

Military power alone is not enough — international aid is vital to US security

by Anthony Zinni and Laura Richardson, opinion contributors - 03/07/25 10:30 AM ET



Mark Schiefelbein,

Associated Press pool

Secretary of State Marco Rubio speaks to reporters at Albrook Airport in Panama City on Feb. 3, 2025.

Before he served as President Trump’s first secretary of defense, Gen. James Mattis, as head of U.S. Central Command, testified before Congress in 2013 that “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.”

He was right then, and he is right now.

Mattis recognized that a “peace through strength” foreign policy centered on deterrence demands the most lethal and formidable military in the world. He, like so many of our military leaders, also understands that this strength must go hand-in-glove with the critical tools of international assistance and diplomacy, which help prevent conflict and insecurity from escalating to costly wars that can require American troops.

Trump inherited a complex diplomatic battlefield, with an axis of rivals and competitors — China, Russia, Iran and North Korea — working to undermine U.S. influence, security and economic interests around the world.

It’s no secret that the Chinese Communist Party is on the march, looking to replace America as the preeminent economic driver of the international order. In fact, Beijing has been ramping up its Belt and Road Initiative by 525 percent over the past decade and a half, a long-range strategy focused on

influencing countries through non-military development, humanitarian support, financing and political influence. From exploiting critical minerals in Africa and South America to cultivating relationships in southeast Asia, the race is on for partnerships and export markets that will define this century.

When one of us led U.S. Southern Command, we witnessed Beijing's bold diplomatic maneuvering: Panama signed 47 bilateral agreements with China — at a time when the U.S. lacked an ambassador on the ground — joining 22 other Central and South American nations signing on to the Belt-and-Road Initiative. The outcome? Increased revenue and jobs for Chinese workers and state-owned enterprises, while our neighbors fell into debt traps. American influence waned.

Gutting U.S. international assistance infrastructure will not help the American people win the battle for the 21st century. Instead, we are seeing significant unintended damage from the abrupt and chaotic dismantling of programs, which will ultimately put America at a disadvantage to our rivals. These actions undermine Secretary of State Marco Rubio's doctrine that every dollar we spend should make America safer, stronger and more prosperous.

We need to play both offense and defense to advance a "peace through strength" agenda to outcompete rivals like China; prevent costly wars; and stop disease, drugs and terror from reaching our borders. Withdrawing from America's leadership role on the global playing field risks leaving a void for our adversaries to fill.

What do we lose by stepping back from our counterterror assistance programs? When one of us led U.S. Central Command and spent decades rooting out terror infrastructure across the Middle East, we were most effective in our mission when our civilian aid implementers were empowered. It is far preferable to strengthen the capacity of partner nations to fight Al Qaeda and ISIS themselves, so Americans don't have to.

But now we are seeing programs from Syria to the Sahel that work alongside the U.S. military abruptly terminated. Security guards at the Al Hol and Al Roj camps in Syria — which house close to 10,000 captured ISIS fighters — were cut off, jeopardizing hard-fought progress in the campaign to defeat the terror group.

And across the Sahel — the new epicenter of jihadist activity and Russian mercenaries exploiting power vacuums — counterterror programs that improve local law enforcement capacity to prepare, respond, apprehend and prosecute terrorists have been paused.

Long before Sept. 11, many military leaders warned of the acute risk of terrorism that our absence from diplomacy and development in Afghanistan would invite. Imagine how many trillions of dollars and lives could've been saved if we had invested back then in what Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) has called "national security insurance."

America's competitors and rivals are seizing on the opportunity to fill the vacuum we are leaving behind. In Cambodia, China has stepped into the void we created, subsidizing de-mining programs, once funded by the U.S. government. What will China demand in return when U.S. freedom of navigation is threatened in Southeast Asia?

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Kremlin is now supporting disease specialists to help detect and stop outbreaks where U.S. programs have been suspended. Congo is home to one of the largest supplies of critical minerals in the world, needed for everything from smart phones to AI chips. What will Moscow expect in return as supply-chain competition intensifies?

There is still time to send a clear message that America intends to use all instruments of national power to safeguard our economic and security interests. If Americans want to win — and avoid losing — influence around the world, then we need international development, global health and humanitarian assistance programs to support our allies, deter our adversaries and ultimately protect our homeland.

Anthony Zinni is a retired four-star U.S. Marine Corps general. Gen. Laura Richardson served as the commander of U.S. Southern Command until her retirement earlier this year. They now serve as co-chairs of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition's National Security Advisory Council.