

There's Bipartisan Support for Boost in Foreign Aid Budget

By Reps. Gerry Connolly and Aaron Schock, Dec. 7, 2009

Among the many myths that exist about the federal budget, perhaps none is greater than the widespread belief that more than 10 percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid. The reality, of course, is far different. Even with the modest increases in recent years supported by both Democratic and Republican administrations and Congresses, the international affairs budget totals less than 1.5 percent of the federal budget.

A couple of weeks ago, we joined together with a bipartisan group of Members to send our colleagues in the House and Senate a unique letter. The letter, co-authored by more than 55 Senators and more than 175 Representatives from both parties, calls on President Barack Obama to request a robust international affairs budget in the upcoming fiscal year.

With partisanship at an all-time high, it is no small feat for Democrats and Republicans to be united on a major issue. As it stands now, development and diplomacy are badly underresourced elements of a comprehensive national security approach. But both parties recognize it is critical for the U.S. to have a full range of tools at its disposal to meet today's global challenges.

This is hardly a novel conclusion. Numerous bipartisan commissions, among them the 2006 National Security Strategy, the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review, the 9/11 commission and the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study

Group, have concluded that increases in the international affairs budget are essential to ensuring U.S. security in the 21st century.

These commissions, like the signatories of our letter, know that we live in an increasingly interconnected world where infectious diseases, failed states, economic despair and terrorism don't observe national borders. The sobering realities of today's world demand that America utilize the full range of its nonmilitary tools as a primary pillar of our national security. Investments in our international affairs programs bolster our national security by allowing us to work with foreign partners to track down terrorists and weapons, to improve the economic and political lives of others, to help stabilize fragile states, and to increase goodwill abroad.

But it's not just about security. It's also about the economy and jobs. With 1 in 7 U.S. jobs export-related, the international affairs budget also is critical to creating jobs and economic growth here at home by expanding export markets overseas.

Last year, more than 200 Members of the House and Senate signed a similar letter, among them prominent members of the Appropriations, Armed Services, Budget, Senate Foreign Relations and House Foreign Affairs committees. Both Democratic presidential nominee Obama and his Republican counterpart, Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), also called for increases in the

international affairs budget, illustrating the degree to which this issue has bipartisan appeal. And as freshman Members of our two caucuses, we both realize how important this issue is to our economic well-being, place in the world and national security.

Few people represent this consensus as well as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who has served with distinction in both Democratic and Republican administrations. With his decades of experience, Gates knows the importance of diplomacy and development in U.S. foreign policymaking. As he stated, "America will be grappling with a range of challenges to the international system and to our own security — from global terrorism to ethnic conflicts, to rogue nations and rising powers. And as I have said before, they will require devoting considerably more resources to nonmilitary instruments of national power." We agree, which is why a new, stronger international affairs budget is so vital.

As Obama prepares his fiscal 2011 budget request, he should know that he has strong bipartisan support for a robust international affairs budget. Together, we must ensure that the U.S. is fully equipped to face the global challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

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