



American Diplomacy at Risk: The Costs of the Government Shutdown

A Product of the American Foreign Service Association

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To document the far-reaching consequences of the government shutdown on the implementation of U.S. foreign policy, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) has gathered accounts from active-duty Foreign Service members around the world. What we've found is staggering; stalled diplomacy, diminished capacity to serve and protect the American people, and an erosion of U.S. credibility abroad.

To date, we've received nearly 125 submissions. Below is a selection of anecdotes that capture the breadth and depth of the impact, lightly edited for length and clarity.

Security at Risk

Even as the resources diminish and work pauses, the security risks don't stop.

"A lack of funds to repair armored vehicles means we are using soft-skinned (e.g. non- armored) cars at a post that is rated "critical" for terrorism."

"Critical border security work is not being accomplished given the embassy's inability to backfill a consular role. Issuing visas is a vital screening tool for those wishing to enter the United States."

"I maintain equipment and systems vital to life safety and protection of national security, and am unable to travel to my locations, endangering personnel."

"My classmates and I are [supposed to be in training], due to replace officers engaged in work such as visa adjudication, fraud prevention, and other jobs with direct links to national security. Sending officers to post with insufficient language skills could have [serious] implications. I just want to learn my language and do my job, but the shutdown has made that impossible."

"America is less safe because of the shutdown. Our competitors take every shutdown as an opportunity to demonstrate the lack of American resolve and reliability."

"I cannot effectively keep up with IT requirements. We can't fix things that break, regular maintenance can't be done, and we can't buy replacements. Our society and our government depend on computers and the internet. The Department of State and the U.S. is becoming more vulnerable to cyberattack by the day."

"The U.S. federal government is facing a sharp increase in cyberattacks coinciding with the shutdown beginning October 1. Attackers are exploiting the financial stress and uncertainty of furloughed or unpaid government workers [and mounting more attacks]."



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Americans Left Waiting

U.S. Embassies continue to serve but limited resources mean slower help for U.S. citizens abroad in need.

"We can't coordinate with foreign governments on crisis preparedness or assist Americans returning home who need emergency loans for plane tickets."

"As funding dries up, we may lose transportation to visit U.S. citizens in prison or hold off-site passport services for those far from our embassies."

"We must get special approval for pouch funding to return absentee ballots from Americans abroad."

Losing Ground

The more constrained our diplomats are by furloughs and lack of resources, the more the vacuum opens for eager adversaries to fill.

"The shutdown creates vacuums that our adversaries are very happy to fill -- around defense, intelligence, markets, treaties, partnerships, influence. If you're not at the table, you're on the menu."

"My department works on behalf of U.S. farmers, ranchers, and fisheries no matter which party is in power. We need Congress to pass a budget so that we can continue our work promoting American prosperity by assuring access to overseas markets."

"The shutdown inhibits our ability to implement U.S. foreign policy abroad and deeply hurts morale among people serving the American people overseas. Diplomats are unable to advocate for and further the U.S. trade agenda in overseas embassies, which restricts our markets overseas and weakens our economy."

"Allies are unable to get meetings with higher level officials, nor are U.S. government officials able to contribute or participation in public discussions on the value of our relationships. Our alliances, and our ability to foster goodwill that benefits American citizen safety, businesses, study, travel, and work overseas are being harmed."

"We help the farmers, small businesses, and everyday American survive and thrive in a competitive world. Trade shows with hundreds of American companies vying for opportunities to sell to global buyers are happening, and we aren't able to go support these companies with matchmaking, small business-tailored support, and other key services. We won't hear their challenges with burdensome non-tariff trade barriers, nor about the Chinese companies that are stealing their tech and ideas. When shutdowns happen, small and medium American companies lose out."



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“Our work directly benefits U.S. exporters and producers who are already struggling with uncertainty and loss of markets. **With U.S. [staff] sidelined, that is one less advocate on their side in overseas markets that are key to their success.**”

“I am...serving in a country with a recent history of civil war and gross human rights violations. The U.S. is not at the table at multilateral discussions with our like-minded and international organizations. **This country also has a strong Chinese presence/influence, and we are ceding ground to them daily by not being present and active.**”

“[The taxpayer] is paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for me to be posted in a high-threat post overseas, and those bills have to be paid, but our entire [embassy] is acting mum and not doing any public engagement or meetings because we have to pretend that we're "shut down" even though we are working more hours than usual trying to figure out how to handle this...situation.”

Training Interrupted

With training programs on hold, a generation of diplomats will arrive at posts unprepared.

“I am a consular officer assigned to one of our critical needs posts next year. I am... assigned to learn the local language. Because I am furloughed, my language training has not yet started and the longer it goes on, **the more difficult it will be for me to get to the proficiency I need to accurately interview people about their plans to visit the USA and detect fraud.**”

“Overseas training in high-level Mandarin Chinese [is] required for positions that are currently deemed excepted. The instructors and the course have been pre-paid, but the students are forbidden from studying, even without pay! Strong language skills are critical in engaging with any foreign country, but especially so in China. **How are we supposed to work with our largest competitor if we aren't equipped to communicate?**”

Operational Paralysis

When vital functions stop, inefficiency compounds. Projects stall, costs grow, and the government spends more fixing what neglect has broken.

“We have almost no support staff in our office, so anything related to budget, finance, or travel is on hold. **With fewer people to handle the work that can still get done, even more piles up.**”

“Instead of advancing the president's priorities, my work has shifted to minimizing legal risk—making sure we're not sued or fined for not paying local staff or utilities. **We're negotiating with local utility companies just to keep the heat on.**”



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Work Without Pay

Essential diplomatic work continues, but unpaid labor is no victory. Each day it goes on, morale erodes, burnout deepens, and the credibility of U.S. institutions suffers.

“Despite the lapse, my embassy team continues to work long hours for the American people. We are supporting trade negotiations, upcoming official travel to my region, stopping illegal transfers of Iranian and Russian oil, fighting cyber scams that victimize Americans, and always prioritizing aid for American citizens who are ill, injured, become victims of crime or even get arrested. **We are doing this without pay and under threat of never receiving back pay.**”

“I am still required to visit American citizens in jail on overnight trips. These trips require me to front the costs of the hotel, etc., until I am ultimately reimbursed. All the while I'm not being paid for my work.”

“We keep working to protect [our country], reunite families, and facilitate travel to stimulate the U.S. economy even during a shutdown. **Our day-to-day work has not changed, but the stress of a lack of paycheck, the burnout, and the systemic instability and fear taken a serious toll.**”

“We can't have external meetings, so **we can't check on overdue airport runway repairs that impact hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizen tourists.**”

The Human Cost

Behind every unpaid paycheck is a person juggling financial stress and family duty. The emotional toll of the shutdown limbo is eroding a workforce already stretched thin.

“We are working without pay, without our families, in challenging, dangerous places to further U.S. interests. **There is no part of this that is OK, and it is definitely making me rethink continuing in this career.**”

“I am [posted] in the Middle East. We had an [embassy] vehicle break down outside of town while returning from supporting [a high-level VIP] visit and were told that we would have to pay personally out of pocket to tow it back to the embassy.”

“I've had to suspend my 7-year old's occupational therapy because the government can't incur costs during the shutdown. Normally, the State Department pays for Foreign Service special needs kids equivalent to what they'd get for free in the States. We are being asked/told to perform normal work without the guarantee of pay. We cannot speak out for fear of losing our jobs.”

“It is demoralizing to continue to show up to work and give it my all to help American citizens overseas but watch my bank account get smaller and smaller.”