



International Organizations and Treaties

Summary and Key Talking Points

Policy Proposals

1. Conduct an analysis of, and publicly report on, how U.S. participation in international organizations advances specific U.S. interests.
2. Enforce the 25 percent cap on the U.S.'s assessed share of the United Nations peacekeeping budget.
3. Clarify the Senate's process for consenting to international treaties and agreements.
4. Make U.N. voting a mandatory consideration in aid allocation.

Quick Facts

1. Oppressive governments such as China, Cuba, Russia, and Venezuela have won election to and served on the U.N. Human Rights Council.
2. In 2019, the U.S. contributed \$639 million to the U.N. regular budget and over \$1.8 billion for U.N. peacekeeping.
3. U.S. financial contributions to the U.N. surpassed the combined contributions of 184 other countries.

Power Phrases

Tools of Diplomacy

- The U.S. must engage in a broad spectrum of relationships, organizations, legal agreements, and treaties to secure safety and prosperity for the American people.
- The U.S. is a member of or financially contributes to nearly 200 international organizations, funds, and treaty bodies, providing nearly \$12 billion to those organizations in 2018.

Exerting Influence

- America should not be shy about withholding funding in order to bolster reform while working through international organizations and agreements to accomplish common goals.

The Issue

The preeminent responsibility of the United States government is to defend and protect the American people and advance their interests and welfare domestically and abroad. Fulfilling this responsibility requires the U.S. to engage in a broad spectrum of bilateral and multilateral relationships, international organizations, and legal agreements and treaties. However, it is imperative that the U.S. understand that these relations are not an end but merely a means for securing the safety, prosperity, and opportunities of the American people.

Successfully defending America's interests by engaging in these relationships can be challenging. International organizations frequently have member states whose interests are at odds, so action and decision in these organizations is often gridlocked or subject to a process that appeals to the lowest common denominator. Worse, countries opposed to U.S. policies and leadership use the UN and other international organizations, in which they are on a more equal footing with the U.S., to assert their influence and counterbalance U.S. leadership and constrain U.S. action. As noted by the 2017 National Security Strategy,

Authoritarian actors have long recognized the power of multilateral bodies and have used them to advance their interests and limit the freedom of their own citizens. If the United States cedes leadership of these bodies to adversaries, opportunities to shape developments that are positive for the United States will be lost. All institutions are not equal, however. The United States will prioritize its efforts in those organizations that serve American interests, to ensure that they are strengthened and supportive of the United States, our allies, and our partners. Where existing institutions and rules need modernizing, the United States will lead to update them. At the same time, it should be clear that the United States will not cede sovereignty to those that claim authority over American citizens and are in conflict with our constitutional framework.¹

This is a sound guiding principle, but following through is difficult. The U.S. currently is a member of or financially contributes to nearly 200 international organizations, funds, treaty bodies, councils, groups, bureaus, centers, commissions, and peacekeeping operations. According to the most recent report, the U.S. provides over \$12 billion to those organizations each year.² The benefits of membership in these entities to U.S. interests varies considerably.

Some of these organizations, such as NATO, clearly enhance American interests by strengthening our security cooperation with allied nations. Other organizations, such as the United Nations, are often ineffective and flawed, but U.S. membership is critical to oppose actions and resolutions contrary to our interests, particularly in the UN Security Council where the U.S. has a veto. However, the UN is not a monolith, and UN membership does not require U.S. participation in all of its affiliated organizations. The U.S. should therefore leave those whose costs outweigh the benefits of membership. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), for instance, provided so little value that the Clinton Administration withdrew the U.S. from membership in 1996.³ Other organizations become politicized to the point that their value is outweighed by the damage done to American interests. In 2011, the U.S. suspended its contributions to one such organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and withdrew in 2018.⁴

The spectrum of international agreements and treaties is similarly complex. As acknowledged in the National Security Strategy, when the U.S. ratifies a treaty, the U.S. is bound to observe the terms of the agreement. In some cases, the benefits of the agreement can justify accepting these constraints. For instance, in addition to the NATO treaty, a number of agreements improve the mutual security of the U.S. and its allies. Similarly, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and subsequent modifications, including the establishment of the World Trade Organization in 1995, established rules for trade that have contributed to enormous increases in per capita income in the U.S. and around the world. Human rights instruments, such as the Geneva Conventions and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, codify important rights, principles, and behaviors that benefit all humanity.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, are treaties that would impose significant economic costs or threaten fundamental freedoms. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which the U.S. signed in 1977 but has not ratified, would elevate entitlements and policy decisions on health care and education to the level of rights, which serves to debase the notion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Paris Agreement on climate change, for instance, imposes significant costs on the U.S., but would do little to address climate change. Likewise, the Arms Trade Treaty would impose significant constraints on the ability of the U.S. to support the defense of its allies, while doing nothing to constrain arms sales by dictatorships. President Trump was correct to end U.S. support for these deeply flawed agreements.

Reconciling U.S. interests with the varying efficacy of international organizations and treaties does not lend itself to a bumper sticker policy. The United States must be flexible in its approach. If the United States and other nations operate only multilaterally, they hand the spoilers the means to frustrate their efforts. Multilateralism is a tool, not an end in itself. America should be willing to work through international organizations and ratify international agreements to address genuinely shared concerns, but it must not be held hostage by an irrational adherence to these approaches, nor should it be shy about using the tools available to it—including withholding financial support—to bolster its efforts to reform these organizations and advance U.S. interests.

Recommendations

Conduct an analysis of, and publicly report on, how U.S. participation in each international organization advances specific U.S. interests. Multilateralism is a tool, not an end in itself. The United States should be open to working through the UN and other international organizations to address shared concerns, but if a UN body has proven irrelevant, hopelessly flawed, or antithetical to U.S. interests, the United States should not reward its poor performance with U.S. financial support or participation, which lends it unwarranted prestige and credibility. The Trump Administration has wisely severed U.S. ties with the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO for these reasons. The U.S. would benefit from a regular and systematic evaluation of the costs and benefits of membership in international organizations.

Maintain and enforce U.S. law prohibiting funding of UN organizations that admit Palestine as a member state. The Palestinians have sought full membership in international organizations for years as a means of achieving recognition of their statehood absent a negotiated peace with Israel. In response, the U.S. enacted legislation in the 1990s to withhold funding from international organizations that accord “the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states” or grant “full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.” The U.S. did this because the Palestinian effort undermines prospects for a negotiated peace with Israel. To discourage international organizations from granting membership to the Palestinians before a mutually agreed peace agreement with Israel is concluded, Congress and the Trump Administration should enforce U.S. law.

Be willing to withhold funding to reform international organizations. Many nations provide negligible funding to international organizations and, therefore, have little concern if their funds are misused. Failure to demand that international organizations operate effectively and efficiently does a disservice to the mission of those organizations and fails to respect the American people, whose tax dollars often comprise a major share of their budgets. The U.S. needs to ensure that every agency and body in the UN system is operating in a transparent, accountable, and well-managed manner. Although the U.S. is an influential nation, most international organizations operate on a one-nation, one-vote process, and the U.S. often fails in its efforts to pass reform measures. As such, it must be prepared to use its considerable financial leverage to advance critical reforms when normal diplomatic efforts fall short.

Enforce the 25 percent cap on America’s United Nations peacekeeping assessment. Since the first scale of assessments was adopted in 1946, the U.S. has objected to the UN’s excessive reliance on a single

member state for the budget, and has argued for a maximum assessment level and, subsequently, for lowering that maximum. Two decades ago, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke testified to the Senate that he had secured a deal to lower the U.S. peacekeeping assessment to 25 percent as required under U.S. law and as a condition for payment of U.S. arrears under the Helms–Biden agreement. By 2009, the U.S. share had fallen to less than 26 percent. Starting in 2010, however, the U.S. assessment began to rise again. In 2019, it was 27.8912 percent. Failure to lower the U.S. assessment to 25 percent has cost U.S. taxpayers billions of dollars because Congress has in the past approved payments over 25 percent in continuing resolutions and omnibus appropriations bills. The U.S. should withhold the difference between our peacekeeping assessment and the 25 percent cap until the UN implements a maximum peacekeeping assessment of 25 percent.

Engage with Congress to clarify the treaty process. Which international agreements constitute treaties requiring Senate advice and consent in accordance with Article II of the Constitution is often subject to dispute. This is demonstrated by the debates over whether the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iran nuclear program constituted treaties. The uncertainty persists despite internal regulations adopted by the State Department, known as the Circular 175 procedure, which lay out eight factors for determining whether an international agreement should be negotiated as a treaty, which is subject to Senate advice and consent, or as an “international agreement other than a treaty.” The Senate should also adopt a practice of returning treaties to the executive branch if they fail to secure Senate advice and consent or are not voted on for extended periods.

Make UN voting a mandatory consideration in aid allocation. While the U.S. uses its foreign assistance to advance a number of goals, advancing U.S. interests in the UN must rank highly. Failure to include this goal among the hundreds of legislative directives on aid allocation is extremely imprudent, considering the serious matters discussed, debated, and decided in the UN. This consideration has increased urgency now that China is using its bilateral assistance to reward support in the UN. Not every UN vote is equally important to the United States, but some affect important U.S. interests. Congress should make support for U.S. positions in the UN a mandatory consideration in aid allocation. The Secretary of State, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN should meet regularly to identify important votes and adjust U.S. assistance to reward or punish countries for their support or opposition to U.S. policy in these important votes.

Facts and Figures

FACT: The U.S. provides generous financial support to the United Nations and many other international organizations.

- The U.S. is the highest assessed country and is charged 22 percent of the UN regular budget, while it was charged 27.8912 percent of the peacekeeping budget in 2019. In dollar terms, this equates to \$639 million for the amended 2018–2019 UN regular budget and over \$1.8 billion for the current UN peacekeeping budget. By contrast, the least assessed countries pay less than \$36,000 per year. All told, the U.S. is charged more than 184 other countries combined.
- The U.S. contributed more than \$12.1 billion in funding to 194 international organizations, funds, treaty bodies, councils, groups, bureaus, centers, commissions, and peacekeeping operations in fiscal year (FY) 2017.⁵
- The vast majority of this funding (approximately \$10.5 billion) was distributed to the UN and over 60 specialized agencies, peacekeeping operations, funds, programs, treaty bodies, or other entities related to, or affiliated with, the UN.
- The nearly 130 other international organizations receiving U.S. funding include commodity-focused entities such as the International Coffee Organization, large non-UN international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), regional governance bodies such as the African Union, security alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and small non-UN scientific or technical organizations such as the International Bureau of Weights and Measures.

FACT: The United Nations and other international organizations can be useful and contribute to U.S. interests, but not all are equally important, and many have serious flaws that lead the U.S. to seek reform or withdraw from membership.

- The U.S. was instrumental in the founding of the UN, and the organization remains a key venue for multilateral meetings, negotiations, and action to address threats to international peace and security. As a permanent member of the Security Council with a veto, the U.S. is in position to block potentially harmful decisions of that body.
- There are dozens of other international organizations and entities in the United Nations system or outside of it that the U.S. has joined over the years. A number of these organizations do valuable work, such as the World Health Organization, which combats pandemics, or the International Civil Aviation Organization, which advances universal standards and practices to make air traffic safer. Not all are equally important, however, as concluded by the Clinton Administration when it withdrew from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in 1995 and the Reagan and Trump Administrations when they withdrew from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in, respectively, 1984 and 2017.

FACT: Peacekeeping can be a useful option for addressing crises, but significant problems and weaknesses continue to beset these operations.

- One of the United Nations' primary responsibilities is to help maintain international peace and security, and the Security Council can establish peacekeeping operations to fulfill this duty. These missions can be useful in addressing crises in places that the U.S. and other governments have minimal interests or where unilateral interventions are not an option.
- At the end of September 2019, UN peacekeeping had 98,544 personnel (including 84,382 uniformed personnel) involved in 14 peacekeeping operations.⁶ The approved budget from July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2020, was \$6.52 billion.⁷ Seven of the 14 peacekeeping operations, including the largest and most expensive operations, were located in Africa.
- In recent years, UN peacekeeping operations have had problems with sexual exploitation and abuse, unwillingness by peacekeepers to protect civilians as they are charged to do, and unintended tragic consequences, such as the introduction of cholera to Haiti.

FACT: Repressive governments are able to secure prominent positions in the UN system and exert harmful influence.

- A majority of the UN's 193 member states are neither politically free, according to Freedom House, nor economically free, according to The Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom*.
- Saudi Arabia, which denies women equal rights and treatment, is a 2020 member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women whose mission is to promote "gender equality and the empowerment of women."
- China, Cuba, Eritrea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and other oppressive governments that deny their citizens basic human rights have won election to and served on the UN Human Rights Council.
- Membership of the UN Conference on Disarmament, which is charged with combatting proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction, includes known proliferators such as Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, and Syria.
- Voting coincidence with the U.S. in the UN General Assembly between 1980 and 2017 averaged 34.6 percent, i.e., other countries voted with the U.S. only about a third of the time on average.

Additional Resources

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ENDNOTES

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4. Brett D. Schaefer, “The U.S. Should Withdraw from UNESCO,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3760, October 19, 2012, http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/pdf/ib3760.pdf, and State Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert, “The United States Withdraws From UNESCO,” Press Statement, October 12, 2017, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/the-united-states-withdraws-from-unesco-us-department-of-state-press-release/> (accessed December 12, 2019).
5. U.S. Department of State, “United States Contributions to International Organizations: Sixty-Sixth Annual Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 2017,” <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Sixty-Sixth-Annual-Report-to-the-Congress-for-FY-2017.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2019).
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