

The vital role of foreign assistance

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It's no secret we live in a dangerous world. At the same time, we know our current fiscal situation needs immediate attention. As we in Congress grapple with these issues, the essential and cost-effective role of foreign assistance programs to both our national security and economy deserves greater attention.

Our senior military leaders are resolute in support of development and diplomatic programs as tools key to our national security. U.S. Central Command's Gen. James Mattis told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March that, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition."

Foreign assistance programs are important for spurring our economy, too. More than half of our exports go to the developing world now and that number is growing. The key to expanding our economy and creating jobs here at home lies beyond our shores, and reaching the 95 percent of the world's consumers who live outside the U.S. requires investment in these rapidly growing markets.

Careful attention must be paid to how we spend every taxpayer dollar. As the co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Effective Foreign Assistance, our goal is to help ensure the global investments we make bring the best return possible to America.

Significant strides have been made over the past decade to make these programs more effective, and a new "Report on Reports" released by the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition details areas of consensus on how we can do even better.

Just as military leaders have called for, we need to strengthen the capacity of our civilian agencies. Both Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush have taken steps to increase the footprint and quality of development experts and diplomats around the globe, but we are still understaffed and underfunded with the challenges we face around the globe.

Given our fiscal environment, we have to focus on real results in every federal program. Enhanced evaluation and accountability in our development efforts are being implemented. As an example, the Foreign Assistance Dashboard allows taxpayers to see where our dollars are being spent. More focus on data-driven innovations like this are necessary to ensure we get the best bang for the U.S. buck.

The private sector now accounts for more than 80 percent of capital flows to the developing world, playing a more critical role than ever. Working together, public-private partnerships are changing the way we do foreign assistance, and we need more of them. Our development and diplomatic programs create the enabling environments with host governments for U.S. businesses and non-governmental organizations to operate successfully. That's a role only our

development experts and diplomats can play, which is why it is so essential for us to maintain sufficient resources for these programs around the globe.

Efforts to better coordinate the many foreign assistance programs across our government are also needed. Streamlining decisions and improving coordination across agencies would enhance the effectiveness of our programs.

Finally, we have to focus and prioritize our efforts. We cannot do it all, so we must concentrate on what we do well and where we can have the greatest effect. In addition to ensuring the integrity of our development and diplomacy programs from further deep cuts, Congress should ensure that these programs are focused where they have the most impact.

It is gratifying to see the initiatives and pioneering efforts on accountability and transparency in our foreign assistance programs. This is good government. We look forward to continuing to work with our colleagues in Congress to expand and strengthen these efforts even further. There is agreement across the political spectrum that foreign assistance is an essential part of America's leadership.

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