
Soft Power and Security

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE HAS BEEN A CRITICAL TOOL FOR EXPANDING POLITICAL FREEDOM, ECONOMIC PROGRESS, AND GLOBAL SECURITY SINCE THE MARSHALL PLAN FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II. The security challenges facing the United States are broad and varied, and an effective administration will use the full array of tools at its disposal. In some cases, a military response to a security challenge is not the best option available. Ideally, we defuse threats before they manifest by expanding and strengthening the rules-based order that the United States and its allies constructed over the last 70 years. One of the most important questions facing the next American president will be: How do we apply development assistance and other forms of soft power to increase our security?

If American taxpayers are going to continue to support the U.S. foreign assistance budget, which at roughly \$30 billion annually makes us the most generous nation on Earth, they need to know that this money is well spent and that it makes them more secure. This means addressing threats to core U.S. interests, and doing so in an effective and accountable manner. International assistance is a reflection of national generosity, but at a strategic level it aims to help countries develop economically and socially so that they can become net contributors to the rules-based world order.

A few ongoing challenges that the United States should address (at least in part) through strategic foreign assistance are: the threat of global pandemics like the Ebola outbreak in the fall of 2014; security and humanitarian issues arising from immigration crises at U.S. and Euro-

pean borders; instability and security threats arising from radical extremism; and confronting great-power threats to the rules-based world order. All of these challenges demand cooperative solutions that leverage military, diplomatic, and economic assets from countries interested in upholding global security and prosperity.

There is no question that development spending can be a safeguard for stability and security when deployed effectively. It must be stated, however, that major global progress on a number of fronts over recent decades has changed the way foreign assistance should be utilized. The world is freer, more prosperous, and has greater capacity than at any time in human history. The largest drivers of international development are private-sector activity and good governance (with a bias toward democratic governance). International assistance can catalyze these forces, but donors no longer hold the largest wallet in the room. In a world where total foreign direct investment and tax dollars collected in developing countries are orders of magnitude larger than official development assistance (ODA), donors need to recognize their role as facilitators, providers of expertise, and catalytic investors.

Despite these changes, international assistance still has an important role to play, and has underpinned global economic and social development in ways that support U.S. security and prosperity. Historically, U.S. foreign assistance has been strikingly effective. Nineteen of 20 top U.S. trading partners are former assistance recipients, including key partners like Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. These successes demonstrate the potential of foreign assistance to transform the world for the better. There are, however, a series of critical questions the United States should be asking itself to ensure that our assistance dollars are leveraged in the most effective way possible.

Are our assistance agencies organized appropriately? As it stands, the United States has over 20 agencies that help deliver U.S. foreign assistance. This has led to frac-



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tured goals and policy, and limits our ability to deliver impact. Presidents Johnson and Nixon had one single aid agency that coordinated all assistance activity. In an era where there are coordinators and czars for seemingly every government activity, there is an argument to be made for a consolidated aid apparatus.

Does our assistance spending aim to leverage and catalyze larger forces? Private-sector activity, investment, and domestic resources collected in developing countries themselves will provide the bulk of development finance over the coming decades. We should be designing our aid programs to enable private-sector growth and support effective and transparent governance.

Do our aid agencies have the right human resources and human-resource strategies? U.S. foreign assistance capability would benefit greatly from a special expeditionary force that is equipped and trained to operate in less than stable environments. This would include conflict zones as well as failed and failing states. We should also consider much longer commitments for personnel operating in conflict countries contemplating tours of duty as long as eight years in one country. Providing the necessary training and incentive structure for this force may require specialized college scholarship programs.

Do current regulations maximize the potential impact of international assistance spending? Current

constraints on resources, including inflexible uses for monies, arduous inspectors general oversight, an outdated Foreign Assistance Act, and a constraining rule book for procurement, limit our ability to deliver effective assistance. Longer project timelines that extend beyond 3 to 5 years should be replaced with projects with 7- to 15-year time horizons. This is especially true in the conflict zones and failing states that have the most pressing need for assistance.

Today the world faces a complex and growing list of shared challenges. As has been the case since World War II, the United States and our allies have the task of supporting a rules-based global order. Following China's creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), we face true geostrategic competition in the soft-power arena. We need to be cognizant that we must offer the types of assistance that developing countries themselves want, or they now have the option of taking their business to China. This pressure on us and our allies could be positive if it forces a modernization and rethink of our approach to international assistance.

The globalization of trade, investment, and commerce has left us with a world that is more integrated than ever, but has also led to the rise of transnational threats that undermine security and economic prosperity. Now more than ever, the task of upholding global security and facilitating economic and social development requires the cooperation of likeminded nations capable of harnessing military, diplomatic, and economic tools in coordination to achieve positive outcomes. Foreign assistance, when deployed effectively, is a big part of this picture. □