

USAPC Washington Report

**“Tackling Global Economic, Diplomatic Challenges
In The 111th Congress”**

Interview with Rep. Howard Berman (D., California)
Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee

USAPC: You have indicated that a priority in the new Congress will be to re-write the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and reform the U.S. foreign assistance system. What are the most serious systemic weaknesses and how should they be rectified?

Berman: Our current system of foreign assistance is severely hindered by the duplication of programs among the various agencies involved, inadequate coordination among them, the lack of clear purposes and objectives, and -- especially with respect to USAID -- a basic lack of capacity to implement programs on the ground. Many of these problems stem from the fact that the basic legal framework for foreign assistance, the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, is badly outdated. Others are the result of inadequate resources. Over the past decade, there have been a number of ad hoc efforts to reform our foreign assistance programs through new initiatives, such as the Millennium Challenge Account, new mandates, and more congressional and administration directives. We need a more systematic approach

USAPC: Secretary of State Clinton has indicated that a priority for the new administration will be to devote more resources to developing civilian capacity to conduct vigorous American diplomacy, provide greater foreign assistance, and operate effectively alongside the U.S. military. Do you think this will give greater impetus to congressional action in 2009 on a Foreign Relations Authorization Act?

Berman: I applaud Secretary Clinton’s commitment to rebuilding the capacity of the State Department and USAID, the premier diplomatic and development agencies of the US government. I do think her interest in these areas will help generate support in Congress for foreign assistance reform and a Foreign Relations Authorization Act, and I look forward to working with her on these legislative initiatives.

USAPC: Some experts have suggested that the new Congress and the Obama administration may have problems building grass-roots support for an expanded diplomatic and foreign aid effort during these difficult economic times. According to this view, the beleaguered American public would prefer that the government focus resources and energy on boosting the U.S. economy and creating jobs. How would you persuade your constituents that the new focus advocated by Secretary Clinton is important?

Berman: Diplomacy and development are two of the three key pillars of the U.S. national security strategy (the other being defense), and I have always argued that reducing poverty and promoting economic growth and stability in developing countries serves U.S.

national security interests. The American people are also keenly aware that prosperity and stability abroad provide new markets and partners for American companies, thus boosting the U.S. economy. One of my key goals for foreign assistance reform is to make our assistance programs more efficient so the taxpayers get “more bang for the buck.”

USAPC: How should Washington respond if voices in Asia increasingly blame the United States for the global financial crisis?

Berman: While the frustration and anxiety of Asian nations is understandable, in today’s inter-connected global marketplace it is impossible to assign the blame for the current global financial crisis to any single country. Whatever the causes of the crisis, the international community is clearly looking to the United States for leadership in restoring the health of the global economy. As we tackle the largest economic shock in generations, we must make it clear to all of the world economies – including those in Asia – that the United States seeks to approach this problem globally. We should draw on the lessons that Asia learned from its crisis in the 1990s: the need for international cooperation, financial transparency, and corporate responsibility.

USAPC: U.S.-China relations face a broad array of economic, political, diplomatic, and security-related challenges. What are the most pressing issues the Obama administration should tackle? Do you think cabinet-level dialogue, such as the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue instituted by the Bush administration, is an effective means of engagement?

Berman: The US-China relationship is one of the most important and complex in world affairs. The Obama administration now has the difficult challenge of managing this relationship in a way that addresses the serious concerns we have regarding a number of China’s policies while at the same time strengthening our cooperation with Beijing in other areas in which we have shared interests.

We must continue to press China on issues such as human rights abuses; lack of military, economic and political transparency; stalled democratic reforms; and support for oppressive regimes such as those in Sudan and Burma. At the same time, we should seek to build on the positive cooperation developed in the context of the Six Party process to address other difficult issues including Iran’s development of a nuclear weapons capability, global climate change and energy security.

From the time that Henry Kissinger first went to China to pave the way for President Nixon’s historic visit there in 1972, high-level dialogues between the US and China have played an important role in our relationship. The Obama administration would be wise to continue this tradition of senior-level discussions that help build a strategic framework for our engagement.

USAPC: Most experts agree that the success of any global climate change initiative depends on the extent to which China, India, and other large energy consumers are engaged effectively in this effort. What economic or foreign policy tools could Congress provide the Obama administration to facilitate such bridge-building?

Berman: China is the world's second largest consumer of energy after the United States and is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide on the planet. No solution to the problem of climate change will be effective if it does not address China's emissions. While the Chinese leadership has said repeatedly that it will address the serious challenges posed by environmental degradation and climate change, Beijing remains concerned that responding to these challenges may threaten economic growth and social stability.

We must make it clear to the Chinese leadership that the U.S. is serious about reducing its own emissions, and that China has a responsibility as a rising global power to deal with this pressing issue. At the same time, we should think creatively about engaging China on the development and application of clean energy technologies that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and expand opportunities for economic growth.

USAPC: The Six-Party Process collapsed on December 10. What approach would you like to see the Obama administration use to secure denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula? What sort of congressional oversight do you anticipate?

Berman: There are no easy solutions to the problem of North Korea. However, experience has shown that efforts to isolate Pyongyang are at best ineffective, and at worst counterproductive.

When the previous administration pursued a policy of isolation, North Korea responded by producing more weapons-grade plutonium and testing a nuclear device. It was only after that policy was abandoned in favor of the Six Party process that any progress was made toward denuclearization. Regrettably, that process has stalled.

But that doesn't mean we should abandon tough engagement. On the contrary, we must redouble our efforts, in close cooperation with our partners, to attain the full and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea. The specific form future negotiations take ultimately will be a decision of the Obama administration. Congress has consistently played an active oversight role with respect to our efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, and I expect this rigorous oversight to continue.