

THE HILL

Smart power in the name of security

By Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.), Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) and Claude Fonthelm - 07/27/09 02:46 PM ET

In our security policies toward Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, there is an emerging component that may be the most critical one of all: “smart power.” It’s what Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was referring to in her confirmation hearing when she said: “Calls for expanding civil and political rights in countries plagued by mass hunger will fall on deaf ears, unless democracy actually delivers material benefits that improve people’s lives.”

For the Obama administration, a key aspect of smart power is the process of using economic diplomacy tools — like economic assistance for health and education — which can win hearts and minds in countries that pose transnational threats. But smart power should be used in the case of many more countries where deep poverty and instability must be addressed now to prevent future security risks. And smart power should also include policies to enable those countries to take advantage of the global economy, help them tackle the impact of climate change, and enhance the role of women in their societies.

The global recession has made this task especially urgent. Millions are sliding back into poverty and the number of chronically hungry people is expected to climb to over one billion in 2009. We need to reverse such negative trends in order to prevent long term threats to our security. The Least Developed Countries (LDCs), especially, are in horrible straits. If America is going to help lift them up, here’s some of the ways we’ll do it:

Trade preferences

The United States should provide duty-free, quota-free market access to the 50 LDCs in Africa and Asia, as well as Haiti, which together account for a mere 0.5 percent of U.S. non-oil imports and only 0.8 percent of world trade. Our current policies on tariffs and quotas aren’t helping. Several products that poor countries export — such as apparel and light manufacturing products from Asia, as well as sugar, cotton and peanuts from Africa — face restrictive tariffs and quotas. Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus has described the impact of such tariffs on one of the LDCs: “In Bangladesh, the garment industry and micro-credit have helped bring about a major social revolution, empowering women in this predominantly Muslim nation. The industry, which accounts for most of Bangladesh’s exports, has provided jobs and training to 2 million young women. But this labor-intensive, export-dependent sector will not continue to grow and thrive unless the United States reduces or eliminates duties on products from Bangladesh and other Least Developed Countries.”

Climate change adaptation

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), climate change will hit the poorest populations the hardest. One model projects that by 2020, between 75 and 250 million people may be exposed to increased water stress due to climate change.

Recent development gains would likely be erased as up to a billion people risk falling back into poverty, with alarming developments for the United States and the world in the form of humanitarian crises, mass migration, conflict over resources and state failure.

Numerous anti-poverty groups and faith organizations are pushing the U.S. to do more to help the poorest countries tackle the effects of climate change. At the very least, the U.S. should deliver on its promise made over 15 years ago, when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed: support the efforts of developing countries to adapt to climate impacts and adopt clean energy technologies. The U.S. must also bring the poor into carbon markets to generate financing for adaptation.

Regulations that won't harm women

Many of the products that face steep U.S. tariffs and quotas are made by poor women — among them, agricultural products in Africa and apparel products from Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Pakistan. If we allow these sectors to grow by reforming our trade policies, tens of millions more young women will be able to earn their own salaries, enter marriage from a position of financial equality and provide directly for children.

Climate change, too, has an outsized impact on women in poor countries who are very dependent on natural resources such as land, forests, and waters. As Kenyan Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai points out: “Women are very immediately affected, and usually women and children can't run away. Men can trek and go looking for greener pastures ... but for women, they're usually left on site to face the consequences.” When climate change causes deforestation, drought, or crop failure, it is the women and children who suffer most. Policies to help poor countries adapt to climate change would thus be a direct investment in the prosperity of women in these countries.

These and other elements of smart power need to be on our agenda. We began the journey on July 15 at a discussion hosted by the Trade, Aid and Security Coalition with policymakers, business and non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders. We proposed new global development policies that can help the U.S. take concrete steps toward addressing future threats to our national security. We hope you will join us in this journey to insure our future.

Crowley serves on the House Ways and Means Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee; Smith is a member of the House Armed Services Committee and the Intelligence Committee; Fontheim is CEO of Fontheim International LLC and chairman of the Trade, Aid and Security Coalition.