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United Nations Issues: Overview of the United Nations System

The United Nations (U.N.) system comprises interconnected entities including the United Nations, specialized agencies, U.N. peacekeeping operations, funds and programs, and other related bodies. Congress has generally supported the U.N. system and mission, and often uses U.N. mechanisms to further U.S. foreign policy objectives. At the same time, some policymakers have been critical of the U.N. system, arguing that U.N. actions or decisions do not align with U.S. policy priorities, or that it is not operating as effectively as possible.

Each U.N. entity has different mandates, structures, leadership, and funding mechanisms. U.N. entities are funded through assessed and voluntary contributions from U.N. members. *Assessed contributions* are required dues, the payment of which is a legal obligation accepted by a country when it becomes a member. *Voluntary contributions* finance special funds, programs, and offices. Some U.N. bodies receive both types of funding.

The United Nations

Established in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations is an intergovernmental organization composed of 193 member states. The U.N. Charter, an international treaty to which the United States is a state party, is the founding document of the United Nations. Article 1 of the charter states that the purposes of the organization are to maintain international peace and security; develop friendly relations among nations; solve economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian problems; and promote human rights. The United Nations includes six main parts (referred to as “organs”).

- The 193-member **General Assembly** (GA) is the organization’s primary decisionmaking body. It approves the U.N. regular and peacekeeping budgets and supports the work of its committees and subsidiary organs, such as the U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC).
- The 15-member **Security Council** (SC) is mandated with maintaining international peace and security. It includes 5 permanent members with veto power (United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom) and 10 nonpermanent members, who are elected by the GA for two-year terms.
- The **Secretariat** is the U.N. administrative body. It is led by the Secretary-General (SG), who serves as chief administrative officer. The SG is appointed by the GA on the recommendation of the SC. The SG serves a five-year term, with the possibility for a second term. The Secretariat is located at U.N. Headquarters in New York City.

The three other principal organs are (1) the U.N. Economic and Social Council, a 54-member body that addresses economic, social, and environmental issues; (2) the International Court of Justice, the principal U.N. judicial body; and (3) the Trusteeship Council, which supervised the administration of trust territories from colonies to sovereign nations and completed its mandate in 1994.

The United Nations is funded through the U.N. regular budget, which totaled \$3.2 billion in 2020. The United States’ assessed contribution is 22% of the regular budget (\$638.6 million in FY2020). Other top contributors include China (12%) and Japan (8.5%). U.N. members approve assessment levels every three years based on a formula taking into account gross national income and other economic data. The United States often accumulates arrears to the regular budget due to differences between the U.S. and U.N. fiscal years (which affects the timing of U.S. payments) and U.S. withholdings from U.N. activities, among other reasons. (For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10354, *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding to the U.N. System*.)

U.N. Specialized Agencies

The U.N. system has 15 specialized agencies, each of which is a legally independent intergovernmental organization with its own constitution, rules, membership, organs, and assessed budget (**Figure 1**). Many specialized agencies follow the assessments for the U.N. regular budget, while others use their own formulas. The United States is a member of all specialized agencies except for UNESCO, UNIDO, and UNWTO. (President Trump initiated WHO withdrawal in 2020; President Biden halted the process and resumed U.S. participation in 2021.)

Figure 1. U.N. Specialized Agencies

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
International Labor Organization (ILO)
International Maritime Organization (IMO)
International Monetary Fund (IMF)
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
● U.N. Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
● U.N. Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
● U.N. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
Universal Postal Union (UPU)
World Bank Group (WBG)
World Health Organization (WHO)
World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
● indicates the United States is not a member.

Source: United Nations, adapted by CRS.

U.N. Peacekeeping

The United Nations currently operates 13 U.N. peacekeeping missions worldwide, with more than 80,000 personnel from over 100 countries. The SC is responsible for establishing and renewing each operation, as well as determining the mission's mandate and budget. The United States, as a permanent SC member, plays a key role in shaping peacekeeping missions. The approved peacekeeping budget is currently \$6.58 billion. The United States is the largest financial contributor, assessed 27.9% of the total peacekeeping budget in 2020, followed by China (15.2%) and Japan (8.5%). In 1994, Congress enacted a 25% cap on U.S. funding to U.N. peacekeeping. Over the years, the gap between the U.S. cap and U.N. assessment has led to the accumulation of arrears. In FY2021, Congress appropriated \$1.46 billion to most peacekeeping activities, up to the 25% cap. (For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10597, *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding of U.N. Peacekeeping*.)

U.N. Funds and Programs

U.N. funds and programs are generally established by the GA and have a specific mandate. The SG appoints the head of each entity, while the governing boards (composed of U.N. member states) review policies and activities. Funds and programs rely on voluntary contributions from governments, the private sector, and civil society. Such contributions might fund the core budgets of these bodies or be earmarked for specific activities. Examples of U.N. funds and programs include the U.N. Development Program, U.N. Environment Program, U.N. Population Fund, and World Food Program.

Other Entities and Related Organizations

Several other U.N. entities do not fall under the previous categories, including the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Women, and U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Like U.N. funds and programs, these bodies often focus on specific issues and rely on voluntary funding. Depending on the organization, their heads are appointed by the SG or elected by the GA.

Other separate U.N.-related organizations such as the International Criminal Court, International Atomic Energy Agency, and International Organization for Migration are part of the U.N. system but not considered U.N. bodies. They may have special agreements with or report to U.N. bodies like the GA or SC.

U.S. Participation in the U.N. System

The United States played a lead role in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and is the largest financial contributor to many U.N. entities. It is a member of the GA and is a permanent member of the SC. It is also a member of 12 U.N. specialized agencies and is often elected to leadership positions on U.N. boards, councils, and other bodies. U.S. participation in and funding of the United Nations is authorized through the United Nations Participation Act of 1945 (P.L. 79-264, as amended). Authorization for U.S. participation in other U.N. bodies is included in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (§301 of P.L. 87-195, as amended) and other legislation.

Both Congress and the executive branch have key roles in furthering U.S. policy toward the U.N. system. Congress authorizes and appropriates U.S. funding, while the executive branch represents and shapes U.S. policy through the State Department and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN) in New York City. The President nominates ambassadors for U.N. posts, and the Senate provides advice and consent for nominees. This includes the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, who leads USUN and represents the United States in the Security Council and other U.N. bodies. Over the years, Congress and the executive branch have raised, lowered, or conditioned U.S. funding to U.N. entities. Many have also sought to reform the U.N. system, with a focus on improving management and accountability mechanisms. Congress further oversees U.S. policy through hearings, reporting requirements, and executive branch consultations.

During the past decade, U.S. approaches toward the United Nations have varied. President Obama strongly supported U.S. participation in the organization. Conversely, President Trump declined to fund several U.N. entities or withdrew U.S. membership. President Biden has stated that the United States will reengage with the U.N. system.

Congressional Considerations

Congressional debates on U.S. participation in the U.N. system often occur against the backdrop of competing foreign and domestic priorities and broader questions about the role of the United Nations in U.S. foreign policy. The 117th Congress may consider several overarching issues.

U.N. role and effectiveness. Many policymakers have debated the effectiveness of U.N. entities in achieving their mandates. For example, some express concern that the SC has taken insufficient action on certain peace and security issues (such as the humanitarian situation in Syria), or that HRC does not effectively address human rights violations (while disproportionately focusing on Israel). At the same time, many acknowledge the benefits of the U.N. system, particularly its convening power, burden-sharing principles, and role in setting global norms and standards.

U.S. funding and reform. Members may consider the benefits and drawbacks of U.S. funding to the U.N. system, including areas where the United States can use funding to increase efficiency and accountability through reform, or to achieve the largest return on its investment. Some policymakers may also consider the impact, if any, of U.S. arrears or withholdings on U.S. influence in U.N. fora and U.N. operations.

Influence of other countries. Policymakers may assess the implications, if any, of reduced U.S. participation in and funding of the U.N. system since 2017, including the possible impact of other countries providing funding and leadership traditionally held by the United States. For example, many policymakers express concern that China was elected to lead four U.N. specialized agencies since 2017: FAO, ICAO, ITU, and UNIDO.

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