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A National Response
Platforms Proposal

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The U.S. government spends billions of taxpayer dollars each year on foreign development while U.S. citizens donate billions more. But direct financial aid provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) too often lacks adequate accountability such that very little of the aid reaches the intended recipients.

Our government seems intent on giving away taxpayer dollars, no strings attached, so that the receiving countries can buy what they want, where they want, and have it delivered however they wish. So, along with U.S. tax dollars that are forever removed from the U.S. economy, we are also giving away jobs. More distressing, development gains suffer major setbacks when governments are unable to respond effectively to crisis.

The inefficiency of ad hoc funding and resource gathering for the United States to respond alone or in concert with the international community increases the costs and reduces the effectiveness of immediate and long-term recovery.

The U.S. military frequently gets the call, but in an era of reduced budgets, military-led engagements are cost prohibitive.

The time has long since passed to consider Winston Churchill's wise words, "Gentlemen, we have run out of money. Now we have to think."

With transportation by sea being vastly more cost-effective than by air or land, the U.S. government and private sector have generated many concepts to improve capabilities for crisis response "from the sea." The National Response Platforms (NRPs) is one such concept, but one that holds the increased efficiency and effectiveness of foreign development as its cornerstone.

Essentially a "floating warehouse," an NRP is a U.S.-flag merchant cargo ship, operated by a U.S. shipping company, manned by U.S. Merchant Mariners, and carrying U.S.-manufactured equipment and supplies. The NRP cargo, once delivered, will be employed by the host nation with the close assistance of the U.S. government and intergovernmental organizations working by, with and through NGOs and multinational corporations.

The improved coordination and increased visibility will help to ensure U.S. aid goes where intended and that the American economy and American workers benefit from the aid thus provided.

An NRP will be able to self-offload in port or at sea, support helicopter operations, and have additional berthing, messing and communications capacity. In addition to standard development and crisis response commodities, the NRP cargo will include modular hospital units that can be employed ashore as a full hospital or a

series of smaller clinics to make NRPs far more efficient than hospital ships for humanitarian assistance operations.

Once its cargo is offloaded, the NRP can remain on station to provide tremendous capability to include: berthing, messing, sanitary and medical facilities; fresh water generation, holding and pumping; fuels holding, pumping and transfer; food storage, delivery and transshipment; and extensive meeting and communications facilities to improve coordination between the host nation, responding organizations and news agencies.

NRPs will eventually be purpose-built ships. However, for use in a pilot program, the U.S. government owns 60 Merchant Marine cargo ships, each sitting idle at taxpayer expense of roughly \$10 million per ship. Forty-six of these ships reside in the U.S. Maritime Administration's National Defense Reserve Fleet (NDRF) and 16 with the Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC).

Each ship is operated by a U.S. company but, because of its reduced operating status, employs only about nine U.S. Merchant Mariners as a maintenance crew. These ships rarely get underway and generate only meager business for employers in the maritime industry and in the many other U.S. economic sectors that provide equipment, supplies and services to ships.

By contrast, NRPs will be fully crewed and operate year-round creating an additional 50 or more U.S. Merchant Mariner jobs per ship and countless jobs ashore. NRPs will be homeported in ports of the many U.S. maritime states to ensure domestic response capability and provide training and exercise opportunities for the U.S. citizens that will support NRP operations.

NRPs will move from homeport, to domestic standby, to overseas standby, to planned engagement or crisis response and back to homeport. NRPs on standby will be positioned near areas prone to or threatened by disaster (e.g., the U.S. Gulf Coast, Atlantic coast, Hawaii and Guam during hurricane/typhoon season) and in areas proximate to planned engagements or otherwise important to diplomacy, stability or national security (e.g., several NRPs off the coast of Syria to provide the "carrot" to the military's "stick.")

But how do we pay for it? The answer is simple. We are already paying for it, but in uncoordinated and wasteful ways.

Less than 1 percent of USAID's 2011 budget for overseas loans and grants — which totaled \$49.59 billion, according to agency statistics — added to current expenditures on 25 NDRF or MSC ships would operate those 25 ships as NRPs for the whole year. A small fraction of the commodities being shipped by USAID and NGOs today on foreign ships would be plenty to fill the ships.

Further, USAID and NGO efforts will be made more efficient and thus more impactful. And if we want to give our defense budget a break, when the next Typhoon Haiyan happens, the U.S. government will be able to send a half dozen NRPs for a fraction of the cost of an aircraft carrier, an expeditionary strike group and C-17 aircraft.

The United States must contribute to foreign development in ways that ensure the money is spent as intended while also guaranteeing U.S. economic security by offering employment opportunities at home. The U.S. response to humanitarian crises must be neither ad hoc nor dependent on our armed services.

The NRP proposal strengthens the U.S. economy by leveraging civilian maritime capabilities to improve U.S. foreign aid, and domestic and foreign crisis response. Creating the public-private partnerships necessary, redirecting funds and coordinating efforts will be no small feat and will directly challenge existing paradigms. But the results will be well worth the effort.

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