
Most Frequently Asked Questions: U.S. Participation in the United Nations

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1. U.S. Involvement in the United Nations

Why should Americans care whether our country participates in the UN?

The vast majority of Americans believe the U.S. should maintain its international leadership role; one important means of doing so is through participation in UN organizations and programs. The broad membership of the UN confers unique legitimacy upon it as a means of addressing some of the greatest challenges of our time. Because the UN is governed by its 185 members, it is often an unwieldy vehicle; nevertheless, it can serve in a number of areas as a useful means for advancing our national interests.

Working through the UN system has helped build support for U.S. foreign policy goals. For instance, we work through the UN to isolate nations that support terrorism (e.g., Libya), to build coalitions against nations that pose a threat to international security (e.g., North Korea, Iraq), to provide humanitarian aid to those desperately in need, and—through UN-affiliated agencies such as the International Civil Aviation Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Health Organization—to protect the health, safety, and prosperity of U.S. citizens and to support American business interests in the global economy.

What can we accomplish through the UN that we could not accomplish by ourselves or in conjunction with key allies?

UN organizations and programs represent a broad international burdensharing system. Countries pay dues to the UN organizations to which they belong primarily based on their share of the global economy. This is a common sense approach which pulls together resources from around the world to meet challenges that virtually all countries have an interest in addressing.

The UN was created by the U.S. and our allies after World War Two because Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, British Prime Minister Churchill, and other far-sighted leaders correctly saw the need to bring countries together to work toward common goals of peace and prosperity. That rationale still applies: many current challenges—for instance fighting disease, protecting the global environment, and combating terrorism—demand broad international cooperation.

2. U.S. FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THE UN

How much does the U.S. contribute to the UN?

For fiscal year 1997 Congress appropriated \$313 million to cover U.S. assessments for the UN's regular budget, and \$282 million for peacekeeping dues. The U.S. pays 25 percent of the UN regular budget and peacekeeping costs, as funds are appropriated by Congress. The U.S., along with many other countries, also makes voluntary contributions to certain UN programs.

Total official U.S. contributions—assessed and voluntary—to all organizations and programs in the UN system amounted to \$1.84 billion in calendar year 1995. This represented 15 percent of total worldwide funds received by the UN system during that period.

Total U.S. payments to the UN system amount to less than one-quarter of one percent of the federal budget.

How are dues to the UN calculated?

Membership dues, called assessments, are based primarily on each nation's share of the global economy. Additional criteria include minimum and maximum rates (.01 percent and 25 percent, respectively), and discounts for nations with low per-capita income and/or a heavy external debt.

The U.S. is the only country which benefits from the maximum rate ceiling; were it not for the 25 percent cap, the U.S. share of the UN budget, under the established formula, would be somewhat higher.

Peacekeeping assessments are based on the regular scale, but include a surcharge for permanent members of the Security Council and a discount for less developed nations. By law, the U.S. pays no more than 25 percent of the UN's annual peacekeeping costs.

How much do other countries contribute to the UN?

After the U.S., the other top contributors to the UN are: Japan (15.5 percent); Germany (9.0 percent); France (6.5 percent); and the U.K. (5.5 percent).

How much does the U.S. owe the UN?

The U.S. owes, from prior years, \$224 million in unpaid assessments to the regular budget and \$708 million in unpaid peacekeeping assessments.

3. UNITED NATIONS REFORM

Has there been any progress on reforms to cut costs and improve UN effectiveness?

Yes, there has been considerable progress. The U.S. has been at the forefront of efforts to make the UN more efficient, better focused on key priorities, and more accountable to its members. In recent years we have succeeded in bringing about significant progress in this direction. Some examples:

- For the first time ever the UN is operating under a no-growth budget.
- The UN's Undersecretary-General for Administration and Management, formerly CEO of a major international accounting firm, is overhauling the Secretariat's personnel, procurement, and planning systems.
- An Office of Internal Oversight Services—an independent inspector general—is working to deter waste, fraud, and abuse in the UN bureaucracy.
- The UN's approach to peacekeeping, in terms of the quality of its staff and its administrative capabilities, has been strengthened over the past two years.

Much work remains to be done on UN reform, and a crucial step is to build consensus among the 185 member nations as to what type of changes are most needed. Toward this end, the U.S. has submitted to a UN reform working group a detailed set of proposals for reform of the UN's economic, social, and administrative functions.

4. UN PEACEKEEPING

Why should the U.S. support UN peace operations?

UN peacekeeping missions help prevent and resolve conflicts before they can directly threaten our national interests. The U.S., through its veto on the Security Council, can block any proposed peacekeeping operation that would not serve our national interest.

Sharing costs and risks through UN peacekeeping operations is a sensible bargain that the vast majority of Americans support. This type of cooperation gives us a valuable alternative to either acting alone or doing nothing at all in response to conflicts overseas.

UN peacekeeping missions serve a useful role in regions of direct strategic importance to the United States. For example:

- On the Iraq-Kuwait border, a UN force of 1,200—only one percent are Americans—monitors Iraqi troop movements.
- In the Middle East, UN operations support the ongoing peace process.
- In Haiti, a UN mission is helping to restore democracy and respect for human rights, thus helping to stem the flow of refugees toward U.S. borders.
- UN missions help reduce tensions between India and Pakistan, two possible nuclear rivals, and in Cyprus between Greece and Turkey, two NATO allies.

How much does UN peacekeeping cost the United States? For fiscal year 1997, Congress appropriated \$282 million to pay for the U.S. share of UN annual peacekeeping costs. That is equivalent to around one-tenth of one percent of the U.S. defense budget. Peacekeeping costs peaked in 1994-95, and have decreased sharply since then.

The U.S., like many of our allies, also incurs substantial additional expenses for U.S. military operations that are complementing certain UN peacekeeping operations of especially high priority to U.S. national interests, such as in Haiti and Iraq.

How many U.S. personnel are involved in UN peacekeeping operations?

Currently less than 800 (or 3 percent) of the 26,000 UN peacekeepers around the world are American.

Do U.S. personnel ever serve under UN command?

No. As Commander-in-Chief, the President never gives up his command authority over U.S. troops. When large numbers of our troops are involved and when the risk of combat is high, operational control of U.S. forces remains in American hands, or in the hands of a trusted military ally such as a NATO member.

The President must retain the flexibility, which has served us well throughout our history, to allow temporary foreign operational control of our troops when it serves U.S. interests—just as it has often served our interests to have foreign troops serve under U.S. operational command. However, such temporary operational control does not permit a foreign commander to change the mission agreed upon by the President, [or to] divide U.S. units, allocate their supplies, administer discipline, or change a unit's organization.

How effective are UN peacekeeping operations?

The vast majority of peacekeeping missions of the past fifty years have made a substantial contribution toward peace and stability in troubled regions. Recent examples of places where UN missions have monitored cease-fires, safeguarded relief supplies, and deterred human rights violations include El Salvador, Haiti, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Cambodia.

Even in Somalia and Bosnia, sometimes labeled as UN peacekeeping "failures," UN peace operations helped save the lives of millions of innocent civilians. The fact is, UN peacekeeping missions can only do what the Security Council authorizes them to do, and even authorized missions are dependent on the willingness of individual nations to contribute troops and equipment.

5. U.S. BUSINESS AND THE UN

What share of UN contracts is awarded to U.S. companies?

In 1994, UN system procurement worldwide totaled \$3.8 billion; U.S. companies were awarded \$737 million (19 percent), more than three times as much as the next largest supplier.

What is the benefit, in terms of U.S. business, of having the UN headquarters located in the U.S.?

The UN, its agencies, and the UN diplomatic corps contribute over \$3 billion to the economy of the New York City area alone, according to the New York City mayor's office.

Do UN organizations and programs serve the interests of U.S. companies?

Yes. Many UN-affiliated organizations, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Labor Organization, the International Telecommunications Union, the Universal Postal Union, and the World Intellectual Property Organization serve broad U.S. business interests. Here's how:

- They set standards that facilitate trade and commerce.
- They serve as forums in which national governments cooperate on complex international economic and business issues.
- They collect, analyze, and disseminate valuable economic and trade data.
- They assist countries with the implementation of market-oriented reforms, in the process creating new opportunities for U.S. firms.

6. THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

What is the difference between the UN and the UN system?

The UN is a distinct organization based in New York, while the "UN system" is a term used to include the UN as well as a large number of affiliated organizations and programs. Many organizations considered part of the UN system are not under the authority of the UN itself, but are rather associated with the UN by special agreements.

The UN is an organization comprised of 185 member nations. It has six main organs, all with their headquarters in New York, except the International Court of Justice, which is located

at The Hague in the Netherlands. The six organs are: the Secretariat, the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, and the International Court of Justice. The Secretariat provides administrative services for the other main organs of the UN; it is headed by the Secretary-General, who is selected by the member nations upon the recommendation of the Security Council.

Over the years the General Assembly has created special bodies, such as UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund], the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the World Food Program, to respond to distinct economic and social challenges. Some of these are funded through the UN's budget, while others rely on voluntary contributions from governments and private citizens.

There are 18 autonomous intergovernmental organizations—each with its own membership, charter, budget and staff—that are related to the UN by special agreements, but are not under UN authority. These include organizations such as the Food and Agricultural Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

7. THE UN AND U.S. SOVEREIGNTY

Does the UN pose a potential threat to U.S. sovereignty?

The UN is not a sovereign entity. It is a collection of nation states joined to work cooperatively toward certain common goals. All policy decisions are taken by the member nations, not by the UN Secretariat. The UN does not, and can not, exercise sovereign jurisdiction over any territory.

Are some areas of the U.S. under any form of "UN control?"

No. Some Americans have expressed concern over the designation of Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites on U.S. territory, but such designations do not convey any control over such sites to the UN or to any other entity. Furthermore, all Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Sites in the U.S. attained their designation after being nominated voluntarily by the U.S. government.

The 47 Biosphere Reserves in the U.S. are areas where research on ecological concerns—especially the impact of human activities on the environment—can be undertaken. The 20 World Heritage Sites in the U.S. are unique natural and cultural sites of exceptional value to mankind, such as Yellowstone National Park. The U.S. initiated and led the development of the international treaty under which 469 such sites have been identified around the world.

Does the UN limit our ability to act as we would like in foreign affairs?

No, the U.S. is never forced to go along with UN decisions we do not support.

General Assembly resolutions are non-binding on member nations.

UN Conventions bind only those nations which choose to approve them. Only decisions taken by the Security Council to maintain or restore international peace and security, in accordance with Chapter VII of the UN Charter, are binding on member nations.

The U.S., as a permanent member of the Security Council, can use its veto to block any proposed action that would be counter to U.S. interests.

8. THE UN AND INTERNATIONAL TAXES

Is the UN proposing that it should have the power to levy international taxes?

The UN does not have the authority to impose international taxes within the jurisdiction of a member state unless authorized to do so by that member state. The U.S. is firmly opposed to any international taxation scheme, and has made this position known to the UN and to UN member states. There is simply no prospect that the UN will gain the authority to levy any form of international tax on U.S. citizens.

Ideas for alternative sources of funding for the UN are as old as the organization itself. The UN Secretary-General in January 1996 attracted attention to such proposals, and indicated he favored consideration of new revenue-raising measures for the UN.

The U.S. government continues to believe that reform measures are needed to result in a more equitable system of financing, to reduce overall costs, and to focus the UN's efforts on high priority activities. But such reform measures should not include any form of international tax; the UN system should continue to be financed by a combination of assessments on member states and voluntary contributions.

9. UNITED NATIONS SALARIES

Are UN salaries tax-free?

The UN salary system is designed to ensure that UN employees—regardless of what country they come from—receive equal pay for equal work. Because most member nations exempt their nationals from tax on UN income, the UN establishes salaries at levels which assume they will not be taxed (i.e., at lower levels than otherwise would be appropriate).

UN salaries are based on the U.S. federal civil service pay, less estimated taxes on such pay, plus a differential to recognize most UN staff members' expatriate status. Cost-of-living and housing and educational allowances are also granted in some cases, such as is done for U.S. foreign service employees stationed overseas.

10. TAIWAN AND THE UN

What is the U.S. position on Taiwan's bid for UN membership?

The U.S. does not support Taiwan's participation in the UN.

The U.S. could, however, accept any solution to this issue which is consistent with the UN Charter and is agreed upon by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.