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## The House Foreign Affairs Committee Discusses the Department of Defense Role in Foreign Assistance

[The following are excerpts from opening remarks and testimony relative to the title subject, 18 Mar 2009.]

The House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) conducted the hearing, “Striking the Appropriate Balance: the Defense Department’s Expanding Role in Foreign Assistance,” on 18 March 2009 to discuss the role of the military in foreign assistance. Representative Howard L. Berman of California, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said that the decision to hold this hearing was due to the fact that several full and subcommittee hearings addressed the issue of foreign assistance last year and that they touched upon the Defense Department’s increasing role in foreign assistance.

### **The following is a transcript of Representative Berman’s remarks:**

We have heard the same explanation for this over and over again: DOD is filling a vacuum left by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which lack the capacity to carry out their diplomatic and development functions. For example, USAID has only about 2,500 permanent staff today, compared to 4,300 in 1975. The agency is responsible for overseeing hundreds of infrastructure projects around the world, yet employs only five engineers. They have only 29 education specialists to monitor programs in 87 countries. Likewise, the State Department lacks resources to fill critical diplomatic posts. Today, the agency has a 12 percent vacancy rate in overseas Foreign Service positions, and an even higher vacancy rate here in the United States. This hollowing out of the State Department cripples its ability to aggressively pursue and protect American interests abroad. President Obama’s fiscal year 2010 international affairs budget request represents an important step forward in addressing these weaknesses. The Committee also plans to tackle these troubling capacity issues when we take up the State Department authorization bill and foreign assistance reform legislation later this year.

Beyond capacity and resources, there are some deeper issues I would like to examine today:

- Is providing military assistance to a foreign country a foreign policy decision that should be the primary responsibility of civilian agencies with appropriate Defense Department involvement in implementation? Or is it a national security mission that should be planned and carried out by the Pentagon?
- Does DOD have such a comparative advantage in performing certain non-traditional defense missions that it should be carrying out activities previously reserved for civilian agencies? And what are the implications of putting a military face on development and humanitarian activities? How does this affect the way we are viewed in the world, and what is the practical impact on USAID’s ability to carry out development projects?

The Department of Defense has always played an important role in carrying out certain security assistance activities, particularly implementing military training and military sales directed by the Department of State. However, DOD’s role significantly expanded in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan, where they took on a direct role in planning, funding, and implementing military and police training and other non-military activities. And beyond those two conflicts, the Pentagon began requesting—and receiving—authority to conduct similar activities in other parts of the world. DOD’s goal was to address irregular security threats on a global scale—threats they argued did not fit neatly

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into traditional State Department or Defense Department missions and thus required new tools of engagement.

These include global train and equip authority, also known as the Section 1206 program; a worldwide stabilization and reconstruction fund, also known as the Section 1207 program; and numerous new training programs directly managed by the Defense Department. In addition, some existing authorities were expanded, including the Combatant Commander's Initiative Fund and Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Assistance.

DOD's argument that these programs are justified by "military necessity" should be given significant deference. Indeed, I can think of many situations in which it might make sense for military commanders to get involved in activities that—in peacetime—would be considered foreign assistance. However, many questions remain regarding the utility and implications of such programs. For example, on several occasions this Committee has raised concerns about the use of Section 1206 funds. In some cases, it appears they've been used for programs with only a tenuous link to counterterrorism. In others, it looks more like a traditional diplomatic tool designed to curry influence with potential friends. In the development context, critics have argued that DOD's role erases the distinction between military personnel and civilians carrying out similar development activities, ignores development best practices such as sustainability and effectiveness, and puts a military face on inherently civilian programs.

It can also result in waste, fraud, and abuse, which has been well documented by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. Interestingly, in a letter attached to a report submitted last week on one of DOD's international programs, the Pentagon stated, "Humanitarian assistance activities continue to provide significant peacetime engagement opportunities for Combatant Commanders (COCOMs) and U.S. military personnel while also serving the basic economic and social needs of people in the countries supported." The questions remains:

- Shouldn't our "peacetime engagement" efforts be carried out by USAID, our nation's premier development agency?
- And should our military be responsible for performing the mission of civilian agencies?
- Do we really want to ask the men and women who go to war to do the mission of both Defense and State?

Some have suggested that a National Development Strategy would serve as a useful mechanism to help coordinate and establish appropriate roles for various agencies that provide foreign assistance.