



Is reducing US foreign aid in the Middle East a wise strategy?

FOREIGN AID is an indispensable tool to advance American national security interests, which according to the State Department is “to build... a more democratic, secure and prosperous world for the benefit of the American people and the international community.”

Yet across the American political spectrum there is a growing chorus for retrenchment in international affairs, especially in the Middle East, claiming the US has intervened in conflicts that are not in our national security interest. According to Thomas Wright, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, critics from the Right and Left have recommended that America withdraw from its “military interventions in the Middle East,” in effect abandoning long-standing allies.

Contributing to isolationist sentiments is the commonly held belief that 25% of the US budget goes to foreign aid, decreasing what the government should be doing for its citizens, whereas in reality it is closer to 1% of the federal budget. However the conventional wisdom that Americans are averse to Middle East interventions may be overstated. According to a recent Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll after the targeted assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, 74% of Americans support maintaining or increasing “the US military presence in the Middle East” while only 24% favor reducing it.

US President Donald Trump, for his part, has long criticized America’s involvement in the Middle East, but in practice as president has stood by Israel because he appreciates that Israel is our only reliable ally in the region and asks for no US boots on the ground to defend her.

Despite repeatedly saying that he favored leaving the region while recommending slashing foreign aid, once Trump became commander-in-chief, he has been driven

like presidents before him to deal forcefully with events there. President George W. Bush had no interest in foreign interventions, but 9/11 occurred on his watch, and the rest is history.

Trump tried to remove all American soldiers from Syria in 2018 and ran up against his defense secretary, who resigned in protest. American disengagement from the Kurds in northeast Syria allowing Turkey to ride roughshod over them did not quite work out for us. The US had to change course, leaving troops in place to protect our interests, which included protecting Kurdish oil, preventing ISIS from returning and blocking Iran’s push for a land bridge through Syria to the Mediterranean.

Most recently the Iranian-orchestrated attack at the US Embassy in Baghdad and the attack on the US base in Iraq that killed an American contractor led to a series of events that culminated with the Soleimani assassination. This was in opposition to the president’s stated goal of minimizing American military actions in the region. However in his most consequential non-military action, this president has been much stronger than the previous administration with its economic pressure on Iran, its preferred method to pressure an adversary.

It is certainly tempting to throw the baby out with the bath water, ending US involvement with corrupt authoritarian Middle East regimes, assisting supposed allies who often soon afterwards work against our security interests as soon as their leaders see more to be had elsewhere. Turkey is a prime example.

Another example is Egypt, home to more than 90 million poor people that is the second-largest recipient of American aid, but is in danger of turning to Salafist or Muslim Brotherhood leadership if the current authoritarian president, who – for shared interests, rather than shared values – works

with America. Withdrawing foreign aid to Egypt will destabilize the nation, endanger Israel and force Egypt to turn to China or Russia.

The president and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo must appreciate that strategically focused foreign aid can stabilize regions, especially in the Middle East, and give us some leverage with these countries and their leaderships. They should not underestimate the power of diplomatic leverage and the influence foreign aid affords us in advancing our security goals, while reducing the possibility of being pulled into military conflicts in the quagmire of the Middle East.

But the greatest damage to American foreign policy can occur in the next election, which would make a reduction in foreign aid pale in comparison. The election of Sen. Bernie Sanders and his socialist anti-Western perspective to the White House would likely put American influence in the world into a tailspin. American foreign policy and influence is built on the bedrock of its global capitalist financial influence making it a unipolar superpower. A strong American economy makes diplomatic initiatives possible. Sanders’s domestic policies would likely depress the US and other economies. Furthermore, Sanders’s affinity for the Palestinian Authority, Iran and Venezuela, with its Hezbollah influence, would add more fuel to the foreign policy maelstrom.

The president is proposing that more than \$4 billion be cut from foreign aid in the new budget. More than half the cuts (\$2.3b.) would be to USAID and an additional \$2b. cut to the State Department through a process called rescission. According to Politico, “\$787 million for UN international peacekeeping activities, \$522m. in core funding for the UN and \$364m. for a range of UN humanitarian and human rights programs” would be cut.

There is little doubt that the UN has a checkered record as peacekeeper with a bloated anti-American bureaucracy. But shouldn't the president use that money instead for the same purpose, redirecting it to work with other willing democracies instead of the UN? In addition, the cuts could violate the Impoundment Control Act of 1974 by rescinding funds already allocated by Congress, which cannot be canceled by the executive branch.

According to Politico, the bipartisan leadership of the House and Senate Foreign Relations committees wrote to the White House to reconsider. "Such action would be precedent-setting and a direct affront to the separation of powers principle upon which our nation was built."

The chair of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Nita Lowey, said "these funds are essential for US global leadership and protecting the security of the American people."

This dispute about foreign aid is just one part of the battle between the executive and legislative branches of the American government where passions run high between Trump and Congressional Democrats. Eight Republicans joined Democrats in the Senate this year trying to limit the independent discretion of the president by invoking the War Powers Act, demanding Congress be the one to declare war, in this case against Iran in the post-Soleimani era.

Sen. Tim Kaine has led this charge, which according to the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal would, if implemented, put 535 members of Congress as mini-commanders-in-chief, an impractical chain of command for the nation's defense. The bill will be vetoed by Trump. However, the secret is that it would be vetoed by almost every president of either party who believes foreign policy is the exclusive purview of the Executive Branch.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

Democrats in Congress, and not an insignificant number of Republicans, do not trust this president to avoid impetuous decisions and think he does not have a coherent foreign policy. Defenders of the president claim his record of flying in the face of conventional wisdom has been a success, especially regarding his actions against the Palestinian Authority, Iran and the UN Relief and Works Agency, which they feel are long overdue.

This legislative effort can be seen simply as a shot across the presidential bow, a warning to Trump with a guaranteed presidential veto and an escape clause in the legislation that "Nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent the United States from defending itself from imminent attack."

But this begs the question, is the world safer if the US disengages from the Middle East and reduces not only its footprint but foreign aid?

The US is still the world's only superpower and the positive effects of the stability that it affords the world are largely unappreciated, from allowing the world to transit its seas and air without fear, to its stable economy allowing the world to invest and bank worldwide with security.

The world is safer with a strong America. The Wall Street Journal nails it when it says American "adversaries will be less cautious



Rep. Nita Lowey (D-NY, 17th District)

in attacking US forces if they think a president needs to wait for approval from the Congress for a military response," if Kaine's bill were passed with a veto-proof majority.

Trump is pulled by two contradictory opinions. One day he is playing golf with the isolationist Sen. Rand Paul, who wants the US to disengage from the world and cut foreign aid even to Israel. The next day he is having lunch with Sen. Lindsey Graham, who believes in the power of foreign aid and a robust American military, believing the best way to prevent conflict is strength, making adversaries believe you are willing and ready to use that force along with the soft power of foreign aid.

The Middle East is complex and well-intentioned actions go sideways quickly. But the combination of a well-thought-out strategy, targeted foreign aid, military strength, a small-but-significant footprint and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is the best way to advance both the interests of the United States and worldwide peace and prosperity. ■

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