

Jim Hoagland

Foreign Aid to the Dogs

The Republican-controlled Congress is playing a high-level game of chicken with the Democratic-controlled White House over foreign aid, presidential authority and America's role in the world. It would be thrilling politics if the stakes were not so high and the rest of the world were not watching and interpreting every move. This is getting to be a dangerous game that damages American prestige and authority abroad.

House Republican leaders are pushing for legislation that would effectively shut down U.S. development aid to the world's poor in a few years. Teaming up with Sen. Jesse Helms, the House Republicans also want to restrict President Clinton's power to give aid to Russia, annul Clinton's latest Cuba refugee policy, force him to name an ambassador to Chinese-occupied Tibet and slash the number of embassies abroad.

These are not unworthy objectives. Clinton's Cuba and China policies are far from perfect. The threat on aid to Russia should help focus Boris Yeltsin's attention on denying nuclear weapons technology to Iran. GOP proposals to cut foreign aid by at least 15 percent over the next two years have provoked a serious, needed debate about the future of U.S. bureaucracies and programs made obsolete by the end of the Cold War.

But the slash-and-burn methods of the House Republicans and Helms communicate to the nation and the world a deep disrespect for this president, and for the execu-

tive branch's historic foreign responsibilities and powers as well. The GOP majorities seem to give little importance to the reality that they are shearing away authority from Republican presidents to come. Clinton goes to Halifax, Canada, for the summit of the

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Group of Seven wealthiest industrial democracies on June 15, with the weakest hand to play of any American president since these meetings began 20 years ago.

To say that the Clintonites have brought a great deal of this disrespect on themselves is to state the obvious. Small wonder the Republicans seize on China and Cuba, two communist regimes where Clinton policy has been shaped by self-advertised expediency. The administration was at it again this week—caving to the most urgent recent pressure—

by reversing itself on granting a visa to Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui.

After telling Congress it would not let President Lee visit the United States because of pressure from Beijing, the State Department is now telling Beijing it decided to give President Lee a visa because of pressure from Congress. This is what passes for statesmanship in Washington today.

It is hard to respect policymakers who do not seem to respect themselves. But the proposals the Republicans are pushing without any serious consultation with the administration will merely compound the weaknesses this White House has shown and project those weaknesses into future presidencies, locking America onto a glide path of international inertia in diplomacy.

"As the 21st century begins, on current trends Germany will be spending 1.9 percent of its gross national product on defense while the United States will still be above 4 percent," a European ambassador to Washington observed recently. "On the other hand we in Europe will strive to give development aid at or near one percent of GNP, while the United States contribution drops to insignificance. A division of labor is occurring, in which America will use troops to handle hard security and Europe and Japan will handle soft security and preventive diplomacy. Is this what we want?"

If such a division of labor occurs, "it would be both unconscious and unwise," Secretary

of State Warren Christopher responded when I put the question to him. It would leave the United States with the choice of intervening militarily or doing nothing in the event of crisis abroad, Christopher added in an interview.

Letting Japan and Europe dominate infrastructure aid to poor countries with little input from the United States would give the other industrial democracies considerable advantages in trade and investment flows, adds Brian Atwood, administrator of the Agency for International Development. In his spirited rear-guard action to save AID, Atwood has put heavy emphasis on the essential role of developmental aid, as opposed to military or humanitarian help, in transforming poor econ-

omies into marketplaces viable for American trade and investment.

GOP moderates have remained silent as Helms and his House acolytes have loaded this session's foreign affairs legislation with features certain to provoke a Clinton veto. The veto, if sustained, would rescue the Republicans from the full impact of their assault on the presidency.

Maybe the moderates are banking on both sides swerving at the last minute. But they run an enormous risk. A Washington stalemate on America's role in the world would be a disaster in today's fluid international environment.