing is perhaps the central question that the 'America First' doctrine has yet to fully reckon with.

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