

Statement for the Record

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Today, nine in ten Americans support strong U.S. global leadership. Such leadership is unthinkable without a strong professional Foreign Service deployed around the world protecting and defending America's people, interests, and values. American leadership is being challenged by adversaries who want to see us fail; we cannot let that happen. We need to reassure our allies, contain our enemies, and assert U.S. leadership around the globe. If the United States retreats, we leave a vacuum that will be filled by others who do not share our values or interests. Walking that back--reclaiming American global leadership--would be a daunting and uncertain task, in short, a grave risk we should not take.

American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) members are over 16,600 professionals, active and retired, from the Department of State, USAID, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Our members spend approximately two-thirds of their careers deployed overseas, usually in difficult and often in dangerous places. We maintain an enduring presence at 270 embassies and consulates around the world, so Americans seeking to navigate unfamiliar terrain—whether to study, adopt a child, or expand an export market—have a home base to turn to, an Embassy staffed by fellow Americans who speak the local language fluently and know how to get things done.

AFSA is extremely grateful for the expressions of support from members of Congress and from the public. The value of the Foreign Service is clearer to Americans than ever. But AFSA members, who care deeply about American global leadership, are worried. If the budget reductions proposed by the Administration are approved by Congress, we could seriously degrade the capacity of the Foreign Service to help sustain American leadership. As Senator Lindsey Graham, the head of the State and Foreign Operations Sub-Committee of the Senate Appropriations Committee (SACFO) has noted, "A 29 percent cut means you really have to withdraw from the world because your presence is compromised. That may be the goal of this budget. It's not my goal. This guts soft power as we know it."

Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have described the Foreign Service as being among the "most skilled, loyal, and motivated workforces of any organization on the planet." We are encouraged by these words and believe we are exactly the right national security instrument for the moment: a corps designed to be regularly redeployed around the world in pursuit of the President's foreign policy priorities. Consequently, we have to ensure that our budget priorities do not cut short our critical capabilities. If we damage core diplomatic capability by cutting off the flow of new officers, we risk walking off the field and forfeiting the game to our adversaries.

Diplomacy is also the most cost-effective tool in the national security toolkit. The cost of helping to ensure a Europe whole and free, stopping ethnic conflict in the Balkans, or making peace between the government of Colombia and FARC rebels pales in comparison to the cost of sustaining a war. As the SACFO ranking member Senator Leahy said, "National security is not

solely the mission of the Department of Defense. The President says he prefers “hard” power to “soft” power, but the notion that “soft” power is weak or wasteful is mindless. Failing to invest in America, and cutting programs that feed millions, prevent AIDS or treat tuberculosis and malaria, will make the world less stable, and make your job more difficult. Secretary Mattis...has said if we do not fully fund the State Department, we should be prepared to buy more ammunition for the military. That is not a trade I am willing to accept.”

The very existence of skilled diplomats and development professionals in our national security arsenal allows us to reject that trade-off. For example, fighting ISIS is a top priority of this Administration, and the Foreign Service has the skill and field experience to help with the fight. As former Appropriations Chairman Rogers said to Secretary Tillerson, "We need an aggressive plan to fight ISIS and any other enemy that wishes us harm. Secretary Tillerson and I agree that this requires a comprehensive approach, including not just military engagement, but also the full and responsible use of all diplomatic tools at our disposal. While the full budget picture has yet to emerge, we intend to work closely together over the next cycle to ensure that the necessary resources are available to fulfill these goals."

The Foreign Service has regional and language knowledge, top-notch reporting skills, and sophisticated public diplomacy capabilities. We know how to get things done overseas—how to coax a partner overseas to “yes” with the lightest touch and the maximum residual goodwill. Our annual performance ratings, by which we are rank-ordered against our peers, are judged according to how well we met mission goals. Because these rankings have real consequences—determining whether we are promoted and can continue to serve, or low-ranked and forced out—they serve as a powerful way to ensure we are responsive to the priorities of successive administrations.

While we know the Administration is focused on some core priorities, such as fighting ISIS, protecting our border, countering international criminal activity, and preventing the spread of epidemics, but we still have no sense of overall foreign policy direction. As Secretary Tillerson put it in an April town hall meeting at State, “if we don’t know where we’re going, all roads will take you there. “ We agree and would encourage Congress to ask the Administration to provide the kind of strategic clarity that enables the Foreign Service to do our best delivering for America, using all our skills to the fullest and not letting them atrophy. We know from experience that understanding the Administration’s game plan allows diplomats to create the most effective means to get us where we want to go.

The Foreign Service is modeled on the military, in particular on the Navy. Our rigorous entry requirements and the up-or-out system ensure high performance and accountability and keep us lean. The out in up-or-out is real, and many if not most members of the Foreign Service are required to leave the Service long before they are ready. This amounts to a built-in annual reduction in force, something we accept as part and parcel of maintaining a high-performing, accountable workforce. But this self-renewing system depends on a steady stream of new recruits to function. If we don’t hire entry-level officers this year, we won’t have FS-1s (colonel equivalents) in 20 years. Flow-through is critical now--and for the future.

The next year or two will be a period of clear prioritization in the Department of State. We certainly see the case for streamlining, which could increase diplomatic effectiveness, but it has to be done carefully and with an eye to preserving core capability. We would like to see our

professional talent unleashed by getting rid of overly-complex bureaucratic procedures that keep our Foreign Service checking boxes instead of doing their jobs. Making these processes truly client-centered would literally change lives.

We would like to partner with Congressional supporters to ensure that today, and 15 or 20 years from now, U.S. diplomats are still on the field, deployed around the world, protecting and promoting U.S. interests, and working at the top of their game. We should not, in a dangerous world, abandon the field to our adversaries.

The United States has enjoyed a position of unprecedented global leadership in our lifetimes. This leadership was built on a foundation of military might, economic primacy, good governance, tremendous cultural appeal--and diplomatic prowess to channel all that power, hard and soft, into global leadership that has kept us safe and prosperous at home. This did not happen by chance. It was not destiny. It was effective diplomacy.

As Secretary Tillerson said in his confirmation hearing, "America has been indispensable in providing the stability to prevent another world war, increase global prosperity and encourage the expansion of liberty." To continue to lead the world, America needs diplomacy, and for effective diplomacy, we need an adequately resourced professional Foreign Service.

Thank you.