

At the Breaking Point

The State of the U.S. Foreign Service in 2025

A Report by the American Foreign Service Association

December 3, 2025

A Message from AFSA's President

As we describe in the opening pages of this report, the U.S. Foreign Service is being systematically undermined by its own leadership. In less than a year's time, a quarter of the workforce has departed. Morale is dangerously low.

From the time they swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, members of the U.S. Foreign Service are trained to provide honest, unfiltered input to leadership to allow for the best decisions to be made. Unfortunately, in the present environment, speaking truth to power is being turned into an occupational hazard. When recalcitrant leadership visits retribution on the heads of earnest subordinates, a "vicious cycle" develops, manifesting itself through increasingly uninformed decisions, short-circuited deliberations, and short-sighted policies—not to mention diminishing ranks, as this survey indicates.

We are deeply grateful to the more than 2,000 members of the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) who responded to our survey and were willing to share elements of their increasingly distressing work environments. The data in this report are powerful—but beyond the numbers lies a more sobering reality. The decision-makers of this nation must understand: the ship of State is running aground, and the Foreign Service—the very institution tasked with navigating our global interests—is being dismantled in real time.

The diplomatic element of our national power is being depleted before our eyes. Sadly, our nation is being robbed of this treasure—even as far too many of its citizens are unaware—largely because the basic precepts of sound personnel management are being ignored.

As AFSA president, I hope this report serves as a wake-up call. The toll being exacted on the men and women of our Foreign Service is not only unjust—it ultimately weakens the nation they have sworn to serve.

While the survey paints a sobering picture, it is not too late to change course. But that course correction must begin now.

John Dinkelman, President
American Foreign Service Association

Executive Summary

America's diplomatic capacity is being decimated from within. Since January 2025, as many as one in four members of the U.S. Foreign Service—the career professionals who implement American foreign policy—have resigned, retired, seen their agencies dismantled, or been removed from their posts. This unprecedented loss of personnel and institutional capacity puts U.S. global leadership and the safety of American citizens at serious risk.

To assess the impact of these dramatic shifts, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), the union and professional association of the Foreign Service, surveyed more than 2,100 of its active-duty Foreign Service members worldwide.

The results are sobering:

86%

said changes in the workplace since January 2025 have affected their ability to advance U.S. diplomatic priorities. 98%

reported poor morale.

Nearly 1/3

reported changing their career plans since January 2025.

The following report underscores the urgent need to restore the resources, protections, and institutional integrity vital to support U.S. foreign policy interests.

AFSA's Policy Recommendations

The survey findings make clear that the U.S. Foreign Service is in crisis. To restore its effectiveness and protect independence, AFSA urges Congress to

- **Protect the Nonpartisan Career Foreign Service:** Reaffirm that career diplomats serve under presidents of either party and they must be able to offer their expertise shielded from political retaliation including reassignment or dismissal for political reasons.
- Reassert Congressional Oversight: Ensure transparency and accountability in executive actions affecting the Foreign Service and foreign policy institutions; exercise oversight of organizational and policy processes through congressional proceedings and data requests.
- **Strengthen and Modernize the Foreign Service:** Partner with AFSA on reforms that enhance training, leadership, and adaptability while safeguarding professionalism and integrity to meet 21st-century challenges.

These steps are essential to restore trust, morale, and the institutional foundations of American diplomacy.

Detailed analysis and recommendations can be found in the full report.

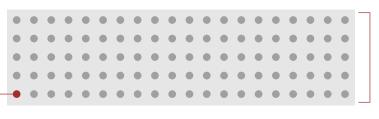
The Big Picture

The global challenges facing the United States are more pressing than ever. From strategic competition with China and deliberate Russian aggression to the impacts of climate change, mass migration, and artificial intelligence, **America's safety and security require a strong presence on the world stage**. Confronting these challenges demands a well-trained, nonpartisan corps of professionals dedicated to advancing U.S. interests, upholding its values, and cultivating the relationships essential to brokering peace.

That corps is the U.S. Foreign Service.

Established by the Rogers Act of 1924, the U.S. Foreign Service is America's professional diplomatic corps. Hailing from all 50 states, these career professionals, often described as "the eyes and ears of America abroad," represent the U.S. in more than 190 countries. These public servants operate in conflict zones and fragile states, often amid political unrest or natural disasters. You will find them negotiating peace agreements, responding to humanitarian crises, securing the release of detained Americans, issuing visas and passports, supporting U.S. businesses abroad, and explaining U.S. values and policies to foreign audiences.

Despite its outsized role in safeguarding U.S. interests, the Foreign Service is a comparatively small federal workforce. Up until this year, there were 17,000 employees across six federal agencies¹—slightly over 1 percent of the size of the active-duty U.S. military,² at a cost of less than half a percent of the U.S. federal budget.³



Active-duty U.S. military



This lean workforce has historically operated across the U.S. Department of State; the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS); the Foreign Commercial Service (FCS); the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS); and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM).

From ambassadors to consular officers, management and security professionals, political and economic officers, public diplomacy experts, agricultural attachés, journalists, health and technology specialists, and more, the Foreign Service forms the backbone of America's global presence. All Foreign Service members take an oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution and carry out their duties across presidential administrations, regardless of political party.

But even as these professionals continue to serve with dedication and distinction, the institution that supports and enables their work has come under unprecedented strain.

Early in 2025, both USAID and USAGM, key soft power agencies supporting global development and media, were dismantled, eliminating thousands of positions and critical diplomatic capabilities almost overnight. Then in July, the State Department laid off more than 200 members of the Foreign Service in a single day—the largest number of single-day layoffs in its history. More than 1,000 civil servants also lost their jobs on that day. These layoffs were















done without consideration to merit, resulting in the firing of experts on the South China Sea, chemical and biological weapons, human rights, visa fraud, embassy security, economic policy, global agriculture, to name a few.

The consequences of these policy changes were starkly evident in the U.S. response to the devastating earthquake in Myanmar in March 2025. With USAID dismantled, the U.S. was limited to a small response team and a total aid pledge of approximately \$9 million. In contrast, China rapidly deployed multiple rescue teams and pledged more than \$137 million in relief and reconstruction aid—around 15 times the U.S. contribution. Prior to this administration, China had already surpassed the U.S. in diplomatic capacity, expanding their global presence just as the United States scaled back its own.



More cuts are yet to come.

The president's Fiscal Year 2026 budget request represents another sharp contraction in U.S. global engagement. In the coming year, the administration plans to eliminate most contributions to international peacekeeping, cut humanitarian assistance by 60 percent, and slash economic development by nearly 70 percent. The task of implementing these cuts, and managing the diplomatic fallout, will inevitably adversely affect members of the U.S. Foreign Service, professionals who are already being asked to do more with fewer resources and shrinking institutional capacity.

These rollbacks would be in addition to recent unilateral changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM), the official rulebook for U.S. diplomats on the job, and the introduction of a new category in employee evaluations that requires a rating on the employee's "fidelity" to the administration. At the same time, the collective bargaining rights for much of the Foreign Service have been stripped by executive order. Together, these changes are politicizing a workforce long respected for its nonpartisan professionalism. Such measures erode the bedrock principle that U.S. diplomacy is guided by the Constitution rather than political allegiance. The Foreign Service is an essential part of the government workforce. It is on the front lines of



U.S. global leadership. Its well-trained, multilingual members are among the most adaptable, mission-driven professionals in public service—with years of specialized knowledge and experience. When this critical workforce is sidelined and its ranks hollowed and politicized, America's ability to lead, respond, and compete on the world stage is diminished. Americans will ultimately pay the price for this unforced error.

About This Report

"At the Breaking Point: The State of the U.S. Foreign Service in 2025" is based on findings from AFSA's global survey of its active-duty membership conducted electronically between August and September 2025 and distributed exclusively to AFSA members. More than 2,100 members responded, representing a diverse cross section of the Service—from entry-level officers to senior leaders, from Washington-based staff to those at posts worldwide.

In the absence of a federal government workforce survey—which was discontinued earlier this year—AFSA undertook this research to document the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of America's career diplomats at a moment of profound institutional stress.

As both the professional association and labor union for the U.S. Foreign Service, AFSA is uniquely positioned to assess the state of the diplomatic workforce. Its membership includes active-duty personnel from the remaining foreign affairs agencies and retired personnel from all agencies, providing an unparalleled view into the health and capacity of the Service.

This report draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from the survey to provide a comprehensive picture of the Foreign Service in 2025. It reflects not only the numbers behind the crisis but also the voices of those who carry out U.S. foreign policy every day on behalf of the American people.

Findings

Eroding Capacity to Deliver U.S. Foreign Policy

AFSA's 2025 survey reveals a Foreign Service workforce struggling to fulfill its mission amid unprecedented political and budgetary pressures. Across the board, career diplomats report that the conditions necessary for effective U.S. diplomacy are rapidly eroding.

An overwhelming 86 percent of respondents said that recent policy changes have negatively affected their ability to implement the foreign policy of the United States. Only 1 percent reported any improvement.

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The effects are being felt in every corner of U.S. diplomacy: 78 percent of respondents reported operating under reduced budgets; 64 percent said key projects and initiatives are being delayed or suspended; 61 percent are managing significantly heavier workloads due to staffing losses; and 46 percent report new obstacles in negotiating with foreign counterparts. These challenges stem from diminished credibility, shifting directives, and resource shortfalls.

Respondents identified several core areas of U.S. foreign policy in which capacity has been especially weakened: development and humanitarian assistance (59 percent); public diplomacy (56 percent); national safety initiatives (52 percent); and economic and trade promotion (37 percent). These are the pillars of America's global engagement, each weakened by the constraints now facing the diplomatic workforce.

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A Workforce in Freefall

Among our survey respondents, an alarming 98 percent reported somewhat or significantly reduced morale in the workplace since January.

Additionally, one-third reported that they have considered leaving the Service early since January.

Among those who are considering leaving the Service, 75 percent cited declining workplace morale; 59 percent cited the loss of workplace protections or benefits; 56 percent noted reduced resources to do their jobs; and 54 percent cited negative political influence at work.

Brain Drain

Diplomacy was once a lifelong calling.

For generations, Foreign Service members dedicated their entire careers to advancing U.S. interests abroad. In AFSA's 2025 survey, 81 percent of respondents said they entered the Service intending to serve 20 years or more. Today, that commitment is wavering. Only about half of those say their plans haven't changed, and nearly one-third said they have changed their minds since January 2025. By contrast, in AFSA's 2022 survey, only one in four respondents said they might leave before completing a full career.

"Recent events have made it difficult to want to stay or to recommend the Foreign Service as a career to others."

> - Anonymous Foreign Service member

"I've served in hardship posts and multiple unaccompanied tours, but I never expected by my own government to openly disparage public service or the work of public servants."

- Anonymous Foreign Service member The difference in just three years speaks to a growing sense that the Foreign Service has become untenable for many of its members. The numbers do not capture those whose careers were cut short involuntarily, through reductions in force, politically motivated dismissals, or agency closures beyond their control.

Among those who remain, the reasons for reconsidering a career in diplomacy are clear: 65 percent cited the politicization of the workforce, while 41 percent pointed to fear of being personally targeted. Roughly 57 percent referenced circumstances beyond their control, and 30 percent noted a broader decline in public respect for government service.

This loss is reflected in the numbers of those who are planning to depart the Service early. Historically, less than 5 percent of the Foreign Service retire every year on average. By comparison, 9 percent of those surveyed plan to leave the Service this year—and that doesn't count the hundreds who departed in the first

nine months of 2025 and were not included in the survey. An additional 21 percent say they plan to leave in the next couple of years.

When asked what might persuade them to stay, respondents emphasized a desire for a return to pre-2025 professional norms, including restored workplace protections and depoliticized assignments. Nearly half said that such a restoration, along with stronger career and promotion opportunities, would influence their decision to remain.

"The hardest thing to see is 'leaders' in the organization directly demonizing members of the Foreign Service."

> - Anonymous Foreign Service member

This sense of loss is particularly poignant given the ideals that drew most into the Foreign Service in the first place. More than 80 percent said they joined out of a commitment to public service and to advancing U.S. interests and values around the world. Many were also motivated by the opportunity to use their cultural knowledge and foreign language skills to serve the American people—a hallmark of professional diplomacy.

When asked whether they would choose this career again, 62 percent said yes, 32 percent said maybe, and 6 percent said no.

Taken together, these responses paint a sobering picture of a once-stable profession, now shaken by uncertainty, frustration, and disillusionment.

Policy Priorities

Survey respondents identified a series of urgent priorities aimed at restoring the integrity, independence, and effectiveness of the U.S. Foreign Service. Their responses reveal deep concern that the career structure of American diplomacy—the framework that has sustained a professional, nonpartisan corps for more than a century—is being systematically weakened.

At the top of the list is protecting the Foreign Service career path itself. **Respondents voiced** alarm over the replacement of career positions with political appointees, widespread budget reductions across the foreign affairs agencies, and the erosion of the merit-based systems that govern assignments and promotions. They also called for greater protection of the Foreign Service performance review process, the integrity of the assignments system, and fair retirement and benefits policies.

In open-ended responses, more than 380 members elaborated on their concerns. The most common appeals were to reverse ongoing reductions in force, prevent additional layoffs, reform the employee review processes and assignments systems to ensure fairness and transparency, and reinstate collective bargaining rights—an essential mechanism for safeguarding the workforce's voice within government.

"Message is loud and clear that anything less than slavish devotion to policies that harm the American people will be met with termination, if not legal persecution and online harassment."

> - Anonymous Foreign Service member

Survey participants were particularly troubled by recent procedural changes that appear to politicize or weaken professional standards. Among the most alarming was the introduction of a new "fidelity" or loyalty category for employee evaluations, which 77 percent cited as a major or moderate concern, and the sweeping changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual, the Foreign Service administrative manual, which were noted by 86 percent. Other controversial developments include the use of directed assignments, the cancellation of detail assignments, and the elimination of the annuity exception, which provided an earned annuity to those forced out of the Service before full retirement age.

Respondents were equally clear about what must be preserved to sustain the Foreign Service's professional corps. Nearly all—an overwhelming 98 percent—rated nonpartisanship as "important" or "very important." Other key priorities included maintaining opportunities for advancement into senior leadership roles, preserving collective bargaining rights, ensuring a fair and transparent grievance process, and protecting the Service's rotational assignment system and training pipeline for new officers.

98%
rated nonpartisanship as "important" or "very important."

Together, these findings reflect a workforce deeply alarmed by the erosion of the systems that have long upheld their professionalism. The message from America's diplomats is clear:

Safeguarding the integrity of the career Foreign Service is essential to safeguarding the nation's capacity to lead.



AFSA's Policy Recommendations

The findings of this survey demonstrate that the U.S. Foreign Service—the professional, nonpartisan corps that carries out U.S. foreign policy—is in crisis. Congress has a critical role to play in restoring its effectiveness, protecting its independence, and ensuring that the U.S. can meet the global challenges of the 21st century.

AFSA urges Congress to;

Protect the Nonpartisan Career Foreign Service

Career diplomats are sworn to represent the United States faithfully under presidents of either party. Yet in recent months, the politicization of the Foreign Service has reached alarming levels—undermining both morale and the credibility of U.S. diplomacy. AFSA calls on Congress to reaffirm, through legislation, the core principle of a merit-based, nonpartisan diplomatic service. Congress should make clear that career professionals cannot be punished, reassigned, or dismissed for political reasons, and that their expertise and judgment must remain protected from partisan interference. America's foreign policy cannot succeed if its diplomats are treated as political pawns.

Reassert Congressional Oversight of U.S. Foreign Policy and the Foreign Service

The dismantling of key agencies, sweeping personnel actions, and major shifts in foreign policy over the past year have occurred with little congressional consultation or transparency. AFSA urges Congress to conduct robust and sustained oversight of the executive branch's management of the Foreign Service and the broader foreign affairs enterprise. Regular hearings, reporting requirements, and accountability mechanisms are essential to ensure that U.S. diplomacy remains grounded in law, professionalism, and the national interest. Restoring balance between the branches of government is vital to the health of U.S. foreign policy.

Work to Strengthen the Foreign Service as an Institution and Prepare Its Personnel

The Foreign Service must evolve to meet the challenges of great power competition and technological disruption. But reform must be undertaken in partnership with the workforce, not imposed on it. As the elected representative of the career Foreign Service, AFSA stands ready to partner with the foreign affairs agencies and Congress on reforms that modernize training, assignments, and promotion systems, and strengthen leadership development. True modernization means empowering U.S. diplomats to operate effectively in a complex global environment while preserving the institutional values that make the Foreign Service unique: professionalism, integrity, and service to country above politics.



Conclusion

AFSA's 2025 workforce survey reveals a stark truth: America's professional diplomatic corps, long one of the country's greatest strategic assets, is under extraordinary strain. The numbers tell a story of deep loss, as one in four Foreign Service members has left or been removed since January and nearly every remaining diplomat reports diminished morale and capacity to carry out U.S. foreign policy. Behind these numbers are dedicated public servants who have spent their careers advancing U.S. interests abroad and safeguarding the country's safety and stability.

Their message is clear: The damage to U.S. diplomatic institutions threatens its leadership in the world. The hollowing out of the Foreign Service, the politicization of its ranks, the diminishing of career professionals, and the dismantling of once-vital agencies have weakened the nation's ability to respond to crises, manage alliances, and promote stability and prosperity.

Yet the survey also underscores the resilience and professionalism of those who remain. Despite extraordinary challenges, U.S. diplomats continue to serve with dedication and courage in every corner of the world. They are asking to be heard and to be given the tools, protections, and respect necessary to do their jobs on behalf of the American people.

Restoring the strength of U.S. diplomacy requires immediate action. Congress must reaffirm its constitutional role in overseeing foreign policy, protect the nonpartisan nature of the Foreign Service as an institution, and work with AFSA to rebuild and modernize a diplomatic corps equipped for the realities of 21st-century global competition. The effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy depends on it.

At its core, this report is not merely a dataset but a warning from those who know the stakes best: the men and women who represent the United States abroad. They are sounding the alarm not for themselves but for their country.

Survey Methodology

AFSA conducted its survey between August 18 and September 12, 2025, to assess the impact of recent policy and budget changes on the professional U.S. Foreign Service and to identify areas for future advocacy.

The survey was distributed electronically to all 6,484 active-duty AFSA members serving across the four remaining foreign affairs agencies. In total, 2,102 individuals responded, yielding a response rate of 32 percent.

Respondents represented a broad cross section of the active-duty Foreign Service. The respondents were 53 percent male and 43 percent female, with the remainder declining to report gender. In terms of racial and ethnic identity, 75 percent identified as white, while 5 percent identified as Hispanic and 5 percent as Asian, with smaller percentages identifying as other or multiple races.

Agency affiliation closely mirrored the current structure of the Foreign Service: 97 percent of respondents were employees of

the Department of State, with the remaining 3 percent split between the Foreign Agricultural Service, the Foreign Commercial Service, and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Because USAID and the U.S. Agency for Global Media were formally dissolved earlier in 2025, the survey did not include respondents from those agencies.

The survey captured a balanced distribution of experience and rank. The majority (53 percent) of respondents were at the FS-2 and-3 levels, which are the mid-levels of the Foreign Service ranks; 16 percent were at the FS-4 and-5 levels, frequently the younger ranks of the Service; 17 percent were at the FS-1 level—the threshold to senior leadership; and 15 percent were among the Senior Foreign Service.

Survey data was collected anonymously to encourage candid feedback. Responses were aggregated and analyzed by AFSA's public policy team.

About AFSA

The American Foreign Service Association, established in 1924, is both the professional association and exclusive representative for the U.S. Foreign Service. AFSA's members include active-duty and alumni/retired members of the Foreign Service at the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Foreign Commercial Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the U.S. Agency for Global Media.



Sources

- 1 Total staffing figure is based on U.S. Department of State Global Talent Management data (2024), not publicly available, expressly provided to AFSA, as well as information provided by AFSA agency vice presidents across the six foreign affairs agencies.
- Comparative data based on U.S. Department of Defense active-duty military figures and budget reports available at "DoD
- ² Personnel, Workforce Reports and Publications," Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), accessed October 16, 2025, https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports.
- According to data from the U.S. government's budget explorer, funding for international affairs consistently represents less than
- ³ 1 percent of the total federal budget—and often less than a half percent. See "Spending Explorer [FY 2025]," U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed October 16, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/explorer/budget_function.
- ⁴ Reporting is based on the largest single-day Foreign Service layoff in the State Department's history, including more than a thousand Civil Service positions. See Jory Heckman, "State Dept Lays Off 1,350 Employees as Reorganization Nears Final Phase," Federal News Network, July 11, 2025, https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2025/07/state-dept-prepares-for-widespread-layoffs-as-reorganization-nears-final-phase/.
- These figures are based on analysis showing that China's humanitarian response to the March 2025 Myanmar earthquake far outpaced that of the United States in both funding and manpower. See "Where Is the United States? An Earthquake in Myanmar Is the First Test of President Trump's Emergency Aid Cuts," Critical Questions by Michelle Strucke and Lily Kennedy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 7, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/where-united-states-earthquake-myanmar-first-test-president-trumps-emergency-aid-cuts; U.S. Mission Burma, "Declaration of \$2 Million for Humanitarian Needs in the Aftermath of the Myanmar Earthquake," U.S. Embassy in Burma, March 30, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/china-pledges-137-million-myanmar-earthquake-relief-2025-04-11.
- 6 This statement is based on findings that China has surpassed the United States in global diplomatic presence. See Tom O'Connor, "China Is the World's No. 1 Diplomatic Power, Ahead of the US, Report Shows," Newsweek, published February 25, 2024, updated February 26, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/china-worlds-no-1-diplomatic-power-ahead-us-report-shows-1873085.
- 7 Data on proposed cuts to international peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and economic development can be found in the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition's analysis of the FY 2026 budget. See "Draconian Cuts to Diplomacy and International Assistance Are Not How America Wins in the World: : Analysis of the Administration's FY26 International Affairs Budget Request," U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, June 3, 2025, https://www.usglc.org/the-budget/draconian-cuts-to-diplomacy-and-international-assistance-are-not-how-america-wins-in-the-world/.
- This figure is based on AFSA survey data showing that 9 percent of respondents plan to leave the Foreign Service in 2025, which does not include those who departed earlier this year. For comparison, historical attrition rates have typically been lower. See "Five-Year Workforce Plan, Fiscal Years 2019 2023," U.S. Department of State Bureau of Human Resources, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Five-Year-Workforce-Plan-FY19_FY23-Final.pdf (PDF no longer available on State Department website).





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