

Some Republicans Worried re gutting of USAID, *Wall Street Journal*, 10 Feb 2025

Some congressional Republicans who for years wanted to curb USAID's activities are now watching its [sudden collapse](#) with alarm, saying they worry about the fate of programs they see as playing a critical role in protecting U.S. national security and countering China.

The 10,000-person agency was preparing to shrink to 600 staffers by midnight Saturday before a judge who was appointed by President Trump during his first term temporarily blocked the action until Feb. 14. The judge's action pauses until then the White House from placing staffers on paid leave and recalling nearly all of those posted abroad. In the hours before the ruling, [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) officials at American embassies were pleading with State Department leadership, which now runs USAID, to spare their programs.

The USAID budget in fiscal year 2023, the last year with complete data, was approximately \$40 billion, according to the State Department. That funding accounts for less than 1% of the overall \$6.75 trillion federal budget.

For years, Republicans had complained that the agency was going beyond core priorities such as ending poverty and spearheading economic development, straying into green energy and social programs driven by ideology. They warned Democrats that these programs undercut GOP support.

These same lawmakers saw USAID as an important component of American soft power and worry that Trump has gone too far.

"They were funding a lot of stupid stuff. That's a fact, but they're also doing a lot of good stuff, too," Rep. Don Bacon (R., Neb.) said. "So you don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water. Instead of taking a sledgehammer, let's get the scalpel out."

Lettering was removed from a USAID building in Washington last week. Photo: Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images

Rep. Michael McCaul (R., Texas), when he was the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, tried to address what he worried were excessive USAID overhead costs. He now says that [Elon Musk's](#) strategy of [shutting the entire agency down](#) is an overcorrection.

"The problem with doing that with a lifesaving agency like USAID that administers lifesaving food and medications is that you're putting on a stop-payment order that may have some unintended consequences," he said.

It is a sentiment about USAID that puts Republicans on a collision course with Musk, the [Department of Government Efficiency](#) chief who has said it was "time for it to die." Trump posted on social media Friday: "CLOSE IT DOWN!"

For now, many Republicans have sought to paper over differences with Trump and Musk by agreeing that deep scrutiny of USAID is important. But many GOP lawmakers also argue that some USAID programs are crucial to countering adversaries including China and Russia and that winding down the agency's operations was a bad idea. Some are now delicately reaching out to administration officials to try to preserve certain programs.

Rep. Don Bacon (R., Neb.) advocates a surgical approach to reductions at USAID. Photo: Anna MoneyMaker/Getty Images

"I'm eager to see an audit," said Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Roger Wicker (R., Miss.). But Wicker also said, "I have felt for a long time that USAID is our way to combat China's Belt and Road Initiative," in places including Africa and South America. "So, we need an aid program to match the Chinese effort," he said.

On Thursday, Rep. Joe Wilson (R., S.C.), who called himself one of USAID's top Republican supporters, said he texted national security adviser Mike Waltz, a former House colleague, about concerns he heard from the foreign ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania about a tech-focused program.

Wilson said he would press administration officials about programs that have been negatively affected, including construction and education initiatives. "Something I really like about [Donald Trump](#)—he can be assaulted by reality," he said. "So when the reality comes back not to the desired effect, he's an amazing guy."

Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R., Fla.) says he is worried about whether there will be enough workers to handle lifesaving projects overseas. Photo: Rebecca Blackwell/AP
Secretary of State Marco Rubio is now acting chief of USAID. As a Republican senator, he repeatedly praised USAID's work as bulwark against China. While Rubio told lawmakers that some components of USAID could be salvaged and absorbed by other offices, Republicans who are familiar with the reach of its programs said that they don't have clarity on what that reorganization would look like.

A USAID official familiar with the dynamic between Musk and Rubio said the secretary of state is more attuned to the agency's reduction since he will be asked to answer for it. "Rubio has to own this in a different way because he has to own the consequences while Elon doesn't," the official said. "They are aligned, and they work closely together," speaking nearly every day. "Rubio has the chain of command, but Elon has a lot of input," the official added.

The USAID official said Trump, Musk and Rubio have shown no sign of reversing course on closing the agency, whose signage was removed from its headquarters Friday. Pete Marocco, whom Rubio designated to lead USAID during the transition period, is a known skeptic of foreign aid.

Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida, the top Republican in charge of funding requests from State Department and other foreign programs, had warned the Biden administration against bankrolling contentious “woke” programs that he said diminished public support for USAID. In 2023, he said the U.S. was inappropriately requiring energy-development projects in Africa to use renewable sources, putting projects at risk of delay.

“Funding and promoting polarizing and politically charged programs will frankly only mean additional cuts,” he said at an April 2024 hearing. “That’s just a statement of fact.”

But Diaz-Balart said this past week that he is worried about whether the USAID wind-down will leave enough workers to administer lifesaving projects overseas.

“I’m not disagreeing with why they’re doing what they’re doing,” Diaz-Balart said in an interview. “But here’s the issue: There are some folks out there that are doing jobs that are crucial.”

Republicans have also seen USAID as playing a valuable role in countering Beijing. In 2023, a Republican-led panel focused on China issues recommended full funding for USAID programs in its annual report.

Sen. Joni Ernst (R., Iowa) has spent years looking into concerns of unnecessary spending at USAID. Photo: Daniel Heuer/Bloomberg

Last year, Rep. Andy Barr (R., Ky.) and several other Republicans proposed with Democrats to inject \$40 million more a year into USAID to [fortify Taiwan’s relationships](#) with other countries, countering China’s efforts to isolate it. On Friday, Barr said he supports a top-to-bottom agency review to refocus it. Asked about Congress’s role in that, he said, “We’ll be seeing what the administration does, and then we’ll offer them feedback.”

The House select committee on competition with China, headed by Rep. John Moolenaar (R., Mich.), released a statement that said the group “has full trust in Secretary Rubio’s ability to effectively handle critical human rights and development issues.

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D., Ill.), the top Democrat on Moolenaar’s panel, said his Republican colleagues are in a bind. “They just don’t want to do anything that would go against what Elon Musk and Trump are saying and doing,” he said. “That being said, we’re absolutely ceding the field to China at this point.”

In a recent X Spaces conversation including Musk and Sen. Joni Ernst (R., Iowa), the senator appeared to push back delicately against Musk’s conclusion that the agency was “just a ball of worms” and should be abolished.

“There is no apple,” he said. “And when there is no apple in this, you’ve just got to basically get rid of the whole thing.”

Ernst later gently countered: “There are probably some arguments to be made about what could be important work that falls under USAID.” Later, she added: “If there are truly good pro-American programs, then let’s move them to the State Department. Let’s make sure we have proper oversight.”

The senator has spent years looking into what she was concerned was unnecessary spending at USAID. In [an opinion article](#) in The Wall Street Journal on Sunday, Ernst wrote: “The question we should be asking isn’t why USAID’s grants are being scrutinized, but why it took so long.”

Republicans might have trouble defending USAID programs they feel are worth preserving. Congress might be forced to take a side if House Republican leaders force a vote to defund USAID, cementing Trump administration actions into law.

A vote on that measure would put some lawmakers in a tight spot. “I haven’t reached that conclusion,” said Rep. Jim Baird (R., Ind.) when asked if the entire agency should be eliminated. “I think it deserves some evaluation.”