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Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin warned President Donald Trump cutting foreign aid would be detrimental to national security and to bipartisan negotiations ahead of a shutdown deadline. | Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP Photo

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By **JOHN BRESNAHAN**, **JENNIFER SCHOLTES** and **MARIANNE LEVINE** | 08/22/2019 01:16 PM EDT | Updated 08/22/2019 05:15 PM EDT

President Donald Trump has scrapped a plan to freeze more than \$4 billion in foreign aid in a move that would have been another end run around Congress' power of the purse.

The president's decision Thursday to forgo a "rescission" comes after another internal tug of war between his budget advisers and Cabinet officials. But the fiscal hawks in Trump's corner, failing again to sell him on spending restraint, blamed Congress for souring him on the idea.

"The president has been clear that there is fat in our foreign assistance and we need to be wise about where U.S. money is going," said a senior administration official. "Which is why he asked the administration to look into options to doing just that. It's clear that there are those on the Hill who aren't willing to join in curbing wasteful spending."

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and several GOP lawmakers warned Trump over the last two weeks that the move would be detrimental to national security and to bipartisan negotiations ahead of another shutdown deadline.

The president's acting budget director, Russ Vought, and acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney had both pushed Trump to pursue the plan.

Foreign aid advocates were quick to characterize Pompeo as a gutsy crusader against both fiscal hawks and progressive Democrats seeking to politicize foreign assistance.

"A huge shout-out to Secretary Pompeo who — for the second summer in a row — brought his swagger and fought for his department alongside strong bipartisan leadership in Congress," Liz Schroyer, head of U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, said in a statement.

The funding freeze would have been Trump's first big show of fiscal restraint since signing a budget deal into law this month that increases spending limits by about \$50 billion over current funding in each of the next two fiscal years. Behind the scenes, the president's budget advisers railed against the size of that bill, even as Trump encouraged GOP lawmakers to "Go for it" in passing the measure, promising "there is always plenty of time to CUT!"

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In a letter Friday, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the foreign aid cuts Trump was considering would violate “the good faith” of that bipartisan deal-making.

Republicans on the Hill praised the decision to back off the cuts, deeming the fight “unwinnable,” in the words of one aide.

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House Budget Chairman John Yarmuth (D-Ky.) said Thursday that Trump's retreat from the rescission was "a win" for those who "pressured the White House" to nix the plan.

"The Constitution grants Congress the power of the purse, and we will not cede that authority to this Administration and their constant executive overreach," Yarmuth tweeted, referencing Trump administration decisions to dismiss the intent of congressional appropriators in funding projects like the president's border wall.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Twitter that he hopes Trump "learned the lesson not to play games with the budget."

Before ultimately deciding to kill the plan altogether, the president privately considered lesser cuts Monday after a call with Mnuchin and Pompeo. Certain funding reductions might be "a pennywise," Trump said publicly on Tuesday, while others were “on the table very much.”

Leaders at the Office of Management and Budget hatched the initial plan this month to force the expiration of \$2.3 billion for USAID and \$2 billion for the State Department, including \$787 million for U.N. international peacekeeping activities, \$522 million in core funding for the U.N. and \$364 million for a range of U.N. humanitarian and human rights programs.

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Foreign Relations and Appropriations committees, also sent a letter this month to Trump warning against the package.

In their letter, Rogers and Graham cautioned that the cuts would undermine national security and “complicate the ability of the administration and Congress to work constructively on future appropriations deals.”

Burgess Everett contributed to this story.

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