

Testimony of Representative Eliot L. Engel (NY-16)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Lowey, and all the members of the subcommittee. I'm grateful for the opportunity to make the case for continued strong investment in American security through our international affairs budget.

Congress is a coequal branch of government, and, according to the Constitution, we appropriate funds. We don't just have to roll over because the White House says so. This year, we're going to have to put that idea to the test.

A few weeks ago, we saw reports that the White House planned a 37 percent cut in the international affairs budget. That would be a disaster. But let's be honest: any large cut in our international engagement, at a time when we're facing serious challenges around the world, would be a disaster.

We're hearing that initial number has come down, and senior State Department officials have told me that rather than chopping off nearly 40 percent of their budget in one stroke, they want instead to put the department on a "glide path" to achieving those reductions.

The way I see it, whether you nosedive into the side of a mountain or you're on a glide path into the side of a mountain, you still end up on the side of a mountain.

That's why more than 100 of our colleagues joined me in making the case to Secretary Tillerson that such cuts would be a catastrophic mistake.

The world can be a dangerous place. And there will be times when the only option for keeping America safe is the use of military force. We have the greatest military in the world, and I've always supported a strong national defense.

The men and women who wear our uniform put their lives on the line to protect our country. So we owe it to them to exhaust every possible option before we send them into harm's way. By cutting support for American diplomacy and development, we are betraying that commitment. If we don't give these efforts their due, we are not exhausting every option and instead unnecessarily putting our troops at risk.

Because what the State Department does, what USAID and MCC and the Peace Corps do and what our funding for the United Nations supports, is stopping crises before they start.

Diplomats work out disagreements across a conference table or in quiet corners, so they don't need to be resolved on the battlefield with bombs and bullets. Diplomacy makes old friendships stronger and builds new bridges to connect with new partners.

Development efforts aren't charity. They're investments in countries and communities to help them become more stable, healthy, and prosperous. Poverty creates hotbeds for

violence, crime, and corruption, and those problems inevitably spill over into neighboring countries. Development assistance, on the other hand, builds stronger partners on the world stage, partners who will share our values and priorities.

What's more, these efforts cost pennies on the dollar compared to military engagement.

If we slash investment in diplomacy and development, we're telling our servicemembers—and the American people—we'll take our chances down the road, even if that may mean a much steeper cost in terms of American blood and American treasure.

When that time comes, what will we say to constituents who want to know, "Could you have done more? Did you have the chance to put out this fire before it burned out of control?" What will we say to mothers and fathers who ask, "Did my son or daughter really have to make the ultimate sacrifice, or could we have stopped the crisis before it started so that my child could have come home?"

There's another cost. If the United States draws back from the world stage, what signal does that send? What does it say to countries that look to our values and our leadership? What does it say to other big powers—maybe those that don't share our values or our interests—when they see the void we've left behind. History has shown us what we can get by retreating into a defensive, isolationist crouch. If we aren't carrying the mantle of global leadership, make no mistake, someone else will pick it up, and we may not like what we see.

The American people don't want to see that happen to our country. In fact, recent data shows that 72 percent of Americans believe our country should play a leading global role. Nearly six in 10 believe funding levels at the State Department should stay the same or increase.

As for military experts, here's a letter signed by more than 120 retired generals and admirals. They write, "We urge you to ensure that resources for the International Affairs Budget keep pace with the growing global threats and opportunities we face. Now is not the time to retreat."

Secretary of Defense Mattis himself said in 2013:

If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately. So I think it's a cost benefit ratio. The more that we put into the State Department's diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget as we deal with the outcome of an apparent American withdrawal from the international scene.

Mr. Chairman, I fear that following the Administration's path forward for our international affairs budget is the equivalent of retreat. It's retreat from our role as a global leader. It's retreat from our alliances and our careful diplomatic efforts to curb proliferation, human rights abuses, and climate change. It's retreat from the lifesaving

work we do all over the world, whether that's fighting HIV/AIDS, combating tuberculosis, or battling modern slavery. And it's retreat from our solemn commitment that military force must always remain a measure of last resort.

I encourage this committee to support a strong international affairs budget, and I'm again grateful for the time today. I yield back.

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