The Urgent Need for UN Reform

The UN's response to October 7 makes reform more urgent than ever. UN reform used to be a bipartisan priority — it must now be again.

By Alan Goldsmith

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Foreword

By Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Richard Goldberg

Few moments in its history have so completely exposed the decay of the United Nations into a labyrinth of anti-American bureaucracies as Hamas's October 7 massacre. In Gaza, we see evidence of the UN Relief and Works Agency and World Health Organization complicit in Hamas war crimes, while others like the World Food Programme parrot Hamas propaganda. In New York and Geneva, from the Security Council and UN Women to the Human Rights Council and the WHO, groups refuse to condemn Hamas and its crimes against humanity — their condemnation is reserved solely for the victims of the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. The UN secretary-general himself may go down as the greatest enabler of this blatant antisemitism.

Threats to U.S. interests coming from the UN system are not confined to antisemitism, Israel, or Hamas. Since establishing FDD’s International Organizations Program, FDD scholars have documented how China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other U.S. adversaries exploit the UN system to undermine the United States. The January 2021 monograph From Trump to Biden outlined a strategy of using American leverage inside international organizations to counter U.S. adversaries. A June 2021 monograph, A Better Blueprint for International Organizations, explained how the United States could condition aid to win concrete reforms at a dozen UN agencies. Instead, the Biden administration is repeating the mistakes of the Obama administration — insisting that engagement and diplomatic niceties could advance reform without asserting U.S. pressure or utilizing our outsized leverage. This strategy has failed.

This need not be a partisan debate. Indeed, the cause of UN reform was historically bipartisan for most of the late 20th century. If ever there was a moment to find a way back to this bipartisanship and put UN reform back on the agenda, this is that moment. In this memo, Alan Goldsmith, a former employee and colleague on Capitol Hill who worked on UN reform as a professional staff member for the House Foreign Affairs Committee, presents a compelling case for a bipartisan UN reform campaign. He walks us through the history of such efforts, detailing case studies of reform attempts and outlining the tools Congress and the executive branch have at their disposal. Anyone remotely interested in driving a UN reform agenda will want to keep this memo handy.

The United Nations (UN) is the world’s leading international organization, symbolizing multilateral cooperation and a vision to improve the world. However, the UN is also synonymous with inaction and ineffectiveness, mismanagement and malfeasance, bias and farce. It has become a tool to advance the interests and values of U.S. adversaries, like Russia and China, and to serve their interests — often to the detriment of America and the free world. And, as demonstrated in the wake of the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023, the UN has become a tool used by purveyors of Jew-hatred.

Troubled by the UN’s flaws and its frequent alignment against the United States, critics advocate withdrawal from the UN in its entirety. This is understandable but counterproductive. The conduct of some UN agencies is indeed incompatible with U.S. participation. Others are amenable to American influence. Among the latter, the record shows that when Washington goes on offense, using all its diplomatic muscle and financial leverage, it can achieve positive outcomes. If America ignores these levers of influence, it cedes a crucial arena to its greatest adversaries.

This report thus recommends a two-track approach to the UN: participating fully in UN bodies responsive to reform but withdrawing from those that are hostile to necessary changes. America should seek to change the hostile bodies from the outside where possible and work to dismantle those bodies if they prove irredeemable.

This two-track approach reflects the lessons learned from the long history of both congressional and executive branch campaigns to reform the UN. From the early 1970s until the end of the 20th century, the United States conditioned its funding for, and membership in, UN bodies based upon their readiness to enact reforms. In the 21st century, however, Washington has increasingly embraced a policy of unconditional U.S. financial support for, and membership in, UN entities. This stems from a mistaken belief that demonstrations of loyalty to the UN can serve as leverage for reform.

Examining the history of these contrasting approaches reveals that the former approach usually achieves better outcomes than the latter. Conditionality must remain in place to ensure that the UN does not backtrack on its reform pledges. In addition, bipartisan support for conditionality serves as the bedrock of U.S. leverage so that the UN and its agencies do not simply drag their feet on reform while waiting for the election of a more accommodating president or Congress.

Unfortunately, the Biden administration is pursuing a policy of unconditional engagement, which predictably undermines both its own reform agenda and American interests. Examples of this flawed policy include the U.S. decision to remain part of the World Health Organization (WHO) and to rejoin the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) without insisting upon major reforms.

Holding the UN accountable through words and deeds is the best way to force it to perform better or suffer reduced funding and relevance. If both parties come together behind this approach, it can gradually repair the institution to serve the interests of the free world while upholding its values.
The Dysfunctional UN

Dictatorships dominate the UN’s key bodies, advancing their own malign agendas at the expense of Western democracies. This problem has spanned decades. During the Cold War, the UN became a key arena for conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which — along with China, France, and the United Kingdom — were permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The Soviet Union frequently vetoed resolutions supported by Washington and often backed regimes responsible for egregious human rights abuses.

Waste, fraud, and abuse pervade the UN, while whistleblowers face punishment, firing, and legal battles. For example, the UN fired one of its most prominent whistleblowers, Emma Reilly, after she disclosed that UN officials handed over the names of Chinese dissidents to Beijing. Another whistleblower, Aicha Elbasri, lost her job after she exposed efforts by UN officials to conceal crimes against humanity in Darfur. Yet another whistleblower, John O’Brien, was terminated after he reported corruption and financial mismanagement at the UN Development Programme in Russia.

China, one of the most powerful countries in the UN, poses an additional problem. At the UNSC and other bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council, Beijing prevents investigation of its own human rights abuses, such as its persecution of the Uighurs. More broadly, Beijing seeks to reshape the UN system in a way that would increase its autonomy and influence on the global stage and secure immunity from condemnation. Beijing routinely votes against U.S. positions in multiple UN bodies, particularly at the UNSC, where it often partners with Russia to counteract Washington.³

Moreover, the UN singles out Israel for condemnation more frequently than all other countries in the world combined, including major human rights abusers like Cuba, North Korea, and Syria. Perhaps the UN’s most infamous attack against Israel came in 1975 when the General Assembly passed a resolution calling Zionism a form of racism. But while the UN ultimately repealed the resolution in 1991, the decades since have shown little improvement. The UN Human Rights Council, for example, maintains a standing agenda item devoted exclusively to Israel but does so for no other country. UN fact-finding missions and investigations — often initiatives of rogue regimes — regarding Israel’s supposed human rights abuses proliferate at multiple UN bodies.⁴

The UN is resistant to reform. History shows that the best hope for change is bipartisan support for withholding U.S. funding, an approach that achieved considerable success through the 1990s.

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Early Cases of Successful U.S. Pressure on the UN

International Labor Organization

The earliest major example of U.S. efforts to leverage its funding and membership to produce UN reform involves the International Labor Organization (ILO). Founded in 1919 under the League of Nations and later integrated into the UN, the ILO aims to set international labor standards.\(^5\) The ILO’s founders intended to address a particular problem: Even countries inclined to improve their domestic working conditions were afraid to do so lest they be placed at a competitive disadvantage to states with fewer labor protections.\(^6\) The organization has a unique tripartite makeup, with General Conference delegates representing governments, employers, and labor unions in member states.\(^7\) The mandate is to set standards for every member state to maintain.

The United States, an ILO member since 1934, grew frustrated with the ILO beginning in 1954 when it admitted the Soviet Union over American objections. The Soviets did not grant freedom to employers or laborers, violating multiple ILO conventions and undermining the logic behind the tripartite structure. Since the USSR had no independent employers or labor unions, the Kremlin controlled the votes of all Soviet delegates. This problem was exacerbated when the ILO admitted more unfree countries in the 1950s and 1960s, stacking the deck against free markets and organized labor.\(^8\)

The last straw for the United States was the appointment of a Soviet national as ILO assistant director-general in 1970. The Democratic-controlled Congress, with AFL-CIO support, withheld U.S. contributions from the ILO — 25 percent of its budget — from 1970 to 1972.\(^9\)

The ILO’s problems worsened in 1974 at its General Conference. Without following its own rules of commissioning an investigation by its Committee of Experts, the General Conference passed a resolution condemning Israel’s presence in the West Bank and Gaza and Israeli labor practices in those territories. By contrast, when the Committee of Experts issued a report condemning the USSR for violating international conventions against the use of forced labor, the General Conference did not adopt that report. One year later, the General Conference also granted observer status to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a terrorist group.\(^10\)

Congress responded by reducing its contribution to the ILO for 1975 and providing no contribution for 1976. In 1975, the Ford administration gave the ILO the required two-years’ notice of American intent to fully withdraw. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger cited the undermining of the ILO’s tripartite structure, its double standards in the treatment of human rights issues, its violations of due process, and its increasing politicization.11

Kissinger made clear that the United States would “make every possible effort to promote the conditions which will facilitate our continued participation,” but “[i]f this should prove impossible, we are in fact prepared to depart.”12 The Ford administration also established a cabinet-level committee to monitor ILO reforms.

After Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford in 1976, the choice of whether to leave the ILO fell to the new president. Carter’s senior domestic policy adviser, Stuart Eizenstat, argued for leaving, giving reasons that remain sound to this day. Eizenstat noted that U.S. credibility was at stake; that a U.S. departure might encourage ILO members to undertake serious reforms; that withdrawal would not likely harm other U.S. multilateral and UN efforts; and that if the United States stayed, Congress might attempt to withhold U.S. financial support.13

In June 1977, the General Conference rejected reforms related to ending double standards, diminishing politicization, and respecting due process.14 Consequently, in November 1977, the United States announced its withdrawal.15

America’s departure soon had the desired impact. In 1978, the ILO began to do its job. It censured Czechoslovakia for violating the organization’s standards banning discrimination in employment. It also opened investigations into transgressions against labor union rights in Poland and the USSR. That year, the General Conference voted against a resolution that would have condemned purported Israeli violations of working standards in the West Bank and Gaza without first conducting an investigation.16

Western and Third World member states also agreed on rules to filter out resolutions violating due process. The next year, the General Conference changed its rules to allow for voting by secret ballot, potentially enabling employers and workers from Communist countries to vote as they wished without fear of retaliation. Finally, the ILO’s director-general committed to appointing Americans to top jobs if Washington rejoined. The Carter administration, with organized labor’s support, chose to resume its membership in the ILO in 1980.17

12. Ibid., page 18
13. Ibid., pages 20-21
Another early example of successful U.S. pressure involves the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), an organization founded in 1945. As the number of authoritarian member states increased at the UN, UNESCO became politicized and began to serve as a vehicle for the Arab and Soviet campaign against Israel. In the early 1970s, UNESCO adopted resolutions condemning Israel and blocking the Jewish state from joining the organization’s European regional group. Washington employed its funding as leverage, yet the agency resisted reform, ultimately provoking an American withdrawal. This had no immediate effect, yet more than a decade later, UNESCO enacted changes that were sufficient to bring America back in. However, another decade down the line, the body relapsed into hostility toward Israel. Washington initially responded by pulling its funding and — eventually — its membership. In 2022, the Biden administration returned to UNESCO despite the absence of reform.

In the 1970s, UN member states began to push the concept of a “new world information and communication order” (NWICO), with the theoretical goal of expanding developing countries’ communications capabilities. However, in practice, Tunisia and some other member states wielded NWICO to violate press freedom by censoring journalists. UNESCO also produced educational curricula that took a pro-Soviet line on “peace and disarmament” and other politically sensitive topics. Even writer Michael Massing, a defender of the organization, admitted that “UNESCO’s peace programs do often seem to have an anti-Western orientation.” As if that were not enough, UNESCO suffered from dysfunctional management.

In 1983, Congress enacted the Beard Amendment, named for Representative Robin Beard (R-TN), which required the president to withhold U.S. contributions from UNESCO if the body took actions that limited press freedom. At the end of 1983, the Reagan administration, fed up with UNESCO’s trajectory and growing budgets, announced that it would leave UNESCO in one year.

The way in which the United States ultimately withdrew can serve as a model. The Reagan administration outlined all of its problems with UNESCO, citing the organization’s limited effort to reform itself; established an independent panel to observe reform efforts and report back on them; affirmed its commitment to rejoining upon the implementation of necessary reforms; established an observer mission to UNESCO to defend American...
interests and work with other countries on reform; and stated its “support for international activities in the fields of education, science, culture and communication through other existing channels.”

Support for U.S. withdrawal was bipartisan, including from leading Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale and from The New York Times and The Washington Post. At the end of 1985, the United Kingdom and Singapore also ended their membership for similar reasons, demonstrating international dissatisfaction with UNESCO.

The U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO saved American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars and eventually forced the organization to reform. In 1999, the new director-general, Koichiro Matsuura, instituted budgetary and management reforms. America rejoined UNESCO in 2002 under President George W. Bush. Washington made it clear that withdrawal from UN bodies reflected not antipathy to multilateralism but a determination that those bodies do not sufficiently advance U.S. interests and values to justify membership.

Nearly a decade later, however, UNESCO posed fresh challenges to U.S. policy. As this report will discuss, Congress in the early 1990s enacted legislation prohibiting U.S. contributions to any UN entity that admitted a nonexistent Palestinian state. In 2011, over U.S. opposition, UNESCO’s General Conference voted to admit “the State of Palestine” as a member state amidst a PLO-led effort to declare statehood unilaterally. The member states voting in favor may not have cared if UNESCO lost U.S. funding over the decision, but it is just as likely they believed the Obama administration would not implement U.S. law and cut off UNESCO contributions. However, the administration did indeed cut funding while simultaneously seeking a waiver from Congress to allow continued contributions. Congress, though, did not grant a waiver until 2022.

Losing U.S. funding did not prompt UNESCO’s members to reconsider granting membership to the Palestinians. Instead, UNESCO’s General Conference doubled down, characterizing Israel’s presence in eastern Jerusalem as “occupation”; referring to locations in Jerusalem important to all three major Abrahamic religions, such as the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, exclusively by their Muslim names; and designating historic Jewish places in the West Bank as exclusively Palestinian heritage sites.

In October 2017, the Trump administration gave UNESCO one year’s notice that the United States would leave (not just defund) the organization and create a permanent observer mission to UNESCO. "This decision was not taken lightly," the State Department said, citing “U.S. concerns with mounting arrears at UNESCO, the need for fundamental reform in the organization, and continuing anti-Israel bias." In 2018, the United States ended its membership, primarily to stop accumulating arrears due to nonpayment of assessed contributions.\(^{31}\) Israel joined the United States in leaving UNESCO in January 2019.\(^{32}\) However, the Biden administration ultimately reentered UNESCO in 2023.

**U.S. Reform Efforts (1980-2016)**

Since the 1980s, the U.S. government — usually with Congress taking the lead and with varying levels of support from the executive branch — has advanced multiple initiatives that leveraged U.S. funding to influence the UN. These included the Kassebaum-Solomon Amendment, the Pressler Amendment, and the Helms-Biden Act. Unlike later reform initiatives, such as the Henry J. Hyde United Nations Reform Act and the United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act, these earned robust bipartisan support. At the same time, Congress failed to fully implement and enforce some of these reform initiatives, thereby limiting their impact.

**Kassebaum-Solomon Amendment**

The Kassebaum-Solomon amendment to the biennial Foreign Relations Authorization Act, a bipartisan congressional initiative named for Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS) and Representative Gerald B. H. Solomon (R-NY), was adopted in 1985 and withheld U.S. funding to the UN until Washington was given a greater say in UN budgeting.

Funding for the UN’s main budget, called the “regular budget,” comes from member states’ contributions based on a complicated formula approved by the UNGA that purportedly is based on “capacity to pay.”\(^{33}\) This may seem fair in theory, comparable to progressive taxation, but in practice, the system suffers from the freeloader problem.

While the United States has only one vote, it is assessed 22 percent of the regular budget by the UNGA\(^{34}\) and almost 27 percent of the UN’s peacekeeping budget.\(^{35}\) By contrast, more than two-thirds of member states — enough votes to approve budgets — pay a combined total of under 2 percent for both the regular and peacekeeping budgets.\(^{36}\)

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Thus, as former U.S. Ambassador to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick said, “Those countries who have the votes don’t pay the bills, while those who pay the bills don’t have the votes.”

Consequently, most member states have little incentive to exercise fiscal discipline. It is not their money. Meanwhile, the UN’s big donor countries pay their assessments, no matter the cost.

In 1985, the UN’s budget had tripled over the previous 10 years, with the United States assessed 25 percent of the cost. Congress consequently adopted the Kassebaum-Solomon amendment, which, beginning in fiscal year 1987, prohibited payment of assessed contributions that exceeded 20 percent of the budget of the UN and its specialized agencies unless each member state’s voting power was “proportionate” to its contribution. This enjoyed broad and bipartisan support, with the amendment passing the Senate 71-13.

The Reagan administration wielded the amendment to advance its budgetary objectives at the UN. “What I’m doing on the basis of that amendment is trying to make as much constructive use of it as I can to get people's attention,” said Secretary of State George Shultz. He called the UN’s budget system “taxation without representation,” adding, “People who pay practically nothing can vote equally with us to take money from the American taxpayers. I think we have a right to scream about it and try to get it more in line.”

The UNGA quickly established a group of high-level intergovernmental experts (the Group of 18) to “review the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning” of the UN and offer corrective recommendations. UNGA adopted the majority of the group’s recommendations and, in December 1986, made them the basis for budgetary decision-making.

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Congress and President Reagan soon determined that the UNGA-adopted reforms satisfied the Kassebaum-Solomon amendment’s terms. Washington resumed paying most of its assessed contributions. (Over half a billion dollars in arrears accumulated in the interim and remained unpaid for years to come.) Importantly, Congress included a provision in future foreign relations authorization bills — all bipartisan and passed with overwhelming majorities in both chambers — that conditioned the payment of 20 percent of assessed contributions on presidential certification of continued UN progress in budgetary reforms.45

In the biennial Foreign Relations Authorization Act passed in 1994, the 20 percent withholding changed from mandatory to discretionary.46 The next biennial authorization bill included similar language but did not become law due to a presidential veto by President Bill Clinton,47 and the 1998 authorization legislation omitted the withholding language entirely.48 This removed U.S. leverage to pressure the UN to continue “consensus-based” budgeting. In late 2007, over U.S. objections, the UNGA adopted a biennial budget that increased spending by 25 percent, ending the tradition of fiscal decision-making by consensus.49

**Defeat of the PLO’s Attempt to Join International Organizations**

In 1989, Yasser Arafat’s PLO sought to gain international recognition of a “State of Palestine” by gaining membership in multilateral organizations, starting with the World Health Organization (WHO).50 The George H.W. Bush administration sought to prevent this effort to politicize a UN technical organization and to bypass negotiations with Israel. The administration used the leverage of U.S. funding to accomplish this objective. Secretary of State James A. Baker III issued a statement saying:

> The United States vigorously opposes the admission of the P.L.O. to membership in the World Health Organization or any other U.N. agencies … To emphasize the depth of our concern, I will recommend to the President that the United States make no further contributions, voluntary or assessed, to any international organization which makes any change in the P.L.O.’s present status as an observer organization.

While initially some countries did not believe that America would make good on its threat, a concerted U.S. diplomatic lobbying campaign succeeded, defeating the PLO at the WHO and stopping Arafat’s initiative.51

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51. Ibid.

The Urgent Need for UN Reform

Democratic-controlled Congresses built on the victory by incorporating the administration’s threatened funding cutoff into foreign relations authorization acts, making the position permanent U.S. law. The law successfully deterred UN bodies from admitting “Palestine” until UNESCO did so in 2011, as discussed above.

Pressler Amendment

In 1993, the Democratic-controlled Congress adopted an amendment by Senator Larry Pressler (R-SD) that conditioned payment of 10 percent of U.S. assessed contributions to the UN on the establishment of “an independent [UN] office with responsibilities and powers substantially similar to offices of Inspectors General authorized by the Inspector General Act of 1978.” That year, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright proposed the formation of such an office. To that end, in 1994, the UNGA created the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), whose head is approved by the secretary-general with the UNGA’s consent.

According to Bruce Rashkow, a former lawyer for the State Department and the UN, OIOS would never have been established if not for the withholding threat by Congress. However, OIOS has struggled to achieve the “operational independence” granted by the UNGA. While the office has carried out important investigations into corruption and sexual exploitation and abuse, it has been blocked from hiring experienced staff. Moreover, a former head of the OIOS Investigations Division accused the head of OIOS of working with senior UN officials to investigate a whistleblower’s leak and otherwise undermining the office to appease the UN Secretariat. In 2006, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan even prevented the under-secretary-general who ran OIOS from attending a UN Security Council meeting on procurement fraud. Sadly, as Rashkow observed, “an internally independent office to investigate fraud, abuse, and waste within the organization … runs counter to the culture and long practice of the U.N.”

It did not help that Congress, having brought about the creation of OIOS, did not insist upon using its leverage to ensure that the office met Washington’s expectations. Congress could have enacted permanent legislative provisions conditioning payment unless OIOS operated with full independence.

Helms-Biden Agreement

By the late 1990s, Washington was $900 million in arrears to the UN. This included not only the withholdings referenced earlier but also those resulting from legislation prohibiting the United States from paying more than 25 percent of the cost of UN peacekeeping operations — even though its assessment was closer to 30 percent.62

The U.S. government wanted further UN reforms, and the UN wanted payment of the arrears. Congress and the Clinton administration thus negotiated a deal named after two of the leading congressional negotiators, Senators Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Joe Biden (D-DE). The agreement, enacted with large bipartisan majorities in 1999, conditioned payment of arrears on multiple reforms or “substantial progress” toward achieving reform.63

These reforms included limiting the maximum regular budget assessment by the UN for any one member state to 22 percent, eventually lowering the cap to 20 percent; limiting the peacekeeping budget assessment for any one member state to 25 percent; keeping to “zero nominal growth” in the 2000-01 biennial budgets of UN specialized agencies; establishing independent and active inspector-general offices at each specialized agency; providing the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) access to UN financial data; and implementing a UN personnel code of conduct.

Helms-Biden was important UN reform legislation. And because payment of arrears was conditioned on the prescribed reforms, the UNGA adopted most of them. The U.S. contribution to the regular budget was reduced to 22 percent, and the peacekeeping budget assessment fell significantly, hitting a low of just under 26 percent in 2008-09.64

However, as with the Kassebaum-Solomon and Pressler amendments, some reforms were not fully achieved because the threat of withholding was not sustained. Once arrears were paid, the UN had less to fear, and it never followed through on reducing the maximum assessment for any one member state for the regular budget to 20 percent, among other reforms.

Henry J. Hyde United Nations Reform Act of 2005

In 2005, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, angered by frequent reports of UN scandals, passed important UN reform legislation. The bill, and opposition to it by Democrats, also marked a sharp divergence in

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the two parties’ views on UN reform. Most Republicans wanted to again make payment of assessed contributions conditional on sweeping changes to the UN’s operations. Most of their Democratic counterparts no longer supported mandatory conditioning, claiming it would weaken America’s hand at the UN by putting the nation back into arrears.65

The Henry J. Hyde United Nations Reform Act of 2005 — named after its sponsor, the chairman of the House International Relations Committee — sought sweeping permanent reforms, instead of the piecemeal, sporadic changes the UN had made under previous congressional pressure. As the committee’s report on the legislation stated, “Reform … should not be a periodic event undertaken because of the threat of financial pressure. Rather, it should be an integral part of the culture of the United Nations.”66

The bill’s central feature was a mandatory withholding of half of the U.S.-assessed contribution to the UN’s regular budget until the UN made 39 specific reforms. These included switching the funding source of 18 UN programs from assessed to voluntary contributions to increase the UN’s accountability and responsiveness to big donor states; changes to OIOS to make it more independent; the establishment of an ethics office; and the creation of a new UN Human Rights Council with meaningful membership standards.67

The bill also sought to require the U.S. executive branch to veto new UN peacekeeping operations until the UN made further reforms, including adopting a “uniform Code of Conduct” for all peacekeeping personnel.68

Committee Democrats argued that some of the bill’s provisions were too harsh, such as the withholding of assessed contributions even if the UN made most of the required reforms and requiring the veto of any new peacekeeping missions — even urgently needed ones — if certain reforms were not implemented. “The Republican bill has only sticks, no carrots,” the Democrats wrote in the bill’s committee report.69

Interestingly, the main Democratic amendment offered in committee to the Hyde bill preserved the option of witholding half of the U.S. assessed contribution to the UN’s regular budget but left it to the secretary of state’s discretion.70 “Secretary [of State Condoleezza] Rice must be able to use the financial threat to get the job done in New York, but must not be forced to cut off funds according to some mechanical and automatic withholding formula,” said Representative Tom Lantos (D-CA), the ranking Democrat.71

66. Ibid., page 22
69. Ibid., pages 54- 55
The House passed the Hyde legislation in June 2005. However, the Senate did not consider the bill. Moreover, the George W. Bush administration declined to pursue the measure, considering it counterproductive to achieving reform and an excessive interference with the president's authority to conduct foreign policy. The failure of the Hyde bill thus marked the end of bipartisan consensus to condition UN funding to achieve reform.

**The Obama Administration’s ‘New Era of Engagement’**

President Barack Obama declared a “new era of engagement” at the UNGA in 2009, an apparent effort to distance himself from past congressional reform efforts. His administration, like its predecessor, believed in paying assessed contributions to the UN in full, opposing withholdings to achieve reforms. Susan Rice, the administration's first envoy to the UN, suggested that withholding for any reason would violate U.S. treaty obligations.

By the end of 2010, the United States had paid off over a third of the almost $1.2 billion owed to the UN. In 2007, the Democratic-controlled Congress lifted the 25 percent cap on the level of assessed peacekeeping budget contributions (imposed by the Helms-Biden agreement), paying 27.1 percent instead. Congress thus indicated its willingness to pay whatever rate the UN assessed, undermining the peacekeeping budgetary restraint incentivized by the Helms-Biden Act. This payment had been declining and was just under 26 percent in 2008-09 but then started to increase, peaking at 28.57 percent in 2016.

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In some instances, the Obama administration did take steps favorable to reform. For one, the administration appointed the capable Joseph M. Torsella to focus on management issues. Torsella fought for UN budgetary restraint, protesting in 2011, “For a decade now, the United Nations regular budget has grown dramatically, relentlessly, and exponentially.” Torsella also criticized the 2012-13 regular budget, saying it “does not represent a break from ‘business as usual,’ but rather a continuation of it.” However, the administration failed in most of its attempts to cut the UN budget.

The Obama administration also continued and strengthened the UN Transparency and Accountability Initiative (UNTAI), a program that began under the George W. Bush administration. The initiative sought to advance a series of reforms, most notably independent evaluation and ethics functions, “[c]redible whistleblower protections,” and “[t]ransparent financial management.” The U.S. Agency for International Development reported in 2013 that six major UN organizations and programs had “made progress on major managerial aspects” following the relaunch of UNTAI by the Obama administration.

These efforts were not enough to satisfy those on the Hill who remained committed, despite the failure of the Hyde bill, to the old approach of conditioning at least some U.S. funding on the UN’s readiness to accept reforms. After the 2010 elections returned a GOP majority to Congress, there would be one last attempt.

**The United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act of 2011**

In 2011, the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), formerly known as the House International Relations Committee, marked up comprehensive new UN reform legislation. The United Nations Transparency, Accountability, and Reform Act (UNTARA), sponsored by committee Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), pushed back against the Obama administration’s unconditional funding approach. (Full disclosure: This author worked for HFAC during Ros-Lehtinen’s chairmanship and drafted parts of UNTARA.) While UNTARA had no chance of overcoming a presidential veto, Ros-Lehtinen believed the legislation would nonetheless advance an alternative policy that could be implemented later and that merely introducing the bill could push the UN toward reform.

Ros-Lehtinen’s legislation went further than the Hyde bill, with proposed conditions on half of the U.S.-assessed contribution to the UN’s regular budget, moving at least 80 percent of the budget to a voluntary funding basis. It also sought to cut off funding to any UN entity that did not provide extensive documentation to the United States, including audits, investigatory reports, financial statements, budgets, and databases containing financial and programmatic information; implement and uphold whistleblower-protection policies; and establish effective ethics offices and independent internal-oversight entities.

85. Ibid., pages 11-12, 16-28
UNTARA also sought to prohibit U.S. contributions to, or membership in, the UN Human Rights Council and withheld funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) until both bodies reformed. Like the Hyde bill, Ros-Lehtinen's bill required Washington to veto new UN peacekeeping operations until the establishment and implementation of training in a code of conduct for peacekeeping personnel. However, UNTARA allowed the president to waive that restriction to prevent “widespread loss of human life, genocide, or the endangerment of a vital national security interest of the United States.”

As with the Hyde bill, committee Democrats and the executive branch opposed UNTARA. This time, however, Democrats strongly opposed any conditioning of U.S. contributions to the UN on reforms. “Based on our experience in recent years, I would argue that withholding U.S. dues simply doesn't work,” said Ranking Member Howard L. Berman (D-CA).

The House never held a vote on UNTARA, even though the chamber was controlled by Republicans. Later iterations of her bill were not marked up by HFAC, either.

**Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012**

Even though UNTARA made little headway, Congress used appropriations legislation to incentivize UN transparency and accountability. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 was the first to withhold — subject to an executive-branch waiver — 15 percent of the U.S. contribution to international organizations not “taking steps” to make publicly available “regular financial and programmatic audits” and to “implement best practices” to protect whistleblowers. Appropriations bills in later years included similar, even stricter language.

Although multiple UN bodies fail to meet these standards, the executive branch has only twice used this provision to withhold funds. The Obama administration withheld funding from the World Intellectual Property

**References**

86. Ibid, pages 52-54, 108-111, 147-153
Organization in 2016, and the Trump administration followed suit the next year. WIPO's then director-general, Francis Gurry, had ordered the Swiss police to break into the offices of whistleblowers who had worked for him to collect DNA to prove they wrote anonymous letters about him. However, the U.S. withholding was largely symbolic because WIPO collects almost all its revenue from patent service fees. Still, the organization faced increased public scrutiny for Gurry’s misconduct.

**Trump and Biden: Disruption and a Return to the Status Quo (2016-2024)**

As Donald Trump prepared to assume the presidency, he announced plans to break with traditional U.S. policy, tweeting, “As to the U.N., things will be different after Jan. 20th.” Whereas Congress had spearheaded most UN reform initiatives until then, Trump’s policies marked an intensified effort by the executive branch to achieve robust change at the UN.

Trump chose as UN ambassador South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, who wrote in her autobiography that she entered the UN with an “instinct to disrupt.” She and Trump wanted to make the institution more effective and “show the American people value for their investment.”

In September 2017, during the UNGA’s opening week, the United States and 12 other countries released a 10-point Declaration of Support for United Nations Reform. The declaration — which Politico rightly called “vague, but sweeping” — endorsed UN Secretary-General António Guterres’s reform agenda, particularly “strengthening the [UN] system’s accountability framework through enhancing transparency, strengthening oversight, and aligning authority with responsibility.” The statement also included a commitment “to reducing mandate duplication, redundancy, and overlap.” Of the UN’s 193 member states, 143 agreed to the declaration.

Trump declared that to regain global trust, the UN “must hold every level of management accountable, protect whistle-blowers and focus on results rather than on process.” Haley called for “a better United Nations … with the trust and the capability to deliver on its mandate to promote peace, security and human rights.”

Haley warned in December 2017 that U.S. financial support for the UN should not be “taken for granted.” She said she would use Trump’s proposed cuts to UN peacekeeping funding in the U.S. budget “as leverage” and


95. @realDonaldTrump, Twitter, December 23, 2016. ([https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/812390964740427776](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/812390964740427776))


The Urgent Need for UN Reform

emphasized that the United States would not pay more in assessed contributions for peacekeeping than the 25 percent cap enshrined in U.S. law.\textsuperscript{102}

In 2017, the Trump administration pushed for cutting more than $1 billion from the UN's annual peacekeeping budget and came away with reductions of $600 million.\textsuperscript{103} Washington also lowered its peacekeeping assessment from 28.46 percent in 2017 to 27.89 percent in 2019.\textsuperscript{104}

The UN soon changed its peacebuilding and peacekeeping structures. The organization merged its Department of Political Affairs (DPA), which does conflict mediation, and Peacebuilding Support Office to create a Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA).\textsuperscript{105} It also renamed the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) as the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and tasked it with non-peacekeeping missions in unstable countries, which, at least in theory, could avoid duplicating work previously done by DPKO and DPA.\textsuperscript{106} The UN created bodies for Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East to better coordinate peace operations there.\textsuperscript{107}

Thus, the Trump administration's strategy to achieve systemic UN reform yielded positive and significant, albeit limited, budgetary and structural changes. The United States might have accomplished more if it had the same UN ambassador in place for all four years or if the president had kept the position at the cabinet level after the departure of Ambassador Haley at the end of 2018.\textsuperscript{108} The administration also should have built on the "Declaration of Support for United Nations Reform" by urging follow-up declarations committing signatories to more concrete and specific reform measures.

A Win and a Loss: The Universal Postal Union and World Health Organization

The Universal Postal Union (UPU) oversees international agreements that set shipping rates. These rates, called “terminal dues,” aim to give discounts to countries in the developing world. Remarkably, this included China, which is the second-largest economy in the world. Consequently, it can be cheaper to ship a package

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{102} Jennifer Peltz, “US: Won't pay over 25 percent of UN peacekeeping anymore,” Associated Press, March 28, 2018. (https://apnews.com/general-news-ab175f451c924efdb4c38724260980ae)
\end{enumerate}
from China to the United States than to send the same package within the United States. This put many American businesses at a disadvantage compared with Chinese competitors.

In September 2018, the administration threatened to leave the UPU in one year and have the United States set its own terminal dues rates if other member states did not agree to renegotiate them. Some stakeholders worried that if every country set its own rates unilaterally, it would cause chaos in the international postal system. However, some critics of Trump’s policies, including The Washington Post editorial board, supported his UPU threat.

Given that Trump had already pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement, he was probably not bluffing about withdrawing from the UPU. Multilateral negotiations came down to the wire, but in September 2019, they resulted in a compromise, and the United States stayed in the UPU.

As Brett Schaefer of the Heritage Foundation wrote, the American strategy succeeded because:

the United States had a specific goal, communicated it clearly to other governments, and laid the groundwork in advance. Most other nations were convinced that the United States was serious, recognized they were being asked to adopt a change that was targeted and knew that U.S. withdrawal would be more costly than the proposed reform.

In contrast to the quiet victory at the UPU, Trump's high-profile showdown with the WHO was a debacle. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, regurgitated

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Chinese talking points about the purportedly natural origins of the virus.116 He thanked Beijing in January 2020 “for its cooperation and transparency”117 and for “setting a new standard for outbreak response.”118 This occurred even as the People’s Republic threatened, disciplined, and disappeared Wuhan whistleblowers;119 delayed reporting the virus to the WHO; lied about its method of transmission; and denied WHO experts access to China (and then to Wuhan specifically) for weeks.120 By contrast, Tedros ignored the Taiwanese government’s attempts to supply information to the WHO about the pandemic and refused to allow Taiwan to participate as an observer in the World Health Assembly, claiming falsely that the decision was up to member states.121 Clearly, a major overhaul would be necessary to restore the WHO’s independence and effectiveness.

Trump announced in April 2020 that he would suspend U.S. contributions to the organization pending a 60-90-day investigation of the WHO’s COVID response.122 However, the president was not criticizing the WHO from a position of strength, given that the organization designated the coronavirus as a global health emergency six weeks before Trump declared it a national emergency. Moreover, Trump himself had previously said China was transparent about COVID.123

Weeks later, on May 18, 2020, Trump abruptly wrote to Ghebreyesus that if the WHO did not “commit to major substantive improvements within the next 40 days,” the United States would cut off funding permanently and “reconsider” membership in the organization.124 Eleven days after that, the president said the United States would withdraw from the WHO because those changes, which were not specified, had not been made.125

117. @DrTedros, Twitter, January 23, 2020. (https://twitter.com/drtedros/status/1220421162251051008)
118. @DrTedros, Twitter, January 30, 2020. (https://twitter.com/drtedros/status/1222982869871669251)
124. @realDonaldTrump, Twitter, May 18, 2020. (https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1262577580718395393)
A year-long waiting period passed before the withdrawal took effect, however. Joe Biden, already his party’s de facto nominee for president, made clear he would not carry out the withdrawal. After assuming office in 2021, the Biden administration pledged to pursue reform by working from within the WHO, but this has yet to yield meaningful results.

In totality, as FDD noted in its January 2021 monograph *From Trump to Biden*:

The Trump administration’s efforts to drive reforms and counter adversaries within IOs [international organizations] achieved mixed results – mostly due to a lack of a comprehensive IO strategy and the absence of a high-level lead interagency coordinator for IO elections. Instead, the administration relied on ad hoc campaigns targeting IOs of interest.

**Biden Returns to the Status Quo**

President Joe Biden campaigned on reversing Trump’s policies, and he kept his promise at the UN. Instead of leveraging the prospect of restored U.S. contributions and membership to achieve reforms, he unconditionally resumed funding to key UN agencies.

In addition to staying in the WHO, Biden reversed Trump’s withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council, where the worst human rights violators held numerous seats. As in the case of the WHO, the Biden administration argued that full engagement was the best way to encourage reform. Little has changed, however. China, Cuba, Sudan, and other dictatorships still sit on the council, although Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to Moscow’s expulsion.

Biden also restored U.S. funding for UNRW A, which Trump had cut because of the agency’s refusal to end the use of antisemitic textbooks in UNRW A schools, among other problems. A funding cut likely would have rendered UNRW A susceptible to pressure from Biden, but he chose to forgo the opportunity.

Similarly, the Biden administration asked the Democratic-controlled Congress to enact a waiver allowing Washington to again become a member of UNESCO. In late 2022, Congress acceded, enacting a limited waiver in effect until September 30, 2025. The waiver can only be applied if the president first determines that rejoining UNESCO will “enable the United States to counter Chinese influence or to promote other national interests.”


Further, the waiver would be voided if the Palestinians “obtain the same standing as member states or full membership as a state” in the UN or any of its specialized agencies outside of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.132

The Biden administration exercised this waiver in 2023 and rejoined UNESCO in July without first demanding reforms related to the agency’s bias against Israel.133 The results so far are not positive. In September, UNESCO recognized Jericho — a city prominent in the Book of Judges — as a Palestinian historic site, denying Jewish connections to the city.134

The Biden administration’s policy has had a mixed impact on UN spending. The UN’s regular budget for 2022 decreased by about 3.8 percent from the previous year but went up by almost 9 percent in 2023.135 The peacekeeping budget fell by about 3.5 percent in 2021-22 but increased by 1.1 percent in 2022-23.136 That said, the administration did negotiate a cut in the U.S. assessment, from 27.89 percent in 2020-21 to 26.95 percent in 2022 and 2023.137

Whereas the Trump administration issued threats with mixed results, the Biden administration has mistaken engagement for a strategy. Unilaterally surrendering U.S. leverage — providing funding and tacit endorsement without first obtaining reforms — has not yielded positive results.

**Policy Recommendations**

Historically, reforming the UN depends on leverage. The most potent form of leverage is America’s ability to withhold funding for the UN. To revive the prospects of reform, advocates should pursue the following approach:

- **Build bipartisan support to wield funding as leverage for UN reform.**
  - To begin, build bipartisan support for withholding U.S. contributions from the worst-performing UN bodies on a case-by-case basis.
  - If there is no improvement, build support for withdrawal from the worst-performing UN bodies. A credible threat of withdrawal may be sufficient to spur the desired change.
  - Congress has passed comprehensive UN reform legislation in the past. It could resume this comprehensive approach or begin with piecemeal reforms if that is more viable.


• **Build international support for UN reform among U.S. allies and partners.**
  - Urge allies and partners to join the United States in conditioning financial support for the UN on tangible, specific reforms.
  - As appropriate, wield foreign assistance and other incentives to press American partners to support UN reforms.
  - Focus on building support in the UK and in Eastern and Central Europe, where governments are less bound to unconditional engagement with the UN.

• **Strengthen America’s presence at the UN.**
  - Maintain the cabinet-level status of the U.S. ambassador to the UN and ensure this person sits on the National Security Council’s Principals Committee.
  - Nominate a U.S. envoy with the expectation that the nominee will serve at least four years.
  - Advocate relentlessly for the election or placement of Americans to key UN positions, especially in secretariats at UN agencies, in order to pursue U.S. interests.
  - Increase by at least 50 percent the number of U.S.-sponsored Junior Professional Officer slots in the UN in order to pursue U.S. interests.\(^{138}\)

• **Strengthen accountability and oversight mechanisms.**
  - Mandate an annual executive branch review of the efficiency and effectiveness of each UN entity of which the United States is a member. The report should also assess the value to the United States of membership in each body.
  - Resume and make permanent the U.S. policy of withholding 15 percent of the U.S. contribution to any UN entity that does not make itself fully transparent and accountable to the United States and the public.\(^{139}\)
  - Withhold 10 percent of U.S. contributions to the UN regular budget until OIOS, the UN’s internal investigative body, is made fully independent of the Secretariat and the other bodies it investigates.
  - Seek out and protect UN whistleblowers, who have often faced retaliation for exposing misconduct.
  - Congress should hold multiple oversight hearings each year featuring testimony from both whistleblowers and independent experts.
  - The U.S. Government Accountability Organization and similar bodies should investigate waste, fraud, abuse, and other misconduct at the UN.

• **Negotiate changes to UN funding and budgetary processes.**
  - Top contributors should have a proportionately greater say in budgetary matters. Accordingly, the United States should propose a weighted voting system for budgetary questions.
  - One current proposal is to adopt a rule requiring budgetary questions to be approved by countries whose aggregate contributions make up at least two-thirds of the budget as well as two-thirds of UNGA member states.\(^{140}\)


Consider legislation withholding 25 percent of the U.S. contribution to the UN regular budget if the UN does not adopt some form of a weighted-voting system on budgetary questions within five years.

Raise the minimum a member state must contribute to the UN’s regular budget. States should contribute at least 0.01 percent of the regular budget—roughly $340,000 per year — as they did until 1998 when the requirement fell to 0.001 percent.¹⁴¹

Return to the Helms-Biden position of limiting peacekeeping assessments on the United States to 25 percent of the total cost. If the assessment exceeds 25 percent, the United States should not pay the amount above the cap.

Be cautious with any proposal for a shift to greater voluntary funding in place of mandatory contributions. Voluntary funding can incentivize efficiency but also provides opportunities for autocratic regimes to buy influence at the UN.

**Push for reform at UN human rights bodies.**

Work with allies to ensure the UNHRC removes Agenda Item 7, which singles out Israel. No country should be immune from scrutiny, but the council must not serve as an instrument of the campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state.

Set a 2026 deadline for UNHRC structural reforms. The UNGA is presently conducting a review of the UNHRC that started in 2021 and ends in 2026. Two years is ample time to approve major reforms, which should include ending secret ballot voting for UNHRC elections.

In addition, a two-thirds vote — instead of a simple majority — of UNGA member states should be required for membership, and a simple majority — instead of two-thirds — to suspend an existing member.

Pass legislation withholding a portion of the U.S. contribution to the UNHRC in order to create leverage for reform.

Create a new human rights forum composed solely of free democratic member states. Competition may spur reform within UNHRC. Congress could pass legislation authorizing the executive branch to work with U.S. allies to found such a forum.

Conditioning U.S. support for the UN on real reforms will help the organization better achieve its founding purposes. And a UN that accomplishes that is a UN that the American people and their representatives will support, regardless of party. However, if the organization fails to reform, it will never sustain continued U.S. support. Rather, America’s UN policy will continue to shift dramatically depending on party control of the White House and Congress. Such instability is undesirable and unnecessary. It should be replaced with a bipartisan consensus that focuses on rewarding the UN for results and maximizing U.S. taxpayer dollars.

¹⁴¹. Ibid.
Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)

FDD is a Washington, DC-based nonpartisan research institute focusing on national security and foreign policy.

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Every year, the U.S. Congress appropriates billions of dollars to the United Nations, international organizations, international financial institutions, regional organizations, and multilateral development banks. These contributions are often provided with little or no U.S. oversight and without a comprehensive strategy to advance U.S. interests. FDD’s International Organizations Program leverages FDD’s regional and subject matter expertise within its centers on American power to identify ways the United States can more strategically employ its resources.

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