

What Does America Want From Its Foreign Assistance Program?

Strategic Options and Policy-Leader Priorities in a Time of Peer Competition and Partisan Discord



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This report was developed through a “key informant” research approach, in which the researchers interviewed 32 leading U.S. thinkers and practitioners for their views on the fundamental purpose of U.S. foreign assistance. The authors would like to express appreciation for their time and perspectives shared throughout the research and review process.

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Executive Summary

U.S. foreign assistance programs have recently come under increased scrutiny and pressure to adapt to new American national security, foreign policy, and economic priorities. The previous broad consensus on the purpose of U.S. foreign assistance, and what it should prioritize, has eroded in the face of these challenges, with partisan disagreement on how to resolve them.

This study examines how U.S. foreign assistance can be reformulated around unifying strategic objectives, consistent with current global realities. The authors postulate concrete alternative models for how U.S. foreign assistance programs can be updated and then test these models through a series of interviews with Republican- and Democrat-leaning experts. What results is a set of rigorously validated conclusions about the state of the U.S. foreign assistance enterprise, most notably that a bipartisan approach is feasible. The study's findings suggest an emerging strategic consensus about U.S. foreign assistance, based on making America "safer, stronger, and more prosperous," while accounting for contemporary international realities. Finally, the authors provide recommendations for how these conclusions can be considered and implemented through congressional action.

Context for the Study

After decades of relative consensus in Washington over the size, scope, and implementation of U.S. foreign assistance programs, 2025 witnessed extraordinary changes in the content of American foreign assistance and extensive alterations to the mechanisms by which foreign assistance is delivered. These dramatic changes have prompted serious debate about the strategic objectives of American foreign assistance.

In the immediate post-World War II period and during the days of the Cold War, U.S. foreign assistance was widely viewed as one mechanism through which America could project influence abroad. Although never garnering the broad support that American military forces enjoyed from the general populace, U.S. foreign assistance had, for decades, substantial bipartisan support from succeeding administrations and within Congress, despite sometimes serious debate over how, specifically, assistance should be targeted and managed. According to the Congressional Research Service, for most of the past fifty years, annual U.S. foreign assistance expenditures were maintained between 1 percent and 2 percent of federal budget authority, ranging in constant dollar terms between \$20 billion and \$35 billion annually for non-military foreign aid.¹

The consensus supporting foreign assistance was initially built on almost universal American opposition to global communism at the time the foundational Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) was enacted in 1961. Over the past fifty years, that consensus has grown more diffuse with the addition of multiple layers of justification for foreign assistance. The FAA itself provides an extensive range of objectives, including promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, improving governance, expanding access to health care and education, promoting stability in conflict regions, countering terrorism, promoting human rights, strengthening allies, and curbing illicit drug production and trafficking.²

Moreover, domestic issues and partisan domestic debates have regularly shaped the nature of U.S. foreign assistance. For example, U.S. foreign assistance agencies have regularly withheld resources to organizations supporting abortion during Republican administrations in compliance with restrictions put in place during the Reagan administration and then restored those resources at the direction of Democratic

administrations. Similarly, contentious issues like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and climate change have spawned debates over aspects of U.S. foreign assistance in recent years, contributing to the dramatic changes in 2025 and 2026.

These dynamics notwithstanding, the two most recently completed four-year presidencies—the first Trump administration and the Biden administration—included periods of Republican control of both chambers, periods of Democratic control of both chambers, and divided Congresses, yet still maintained consistent levels of funding for foreign assistance. Moreover, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the federal agency managing 70 percent of the non-military U.S. foreign assistance budget, avoided major attacks from the House, Senate, or administrations on its management of American assistance during this period.

In short, as of the end of the Biden administration, history and recent American political dynamics suggested a continuation, with modest variants, of the traditional U.S. foreign assistance program with regard to its size, composition, and management structure.

However, as has been widely reported and analyzed, the pre-existing consensus and the dynamics of the policy debate shifted dramatically with President Trump's Executive Order "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," issued the first day of his second term.³ The President declared that U.S. foreign assistance, as then organized, was "not aligned with American interests and in many cases antithetical to American values." The Executive Order of January 20, 2025, propelled a torrent of dramatic activities: the dismantling of USAID; the temporary freezing of virtually all existing U.S. government foreign assistance programs worldwide; and a transfer, on July 1, 2025, of the majority of foreign assistance functions to the U.S. Department of State (State), accompanied by a reorganization of the department to manage foreign assistance programs.

These dramatic dynamics have resulted both in intense partisan debate about foreign assistance and in dozens of analyses of U.S. foreign assistance, past, present, and prospective. Assessing these debates and analyses, the research team for this study came to two conclusions:

- First, regardless of whether one supports or opposes the U.S. foreign assistance changes of 2025 and 2026, a deep, strategic "reevaluation" of U.S. foreign assistance was long overdue. The FAA was written in 1961, in a pre-globally connected world where the United States was focused on battling communism, and when many new nations were emerging from a period of widespread colonialism. The vast changes in the international environment in the 65 years since then impel reexamination of the FAA, especially given dramatic recent changes in a world of peer competitors, global pandemics, and transnational crime. These changes, compounded by the layering of dozens of well-intentioned policy accretions on the FAA, have produced a foreign assistance framework that can appear—whatever the underlying

reality—increasingly difficult to reconcile with current U.S. foreign policy priorities.

- Second, a review of multiple analyses of U.S. foreign assistance, recently concluded or currently underway, suggests that the bulk of these efforts have been focused on operational or structural aspects of U.S. foreign assistance: the “How?” questions on topics such as State versus USAID, program content, budget levels, delivery mechanisms, and relationships with partners. Few if any of these studies—as important as they may be in terms of operational approaches to foreign assistance—raise the apex policy question regarding the purpose of U.S. foreign assistance. Only when a consensus is reached on the fundamental purpose of U.S. foreign assistance can federal policymakers begin to determine what types of programs—humanitarian assistance, health care, democracy, education, agriculture and food, locally-led, compact-structured, or a dozen other variants—should be prioritized.

The research team concluded that it might usefully contribute to the debate on U.S. foreign assistance by conducting a study asking this first-order, apex question: “What, in the current international and domestic environment, should be the core purpose of the U.S. foreign assistance program?” Or, phrased slightly differently: “Given the current configuration of national security and foreign policy issues facing the nation, especially in an era of potent peer competitors, what does America want from its foreign assistance program in 2026?” Without answering this “What?” question, productive debate and policy-making on a host of subsequent budgetary, organizational, operational, and personnel “How?” questions would be impossible.

Embedded in this approach is the assumption that identifying the apex purpose, or purposes, of the U.S. foreign assistance enterprise addresses multiple issues currently facing the U.S. foreign policy community. First, as noted above, seeking the apex purpose(s) of foreign assistance provides a logical starting point for follow-on analyses of a broad range of foreign assistance operational and structural issues. Second, identifying the highest order objectives of U.S. foreign assistance acknowledges the criticism explicitly advanced by the Trump administration, but shared more broadly, that a clear-cut link between American foreign assistance programs, on the one hand, and U.S. national security and foreign policy priorities, on the other hand, has eroded over time and is unclear, if not disconnected. That is, the research team accepted the view that an updated, sharpened, contemporary strategic focus was necessary. And, third, in practical terms given the deep political rifts over foreign assistance policy currently present in Washington, asking questions about the first-order purpose of U.S. foreign assistance potentially provides a mechanism to begin a bipartisan conversation on optimal foreign assistance approaches, or even contribute to a formal legislative branch/executive branch process toward a consensus framework to align U.S. foreign policy with the threats and opportunities our nation faces in 2026 and beyond.

Two additional factors in the current environment further inspired this study, one in the international context and the other in the Washington policy arena. In the international

context, the emergence in recent years of peer competitors to the U.S. with active engagement initiatives in developing countries, along with issues like massive global migration, access to critical minerals and other assets located in foreign assistance recipient countries, cross-border criminality and pandemics, and related threats and opportunities all impel a serious evaluation of what the nation requires of its foreign assistance effort. The People's Republic of China (PRC) One Belt/One Road Initiative has bulldozed ahead with more than \$700 billion in infrastructure projects over the past dozen years. Both the PRC and Russia are working hard at gaining adherents in the poorer, but mineral-, market-, and human resource-rich nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Post-conflict challenges and opportunities abound in Gaza, Ukraine, and multiple other venues. Critical and potentially dangerous global dynamics, in short, impel focused analysis and clear-cut targeting of U.S. foreign assistance.

As to the Washington policy arena, based on a review of administration and congressional documents and congressional schedules, the research team concluded that a notable aspect of the foreign assistance transition undertaken in the 2025 to 2026 timeframe has been the limited "public analysis to activity ratio." That is to say, despite the scale and scope of the changes initiated during this period, formal, participatory policy analysis of the changes and their impact on U.S. national security has been limited. Congressional leadership allocated minimal time to hearings or other structured examinations of shifting foreign assistance systems. It remains unclear to many observers how changes to foreign assistance were influenced by specific strategic threats to the United States, specific regional priorities, American comparative advantage, technological advances, or other meta-trends relevant to the design of foreign assistance implements of national security.

Given this complex current state of play, the research team concluded that the timing was propitious for research delineating the policy choices, or models, available to shape the design of U.S. foreign assistance at the strategic level, and assessing how those models stack up against each other. This study is the result of that research.

Methodology of the Study

In order to jumpstart an inquiry into the fundamental purpose of U.S. foreign assistance in the contemporary environment, the research team decided upon a “key informant” research approach, to allow in-depth inquiries with expert participants. The researchers interviewed 32 leading U.S. thinkers and practitioners for their views on this topic. The talent within the interview pool was deep and broad, comprising experts from Capitol Hill, the business and national security communities, the foreign assistance practitioner community, and leading foreign policy think tanks. The interviewees encompassed both Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning individuals in roughly equal proportions and included those who had held key positions in the George W. Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. 25 percent of key informants had served on the Trump I and/or Trump II policy teams. A listing of key informants can be found in Appendix B.

The researchers individually presented these policy experts with a list of eight competing models developed through a literature review process, each of which might serve as the central, strategic organizing principle for U.S. foreign assistance in 2026. These models include both current and theoretical options and were designed to offer clear-cut, highly distinguishable options to the respondents. Using a combination of survey techniques and individual interviews, we asked the experts to consider which model, or combination of models, would align with U.S. national security priorities. In other words, which model would be most effective at making America—in the formulation advanced by Secretary of State Marco Rubio—“safer, stronger, and more prosperous,”⁴ while also benefiting individuals in those countries receiving U.S. foreign assistance.

Building the study’s questionnaire and interviews around clear-cut, high level models was a conscious attempt by the research team to elevate debate over U.S. foreign assistance from the organizational, budgetary and operational issues that consumed U.S. policymakers in 2025 towards the strategic, apex question about the purpose of America’s foreign assistance enterprise. Interviewees were specifically asked not to consider, at this stage of the research, operational or organizational issues. Interviewees were also asked to limit their preferences specifically to non-military U.S. foreign assistance.

Eight Models of Foreign Assistance (See Appendix A for Descriptions)

- **Model 1.** “Journey to Self-Reliance” (or Millennium Challenge Corporation/MCC)
- **Model 2.** Regional Stability and Prosperity
- **Model 3.** Quantum Leap (or “Panama Canal”)
- **Model 4.** 21st Century Global Threats
- **Model 5.** Technical Innovation and Global Connectivity
- **Model 6.** Global Conflict Reduction
- **Model 7.** Challenge Peer Competitors
- **Model 8.** Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth

We asked the policy experts to rate each of the eight postulated models on the importance of each model as an apex organizing principle for U.S. foreign assistance programs today. The models were ranked on a scale from four to one, indicating whether participants believed each model was “critically important,” “important,” “generally unimportant,” or “minimally important.” Completion of the survey was followed by an in-depth interview with each key informant to ascertain the reasoning behind his/her model choices. During the interview, each interviewee was also asked questions about the following issues:

- Critical threats or opportunities in the current international environment that should be taken into consideration in selecting the apex purpose of U.S. foreign assistance;
- The participant’s view of whether, regardless of which model(s) he/she preferred, and regardless of how the program was to be implemented, the U.S. should maintain a foreign assistance program in the first place;
- Suggestions for alternative models for U.S. foreign assistance, beyond those provided by the research team; and
- The probability, in the current fraught policy context, of achieving bipartisan consensus on an apex model for U.S. foreign assistance.

In addition to the information drawn from respondents’ specific model preferences and rankings, information gleaned from the responses to these questions, or otherwise volunteered by key informants, is also reflected in the study’s Findings and Recommendations sections.

By asking policy experts to rate competing models, and seeking the reasoning behind their choices, our objective is to present the U.S. foreign policy and national security community with informed perspectives on two critical and timely questions:

- Question 1: What should be the primary strategic objective for U.S. foreign assistance in 2026 and beyond?
- Question 2: Is there bipartisan agreement around the answer to Question 1, enough to serve as the basis for transcending the partisan debate of the past year and beginning the design of a consensus-based and effective U.S. foreign assistance program?

The policy experts' answers to these two questions constitute this report's findings and drive the report's recommendations. The research team found compelling, and sometimes surprising, answers to these questions, as well as an emergent consensus on a path towards aligning U.S. foreign assistance and U.S. national security/foreign policy objectives for 2026, built on a bipartisan foundation.

Findings

Survey results and individual interviews with the key informants produced a “baker’s dozen” of findings, related both to the primary question of the highest priority purpose of contemporary U.S. foreign assistance (Core Findings), and to related analytical and operational observations (Findings).

- **Core Findings:**

- 1. There is unanimity on the value of an ongoing U.S. foreign assistance program.** Despite wide variation in experts’ foreign assistance priorities, and despite the fact that a number of experts acknowledged challenges with the previous, pre-2025 foreign assistance structure, 32 of 32 interviewees agreed that a U.S. foreign assistance system should be retained as a central tool of U.S. foreign policy and American engagement abroad.
- 2. There is broad consensus on the timeliness and appropriateness of comprehensively and systematically examining the U.S. foreign assistance enterprise.** Respondents were widely supportive of the need for an updated U.S. foreign assistance enterprise, often citing a divergence over time between the content of individual foreign assistance programs and clear-cut U.S. strategic objectives. Respondents were widely supportive of a systematic and comprehensive review of current programs, frequently pointing to congressional hearings and congressional revision of key statutes as necessary elements. In addition, there was broad agreement on the timeliness of a comprehensive review of the apex purpose of U.S. foreign assistance.
- 3. There is broad agreement on the national security dynamics shaping the contemporary international system.** Key informants were asked which aspects of the current international environment were most relevant to the design of a strategic U.S. foreign assistance enterprise. That is to say, what “shaping factors” among global trends should be taken into account in formulating a redesigned U.S. foreign assistance effort? The three most frequently cited global factors were: (1) The

presence in the international system of **peer competitors**, with frequent references to the PRC, and/or “great power competition” [94 percent of respondents], (2) the criticality of the economic sector, including **trade and foreign direct investment**, both as a key potential factor in contributing to human progress and as an arena of competition [91 percent of respondents], and (3) **health security** and the risk of pandemic disease [74 percent of respondents]. Other frequently cited international environmental factors included global demographic pressures (including risks to global food supply), violent conflict/extremism, and supply chain/critical resources issues. Each of these factors attracted broad bipartisan consensus.

4. Blunting peer competitors is important, but should not drive specific program design. Given widespread analysis and commentary on the challenge to U.S. strategic standing posed by the PRC, to a lesser extent Russia, and other rising or middle powers, the research team began the study with an expectation that the Challenge Peer Competitors Model would garner deep support among the key informants. To some extent, this proved to be the case, as the experts rated this model among the top four choices as an organizing principle for U.S. foreign assistance [Score 2.72], with nearly 60 percent of the experts rating the model “critically important” or “important.” However, while many experts saw the Challenge Peer Competitors Model as a valuable consensus-building focus—a framework that could generate congressional and public support for the U.S. foreign assistance program—some also questioned whether it should serve as the substantive organizing principle to shape the program’s specific content and design. Overall, the expert pool supported U.S. foreign assistance that advanced U.S. strategic priorities and blunted peer competitors through the impact and effectiveness of well-designed U.S. programs globally, as opposed to a “reactive” U.S. program designed around geographic and/or content-specific targeting or counterbalancing of specific competitor programs like the “One Belt/One Road” Initiative.

5. There is a solid consensus around three models for American foreign assistance that address major U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives. The 32 individual ratings yielded a solid consensus not around a single model, but around a set of three models, as a basis for shaping the U.S. foreign assistance effort of the future. (Note: Overall interviewee ratings of the eight models, broken down by Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning key informants, can be found in Figure 1.) For each of these three models, the average ranking from all key informants was in the “important” to “critically important” range. The consensus occurred around the 21st Century Global Threats Model [Score 3.31], the Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth Model [Score 3.13], and the Journey to Self-Reliance Model [Score 3.03], as illustrated in Figure 2. The combined ratings of these three models

Figure 1 - Ratings of Foreign Assistance Models (N = 32)

Rating: 4=Critically Important; 3=Important; 2=Generally Unimportant; 1=Minimally/Not At All Important

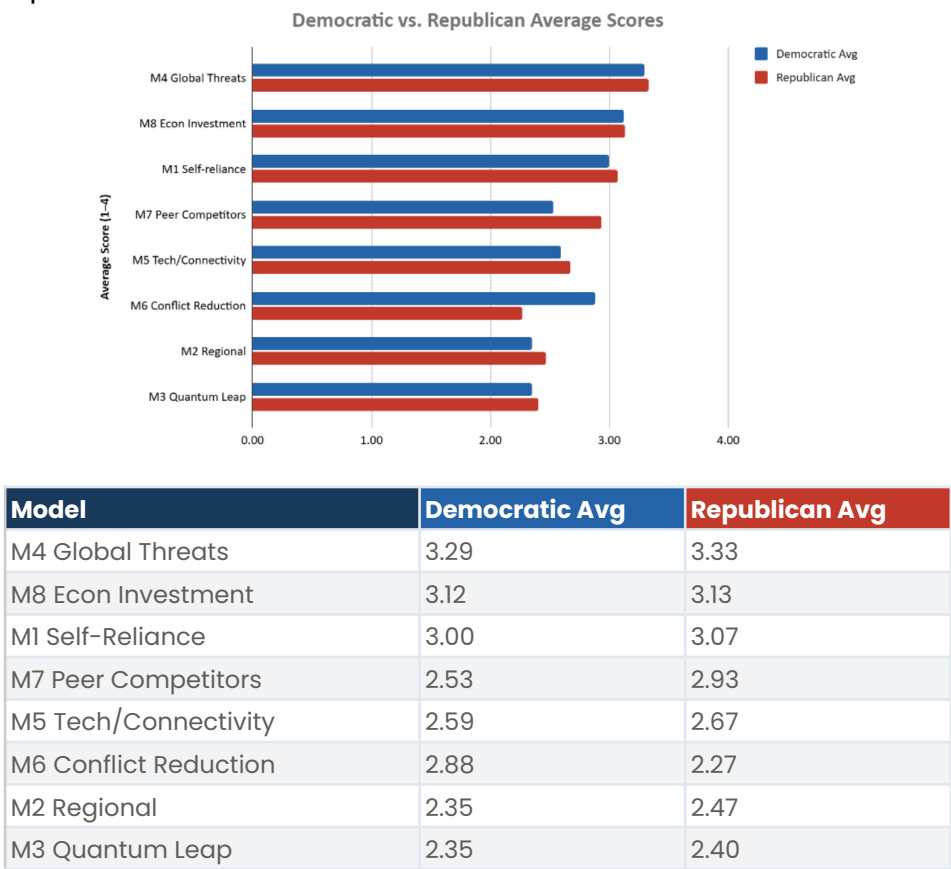
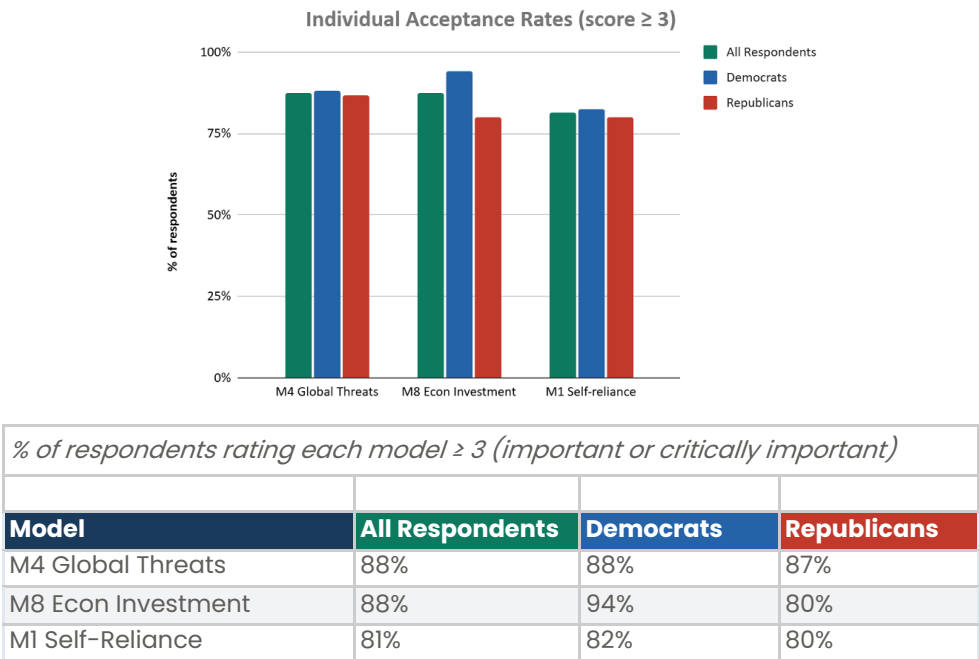


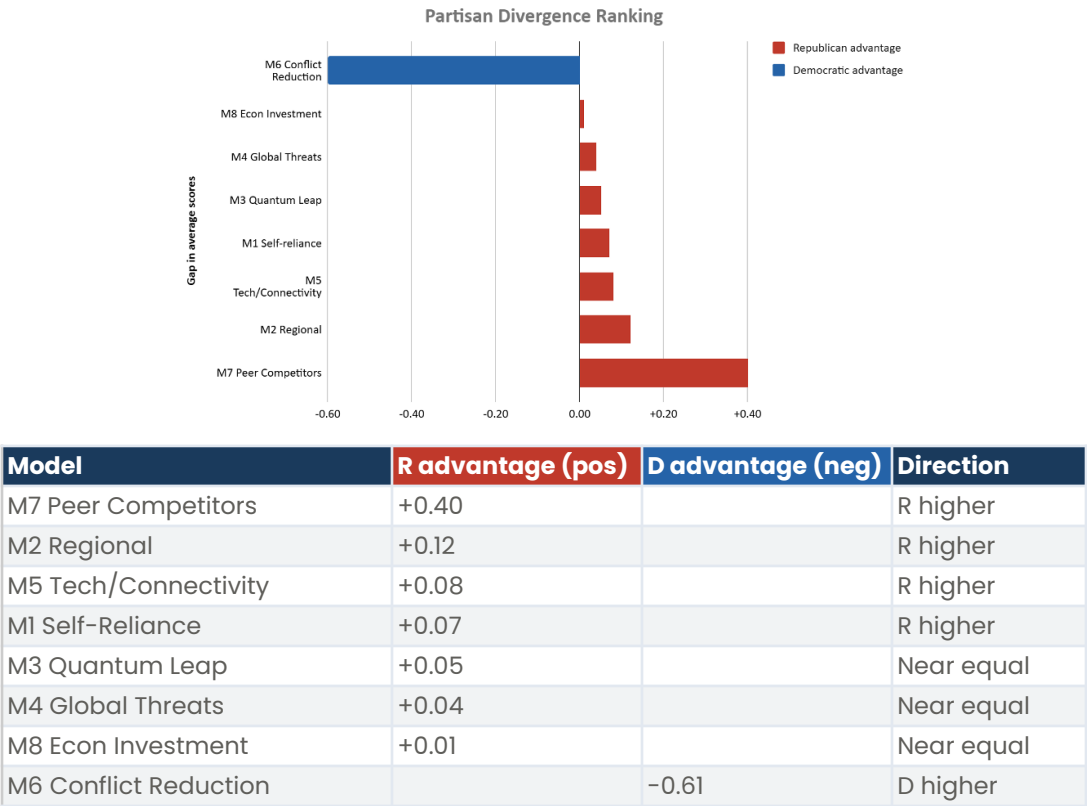
Figure 2 - Individual Key Informant Ratings of Top Three Models (N = 32)



suggest that, from the perspective of the leading experts participating in this study, the design of a U.S. foreign assistance program encompassing these three strategic elements would garner widespread support among policymakers and could serve as the basis for shaping a relevant and strategic U.S. foreign assistance program.

6. In the ranking of the most widely supported models, there is virtually no distinction between Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning key informants, suggesting that—at the strategic design level—it is possible to achieve a bipartisan consensus on the apex purpose(s) of the U.S. foreign assistance program. As illustrated in Figure 3, across all eight posited models, there was broad consensus on their relative importance or unimportance. Substantial, although not disqualifying, distinctions appeared in the ratings on two models: the Challenge Peer Competitors Model [0.40/3.00 Republican-leaning]; and the Global Conflict Reduction Model [0.61/3.00 Democratic-leaning]. Among the three highest rated models (21st Century Global Threats, Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth, and Journey to Self-Reliance) however, differences in ratings along partisan lines were insignificant.

Figure 3 – Partisan Divergence Ranking (N=32)



7. Related to the central purpose of the U.S. foreign assistance program, there is limited support among the cadre of key informants for the Regional Stability and Prosperity Model seemingly embedded in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS). The NSS, released by the Trump administration in November 2025, refers to a “‘Trump Corollary’ to the Monroe Doctrine,”⁵ and suggests a priority focus on specific regions. The overall language of the NSS, while noting multiple regions, focuses on the Western Hemisphere as *primus inter pares*. With the NSS as background, this study included the Regional Stability and Prosperity Model, which would focus and prioritize U.S. foreign assistance regionally. Among the policy experts however, this model rated next to lowest [Score 2.41] of the eight models, reflecting—based on statements from individual interviews—a concern with relative American withdrawal from other critical regions, as well as a recognition that addressing high-priority global threats requires global engagement.

- **Findings:**

1. There is broad consensus on utilizing the “safer, stronger, more prosperous” configuration as an analytical criterion, as long as benefits to recipient/partner nations are given appropriate value. The research team, in recognition of the reality that the United States no longer enjoys the “sole superpower” status it garnered at the end of the Cold War and faces a range of security and economic challenges, determined that U.S. national interest was a major consideration in designing current U.S. foreign assistance. The group of expert respondents were thus asked to weigh the “safer, stronger, more prosperous” standard for U.S. foreign policy. Given the balanced political composition of the key informant pool, the researchers anticipated possible pushback to this standard along partisan lines. Somewhat surprisingly, both Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning interviewees generally accepted this U.S. national security-oriented standard, albeit with frequent strong reminders that benefits to citizens of recipient/partner countries, as well as direct benefits to the United States, should be given appropriate weight. In order to achieve some degree of comparability among responses, the research team developed an outline of “Evaluation Factors to Determine the Effectiveness—In Terms of ‘Safer, Stronger, More Prosperous’ Criteria—of Competing Foreign Assistance Models,” which was shared with the experts, and can be viewed in Appendix C.

2. There is broad consensus on the value of humanitarian assistance as a component of U.S. foreign assistance, whether such humanitarian assistance directly benefits America or not. A humanitarian model of U.S. foreign assistance was not offered as an option in the questionnaire distributed to the informants. However, when asked during the in-person interview process to identify any “missing models,” a majority of respondents asserted that, in addition to models focused on U.S. national

security, humanitarian assistance (such as food aid, disaster response, and help to victims of conflict and displacement) should remain an integral element of U.S. foreign assistance, reflecting the innate generosity of the American people.

- 3. Buttressing the Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth Model with governance investments and reforms is critical to the model's success.** Interviews with the policy experts—especially those with private sector and/or U.S. business promotion backgrounds—generated multiple times the observation that trade and foreign direct investment elements of U.S. engagement abroad rely on foreign assistance investments in governance institutions and processes (such as rule of law institutions, functioning contract enforcement and dispute resolution, regulatory predictability, transparency and anti-corruption, and sound financial systems) to create “investable environments” with sustainable investment and economic benefit, both for the United States and partner countries. Given that the Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth Model was the second highest-rated model, with broad bipartisan appeal, this connection between business investments and foreign assistance investments in good governance, arising from volunteered observations, is significant.
- 4. Connectivity and technology are critical to all the posited foreign assistance models.** The study offered participating policy experts the opportunity to choose the Technical Innovation and Global Connectivity Model. As a stand-alone model, key informants were lukewarm towards this option, rating it in the lower range of options [Score 2.63]. However, based on interview content, the ratings did not reflect limited support for the inclusion of high technology capabilities as a major component of the U.S. foreign assistance program. Rather, informants tended to view the Technical Innovation and Global Connectivity Model as a component of whatever competing model they rated highly. That is to say, respondents tended to view connectivity and technology not so much as a viable stand-alone model, but rather as a critical contributing aspect to *any* apex model of U.S. foreign assistance.
- 5. An expectation of deep commitment from U.S. foreign assistance partner nations—including formal, structured policy and financial pledges, or “compacts”—buttressed broad support for the Journey to Self-Reliance Model.** The Journey to Self-Reliance Model, while one of the three models rated highest by the pool of policy experts, is relatively little known outside the foreign assistance community. The other two top-rated models (21st Century Global Threats and Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth) are—thanks to sustained media attention to issues like Ebola and international crime, in the case of the former, and similar public attention to the search for critical minerals, in the case of the latter—widely recognized as important foreign policy issues. The more obscure Journey to Self-Reliance Model’s title comes

from a foreign assistance innovation launched by Ambassador Mark Green, then USAID Administrator, during the first Trump administration. The model's elements also draw from the approach developed by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), based on targeting focused foreign assistance resources to countries willing to undertake self-help domestic policies and investments. The MCC approach operationally relies on compacts: essentially binding diplomatic agreements or contracts with the U.S. government, committing the partner recipient of foreign assistance to take specified actions and make specified investments agreed upon between the two compact partners. A form of such compacts has become in 2026 the preferred mechanism for State health care assistance to governments in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In the context of this study, the potential wide applicability of the compact approach to foreign assistance, and current administration emphasis on "skin-in-the-game" commitments prior to disbursement of U.S. tax dollars, appeared to contribute substantially to a high rating for the Journey to Self-Reliance Model.

- 6. Strategic direction-setting for U.S. foreign assistance must be accompanied by operational flexibility.** The central hypothesis of the study—that U.S. foreign assistance would be made more effective, and more bipartisan, through a structured examination of the apex purpose of the enterprise—was widely supported by the experts queried for this study. The same group of experts, however, frequently observed during the interview process that clarification of strategic objectives should not hamstring practitioners required to make national security, foreign policy, and foreign assistance decisions on behalf of the U.S. government. That is to say, the key informants, many of whom personally had deep experience in managing U.S. foreign policy abroad, pointed out that the admirable goal of strategic consensus around the core purpose(s) of foreign assistance should not excessively limit the day-to-day operational options available to American diplomats and others implementing U.S. foreign policy and U.S. foreign assistance programs. In some limited cases, support for such operational flexibility was linked to specific programs like the traditional Economic Support Fund, traditional flexibility in delivering humanitarian assistance, or the Trump administration's initiative for an America-First Opportunity Fund. More frequently, however, respondents' comments addressed the general importance of providing to those carrying out U.S. foreign policy the latitude to do their jobs effectively.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, and the input from the 32 expert interviews, the research team offers the following recommendations.

1. **Comprehensive Hearings :** That the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee **launch comprehensive hearings on the apex purpose of the overall U.S. foreign assistance enterprise**; that such hearings focus on the alignment of U.S. foreign assistance programs with critical global trends and with priority national security and foreign policy threats and opportunities facing the United States; that such hearings generate testimony from a broad range of foreign assistance experts from within and outside the administration.
2. **Statutory Revisions:** That the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, based on comprehensive hearings, designate **significant amendment of the FAA**, and related statutes, as a high priority; that such process focus on the establishment of broad, critical national security objectives for the U.S. foreign assistance program of 2026 and beyond; that the establishment of broad, critical national security objectives for the U.S. foreign assistance program be accompanied by updating and consolidation of the multiple, accreted, stand-alone mandates contained in the FAA, with the objective of aligning foreign assistance programs with contemporary national security and foreign policy threats and opportunities facing the United States.
3. **Basing the Apex Mission for Foreign Assistance on the Triad Identified in This Study:** That the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in their respective determinations to establish broad, critical national security objectives for the U.S. foreign assistance program, consider the combination of **the 21st Century Global Threats Model, the Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth Model, and the Journey to Self-Reliance Model**—identified in Core Finding #5 above—as a basis for a bipartisan consensus on the apex purpose of American foreign assistance.
4. **Appropriations Revisions:** That the United States House Committee on Appropriations and the United States Senate Committee on Appropriations also, during the upcoming appropriations cycle, **conduct comprehensive**

hearings on the apex purpose(s) of the U.S. foreign assistance enterprise, with a particular focus on sectoral appropriations configurations; that the Appropriations Committees examine whether the current sectoral configuration can be reorganized under existing law to reflect the strategic objectives identified in this study, in order to align funding pools most effectively with contemporary national security and foreign policy threats and opportunities facing the United States.

5. **Engagement of the Congressional Caucus for Effective Foreign Assistance:** That the Congressional Caucus for Effective Foreign Assistance review the findings of this study and **incorporate these findings into its efforts to “identify ways to improve U.S. foreign assistance and development to maximize its impact and benefit”**⁶ and its efforts to link effective foreign assistance and U.S. national security; that the Congressional Caucus for Effective Foreign Assistance convene a colloquy on the findings of this study; that the Caucus further encourage the relevant authorizing and appropriations committees to conduct comprehensive hearings on the apex purpose(s) of the U.S. foreign assistance program.
6. **Engagement of the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP):** That the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on the CCP review the findings of this study and incorporate its findings into efforts to address “CCP International Influence,” one of the Select Committee’s policy issues; that the Select Committee **consider hearings, and/or a policy review, on the findings of this study**, specifically with regard to the Challenge Peer Competitors Model.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support the assertion that U.S. foreign assistance remains a powerful tool to support U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives. But altered global dynamics and the erosion of an earlier consensus require an updated and sharpened contemporary core mission for U.S. foreign assistance.

The U.S. foreign assistance program, in the views of the research team for this study, did indeed merit the reevaluation called for by President Trump in January 2025. But the comprehensive, structured executive branch/legislative branch review process envisaged by many in early 2025 remains uncompleted, replaced by rapid and dramatic structural changes. Those dramatic changes led to contentious, and still simmering, disputes over how the U.S. foreign assistance program should be structured for success.

This study attempts to contribute to rebuilding the basis for a bipartisan policy debate on U.S. foreign assistance by starting at the top, asking the basic question about what the nation wants from its foreign assistance program in 2026 and in the future. By raising that apex question, and by seeking the answer among a distinguished bipartisan group of policy experts knowledgeable both about foreign assistance and its connection to U.S. national security interests, we believe the study has generated findings and recommendations useful to those seeking a path forward toward a “safer, stronger, and more prosperous” nation.

In short, it is the objective of this study, through its methods and analytical approach, to place within the hands of a significant number of foreign assistance policymakers within the administration, within the Congress, and within the broader foreign assistance community a set of carefully delineated, and bipartisan foreign assistance policy options at a time of intense debate over the future of U.S. foreign assistance, and provide suggestions on how those options can be translated into a coherent, strategic American foreign assistance mission.

Appendices

Appendix A: Descriptions of the Posited Foreign Assistance Models

Below is the exact wording of the foreign assistance model definitions presented to survey respondents and interviewees.

- **Model 1. “Journey to Self-Reliance” (or Millennium Challenge Corporation/MCC) Model:** A world in which an increased number of developing nations “graduate” from foreign assistance and become financially self-reliant, contributing to global stability, a reduction in human poverty, reduced U.S. foreign assistance expenditures, and a “safer, stronger, more prosperous” America. In this model, the system devised by the MCC—which focuses the distribution of U.S. foreign assistance on nations exhibiting the greatest commitment to investment in their own systems and people—would become the central objective of foreign assistance design and targeting. The ultimate objective of this model is graduation from foreign aid and (economic and security) partnership with the U.S. In historical terms, the case of South Korea—a former U.S. foreign assistance recipient nation now operating its own foreign assistance program—would serve as the prototype of this strategic model. A variant of this model—the “Journey to Self-Reliance”—characterized USAID’s approach during the first Trump administration, albeit with limited impact in reshaping legacy foreign assistance programs.
- **Model 2. Regional Stability and Prosperity Model:** A world in which a selected region or regions of particular importance to U.S. safety, security, and prosperity receive focused foreign assistance to produce progress at both the national and regional levels. In this model, U.S. national security leaders would identify regions—such as the Western Hemisphere or the Indo-Pacific basin—which are of magnified importance to U.S. interests. U.S. foreign assistance would be focused exclusively, or predominantly, to address national-level and regional-level problems and opportunities in the targeted region(s), in order to enhance U.S. global influence and address high priority foreign policy and national security objectives.
- **Model 3. Quantum Leap (or “Panama Canal”) Model:** A world in which U.S. investments in selected dramatic, prestige projects with global impact would

bring transformative change to substantial populations and significant numbers of countries, while showcasing American global resolve, capabilities and commitment. Quantum Leap projects would also provide a highly visible counterweight to the One Belt/One Road Initiative. In this model, U.S. policymakers would identify highly selective worldwide barriers or obstacles to millennial progress—in health care, education, infrastructure, energy deficits, or technology—and harness U.S. foreign assistance to overcoming one or more of those barriers. Just as U.S. leadership in constructing the Panama Canal provided a globally recognized boost to prosperity, and enormous value to American prestige, overcoming 21st century obstacles—building the Cape Town to Cairo Highway; eradicating illiteracy worldwide; providing reliable power generating capacity across a continent; or salting internet connectivity across the globe—would bring similar business and diplomatic advantages to the United States, while providing dramatic progress abroad. In this model, the U.S. foreign assistance program would serve as the leading catalyst for synergizing American technical expertise, private sector capabilities, and financing to achieve a few highly selective, but profound, breakthroughs that would make the nation “safer, stronger, and more prosperous.”

- **Model 4. 21st Century Global Threats Model:** A world in which the danger, damage, and/or cost to the United States of the highest threat global socio-economic-security trends are reduced. In this model, U.S. foreign assistance would be designed and targeted to address the root causes and manifestations of the highest order global problems—like pandemic disease, transnational criminality, unrestrained migration, and pollution—determined by national security officials to offer the highest order threats to U.S. interests.
- **Model 5. Technical Innovation and Global Connectivity Model:** A world in which the U.S. would create platforms basing foreign assistance on dissemination of scientific breakthroughs, AI, and global connectivity to address impediments to progress in poorer nations. A world in which breakthroughs in scientific research and global connectivity are widely disseminated and explicitly linked with attempts to address impediments to economic growth, peace and stability, educational attainment, health care and socio-economic progress. In this model, the U.S. foreign aid program—drawing upon the U.S. comparative advantage in basic research and information technology services—would conduct research and engage with private sector and university partners to link high tech innovations to cost-effective impact abroad. Existing U.S. foreign aid programs have historically made use of global connectivity to solve specific development challenges, but not at scale. This model would put the power of the internet and artificial intelligence at the center of U.S. foreign assistance, to benefit human progress and U.S. safety, security and prosperity, while pioneering a potentially more cost-effective foreign assistance model.
- **Model 6. Global Conflict Reduction Model:** A world in which violent conflict is significantly ameliorated, thereby reducing the risks of widespread warfare, human suffering, global migration, federal expenditures, and opportunities for

U.S. competitors to manipulate conflict for malign purposes. In this model, U.S. foreign assistance would be targeted towards nations at the risk of, or experiencing, destabilizing conflict. As contemplated in the existing bipartisan Global Fragility Act—signed into law during the first Trump administration—this model would be designed to use a combination of development, diplomacy, and defense assistance to prevent or reduce conflict in fragile states. Under this model, conflict prevention and cessation would become the central task of U.S. foreign assistance.

- **Model 7. Challenge Peer Competitors Model:** A world in which the core influence-building initiatives of America's peer competitors are blunted, made less attainable, and/or made more costly. In this model, U.S. foreign assistance would be specifically designed and targeted globally to increase U.S. influence in regions, nations, and sectors targeted by peer adversaries. For example, American foreign aid would focus on Pacific Rim nations courted by the PRC, Eastern European and Central Asian nations at risk of Russian influence or domination, or geo-strategically and economically critical regional building block nations in Africa. Alternatively, given the utilization of infrastructure investment as a critical influence-building tool by the PRC, U.S. foreign assistance could dramatically increase U.S. investment in competing infrastructure projects as a core element of foreign aid.
- **Model 8. Progress Through Economic Investment and Growth Model:** A world in which the synergy between U.S. foreign direct investment/commercial interests and U.S. foreign assistance both meets U.S. strategic interests and drives alliances, prosperity, and stability. In this model, U.S. foreign assistance would focus directly on those countries and opportunities wherein major U.S. private sector commercial investments would be enhanced by related injections of foreign assistance, with the dual goal of increasing U.S. prosperity and the prosperity and stability of the nations targeted for investment. For example, the U.S.-supported Lobito Rail Corridor (beginning in Angola and linking four strategic African nations)—intended to provide access to rare earths and other critical minerals in south-central Africa—would see an influx both of U.S. private capital and of U.S. foreign assistance, in order to enhance the project's acceptability, likelihood of success, return on investment, and benefit to Americans and Africans.

Appendix B: List of Interviewees

(Interviewees are listed in alphabetical order by last name)

The Honorable J. Brian Atwood: Senior Fellow for International Studies and Public Affairs, The Thomas J. Watson Jr. School of International and Public Affairs, Brown University; former Dean, University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs; former Administrator, USAID; former Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, U.S. Department of State

The Honorable Nisha Desai Biswal: Partner, The Asia Group; former Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia; former Deputy CEO, U.S. Development Finance Corporation

Brandon Brooks: Analyst, Minority Staff, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives; former USAID Civil Service

Alex Carnes: Minority Clerk and Staff Director, Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Appropriations Committee, U.S. Senate

Erin Collinson: Senior Fellow and Program Director, U.S. Development Policy, Center for Global Development; Member, Steering Committee, Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network

Dr. Zack Cooper: Senior Fellow, Foreign and Defense Policy, American Enterprise Institute; Lecturer in Public and International Affairs, Princeton University; Chair of the Board, Open Technology Fund; former National Security Council Staff

Lisa Curtis: Director, Indo-Pacific Security Program, Center for a New American Security; former National Security Council Senior Director for South and Central Asia; former Senior Fellow on South Asia, Heritage Foundation

The Honorable Ramsey Day: Head of Strategy and Business Development, Lumenix USA; former Assistant Administrator for Africa, USAID

The Honorable Naz Durakoglu: Minority Staff Director, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate; former Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs

The Honorable Enoch T. Ebong: President of the Global Development Department, Center for Strategic and International Studies; former Director, U.S. Trade and Development Agency

Joe Foltz: Director, Global Partnerships and Federal Affairs, Zipline; former Majority Staff Director, Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Bonnie Glick: Senior Fellow, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies; former Deputy Administrator, USAID

The Honorable Mark Green: President, the ONE Campaign; former U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania; former Administrator, USAID

Paul Grove: Clerk, Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Appropriations Committee, U.S. Senate

Tom Hart: President and CEO, InterAction; former President, The ONE Campaign; former Director of Government Relations, Episcopal Church, USA

Dr. Ann Hudock: President and CEO, Counterpart International; Member, U.S. MCC Advisory Council

Dr. George Ingram: Senior Fellow Emeritus, Global Economy and Development, The Brookings Institution; Member, Board of Directors, U.S. Global Leadership Coalition; Member, Steering Committee, Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network

Jeremy Konyndyk: President, Refugees International; former Director, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, USAID

The Honorable Robert A. Mosbacher, Jr.: Chair, Development Advisory Council, U.S. International Development Finance Corporation; Chair, Mosbacher Energy Company; former President, U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation

Lester Munson: Head of the International Practice, BGR Group; Co-Chair, Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network; former Majority Staff Director, Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Senate

The Honorable Tibor P. Nagy: Long-term U.S. career diplomat; former Acting Under Secretary of State for Management; former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia; former U.S. Ambassador to Guinea

The Honorable Andrew S. Natsios: Professor of the Practice, The Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University; former Administrator, USAID

Dr. Stewart Patrick: Senior Fellow and Director, Global Order and Institutions Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; former Professional Staff Member, Policy Planning Staff, U.S. Department of State

Daniel F. Runde: Senior Advisor, BGR Group; Senior Advisor, Center for Strategic and International Studies; former Senior Vice President and Director of the Project on Prosperity and Development, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Dr. Tessie San Martin: Chief Executive Officer, FHI 360; Member, Steering Committee, Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network; former President and CEO, Plan International USA; former Partner, PricewaterhouseCoopers; former Director, Operations Group, Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, The World Bank

Liz Schraye: President and CEO, U.S. Global Leadership Coalition

The Honorable Randall G. Schriver: Chairman of the Board, Institute for Indo-Pacific Security; former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs

Senior Staff Advisor: U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Gayle E. Smith: Former President and CEO, ONE Campaign; former Administrator, USAID; former Senior Director for Development and Democracy, U.S. National Security Council

Dr. Bill Steiger: Chief Executive Officer, Malaria No More; former Chief of Staff, USAID

Christina Tsafoulis: Senior Professional Staff Member, Minority Staff, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives

Noam Unger: Vice President of the Global Development Department, and Director of the Sustainable Development and Resilience Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies; former Director, Policy Office, USAID

Appendix C: Evaluation Factors to Determine the Effectiveness—In Terms of “Safer, Stronger, More Prosperous” Criteria—of Competing Foreign Assistance Models

Boundaries: Non-military U.S. foreign assistance to the world’s poorer, less stable, less self-sufficient nations, taking into consideration both the immediate return on investment to U.S. taxpayers and the return on investment over time.

A. In order to make America *safer*, this approach to foreign assistance:

- Addresses the highest threat global phenomena (such as pandemic disease, unconstrained transnational migration, pollution, and transnational crime), taking into account both immediate impact and root causes;
- Addresses in targeted countries both the immediate impact and socio-economic, and/or historical, drivers of spillover extremism, and/or conflict; and
- Effectively complements diplomatic and military efforts to address direct threats to the United States and its people.

B. In order to make America *stronger*, this approach to foreign assistance:

- Enhances the reputation of the United States as a reliable, capable, engaged partner;
- Increases the number of capable, reliable nation-state partners; and
- Focuses on and blunts the malign initiatives of peer competitors, both in the short-term and long-term

C. In order to make America *more prosperous*, this approach to foreign assistance:

- Creates viable trading partners and stable venues for U.S. direct investment;
- Directly complements U.S. foreign direct investment and local economic growth by filling gaps in countries’ capabilities; and
- Addresses gaps in supply chain systems to benefit U.S. commerce and the economies of poorer, less stable, less self-sufficient nations

Appendix D: Research Team

James R. Kunder (Co-Author) served in senior positions at USAID in three Republican administrations, including as Deputy Administrator, and Senate-confirmed Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East. He currently serves on the Steering Committee of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network. As part of a career managing and analyzing the content and impact of American foreign assistance programs worldwide, he has conducted research, and produced studies and analyses for the Department of State, National Defense University, German Marshall Fund, The Bush School, UNICEF, Institute for Defense Analyses, and other foreign policy institutions.

Laura P. Pavlovic (Co-Author) served until July 2025 as USAID's Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization. Her overseas assignments managing U.S. foreign assistance programs include Burundi, Ukraine, Serbia, and the Regional Development Mission for Asia in Bangkok. While earning her law degree, Ms. Pavlovic served as Editor in Chief of the Harvard Human Rights Journal. She co-authored USAID's 2013 Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, and has published research in both media development and transitional justice challenges in the Balkans. In the private sector, Ms. Pavlovic has worked as a corporate attorney in New York and Washington.

Ramsey Day (Senior Advisor) is the Head of Strategy and Business Development for Lumenix USA, a leading AI technology company. Previously, Mr. Day served in the first Trump administration as the Assistant Administrator for Africa at USAID, where he oversaw an \$8 billion portfolio supporting over 40 missions across the African continent. Prior to his most recent government service, Mr. Day was the Senior Director for the Center for Global Impact at the International Republican Institute (IRI). He also worked in Amman, Jordan as the IRI Country Director from 2014 to 2017, and served at USAID in the George W. Bush administration. [Mr. Day was also identified as a key informant for this study, and interviewed.]

Endnotes

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