

BERMAN: Rethinking foreign aid

Results should be focus, not process

By Rep. Howard L. Berman

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Illustration: Foreign aid by Greg Groesch for The Washington Times

Later this month, the administration will release its plan for updating our diplomatic and development architecture to meet the needs of the 21st century. The Quadrennial Review of Diplomacy and Development, or QDDR, has been 1 1/2 years in the making and represents a serious and thoughtful attempt to identify and repair the gaps in our civilian capacity to operate effectively abroad. The real challenge, however, will be to use the results of this review to implement meaningful reforms with lasting impact. That's where Congress comes in.

Over the past two years, the House Foreign Affairs Committee has been considering proposals for modernizing U.S. foreign-assistance policies and programs to make them more efficient and more effective. We have held hearings and organized round-table discussions, issued concept papers and solicited written feedback as a prelude to rewriting the 50-year-old law that governs foreign aid. As a result of that process and in anticipation of the results of the QDDR and a related presidential study of development policy, we propose a list of common-sense reforms that both parties, both houses and both the legislative and executive branches of government ought to be able to agree on:

Find out what works and stop funding what doesn't. It's time to start measuring in a systematic and comprehensive way the actual on-the-ground impact of our foreign assistance and put that information to use. Budget allocations should be based on facts and evidence.

Get more of the money to the people who need it. Over the past 20 years, we've lost a great deal of our in-house technical expertise. As a result, we spend a large proportion of our aid dollars hiring outside experts to design, manage and carry out programs rather than helping people directly.

Hold governments accountable. The purpose of aid is to create the conditions under which it is no longer needed. Except for humanitarian relief, which is based strictly on need, our aid should give priority to countries that make genuine efforts to help themselves.

Roll back earmarks. Foreign-aid programs are burdened with numerous earmarks and directives that are unrelated to program performance. Instead of spending money on pet projects, Congress should allow aid to be used where it is most needed and will do the most good.

Reduce paperwork. Over the years, reporting requirements have piled up while the quality of the information has deteriorated. We should let diplomats and development professionals do their jobs instead of sitting in the office filling out forms.

Slash red tape. Arcane rules and procedures make it difficult to deliver assistance fast where it is needed. We should simplify and streamline contracting procedures, eliminate Cold War restrictions and allow fast, flexible funding to address urgent problems.

Eliminate duplication and waste. Too many offices and agencies are doing the same things in the same places or, worse, carrying out contradictory policies and activities. Each agency has something to contribute, but all must conform to a clear and coordinated strategy and operate within a unified, civilian command structure.

Increase transparency. It's often difficult to find out how much aid is being spent where, and for what purposes. By making more information available in real time, we can better ensure that aid is reaching intended beneficiaries and achieving its desired objectives.

Share the burden. Our aid will have greater impact if we use it to leverage contributions from corporations, foundations and other governments. We should complement our bilateral programs with contributions to multilateral organizations and harmonize our activities with those of other donors.

Many of these recommendations mirror the findings of the QDDR. While the State Department can enact some of the reforms unilaterally through policy changes and regulations, doing so will not guarantee that the reforms survive. Only by mandating the new structures and processes in law can we establish the level of bipartisan support and executive-legislative consensus that will guard against backsliding and retrogression.

Foreign assistance programs not only reflect American values and principles but serve as essential means for protecting U.S. economic, foreign-policy and security interests. Regardless of the size of our international affairs budget, we have an obligation to make it more effective, more efficient and more accountable. I stand ready to work with the administration and with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to institutionalize

responsible reforms through legislation. While the details undoubtedly will be complicated and sometimes controversial, we can start by identifying areas like the ones above where we all agree and where we can make real progress.

Rep. Howard L. Berman, California Democrat, is chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

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