

ECONOMY

Trump's Security Vision Leaves Little Room for Plowshares

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Since the end of World War II, American foreign policy has understood the role of economic development in the prevention of conflict around the world — providing a subtle yet powerful contribution to the United States' own national security.

Poverty reduces the opportunity cost of violence. Scarcity intensifies competition over resources. Inequality pits have-nots against haves. And poor states are weaker — less able to contain conflict once it breaks out. President John F. Kennedy summed up the argument more than half a century ago: “A more prosperous world would also be a more secure world.”

President Trump isn't buying.

In a speech in Warsaw last week, he offered a graphic illustration of the United States as a nation at war, seeking allies for an all-out conflict “in defense of civilization itself.” Promoting development is clearly not part of his tool kit. He is focused on guns.

This is bad news from the perspective of poverty reduction and economic development around the globe. The shift in policy also opens another question: To what extent could it destabilize the world and come back to bite the United States?

As 16 retired top admirals and generals told the Senate Armed Services Committee in June, “American security is undermined by frail and failing nations where hope is nonexistent, and where conditions foster radicalism, produce refugees, spark insurgency, and provide safe havens for terrorists, criminal gangs, and human traffickers.” Strategic development assistance, they asserted, “is not charity — it is an essential, modern tool of U.S. national security.”

And there is robust economic research linking conflict to underdevelopment. An analysis of conflict around the world by James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, political scientists at Stanford University, concluded that \$1,000 less in per capita income is associated with 41 percent greater odds that civil war will break out in a given year.

In a study based on rainfall patterns in sub-Saharan Africa, the economists Edward Miguel of the University of California, Berkeley, and Shanker Satyanath and Ernest Sergenti of New York University, found that a 5-percentage-point drop in the rate of economic growth raises the odds of civil war by one-half.

“The factors that explain which countries have been at risk for civil war are not their ethnic or religious characteristics but rather the conditions that favor insurgency,” Professors Fearon and Laitin wrote. “These include poverty — which marks financially and bureaucratically weak states and also favors rebel recruitment — political instability, rough terrain, and large populations.”

It’s not hard to find examples. Whatever the policy failures that followed the uprisings in Egypt, Libya and Syria six years ago, the instability that rocked the region might have been mitigated had people been helped to cope with skyrocketing food prices.

The Trump administration’s rebalancing of priorities away from such considerations is apparent in the White House’s budget proposal for 2018. The president has asked Congress for a \$52 billion increase in the Pentagon’s budget, to be paid for, in part, by slashing nearly \$26 billion from the budget for diplomacy and foreign aid next year — a 28 percent reduction from 2017.

As my colleague Helene Cooper reported, African generals and American

military experts are worried that the United States has lost interest in promoting development in Africa and is focusing nearly exclusively on military cooperation.

The Trump administration has proposed cutting one-fifth of the funds used for buying antiretroviral drugs for people infected with H.I.V., a program that has saved hundreds of thousands of lives on the continent. It has pulled out of an agreement to help finance efforts by poor nations in Africa and elsewhere to deal with radical climate change. In contrast, funding for military training programs, joint exercises and antiterrorism initiatives is expected to increase.

And Mr. Trump's stand on trade — threatening to encircle the United States with a wall of punitive tariffs and other protections (ironically justifying protectionism on grounds of national security) — is likely to be more damaging to global development than his stand on aid, further weakening an already wobbly commitment by the world's largest nations to refrain from protectionist measures that would stymie global growth.

As Simon Evenett of the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland noted, American policy has become markedly more protectionist this year, bucking a trend of decreasing protectionism among the world's large economies.

Washington's interest in global development has never been more than lukewarm, despite arguments about its strategic benefits. American foreign aid is paltry, adding up to 0.18 percent of its national income last year, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, far below that of other wealthy countries. But that's roughly twice the share achieved in 1997.

Still, the America First rhetoric from the Trump administration justifies the suspicion among the world's poorest nations that the United States has lost interest for real. The United States — against the advice of its generals — has become indifferent to whether the developing world develops or not. It may even be turning into a promoter of underdevelopment.

Jeffrey Sachs, an economist at Columbia University, heads a team measuring progress toward the so-called Sustainable Development Goals, agreed to in 2015 by most of the world's countries as development targets for 2030. They include

objectives like eliminating hunger and poverty, distributing the spoils of growth more equitably and reducing stress on the natural environment.

When they published their most recent set of indicators last week, they added a new concept: how to measure the extent to which one country's policies and practices might hinder the opportunities for sustainable development in the developing world.

The measure they came up with is, alas, not great. It includes items like arms sales and whether a country's financial rules enable tax evasion by plutocrats in poor nations. It underscores how consumption in rich countries that import things increases carbon emissions in poor countries that export those things, but it doesn't measure factors like how foreign investment from one country might increase the welfare in another — a positive externality. It has no measure for the cross-border impact of, say, computer hacking.

Nonetheless, it provides a rough sketch of cross-border harms. And the United States comes in near the bottom of the barrel — raising nontrivial barriers to development in the poor countries of the world. “There's a lot of truth to the idea that the United States is having tremendous negative effects on global sustainable development,” Mr. Sachs told me. “This is not recognized in our public discourse.”

How much does this matter? Maybe the national security argument is overblown. It's hard to find evidence linking inequality and conflict in the data. And the linkage between poverty and violence might indicate that violence produces poverty, not that poverty leads to war.

Still, perhaps some general could point out to Mr. Trump that the \$110 billion sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia didn't quite enhance world peace, but may have increased the risk that some victim of Saudi violence in an impoverished neighboring state might look upon Americans to seek retribution.

Maybe then the United States would re-engage with the cause of global development.