



NANCY LINDBORG AND BILL LANE

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The Smart Money Is on Smart Power

It's budget time in Washington, and as President Obama released his request for the 2011 fiscal year on February 1, the scrutiny - and partisan finger-pointing - has begun as to what programs should be funded in a tight budget year. But there is one area that both Democrats and Republicans can all agree needs greater attention, and that's our International Affairs Budget.

First, a quick overview of what the International Affairs Budget actually is. It's an important part of our overall national security funding and helps to combat infectious diseases, provide disaster relief to devastated nations, educate children to give them hope and opportunity and it supports economic projects to open new markets for American goods.

Investing in the International Affairs Budget is the smart thing to do in an era when the world is changing and more interconnected. Military power alone cannot guarantee our security and prosperity.

The men and women of our armed forces should not be expected to resolve issues fueled by grinding poverty, poor health and lack of economic opportunity.

These challenges must be met through our civilian development and diplomacy programs by supporting democracy, educating children, building economic infrastructure and fostering business growth in poor countries.

This approach has come to be known as "smart power," and Defense Secretary Robert Gates is among its strongest proponents. "America's civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded for far too long," he said, recognizing how vital these programs are to America's post-9/11 security challenges.

Helping to create the conditions for peace and stability also supports our own prosperity. Developing countries are America's fastest growing markets and represent 40 percent of U.S. exports. As societies become stable they also become consumers, and that's good for America. It means more U.S. exports and more jobs here at home.

And then there are the benefits that have no price tag. The images of American workers pulling victims from the rubble in Haiti, feeding and comforting the afflicted, and beginning the rebuilding ef-

forts send a message to the world about our nation's values and our deep-seated longing for a better world - and our determination to act on it.

Totaling just 1.4 percent of the entire federal budget, and less than 7 percent of what the U.S. spends on national security-related programs, the International Affairs Budget is a critical part of our overall security, right alongside our defense, intelligence, homeland security and veterans affairs programs.

During his term in office, President Bush began proposing significant increases for our development and diplomacy efforts - such as HIV/AIDS assistance - because he recognized their critical role in maintaining our global and economic security. We're happy to see President Obama and leaders on both sides of the aisle are continuing that trend.

Just last month, 58 Senators and 189 Representatives from both parties signed a letter to the president urging him to present a robust request for the International Affairs Budget. They said, "These investments are essential to strengthening our national security, building economic prosperity, and protecting the

health and safety of all Americans, while demonstrating our moral values and humanitarian principles."

Increasing our investments in development and diplomacy alongside a strong defense is an important step in the right direction toward not just protecting our nation, but also improving our economy and demonstrating the best of who we are as a country.

The challenges our nation faces around the world are far greater than the budget we currently devote to the International Affairs Budget. But while future increases are necessary, President Obama's request is a promising start. We call on Congress to support the President's FY11 International Affairs Budget request and begin providing our development and diplomacy programs with the resources they need to meet the global challenges of the 21st century.

The return on this investment will be a better, safer world, and a future of greater security and economic opportunity for the American people.

Nancy Lindborg is the President of Mercy Corps and Bill Lane is the Washington Director of Caterpillar. They are co-Presidents of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition.