



# United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding to the U.N. System

The United States is the single largest financial contributor to the United Nations (U.N.) system. Congress has long debated the appropriate level of U.S. funding to U.N. system activities and whether U.S. contributions are used efficiently and effectively. U.S. policymakers' perspectives on U.N. funding have varied over time. For example, the Trump Administration consistently proposed significant decreases in U.N. funding and withheld contributions to some U.N. bodies; however, Congress funded most U.N. entities at higher levels than the Administration requested. The Biden Administration supports U.S. engagement with U.N. entities; the President's FY2024 budget request proposed fully funding assessed contributions to U.N. bodies and paying selected U.S. arrears. For FY2023, Congress fully funded most U.N. entities but (as in previous years) withheld or conditioned funding for certain activities.

## U.N. System Funding

The U.N. system comprises interconnected entities including specialized agencies, funds and programs, peacekeeping operations, and the U.N. organization itself. The U.N. Charter, ratified by the United States in 1945, requires each member state to contribute to the expenses of the organization. The system is financed by 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. Such funding provides U.N. entities with a regular source of income to pay for staff and implement core programs. The U.N. regular budget, specialized agencies, and peacekeeping operations are all financed mainly by assessed contributions. *Voluntary contributions* primarily finance U.N. funds and programs, such as UNICEF and the U.N. Development Program, and donor commitments may fluctuate annually.

**U.N. regular budget.** The U.N. regular budget funds the core administrative costs of the organization, including the U.N. General Assembly, Security Council, Secretariat, International Court of Justice, special political missions, and human rights entities. The regular budget is adopted by the Assembly and covers one calendar year (January 1 to December 31). Most Assembly decisions related to the budget are adopted by consensus. When budget votes occur (which is rare) decisions are made by a two-thirds majority of members present and voting, with each country having one vote. The approved regular budget for 2023 is \$3.4 billion. The Assembly determines a regular budget scale of assessments every three years based on a country's capacity to pay. (Most recently, the Assembly adopted assessment rates for the 2022-2024 period in December 2021.) The United States is assessed 22%, the highest of any U.N. member, followed by China (15.25%) and Japan (8.03%).

**U.N. Specialized Agencies.** The 15 U.N. specialized agencies, which include the World Health Organization;

Food and Agriculture Organization; and U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Educational Organization (UNESCO), among others, are autonomous in executive, legislative, and budgetary powers. Some agencies follow the scale of assessment for the U.N. regular budget, while others use their own formulas to determine assessments. The United States is a member of 13 of 15 U.N. specialized agencies.

**U.N. peacekeeping funding.** There are 12 U.N. peacekeeping missions worldwide with over 75,000 military, police, and civilian personnel. U.N. Security Council resolutions establishing new operations specify how each mission will be funded. In most cases, the Council authorizes the General Assembly to create a discrete account for each operation funded by assessed contributions; recently, the General Assembly temporarily allowed peacekeeping funding to be pooled for increased financial flexibility due to concerns about budget shortfalls. The approved budget for the 2022-2023 peacekeeping fiscal year (July 1 to June 30) is \$6.45 billion. The peacekeeping scale of assessments is based on modifications of the regular budget scale, with the five permanent Council members assessed at a higher level than for the regular budget. The current U.S. peacekeeping assessment is 26.94%; however, Congress has capped the U.S. contribution at 25%. China (18.69%) and Japan (8.03%) have the next highest assessment rates.

## U.S. Funding

U.S. funding to the United Nations is authorized under the United Nations Participation Act of 1945 (P.L. 79-264, as amended). Funding authorization for other U.N. bodies is also included in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-195, as amended). Congress generally appropriates U.N. system funding through the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) accounts in annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Acts (**Table 1**). Selected U.N.-related funding accounts are outlined below:

- The *Contributions to International Organizations* (CIO) account funds assessed contributions to the U.N. regular budget, U.N. specialized agencies, and other international organizations (IOs). The President's FY2024 CIO budget request is **\$1.70 billion** (\$265.8 million more than the FY2023-enacted amount). Of this amount, \$1.18 billion is for U.N. entities, including \$40 million to synchronize U.S. regular budget payments with the U.N. fiscal year.
- The *Contributions for International Peacekeeping Activities* (CIPA) account funds U.S. assessments to most U.N. peacekeeping operations. The President's FY2024 CIPA budget request is **\$1.94 billion** (\$458.7 million more than the FY2023-enacted amount). The request, which would fully fund U.S. peacekeeping assessments, includes \$344 million to pay a portion of

U.S. arrears that accumulated since FY2017 due to the 25% cap.

- The *International Organizations & Programs (IO&P)* account funds mostly core voluntary contributions to U.N. funds and programs and other IOs such as the U.N. Children's Fund and U.N. Development Program. The FY2024 budget request is **\$485.8 million** (\$22.7 million less than the FY2023-enacted amount).

**Table 1. U.S. Funding: Select U.N.-Related Accounts**  
(Thousands of current U.S. dollars)

	FY2021 Actual	FY2022 Enacted	FY2023 Enacted	FY2024 Request
CIO	1,505,928	1,662,928	1,438,000	1,703,881
CIPA	1,456,214	1,498,614	1,481,915	1,940,702
IO&P	387,500 <sup>a</sup>	423,000	508,600	485,850

**Sources:** Annual congressional budget justifications and SFOPS bills.

a. IO&P also received \$580 million in FY2021 under P.L. 117-2.

**Other U.S. Funding.** The United States also provides voluntary contributions to U.N. entities through other SFOPS accounts. Congress generally appropriates overall funding to each of these accounts, while the executive branch determines how funds are allocated based on policy priorities and issue-specific needs. For example, according to USAID, the United States contributed more than \$7.4 billion to U.N. entities through global humanitarian accounts in FY2022, including Migration and Refugee Assistance, International Disaster Assistance, and Food for Peace, Title II (P.L. 480). Such funding supported entities such as the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and World Food Program. U.S. funding is also provided through accounts supporting global health, security, and development objectives, including the Economic Support Fund and Global Health Programs accounts.

**UNESCO funding.** The United States withheld over \$600 million in assessed contributions to UNESCO from FY2012 until its withdrawal in 2018 under restrictions in P.L. 101-246 and P.L. 103-236. (These laws prohibit funding to U.N. entities that accord the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states, or grant full membership as a state to any group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.) The FY2023 SFOPS Act waives the above restrictions if the Administration reports to Congress that doing so “would enable the United States to counter Chinese influence or to promote other national interests of the United States.” The waiver sunsets in September 2025 and would cease to exist if the Palestinians “obtain the same standing as member states or full membership as a state in the [U.N.] or any specialized agency” through means “outside an agreement negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians.” On June 5, 2023, President Biden waived the aforementioned restrictions and the United States rejoined UNESCO on July 11. The Administration states that it plans to work with Congress to pay U.S. arrears to the organization.

**U.S. Arrears.** The United States often accumulates arrears to the U.N. regular budget and other U.N. bodies due to differences between the U.S. and U.N. fiscal years (which

affects the timing of U.S. payments), U.S. withholdings from U.N. entities, and the State Department practice of paying assessments on a deferred basis, causing some U.S. funding to be delayed by a year. (These deferrals originate from U.N. withholdings by President Reagan.) The status of arrears varies by entity; each organization has its own process for paying, defining and tracking arrears.

## Selected Policy Issues

**U.N. regular budget assessment.** Over the years, policymakers have expressed concern that current regular budget assessments levels result in the United States providing the bulk of funding while having minimal influence on the budget process. Some have called for increased transparency in the process for determining the scale of assessments. Conversely, others contend that the current assessment level is roughly equivalent to the U.S. share of world gross national income. They argue that it reflects U.S. commitment to the United Nations, affirms U.S. leadership, leverages funding from other countries, and helps the United States achieve its goals in U.N. fora.

**U.S. peacekeeping assessment cap.** In 1995, due to concerns that the U.S. peacekeeping assessment was too high (over 30%), Congress set a limit of 25% on funds authorized after FY1995. From FY2001 to FY2016, Congress enacted legislation to raise the cap temporarily so that U.S. contributions were closer to U.N. assessment levels. It did not enact an adjustment for FY2017-FY2023, and the cap returned to 25%. As a result, the United States has accumulated \$1.1 billion in cap-related arrears.

**Executive branch role.** Congress does not specifically appropriate funding to many U.N. bodies. Instead, it often appropriates lump-sum amounts to U.N.-related accounts. As a result, the executive branch has some leeway to determine how funds are allocated, often with little or no congressional consultation. Some observers are concerned that Administrations may not fund U.N. entities as Congress intended. They suggest that Congress could legislate funding levels for specific U.N. entities or activities. At the same time, others maintain that this approach deviates from long-standing (and largely bipartisan) practices intended to provide the executive branch with flexibility to respond to unpredictable circumstances (e.g. conflict, humanitarian, or health crises).

**U.S. funding and U.N. reform.** Congress has attempted to influence the United Nations by enacting legislation linking U.S. funding to specific U.N. reforms or activities. For instance, it has withheld or conditioned funding to UNESCO, the Human Rights Council and U.N. activities related to the Palestinians. It has also limited U.S. payments to assessed budgets (e.g., the 25% peacekeeping cap). Some Members oppose such actions due to concerns that they may interfere with U.S. influence and standing in U.N. fora. Others maintain that the United States should use its position as the largest financial contributor to push for reform, in some cases by withholding U.S. funding.

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