

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## A U.S. Agenda for the 69th Session of the U.N. General Assembly

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The 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) officially opened on September 16. The early part of the UNGA session, generally highlighted by a high-level summit and the theatrics of the General Debate featuring speeches by most of the world's leaders, garners a great deal of media attention that quickly falters once the real grind of the session begins. Despite the relative lack of attention, a number of important issues occupy the UNGA each fall after the General Debate ends that require the careful attention of the U.S. and persistent negotiation, pressure, and dedication to principle to ensure that U.S. interests are protected and advanced.

Regrettably, the U.S. seems to be ignoring most of the key matters that the UNGA actually has within its authority, such as blocking the election of Venezuela to the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) or seeking budgetary restraint and improved whistleblower protections. Instead, the official U.S. priorities for this UNGA session are: (1) the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; (2) ensuring Iran does not get nuclear weapons; (3) the path forward in Afghanistan; (4) the emergency response to Ebola in West Africa; (5) climate change; (6) defending civil society, human rights, democracy, freedom of the press, and full participation of women; and (7) the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup>

While most of these issues are important, they will be addressed through treaty negotiations or by bodies like the Security Council or the World Health Organization. UNGA resolutions are non-binding and offer little more than rhetorical support for all but the SDGs, which will be negotiated and adopted by the UNGA. U.S. priorities for this General Assembly session should include:

**Preventing the Election of Venezuela to the UNSC.** Composed of five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and 10 non-permanent elected members that serve staggered two-year terms, the UNSC is the U.N.'s most powerful body. It is charged with maintaining international peace and entrusted with the authority to authorize military action, employ sanctions, and deploy peacekeeping operations.

On October 16, the General Assembly is scheduled to elect five countries to replace Argentina, Australia, Luxembourg, South Korea, and Rwanda on the Security Council. Among the candidates is Venezuela, which has the support of Latin America and the Caribbean group.<sup>2</sup> Even with this endorsement, however, Venezuela must still earn support from two-thirds of the 193 member states of the UNGA.

Venezuela is an authoritarian state that has regularly committed human rights abuses against its citizens. It has allied with Cuba, Iran, Syria, and other countries hostile to the U.S. and worked with them to oppose U.S. interests. A seat on the UNSC would provide Venezuela a platform to further its anti-American agenda. When Venezuela last sought a UNSC seat in 2006, the U.S. convinced Guatemala to run as an alternative candidate and forced 47 rounds of voting (the third-longest vote in history

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for a UNSC seat) before both countries withdrew in favor of Panama. The Obama Administration should take inspiration from this and prepare for a hard fight to block Venezuela's bid.

**Holding the Line on the U.N. Regular Budget.** The United Nations' regular budget has grown consistently over the past six decades. As the largest contributor to the regular budget, budgetary constraint is of particular concern to the U.S. The U.S. assessment of 22 percent for the U.N. regular budget (which serves as a standard for many U.N. organizations) is more than the combined assessment of the 178 least-assessed states *combined*.

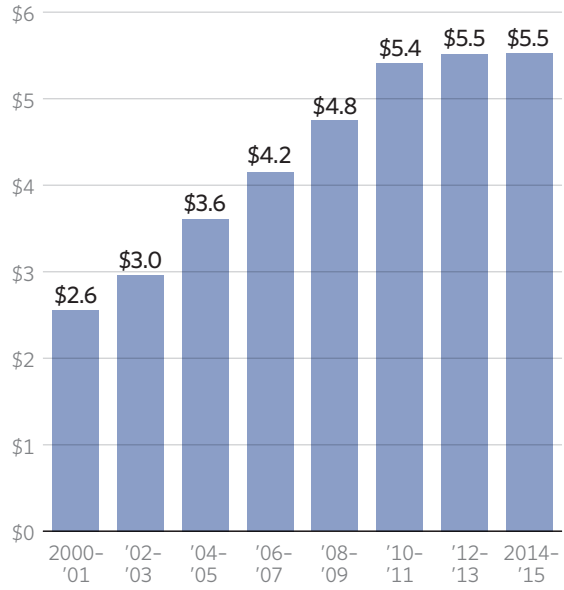
The Obama Administration, aided by economic downturns in the economies of other major contributors that have inspired a renewed interest in fiscal constraint, has had success in constraining growth in the regular budget. (See Table).<sup>3</sup> However, most member states pay a relatively small amount, and the U.N. Secretariat has repeatedly sought to increase the regular budget via add-ons and recosting. The U.S. should endorse a zero-growth position for the regular budget and insist that any new expenses be offset by eliminating extraneous, duplicative, or outdated activities, which, as shown by the defunct Mandate Review, could be between a third and half of all U.N. mandates.<sup>4</sup>

**Bringing U.N. Compensation into Line with That of Comparable U.S. Civil Servants.** The U.N. operates under the Noblemaire principle, which states that professional U.N. staff compensation should be based on that of the member state with the highest national civil service compensation levels. Since the U.N. was founded, this "comparator" has been the U.S.

CHART 1

## U.N. Programme Budget for the Biennium

IN BILLIONS OF DOLLARS



**Source:** United Nations, Programme Budget for the Biennium 2004-2005, A/58/6/Add. 1, pp. 84-85; United Nations, Programme Budget for the Biennium 2008-2009, A/62/6/Add. 1, pp. 122-124; United Nations, Programme Budget for the Biennium 2010-2011, A/64/6/Add. 1, pp. 98-99; and United Nations, Programme Budget for the Biennium 2014-2015, A/68/6/Add. 1, pp. 111-112.

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1. U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Press Center Briefing with Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf on the Upcoming UN General Assembly Meeting," Washington Foreign Press Center, September 15, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/09/20140916308465.html?CP.rss=true#axzz3DadT93gg> (accessed September 19, 2014).
2. Associated Press, "Venezuela's UN Security Council Bid Gains Backing," *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/venezuelas-un-security-council-bid-gains-backing/2014/09/11/f2604b0a-3a14-11e4-a023-1d61f7f31a05\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/venezuelas-un-security-council-bid-gains-backing/2014/09/11/f2604b0a-3a14-11e4-a023-1d61f7f31a05_story.html) (accessed September 19, 2014).
3. Brett D. Schaefer, "U.S. Needs Financial Leverage to Hold Line on U.N. Budget," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief No. 3808*, December 20, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/12/united-nations-budget-constraint-and-the-us-financial-leverage>.
4. At the urging of the UNGA, the Secretary-General created the Mandate Registry to provide, for the first time, a comprehensive list of the more than 9,000 individual mandates of the General Assembly, Security Council, and Economic and Social Council. The only report from the co-chairmen of the Mandate Review was issued in August 2008. It concluded that only 155 (56 percent) of the 279 mandates in the Humanitarian cluster were "current and relevant" and that only 18 (35 percent) of the 52 mandates in the African Development cluster were current and relevant. The Mandate Review has been terminated, and no comprehensive action has been taken to systematically examine other clusters or to eliminate the mandates deemed outdated, duplicative, or ineffective. U.N. General Assembly, "Mandate Review: Co-Chairs' Report," August 8, 2008, p. 3, <http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/letters/cochairsmandatereview080808.pdf> (accessed September 19, 2014).

federal civil service. Notwithstanding this principle, U.N. net remuneration has climbed to levels far above that of comparable U.S. civil servants. Specifically, the seven U.N. professional or higher categories in New York receive net remuneration, on average and after applying its own cost-of-living adjustment of 11.6 percent for New York that is significantly higher than the 3.6 percent used by the U.S. government, is 19.6 percent higher than the net remuneration of equivalent U.S. federal employees.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, U.N. employees enjoy generous benefits and allowances matching or exceeding equivalent U.S. benefits.<sup>6</sup> U.N. salaries and compensation typically account for 65 percent to 75 percent of expenditures for U.N. agencies, funds, and programs.

Multiple U.N. organizations have expressed concern that rising remuneration has squeezed their budgets. In early 2014, the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) recommended freezing U.N. compensation until it falls to 15 percent above that of comparable U.S. civil servants. The U.S. should support a temporary pay freeze and seek a UNGA resolution instructing the ICSC that U.N. net remuneration should not exceed 100 percent of that of the U.S. civil service.<sup>7</sup>

**Establishing a Maximum Peacekeeping Assessment of 25 Percent.** The Committee on Contributions advises the UNGA on the level of assessments for the individual member states working within the instructions provided to the Committee through UNGA resolutions.<sup>8</sup> It will meet in June 2015 to make its recommendation for the 2016–2018

scale of assessments for the regular budget and the peacekeeping budget.

Nearly 15 years ago, the U.N. committed to lowering the U.S. peacekeeping assessment to 25 percent, and by 2009, the U.S. share had fallen to less than 26 percent. In 2010, however, the U.S. peacekeeping assessment began to rise sharply and the U.S. share is currently 28.36 percent, which is more than the *combined* assessment of the 185 least assessed states.<sup>9</sup> These assessment increases have cost U.S. taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. The U.S. should lead an effort in the UNGA to establish a maximum peacekeeping assessment rate of 25 percent, which would cap the U.S. peacekeeping assessment at 25 percent which was established as a condition for payment of U.S. arrears under the Helms–Biden legislation in the late 1990s.

**Improving Whistleblower Protections.** Congress has expressed great concern over the failure of the U.N. to implement measures to protect whistleblowers. The 2014 omnibus appropriations bill requires the U.S. to withhold 15 percent of U.S. contributions unless the Secretary of State certifies that the organization has implemented specified whistleblower protections. The Government Accountability Project, which advocates for whistleblowers, recently issued a report detailing “the consistent failure of the United Nations and its funds, programs and agencies to protect whistleblowers from retaliation.”<sup>10</sup> The U.S. should lead an effort to correct this and withhold funding until necessary reforms are implemented.

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5. International Civil Service Commission, “Report of the International Civil Service Commission for 2013,” Annex IV, p. 44, <http://icsc.un.org/resources/pdfs/ar/AR2013.pdf?d=91520143:52:28PM> (accessed September 19, 2014).
  6. Government Accountability Office, “United Nations: Key Compensation Elements Should Be Reviewed to Address Costs and Sustainability,” Report to Congressional Requesters, GAO-14-546, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/664437.pdf> (accessed September 19, 2014).
  7. The ICSC currently operates under an instruction from Resolution 40/244 adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1985 to maintain U.N. net remuneration between 110 percent and 120 percent higher than the U.S. equivalent, with a further goal of maintaining a five-year average of 115 percent adopted three years later in Resolution 43/226. Brett D. Schaefer, “U.S. Should Lead Effort to Arrest Excessive U.N. Pay,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4099, November 26, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/11/us-should-lead-effort-to-arrest-excessive-un-pay>.
  8. Brett D. Schaefer, “The Window of Opportunity to Overhaul the U.N. Scale of Assessments Is Closing,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2701, June 18, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/06/the-window-of-opportunity-to-overhaul-the-un-scale-of-assessments-is-closing>.
  9. Brett D. Schaefer, “U.S. Must Enforce Peacekeeping Cap to Lower America’s U.N. Assessment,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2762, January 25, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/us-must-enforce-peacekeeping-cap-to-lower-americas-un-assessment>.
  10. Government Accountability Project, “Representative Cases in Which the United Nations or Its Funds, Programmes or Agencies Have Not Complied with Best Practices in Whistleblower Protection,” August 22, 2014, <http://www.whistleblower.org/sites/default/files/Representative%20UN%20Cases.pdf> (accessed September 19, 2014).

**Trimming Back the Overambitious 2015 SDGs.** In this session, the UNGA will debate a new set of development criteria called the Sustainable Development Goals to replace the Millennium Development Goals that expire at the end of 2015. As currently drafted, the SDGs are too numerous and broad, often unmeasurable or subjective, and implicitly endorse a top-down, input-driven development strategy that has not been successful historically.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. should reject the SDG draft as flawed and lead the UNGA to focus on encouraging countries to adopt policies known to facilitate economic growth and development: economic freedom and the rule of law.

## Conclusion

Although the UNGA can be an effective venue to express concerted positions of the world's nations, its authority is limited. UNGA authority is strongest when exercised on budgetary matters and issuing instructions to subsidiary bodies and the Secretariat. Because the U.S. pays so much more than other nations, it has a greater interest in budgetary constraint and ensuring that U.N. funds are used productively and as intended. The U.S. should focus on these goals during the upcoming session.

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11. Brett D. Schaefer and Terry Miller, "U.N. Repeating Past Mistakes in New Sustainable Development Goals," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4251, July 23, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/07/un-repeating-past-mistakes-in-new-sustainable-development-goals>.