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A Short United Nations To-Do List for the New Congress

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The U.S. has been the largest financial supporter of the United Nations since the organization's founding in 1945. The U.S. is currently assessed 22 percent of the U.N. regular budget and more than 27 percent of the U.N. peacekeeping budget. In dollar terms, the Administration's budget for FY 2011 requested \$516.3 million for the U.N. regular budget and more than \$2.182 billion for the peacekeeping budget.¹ The U.S. also provides assessed financial contributions to other U.N. organizations and voluntary contributions to many more U.N. organizations. According to the Office of Management and Budget, total U.S. contributions to the U.N. system were more than \$6.347 billion in FY 2009,² compared to contributions totaling just \$3.183 billion in FY 2001.³

Despite these huge and rapidly growing financial outlays, the U.S. often finds itself on the losing side in U.N. debates and votes, even those involving budgetary matters and proposals to improve U.N. management, oversight, and accountability.⁴

The power of the purse places clear responsibility on Congress to ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars are used prudently. Although U.S. contributions to international programs are not a large part of the budget, they should not be immune from this consideration. In recent years, despite the U.N.'s record of mismanagement and waste, Congress has rejected the use of financial withholding to increase U.S. influence to ensure that those funds are used prudently and in a manner that supports U.S. interests. History shows, however, that the most effective

way to increase U.S. influence over U.N. budgetary decisions and reforms has been to link specific demands with financial withholding legislated by Congress.⁵

Action Items for Congress. There are many things that Congress could do to scrutinize U.S. contributions to the U.N. system and bolster U.S. interests.

Link U.S. Assistance to Support for U.S. Policy Priorities in the U.N. Since 2000, about 95 percent of U.N. member states that receive U.S. assistance have voted against the U.S. most of the time in the U.N. General Assembly on non-consensus votes. The U.S. should inform aid recipients that their support—or lack thereof—for U.S. priorities in the U.N. and other international organizations will directly affect future decisions on allocating U.S. assistance.⁶

Demand More Influence on U.N. Budgetary Decisions. The General Assembly, which establishes budget and policy priorities for the U.N., operates on a one-country, one-vote basis. This creates a free-rider problem in which countries that pay little to the U.N. have a say in votes on financial decisions that is equivalent to those that provide the

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bulk of the organization's financial support. An example of how this dynamic can work happened in 2007, when the U.N. member states approved the organization's regular budget over the objection of the U.S.⁷

If the U.N. is to be a more effective, efficient, and accountable body, budgetary decision-making must be linked to financial responsibilities, because the member states that pay the most have the most interest in seeing that U.N. funds are used effectively. This can be done by weighting votes on budgetary decisions to give major contributors increased influence, shifting funding for activities currently funded under the assessed U.N. regular and peacekeeping budgets toward voluntary funding, or spreading the financial burden across U.N. membership more evenly.⁸ Congress should withhold U.S. contributions to the U.N. until changes are made to address the disparity between contributions and influence in U.N. budgetary decisions.

Insist on a Zero Nominal Growth U.N. Budget. The U.N. regular budget has more than doubled

since 2000. Despite a significant increase in the proposed two-year budget for 2010 and 2011, the Obama Administration did not even demand a vote on the budget in December 2009. Already, the U.N. Secretary-General is projecting an increase in the 2012–2013 biennial budget of more than \$300 million.

Absent Administration leadership, it is up to Congress to impose budgetary restraint on the U.N. The U.S. zero growth policy for the U.N. budget helped to constrain growth in the late 1980s and 1990s. Congress should endorse a zero nominal growth policy for the U.N. budget based on its 2010 assessment (the first year of the current biennium), establish that as the dollar cap that the U.S. will pay for assessed contributions to the U.N. regular budget for future years, and instruct the Administration to use its “voice and vote” to oppose any increase in overall resources and staff for the U.N. regular budget.⁹

Increase Competition for Voluntary Funding. The President's National Commission on Fiscal Respon-

1. U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 1: Department of State Operations, Fiscal Year 2011*, pp. 544, 665, at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAC012.pdf (November 17, 2010).
2. See Brett D. Schaefer, “U.S. Funding of the United Nations Reaches All-Time High,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2981, August 13, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/08/us-funding-of-the-united-nations-reaches-all-time-high>.
3. Robert Portman, “Report on US Contributions to the United Nations System,” Office of Management and Budget, July 31, 2006, at http://www.eyeontheun.org/assets/attachments/documents/OMB_report_on_US_contributions_to_UN.pdf (November 18, 2010).
4. For examples, see Brett D. Schaefer, “Who Leads the United Nations?” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1054, December 4, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2007/12/who-leads-the-united-nations>; Brett D. Schaefer, “The Demise of the U.N. Procurement Task Force Threatens Oversight at the U.N.,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2272, February 5, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/02/The-Demise-of-the-UN-Procurement-Task-Force-Threatens-Oversight-at-the-UN>; Brett D. Schaefer, “Congress Should Withhold Funding for Spendthrift U.N.,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1786, January 29, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/01/Congress-Should-Withhold-Funding-for-Spendthrift-UN>.
5. See Brett D. Schaefer, “A Progress Report on U.N. Reform,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1937, May 19, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2006/05/A-Progress-Report-on-UN-Reform>.
6. See Brett D. Schaefer and Anthony B. Kim, “U.S. Foreign Aid Recipients and Voting at the United Nations,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2395, April 6, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/04/US-Foreign-Aid-Recipients-Show-Little-Support-for-America-When-Voting-at-the-United-Nations>.
7. See Schaefer, “Congress Should Withhold Funding for Spendthrift U.N.”
8. See Brett D. Schaefer, “The U.S. Should Push for Adjustment in U.N. Dues,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2735, December 15, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/12/the-us-should-push-for-adjustment-in-un-dues>.
9. See Brett D. Schaefer, “Time to Rein in the U.N.'s Budget,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2368, February 3, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/02/time-to-rein-in-the-uns-budget>.

sibility and Reform noted that the U.S. gives the U.N. system “more than \$3.5 billion in ‘voluntary’ funds each year.”¹⁰ As a cost-saving measure, the commission recommends reducing these voluntary contributions by 10 percent, or about \$350 million.

These funds are voluntary, and the U.S. is under no obligation to pay them. Considering current budgetary problems, Congress should cut this funding by half and allocate the reduced funding based on evidence of effectiveness, transparency, and cooperation with the U.S. Voluntarily funded organizations that flout this standard, as the U.N. Development Program has in recent years,¹¹ should have their funding eliminated. Having U.N. organizations compete for funding would contribute to efficiency and effectiveness and improve responsiveness to member state requests.¹²

Demand Reimbursement of All Funds Owed the U.S. by the U.N. The U.N. has retained funds owed to American taxpayers both with the Tax Equalization Fund and with the cash surpluses from closed peacekeeping missions.¹³ Together, these funds involve hundreds of millions of dollars. Congress should insist that the U.N. reimburse and repay the U.S. the amounts it is owed on time.

Withhold Funding for the Human Rights Council (HRC). The HRC was created in 2006 to

replace the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, a body that had failed to hold governments accountable for violating basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. The HRC has proven to be no better—and in some ways, worse—than the commission it replaced.

The Obama Administration engaged the HRC believing that the U.S. would be able to improve the HRC from within. Unfortunately, the performance of the HRC with the U.S. as a member has been virtually indistinguishable from its performance absent U.S. membership.¹⁴ Congress should withhold an amount equivalent to the U.S. share of the HRC budget from its funding for the U.N. regular budget.

Press for Management and Oversight Reforms. Sunsetting U.N. mandates and implementing the moribund mandate review,¹⁵ combined with a zero nominal growth policy for the U.N. regular budget, should spur the U.N. to shift resources within the budget from lower to higher priority activities. The absence of a truly independent inspector general similar to the defunct Procurement Task Force at the U.N. is an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed.¹⁶ Similarly, U.N. peacekeepers all too often are not held to account for misconduct, and a fundamental review of ongoing missions for relevance and merit is long overdue.¹⁷ There is also a

10. National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, “Co-Chairs’ Proposal,” November 10, 2010, at http://www.fiscalcommission.gov/sites/fiscalcommission.gov/files/documents/Illustrative_List_11.10.2010.pdf (November 17, 2010).
11. See Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, *United Nations Development Program: A Case Study of North Korea*, January 23, 2008, at <http://www.undp.org/dprk/docs/UNDP-senate-report.pdf> (November 17, 2010).
12. See Ambassador Terry Miller, “The United Nations and Development: Grand Aims, Modest Results,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 86, September 22, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/09/the-united-nations-and-development-grand-aims-modest-results>.
13. See Brett D. Schaefer, “The U.N. Should Stop Ignoring Its Financial Regulations and Pay Its Debts to the Member States,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2484, November 1, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/10/The-UN-Should-Stop-Ignoring-Its-Financial-Regulations-and-Pay-Its-Debts-to-the-Member-States>; Brett D. Schaefer, “The U.N. Should Pay What It Owes the U.S. from Its Tax Equalization Fund,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3052, November 8, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/11/The-UN-Should-Pay-What-Its-Owes-the-US-from-Its-Tax-Equalization-Fund>.
14. See Brett D. Schaefer, “Elections for U.N. Human Rights Council Underscore the Need for Reform,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2417, June 2, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/06/Elections-for-UN-Human-Rights-Council-Underscore-the-Need-for-Reform>; Brett D. Schaefer and Steven Groves, “U.S. Targeted by Human Rights Abusers at Its Universal Periodic Review,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3050, November 5, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/11/US-Targeted-by-Human-Rights-Abusers-at-Its-Universal-Periodic-Review>.
15. For more details, see Schaefer, “Time to Rein in the U.N.’s Budget.”

troubling lack of transparency in many U.N.-affiliated organizations that impedes U.S. oversight.¹⁸

Congress and the Administration, drawing on the analysis and expertise of the Government Accountability Office, should identify the most critical reforms and inform the U.N. and other member states that the U.S. will withhold a portion of its contributions to the U.N. regular and peacekeeping budgets and to specified U.N.-affiliated organizations until they are fully implemented.

Protecting U.S. Interests and Taxpayer Dollars. Pursuing these recommendations would benefit U.S. interests by creating financial incentives for states to support U.S. policies in the U.N. and offset pressures from other nations, increase market incentives for voluntarily funded U.N. organizations to improve their effectiveness and justify their work to

Congress, impose budgetary discipline in Turtle Bay, and reinvigorate the moribund U.N. reform agenda. It would also contribute to the short-term efforts to arrest U.S. budget deficits and help ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars are used prudently.

As stewards of U.S. taxpayer dollars, Members of Congress should be vigilant in scrutinizing the U.N. budget to guard against impropriety and waste and insist that U.S. interests are being advanced through U.S. contributions to the U.N. system.

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16. Since the demise of the U.N. Procurement Task Force at the end of 2008, U.N. investigations into mismanagement, fraud, and corruption have been severely curtailed. Worse, an internal memo by Inga-Britt Ahlenius, former undersecretary-general of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, charged U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his associates with undermining efforts to combat corruption in the organization. See Schaefer, “The Demise of the U.N. Procurement Task Force”; Inga-Britt Ahlenius, “End-of-Assignment-Report: Note to Secretary General,” July 14, 2010, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/sp_uploaded_documents/100719_0_ahleniussummary.pdf (November 18, 2010).
 17. See Brett D. Schaefer, “Critical Reforms Required for U.N. Peacekeeping,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2313, September 8, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/09/critical-reforms-required-for-un-peacekeeping>.
 18. For instance, even though the U.S. is a major, and often the largest, financier of these organizations and generally sits on their executive boards, the organizations frequently refuse to allow the U.S. full and complete access to their internal documents. Two examples are the United Nations Development Program and the World Food Program. See Brett D. Schaefer and Steven Groves, “Congress Should Withhold Funds from the U.N. Development Program,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1783, January 26, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/01/Congress-Should-Withhold-Funds-from-the-UN-Development-Program>; George Russell, “World Food Program’s ‘Sunshine Policy’ Falls Short, U.N. Oversight Panel Says,” Fox News, November 11, 2010, at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/11/11/world-food-programs-sunshine-policy-falls-short-oversight-panel-says> (November 18, 2010).