This issue of AFSA’s Foreign Service Journal focuses on the impact of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on American diplomacy. With a decade’s perspective, we must ask whether terrorism is the central challenge to our national security and interests, and whether diplomacy is less or more relevant in today’s world. It is debatable whether the 9/11 attacks could have been averted, but there is a body of opinion that walking away from Afghanistan after a decade-long engagement in the 1980s left a dangerous vacuum and was an error.

As a global power, America needs to remain engaged around the world. This engagement has to be multidimensional and responsive to the broad range of contemporary challenges, rather than dominated by a narrow focus on any single threat.

While the United States has focused on countering international terrorism, for understandable reasons, other phenomena have been determining the shape of international relations. Today, the fundamental drivers of change include demographics, technology and globalization, accompanied by the emergence of new power centers and increased competition in commerce, political influence and access to, and control of, resources.

The fundamental role of diplomacy is to help manage these new forces through sustained dialogue and negotiation to promote our national interests and values, while avoiding costly military conflict. For this basic purpose, a strong economy and political system are a sine qua non and diplomacy, along with defense and intelligence, is a critical tool.

This is particularly true because the drivers of global change are amorphous, with no defined or consistent center of gravity. They cannot be addressed by military means alone. Interestingly, it is our military and business sector leadership who seem to recognize this most clearly and who are speaking out most consistently on the need for investing more in diplomacy and development. Both former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and his successor, Leon Panetta, have called for the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development to receive the resources they need to build strong, professional diplomatic and development services, in parallel with our outstanding professional military forces.

The international situation is more complex than ever today. There are no neat solutions to either the longstanding conflicts in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe, or to the newer ones emerging. Effective diplomacy is therefore more challenging and more vital than ever before. New tools need to be mastered and old lessons relearned.

Paradoxically, since 9/11 the value of diplomacy seems eclipsed by major military interventions, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is far from clear that the role of diplomacy and the need for a strong institutional basis and professional service are well understood or appreciated.

The budget cutting called for under the various approaches to deficit reduction being put forward seems set to damage our long under-resourced diplomatic and development services at the very moment when our national interests call for them to be strengthened, including by more and better professional education and training.

What can AFSA do?

As the professional association representing active-duty and retired members of the Foreign Service, we must organize ourselves for more effective and sustained advocacy for the resources we need, for reforms that involve innovative use of the resources we have, and for more education and training to ensure that we can recruit and develop the talent we need to build the premier diplomatic and development services America needs.

The newly elected 2011-2013 AFSA Governing Board will focus on ways to do this at its strategic planning retreat in mid-September. I invite you to send your thoughts to johnson@afsa.org in advance.