The Trump Administration recently announced its plan to increase the U.S. defense budget, already over $520 billion, by 10 percent in 2018. This increase will be paid for in part by a proposed 29 percent cut of foreign assistance programs, which only received about $40 billion in 2017. The budget, titled “A New Foundation for American Greatness,” states that it seeks to “reduce or end direct funding for international programs and organizations whose missions do not substantially advance U.S. foreign policy interests.” The administration fails to recognize that these programs—which support strong local governance, food security, health and education development, and economic growth—have yielded incalculable returns that support U.S. interests around the world and are essential to international security. They work to reach vulnerable populations, promote stability, and reduce poverty, all on less than 1 percent of the U.S. federal budget. A comprehensive defense policy should strike a balance between defense and development and recognize the role U.S. foreign assistance plays in ensuring and expanding international stability.

Investments in food security help individuals, families, and communities improve access to safe, nutritious food. These programs have the power to build local economies and to lift people out of poverty, which in turn promotes stability. The relationship between food security and national security is well understood; military leaders and politicians from both parties agree that food security investments are effective at reducing poverty and improving livelihoods; they help secure populations in otherwise unstable environments. Conflict over food and resources—and government policies that restrict access to these resources—can destabilize states. The National Intelligence Council has stated that food insecurity and regions. Worldwide, conflict cost an estimated $14.3 trillion in 2016 alone, or about 13 percent of global GDP by purchasing power parity (PPP). Moreover, the United States bolsters its own national security when it invests in other nations because it helps prevent violence that can affect U.S. citizens, as well as disruptions in global economic and political affairs. Programs funded with U.S. tax dollars—like those that promote food security, improve access to healthcare, and foster economic growth—work as important soft power tools to help protect U.S. interests abroad.
will foster instability if not addressed, especially considering climate change, population growth, and diminishing resources. Syria’s instability sheds light on how such situations could play out. There, poor agricultural and water policies combined with a devastating drought to bring about a massive rural-urban migration. The ensuing tension is thought to have contributed to the 2011 uprisings, a precursor to Syria’s ongoing humanitarian and political quagmire.

Elsewhere, health funding has wide-ranging implications for human security, from preventing the spread of infectious diseases to promoting family planning. Such programs are essential for effectively managing the growing youth bulges in developing countries. When concurrent to economic and political challenges, fast-changing demographics can make violent extremism more likely to occur. Furthermore, research indicates that poor health and nutrition contribute to the onset of armed conflict. As evidenced by West Africa’s Ebola outbreak, inadequate management of infectious diseases can quickly lead to threats at a global scale. Development programs that reduce disease prevalence, increase access to family planning, and improve the wellbeing of vulnerable populations can simultaneously minimize domestic and international security threats.

Finally, economic growth and employment programs provide opportunities for individuals and families of all wealth levels. Growing economies provide burgeoning youth populations with reliable and sustainable livelihoods, grow domestic tax bases for developing governments, and create opportunities for growth for U.S. and foreign businesses. The 2011 World Development Report found that unemployment was a primary driver for joining gangs or rebel groups in about two-fifths of youths surveyed. Examples of the influence of employment range from the recruitment of youth into armed militant groups in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, to recent examples like Boko Haram in Nigeria. Poverty, lack of access to education, and political alienation were drivers for recruitment in these settings. Research suggests that employment prospects can deter radicalization by offering stability and hope. Investments in economic development can thus act as an essential radicalization prevention tool.

Defense spending can’t address global instability in the sustainable, efficient, and proactive ways that foreign assistance can. But, to be sure,
foreign assistance alone won’t provide perfect solutions to these complex problems. Development investments earn high returns but don’t guarantee the prevention of future conflict or the solidification of democratic norms. Investing in development and stability is a long-term effort that takes both national and international commitments, strong national institutions, and populations that are able and willing to hold their leaders accountable. Nor will these investments eliminate extremist groups or authoritarian regimes singlehandedly. Defense and security programs are still a critical element of a holistic defense strategy, but military force alone cannot stimulate a stagnant economy, provide access to food and healthcare, or sustainably deter extremism. Any engagement strategy is helplessly incomplete without soft power development tools.

If the priority is to create a stable world in order to protect U.S. interests, defense policy will need to recognize the value of foreign assistance programs. A 29 percent cut to U.S. foreign aid would seriously undermine ongoing work to stabilize fragile states across the globe. Continued investments in lower-income and politically fragile countries can help mitigate future crises and conflicts, reduce financial risk, and minimize human suffering in ways that reactionary policies miss entirely. To pursue national security and global stability, the United States must maintain its commitment to development.

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6 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Global Food Security.”


11 Per Pinstrup-Andersen and Satoru Shimokawa, “Do poverty and poor health and nutrition increase the risk of armed conflict onset?,” Food Policy, 33, issue 6, 513–20.


