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Goddard & Hager: Engagement is good for Virginia's economy

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Virginia has a rich tradition of being a global leader. As our world becomes a smaller place every day, we must continue to be engaged globally to keep our commonwealth strong here at home. Just consider that in the past five years, Virginia companies have increased exports 56 percent, and in 2009, Virginia companies sold over \$15 billion worth of products in some of the fastest-growing international markets, many in the developing world. These new markets have some of the fastest-growing population of young people in the world, and this presents us with an opportunity to effect real change and develop new powerful economic partners.

As a humanitarian leader and a businessman, we come from different backgrounds, but on this issue we agree — investments in U.S. diplomacy and development overseas are good for our country and our commonwealth. Our investment in a strong and effective international affairs budget pays dividends in three critical categories: It develops our local economy, it helps to keep us safe, and it is a true reflection of who we are as Americans.

The current budget debates in Washington are dominating the airwaves and Internet, with many believing we can cut foreign assistance and the budget will be balanced. That's a myth. The United States spends only 1 percent of its budget on international affairs programs, and 1 percent will not balance the budget. Plus, these programs provide a huge return on investment for our country.

It is clear that American leadership in the world is needed as never before. As we have seen recently with our relief efforts in Haiti, and now in the Horn of Africa, our nation remains a beacon of hope for those living in extreme poverty around the world. The generosity of the American people, our entrepreneurial capacity to reach out across the globe, and the ability of our values to inspire people is unique and extraordinary. Feeding a hungry child or helping his or her mother earn a life-sustaining living represents the best of our foreign policy and demonstrates the best of America. When we show compassion in the world, the greatness of our nation shines through and our true strength is evident.

But the international affairs budget is not charity. It is a critical investment in our own economy and national security here at home. Nearly one in five Virginia jobs now depends on trade, and close to half of U.S. exports now go to the developing world. As 95 percent of the world's consumers are outside the U.S., we have to enter those markets if we are going to be major competitors in the global economy. If we do not, we risk falling behind.

This is why the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Fortune 500 companies have made it clear our international affairs programs are critical for our nation's economic growth. The Chamber recently told members of Congress, "The international affairs budget is critical to U.S. economic engagement with the world, especially at a time when there is a wide recognition of the need to boost U.S. exports to create American jobs." In this economy, we cannot afford not to make this vital investment.

International affairs programs also help to protect our national security by working with communities to prevent conflicts before they occur and build infrastructure to support stable societies and fight poverty and disease. As former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates says, "Development is a lot cheaper than sending soldiers." That's true for the lives of our men and women in uniform, as well as for our pocketbooks. And all of this helps to create freedom and economic opportunity for Virginians and people everywhere.

We know times are tough, and budgets will have to be trimmed in order to bring our country back to fiscal responsibility. But we cannot afford to drastically cut programs that actually promote economic growth and help to secure our nation's future. It takes real leadership to look long-term and to make the decisions that best serve U.S. interests while living up to our truest moral values — which makes America a great leader in the world.

Virginia has always been at the forefront of American leadership, and we hope Virginia's delegation in Washington will do the right thing and support a strong and effective international affairs budget.

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