

SECURITY ASSISTANCE PERSPECTIVES

Security Assistance: What Do We Get for Our Efforts?

By

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Scholars and journalists are beginning to refer to a new phenomenon in American culture that one could call "the death of internationalism." According to these observers, Americans, previously barely tolerant of U.S. involvement in international affairs, now increasingly oppose it. Whatever the truth in these observations, the newest trend appears to be marked by extreme introversion. This trend is not identical to traditional American isolationism but fits comfortably with it. It ignores or rejects active involvement in international affairs because of the all-consuming nature of our concern with internal problems--currently the deficit.

One of the big losers in this trend is the United States security assistance program, which has suffered drastic cuts over the last two years after a period of healthy growth. Although there have always been critics of the program, Congress has supported security assistance by voting funding increases in 1982, 1983, and 1984. Because of this funding, our accomplishments have been notable. The report to this year's House Appropriations Bill for foreign assistance, however, reflects the effects of the deficit problem on congressional thinking. It states that

The Committee does not believe that the funds recommended in this bill adequately meet the program needs for the U.S. Foreign Assistance Program. However, unless Congress and the Administration can find an institutionally agreed upon way to deal with the problem presented by Gramm-Rudman, the Committee has no choice but to present this kind of a bill to the House.

Congress is sensitive to the underfunding of these programs. Both the Senate and House have taken steps to give the executive branch more flexibility in implementing bilateral programs. Similarly, many initiatives and creative solutions to budgetary shortfalls are being actively pursued with the executive branch. Nothing, however, can change the fact that we are simply short of funds for this vital tool. We in the Department of Defense need to reopen the discussion of security assistance now--not merely in budgetary terms but by reflecting on U.S. strategic objectives.

Why shouldn't security assistance, say its critics, be targeted for generous reductions? It is said that recipient countries must face reality during the current fiscal crisis, that the United States can no longer afford to bear the defense burdens of the world. But such conventional wisdom misses the mark. In our well-founded emphasis on putting our own fiscal affairs in order, we risk

the danger of succumbing as a nation to a condition of corrosive introversion. This could blind us, in effect, to the real dangers in the world beyond our borders, potential crises that could cost us dearly not only in dollars, but also in lives, if we are forced to rise to the challenge of defending ourselves and our interests alone in the face of widespread disorders and conflicts. To appreciate that these judgements are not mere hyperbole, we need to examine the budget process in detail and the real impact anticipated cuts could have.

THE PRIORITY OF SECURITY ASSISTANCE

Any examination of the current state of security assistance soon confronts a basic paradox. President Ronald Reagan delineated this paradox quite clearly in his remarks on "Peace and National Security" earlier this year, when he cited the four principles upon which our national defense program must rest. The second of these must be, he said, that,

Our security assistance provides as much security for the dollar as our own defense budget. Our friends can perform many tasks more cheaply than we can. That's why I can't understand proposals in Congress to sharply slash this vital tool. Military assistance to friends in strategic regions strengthens those who share our values and interests. And when they are strong, we are strengthened. It is in our interest to help them meet threats that could ultimately bring harm to us all.

A major problem with security assistance is that it is one of the least popular and one of the most misunderstood programs both in Congress and among the American public.

Even though almost all budget funds are spent in the United States and the program creates or sustains at least 375,000 American jobs, it is widely perceived as a "giveaway" program. In austere times such as these, we cannot afford giveaway programs--so the argument goes--so we should cut security assistance, especially when many good domestic programs could use the funds.

Irony piles on irony, especially since the foreign military sales program, including those sales funded by foreign cash and those financed by funds appropriated by the U.S. Congress, actually reduces the deficit by more than \$2 billion per year at current delivery levels when the tax benefits and offsetting receipts are taken into account. But these economic benefits are not the reasons why the United States has a security assistance program; in any case, they are not considered when funding decisions are made.

Every administration argues--quite correctly--for the U.S. security assistance program on the basis of national security interests. It is fair to ask: What are those interests and what do we get for our money.

WHAT WE GET FOR THE MONEY

Underlying all complex foreign military sales procedures and policies and sophisticated political-military nuances is a simple truth about U.S. security assistance: Our interests are served better if we are not forced to act alone, especially at the low end of the conflict spectrum, and if our friends and allies possess the capability to defend themselves and their own interests--which often coincide with, or at least complement, our own.

Of course, security assistance cannot function effectively in a vacuum; other United States diplomatic and economic assistance tools are also used to achieve our goals. But many recognize that security assistance is often central to achieving our national security objectives. To risk mixing metaphors, security assistance often acts as the glue that holds things together and at the same time the grease that makes them work.

On a different plane, we can say that U.S. programs have enabled some countries to achieve a real defense capability while moving others toward that goal. But the results can be pinpointed with much greater detail, and it is good to remind ourselves what they are.

Militarily, security assistance has helped Israel to deter and defeat threats to its existence; it has helped Egypt secure its borders against infiltration and depredations from Libya, while remaining self-confident, strong, and courageous enough to maintain peace with Israel despite all pressures to the contrary. We have complemented French efforts in Chad to help Chadian armed forces stop the invading Libyan and surrogate Libyan forces from creating a Libyan clone.

In Europe, the southern tier NATO countries have been bolstered in their efforts to continue participation in the joint defense of Western Europe and have continued to grant base rights to United States forces.

In the Far East, security assistance programs have complemented the weight of the U.S. troop presence by helping South Korea build an indigenous deterrent to a North Korean invasion without hindering our ally's greatest national security asset, its vibrant economy. Thailand has been better able to deter Vietnam at its borders and avoid the worst aspects of internal insurgencies.

In Southwest Asia, Pakistan has bolstered its traditional courage with military capability and has thus been able to stand firm on the removal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and to confront Soviet and Afghan attacks along its borders.

Sales and technical assistance have enabled the Persian Gulf countries (including Oman) to stand up to Iran and to help contain the Iran-Iraq war.

On the Horn of Africa, Somalia has been able to deter threats from Marxist-Leninist Ethiopia.

Closer to home, in Central America, U.S. programs have helped protect nascent democracies from radical insurgents. Honduras has been able to confront Nicaraguan aggression along its borders. Further south, the Andean countries [i.e., Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia] have begun to show a renewed determination to use military force to deal with narcotics traffic and narco-terrorism. These are results, clear to anyone who reflects on them.

Maintaining deterrence is vitally important if we as a nation are to avoid being drawn of necessity into wars of aggression against our friends or allies. Security assistance quietly works to bolster deterrence. By planning with countries, we help them make procurement choices that enhance the interoperability of regional forces with U.S. armed forces. No greater sign of U.S. resolve and bilateral defense cooperation can be seen than in the combined exercises involving United States forces and friendly foreign forces trained and equipped by the foreign military sales program, whether the exercises be in NATO or Central America, or one of the *Bright Star* exercises in the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

Politically, it is more difficult to document the influence of security assistance, because programs are meant to assist in defense and promote military professionalism, and we do not intervene in the internal affairs of nations. Moreover, politics are in continual flux and rarely signal events that are clear to all.

But even in the realm of politics, most knowledgeable people would agree that the crisis of government in the Philippines could not have been resolved without United States pressure to confront the insurgency there and to restore military capabilities to do so. It is well to remember that those officers who refused to cooperate with what they considered an illegal government and

thus helped save democracy for their people were trained in the United States through a security assistance program.

Certainly, Tunisia has been better able to maintain its national integrity despite threats from Libya because of French and U.S. support. Could we have renegotiated base access to support critical deployment of U.S. forces with all of our allies without security assistance? Perhaps, but the question is worth asking because the stakes for our national security are so high.

As with any complex effort, not all of our programs have been so successful. Historians will probably always debate what happened in Iran, and certainly no one will see Lebanon as a success story. An objective observer could also find some small programs that have dubious military value, although there are always some political benefits in sustaining relations with countries. Self-criticism is an American penchant, and we are stronger for it, but we must not let such criticism obscure the real fact: security assistance has consistently offered a highly cost-effective contribution to our national defense and global interests.

THE DEFICIT AND NATIONAL INTROVERSION

Last year, the president supported the Gramm-Rudman Bill for deficit reduction as a way to reduce the deficit and thus help the economy without raising taxes. In accordance with that policy, all non-defense programs were automatically cut by a target amount of 4.3 percent, and defense received an across-the-board cut of 4.9 percent. This cut was not comfortable, but was accepted. Gramm-Rudman, however, was the second cut taken by the security assistance program. It had been sliced previously by approximately 10 percent, and Gramm-Rudman compounded the problem.

One cannot appreciate the widespread impact of these reductions on national security interests without considering the cuts on a country-by-country basis. In fiscal 1986, for example, Egypt and Israel received the 4.3 percent cut, but other countries were cut by as much as 12.4 percent below the previous year's levels. We were forced to cut Oman 52 percent, and North Yemen by 62 percent, even as we witnessed a civil war in Marxist-Leninist South Yemen, a war apparently won by hardliners and those favoring radical expansionist policies.

On the Horn of Africa, Somalia was cut by 42 percent. Even Thailand, which annually faces a Vietnamese threat every dry season on its borders, was cut by 15 percent. Countries that provide U.S. forces access to facilities were collectively cut from fiscal 1985 levels by 10.8 percent.

Because of this heavy budgetary impact on our security assistance programs and, hence, the potential damage to our global defense mission, a two-track approach was taken in preparation for this year's [i.e., FY 1987] funding request. First, U.S. defense strategy dictated that these programs remain viable; and secondly, the U.S. budget deficit dictated that strong measures be taken to curtail spending. The executive branch chose a compromise by opting for an austere but responsible request that maintained existing programs but was framed within an overall budget that responded to the requirements of Gramm-Rudman.

Nevertheless, security assistance could be cut again this year approximately 14 percent from fiscal 1986 actual levels to forestall the application of another Gramm-Rudman across-the-board cut. [Editor's Note: The FY 1987 security assistance budget was actually reduced overall by 8.2 percent below the FY 1986 budget and by 21 percent below the Administration's budget request. For further details, see Samelson, Louis J., "Congress and the Fiscal Year 1987 Security Assistance Budget," *The DISAM Journal*, Winter, 1986-1987, pp. 10-30.]

This 14 percent cut does not begin to tell the tale, however. In fiscal 1986, a year that saw severe cuts to many countries, the United States had approximately \$2.5 billion to meet strategic

priorities around the world after Egypt and Israel were funded. This year, so far, the comparable amount is only about \$1.5 billion.

One example demonstrates how serious the funding shortfall for fiscal 1987 will be. The actual program levels for the four southern-tier NATO base rights countries amounted to about \$1.5 billion in fiscal 1986. So, if NATO countries are funded in 1987 at already reduced fiscal 1986 levels, no other countries in Central America, the Middle East, Asia, or Africa could receive any security assistance. Clearly, such an approach is unworkable, so NATO countries will have to suffer further cuts at the same time that other key priorities fall short of what is needed and often expected. Available estimates indicate that after funding three countries earmarked by law, the real cut to the amount of money available to all other recipient countries in the world will not be merely 14 percent but perhaps as much as 40 percent.

The results of these cuts will unfold over the next year, but we may anticipate complications in renegotiating base rights access agreements. It would be irresponsible to predict instability in any particular area, but we could indeed witness increases in conflict between states and in externally supported insurgencies. We must at least worry that many countries, judging that the United States is in actual retreat from its worldwide role, will decide that defense cooperation with the United States would be unreliable and counterproductive.

In this respect, opportunities for others to fill the gap will arise. We see no evidence, for example, that the Soviet Union is reducing its massive arms supply effort. No doubt the Soviets will continue to use attractive offers of arms and assistance as the leading edge of their worldwide policy to the detriment of United States objectives in many key areas. We should also be concerned that United States forces could be called upon to deal with a crisis that properly prepared local forces could have handled. We need to be concerned that our conventional defense strategies will be unacceptably weakened or made much more costly.

Of course, many initiatives are being pursued to soften the impact of these cuts. Nothing can overcome completely, however, the severe shortfall in funding to assist our friends and allies. Unless we can achieve a turnaround, we risk the constant erosion of an international security system that has served us well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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