Preserving America’s Global Leadership

BY BARBARA STEPHENSON

In the Foreign Service, the team that bears such responsibility for maintaining America’s global leadership role, are again in a period of significant transition and change. This is a good time to take stock and look forward, asking what each of us needs to do to ensure that the world continues to look to the United States for leadership.

We are working under a new National Security Strategy, one that takes a clear-eyed look at the serious and escalating threats to our nation and concludes that “we must upgrade our diplomatic capabilities to compete in the current environment.” Meanwhile, AFSA’s recent in-depth review of Congressional Budget Justifications showed that spending on core diplomatic capability has declined significantly over the past decade. In anticipation of deep funding cuts, hiring and promotions were cut deeply, contributing to the loss of hundreds of Foreign Service officers and specialists, with the loss in top leadership ranks particularly pronounced.

We now know that Congress, with overwhelming bipartisan support, firmly rejected deep cuts and passed a budget that actually increases the international affairs budget. For this, we pause and give thanks—profound thanks.

Base funding for “ongoing operations,” the budget line item that covers core diplomatic capability, also held firm. If OCO (overseas contingency operations) funding is taken into account, total funding for core diplomatic capability dipped slightly (by 1.6 percent, from $5.05 billion in 2017 to $4.96 billion in 2018), while still coming in ahead of 2016 levels ($4.89 billion). If we look only at “enduring” (or base) funding for core diplomatic capability without OCO, funding in 2018 is actually up compared to 2017.

I am sharing these complicated numbers for a reason. As stewards of this institution, we need to understand the funding decisions that underpin America’s global leadership role.

Simply put, $5 billion—the amount we spend on core diplomatic capability—is not a big number. It is about what America spends annually supporting Afghan forces, and a little more than one-third the cost of a new aircraft carrier.

What’s more, the $5 billion America spends on core diplomatic capability is not a big number compared to the $9.5 billion China budgeted for diplomacy this year. While apples-to-apples comparisons are hard to nail down, the trend lines are clear. China increased spending on diplomacy in 2018 by 15 percent over 2017, and by a whopping 40 percent since 2013. While China’s spending on diplomacy grew by 40 percent, America’s declined by 33 percent over the same period, from $7.4 billion in 2013 to $4.9 billion in 2018.

For the first time in my 32-year Foreign Service career, I am grappling with whether we can maintain American diplomatic superiority in the face of such funding decisions. As the National Security Strategy says, we need to be building up diplomatic capability—not pulling back.

Even before the painful and unnecessary loss of talent over the past year, American diplomacy had been on a starvation diet, and tales of depleted political, economic and public diplomacy sections at embassies were a regular staple of AFSA’s conversations with members. I hear this often: With just one more mid-level officer at post, we could have such an impact, really put America’s soft power to work, really level the playing field for American businesses.

Rebuilding our nation’s diplomatic capability will take time, and it will require all of us to give our best effort. Now that Congress has spoken and rejected cuts with such clarity, AFSA will press for an immediate restoration of hiring and promotion numbers. We will press to deploy more mid-level officers to the field, where the Foreign Service delivers the greatest value for the American people.

I sincerely hope that the tide has turned, and that reinforcements will soon be on their way. In the meantime, until reinforcements arrive, your role in maintaining America’s global leadership is more important than ever.

Now is the time to lead from wherever you are and to demonstrate that the trust placed in the Foreign Service will be repaid many times over in the results we achieve for the American people. I promised congressional appropriators that they could count on us to do that.

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