

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:  
On cuts to foreign aid

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings podcast network: analysis and commentary and Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

INGRAM: This is George Ingram, I'm a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution. In a State of the Union address last night, President Trump's attack on foreign assistance gives substance to reports of some proposed cuts in the range of up to 37% to the U.S. international affairs budget, an account that totals only 1% of all federal spending.

Maybe it's time the president staff informed him of some of the historic successes of development over the past two decades: more than one billion people removed from extreme poverty, the eradication of smallpox, the elimination of polio in 123 countries, infant and child deaths cut in half. The United States has led, prospered, and been secure under a stable post-World War II international order by adequately funding our military and its companion civil international affairs programs.

Backed by a superior defense capability, our diplomats and development experts are on the frontline of advancing U.S. interests in the world, interests that involve economic prosperity, our human values, and our security. Yes, even our security, as our diplomats and development experts are on the frontline of assembling allies into security alliances and negotiating to find common ground with those less friendly countries. Also, containing global pandemics before they reach our shores, combating international terrorism, helping to stabilize nations before they collapse, and preventing nuclear theft.

So how would these cuts be accomplished? To reduce the foreign aid budget by one third, one obviously has to start with the big ticket items. Looking at the budget by assistance category, health is the largest at eight and a half billion dollars. Is the administration going to cut 37%, or two and a half billion dollars, from the six and a half billion dollar PEPFAR program, the program that has put the brakes on the global HIV AIDS pandemic and last year provided lifesaving treatment to 11.5 million people around the world?

Or will it cut smaller health programs, maternal and child health, vulnerable children, nutrition, all lifesaving programs that are popular with the Congress and reflect the best of American values and national interest? What about humanitarian assistance, also a large category at seven and a half billion dollars. With a record 65 million displaced people in the world, are we going to back away from our historic role as the largest responder to human disasters and suffering? Are we going to fail to respond to the pending starvation in the Lake Chad region of Africa?

Or, to look at it by country, will the administration cut aid to the largest recipient, Israel, the Congress's favorite country and the president's special friend? Egypt and Jordan, number two and three on the list? Will assistance to these two key allies be cut when the lack of support from the U.S. could add to instability in the Middle East and threat to Israel? You get the point. Drastic cuts to the international affairs budget is a threat to our national interest, and no way to make America great. In the post-World War II era, Republican and Democratic presidents have always put America first. It has been a two part agenda, get our domestic affairs in order and advance American interests around the world.

In the 19th century, America could minimize its international engagement thanks to being protected by two oceans and two benign borders. Modern technology and global economics has rendered isolation an historic relic. Retrenching on our commitment to help our allies and those in need undercuts American values that have been part of our heritage since the founding of our nation, and also our security.

If you doubt that, listen to the appeal to fund the diplomacy and development account that was sent on Monday to the leadership of the Congress from 121 retired three and four star flag and general officers. They said, many of the crises our nation faces do not have military solutions alone. The military needs strong civilian partners in the battle against the drivers of extremism. My guess is the Congress will listen to this appeal, as evidenced by Lindsey Graham's declaration yesterday that this part of the president's budget will be dead on arrival.

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