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Democracy Dies in Darkness

'America first' shouldn't mean cutting foreign aid

This tiny category of discretionary spending helps keep America safe.

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We have entered the era of "America first" with only a vague understanding of its meaning. President Trump's inaugural address signaled an ambitious nationalist reimagining of the post-World War II international order. Trump's foreign policy team, in contrast, seems to spring from that order. The resulting uncertainty is global and dangerous. Vacuums of leadership are not generally filled by the good guys.

The administration's policy shift is most evident so far in the areas of trade and refugees — Trump prefers less of both. Given a narrowed conception of national interest and the president's discomfort with the idea of "nation building," foreign assistance would seem a natural next target. Persistent rumors that the administration is mulling major cuts at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have heightened this speculation.

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Although Trump hasn't spoken much on this topic, some of his comments have reflected an inclination to pull back. "It is necessary that we invest in our infrastructure, stop sending foreign aid to countries that hate us and use that money to rebuild our tunnels, roads, bridges and schools," he said when he announced his candidacy. And in a March 2016 interview with the Washington Post editorial board, he said: "I watched as we built schools in Iraq and they'd be blown up. And we'd build another one, and it would get blown up. . . . And yet we can't build a school in Brooklyn. We have no money for education, because we can't build in our own country. And at what point do you say, hey, we have to take care of ourselves."

Yet Trump has also added notes of ambiguity. In August, he told the Miami Herald that Congress should increase funding to fight the Zika virus abroad. In September, he underlined the importance of ensuring clean water for everyone in the world. In October, he stated that "we're going to lead the way" on AIDS relief.

In this case, Trump's better angels would do more to serve the country than his budget-cutters. Putting foreign assistance on the chopping block would be a serious mistake, by any definition of the national interest.

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Let's begin by getting the facts straight. Surveys have shown that many Americans assume the country spends upwards of 20 percent of the federal budget on foreign aid. In reality, nonmilitary foreign assistance — including all of America's work on international development and global health — represents less than 1 percent of the federal budget. Slashing this tiny category of discretionary spending for the sake of budget control would be a form of deception — a sideshow to avoid truly important (and unpopular) budgetary choices.

For less than 1 percent of the federal budget, the United States led a global coalition to fight HIV/AIDS when the disease threatened to devastate and destabilize much of the African continent . Battling another of the world's most lethal killers, malaria, U.S.-led global programs have saved more than 6 million lives, mainly children under 5 years old. America also led a global effort to support agriculture when the food, fuel and financial crisis of 2008 pushed nearly 100 million people back into a state of chronic hunger and extreme poverty. As of 2015, that effort had directly benefited nearly 19 million rural households and reached more than 12 million children with nutrition programs. And America led a global partnership to bring power to half a billion people in Africa who have too often lived, worked, studied and given birth in the dark.

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This established impact runs up against a durable stereotype: that foreign assistance is routinely bundled in large bills and thrown down rat holes of waste and corruption. The charge is not entirely without historical root. During the Cold War, foreign assistance had some remarkable successes, including the Marshall Plan and the Green Revolution, but also notable failures such as aid to Vietnam and to dictators in Central America. In Africa, assistance sometimes went to strongmen such as Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, mainly because of a strategic chess game against the Soviet Union, not because he was spurring development.

But over the past two decades and past two presidential administrations, health and development spending has evolved into a rigorous, innovative and professional enterprise dedicated to measured outcomes. Aid and development practitioners know how to set smart targets, engage private-sector partners, adapt to changing circumstances and make sure taxpayers get the most value for their investments. And they have evidence that what they are doing works.

Most U.S. foreign assistance no longer even goes to foreign governments; It is given to U.S. companies and nonprofits in the form of contracts and grants; these organizations then implement projects in other countries, employing a combination of American and foreign staff members and often partnering with institutions of civil society.

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But why does this emphasis on rigor and outcomes matter to U.S. foreign policy?
How does foreign assistance serve definable American interests?

Many of our most dangerous global challenges — such as terrorism, the drug trade and pandemic diseases — gather strength in countries, or regions within countries, that are poorly governed, often corrupt, and marked by high levels of poverty, hunger and disease. These places are incubators of risks to the United States. Consider Ebola, which took root in the weak health systems of West Africa and threatened our nation and the world with death and panic. Or the poverty and conflict in the Northern Triangle of Central America, which led to tens of thousands of child migrants trying to make their way to the United States on the tops of trains. Or the collapse of sovereignty in Syria, which helped produce the Islamic State and a radiating, destabilizing flood of refugees into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and beyond. Or the weak governments of South America, which are often unable to halt the flow of drugs that enter our country.

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These are all very real consequences of poverty, instability and poor governance. But gains in hope, health and stability reduce these threats and better protect Americans. A forward-leaning Ebola response, employing America's full epidemiological and humanitarian capacity, helped save lives in Africa and prevented the outbreak from spreading around the globe. In the Northern Triangle, our partnerships have helped reduce gang violence and stem the flow of unaccompanied minors to the United States. The Syrian crisis continues apace, but our massive humanitarian support for those displaced and in dire need reduces the pressure of refugee migrations to many nations, including our own.

One of the best examples of the strategic role of aid has been in Colombia, where

criminal gangs, violent conflict and the world's largest production of cocaine threatened to destabilize the region and the world for decades. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the United States had a large security budget in Colombia and a small budget for development assistance. Then the Colombians embraced a greater focus on long-term development, which they integrated into their stabilization plans when territory was taken back from rebels. U.S. development assistance was increased, then integrated and properly sequenced with defense activities. As soon as landmines were cleared and local officials could safely return to liberated towns, USAID poured in assistance, which was crucial to consolidate gains. Those long-term investments are now paying off, supporting peace negotiations and helping to reintegrate former rebels and displaced civilians, in addition to improving business opportunities for U.S. firms. U.S. foreign assistance in Colombia gave stability and peace a fighting chance, and helped remedy a serious security problem for the United States and its allies.

This type of foreign assistance is essential to preventing the kind of uncontrollable strategic threats that might eventually require military intervention. (We are not talking here about humanitarian assistance, which should be driven entirely by the nature and scale of the need, or about direct military aid.) Defense Secretary Jim Mattis made a compelling case for conflict prevention when he was head of U.S. Central Command: "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition." A small investment in foreign assistance today saves big on defense later.

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An “America first” approach to foreign assistance could mean deploying foreign aid even more rigorously to help keep America safe, rather than a simple retreat.

How do we create an aid system that uses big data to identify areas of weak governance that may produce global threats? One that systematically employs the full spectrum of assistance? One that uses information on measured outcomes to adjust policies and practices in real time? And one that ultimately builds local capacity to confront problems?

There are specific actions the new administration can take to deliver on this vision. It should designate a “coordinator for development” who is empowered to ensure results from U.S. foreign assistance programs. This coordinator could be the new USAID administrator or the secretary of state himself — but it must be someone who sits at the principals table at the National Security Council and has the clear backing of the White House. He or she would need to review existing efforts and determine how they match rising threats. To avoid being just another layer of bureaucracy, such an official should be authorized to move budget resources between the State Department, USAID and the Defense Department as necessary to effectively prevent conflicts. Under these circumstances, aid should be categorized in the budget as national security spending, not “non-defense discretionary” spending. And the Trump national security team should make sure American leadership on these issues remains the bipartisan priority it has been for decades, starting with proposing and defending a strong budget commitment to these efforts right now.

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The next few months could mark a turning point for foreign assistance, and it matters greatly what kind. We could see the erosion of support for a cost-effective instrument of foreign policy and national influence — and we would see the consequences of such negligence later, probably in the form of military commitments — or we could see a reform that makes foreign assistance a reflection of American ideals and a rigorous instrument of American interests. The latter is a worthy and necessary goal for a great nation.

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