



Withdrawing from the United Nations: A Misguided Assault

Multilateral Institution Serves Our National Security
and Foreign Policy Interests While Saving Us Money

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Introduction and summary

It is remarkable that lawmakers in Washington are considering slashing our financial commitments to multilateral institutions such as the United Nations with so much ongoing global turmoil. Withholding funds from the United Nations would fail to reap significant savings, make it more difficult for our nation to lead, and seriously undermine our highest foreign policy and national security priorities.

And yet many Republicans hammer away at the importance of cutting—or at least conditioning—our financial contributions to the United Nations. They are afraid our continued engagement with the organization will lead to a diminished American sovereignty or they see cutting funds as a tool to press for greater reform within the organization.

But those arguments don't make sense. History shows that robust U.S. engagement is actually the best way to reform the institution. Ironically, cutting funds now also means we are shifting our obligations onto future generations since U.N. membership still requires dues even if Congress cuts the budget. Restricting U.S. support for the United Nations ultimately has a much higher price tag than it does savings as doing so substantially decreases our political legitimacy while costing America money and jobs.

2011 has already been a year of much upheaval. Popular revolts throughout the Middle East and North Africa continue to grow in countries that haven't already given way to major political change. Countries such as Tunisia and Egypt that embraced democracy face hugely important and uncertain transitions. Libya is a war zone. Japan is reeling from two consecutive devastating natural disasters and the threat of nuclear fallout. And Cote d'Ivoire, or the Ivory Coast, remains perilously unstable, which could destabilize much of West Africa.

U.S. forces continue to draw down in Iraq while the administration works to help ensure the fragile political institutions will take hold and function. Meanwhile, there is broad recognition that the war in Afghanistan will require artful diplomacy and political solutions as much as military force.

The United Nations reflects the commitment of its member states to tackle these enormous challenges and it represents a shared understanding that it is cheaper and more effective for countries to work together toward the same ends.

Every day the United Nations carries out the hard work that its member states, including the United States, have put on its already crowded agenda: immunizing kids from infectious diseases that move easily across borders; running major peacekeeping operations in Asia, Africa, and Europe; supporting peace talks; assisting refugees and the displaced; promoting long-term economic growth, development, and trade; and even preserving vital archeological sites that represent our shared heritage.

The United Nations is far from perfect, of course. But in recent years strong American leadership has resulted in a number of important management reforms that make it both a more effective and efficient body. It is also becoming a more accountable institution. Across multiple administrations the United States has played a vital leadership role to launch reforms that include the creation of internal oversight offices, an ethics office, an independent audit committee, and success in maintaining current budget contributions instead of raising them. In addition, peacekeeping and secretariat reforms underway now bring about greater fiscal responsibility and a more disciplined, harmonized approach to critical operations.¹

Due in part to U.S. leadership, a majority of the management-related reforms recommended by the 2005 Gingrich-Mitchell task force report on U.N. reform have been successfully implemented. Still more are underway.

Meanwhile, the debate about whether we should continue to pay our U.N. dues is not new. In fact, despite a generally favorable perception among Americans, Republicans have dusted off an old argument that is deeply misaligned with how to achieve our national security and foreign policy priorities. They have also disregarded the fact that some 59 percent of Americans support the United Nations and welcome its ability to resolve conflicts and contribute to international peace.²

And yet the agreement negotiated between Congress and the White House only a few hours before a government shutdown in early April 2011 included a \$377 million cut to U.N. and international organization contributions out of some \$8 billion that was shaved off the total international affairs budget.

This means that somehow Congress overlooked the fact that a majority of *all* Americans—both Democrats and Republicans—agree that today’s world is deeply interconnected and requires a shared approach to address common concerns.

The debate in Congress also fails to take account of a long tradition of support for the United Nations from both parties. Even Jesse Helms, a deeply conservative former Republican senator from North Carolina, recognized the important role of the United Nations. In January 2000, Sen. Helms made a now famous speech before the U.N. Security Council, which made it clear that he wanted America to lead efforts to build a more effective and transparent United Nations—not withdraw from the entire institution.

Similarly, President Ronald Reagan said in a 1983 address to the U.N. General Assembly:

Today, at the beginning of this 38th Session, I solemnly pledge my nation to upholding the original ideals of the United Nations. Our goals are those that guide this very body. Our ends are the same as those of the U.N.’s founders, who sought to replace a world at war with one where the rule of law would prevail, where human rights were honored, where development would blossom, where conflict would give way to freedom from violence.³

Republican and Democratic presidents alike have supported the United Nations because it is in our direct national interest to do so.

In harm’s way

Critics are often quick to denigrate the United Nations as a coven of well-heeled diplomats sipping tea at U.N. headquarters in New York. That stereotype ignores the hard reality that the United Nations is a highly operational organization working on some of the most demanding environments on earth and often at great personal risk.

We are increasingly seeing the United Nations undertake work in a range of political environments, which sometimes means taking on a tough role that directly impacts their mission. Sometimes these countries are in the U.S. spotlight and sometimes they aren’t, but they all pose significant risk to U.N. staff. Consider that in just a two-week period in March and April 2011, the following events occurred:

- Seven U.N. staff members and guards were killed in Afghanistan by a mob protesting the burning of a Koran in Florida.
- A Swedish U.N. worker was shot and killed in the Ivory Coast.
- A U.N. peacekeeper in Darfur was slain after being abducted by armed men.
- A U.N. policeman in Haiti was killed while on patrol.
- The crash of a U.N. aircraft carrying both U.N. staff and others in Congo killed 32 people on board.

Engagement in New York helps us build alliances with nontraditional partners and meet diplomatic and development priorities. These goals are articulated in the 2010 National Security Strategy and the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, or QDDR, which provides a framework for elevating nonmilitary efforts that advance our national interests. U.N. funding on the chopping block, however, isolates America and makes us more vulnerable to global threats.

This brief will explore the relationship between the United States and the United Nations and outline the benefits of continued engagement in a number of areas including how the organization:

- Contributes to our national security and foreign policy priorities
- Saves us money and gives tangible economic benefits
- Strengthens our global partnership and enhances our leadership

As the nature of global threats continues to evolve—and particularly given the current fiscal climate—we need to marshal all resources available to address the violence, development issues, and problems associated with weak states that travel easily across borders, undermining governance and the rule of law. Unilateral approaches are one way to combat these challenges but more often than not they are less effective and dramatically more expensive.

The United Nations enhances our national security

The United Nations as an institution and the Security Council in particular function as bodies for member states to discuss and act on many critical issues. Other multilateral organizations, such as NATO, cannot serve this purpose in part because they don't have universal membership, which the United Nations does. The United Nations is the only multilateral organization with such a broad reach and such diverse membership.

It is also the only institution where the United States, as a permanent member on the Security Council and a significant financial contributor, holds a veto-wielding seat of influence that impacts all forms of decision making.

This heightened influence is particularly helpful when it comes to galvanizing support for our foreign policy priorities, as the following case studies demonstrate.

Iran

Iran's determination to pursue nuclear weapons—despite its contention that it is only trying to enrich uranium for civilian nuclear energy—is a profound threat to regional and global stability. Containing Iran's nuclear program and changing the calculus of

Iran's leaders has long been an important U.S. foreign policy goal. Senior U.S. officials recognize that success in this area will only come if the international community works together consistently and constructively.

This U.S. position was reinforced at the June 2010 U.N. Security Council when members passed a resolution authorizing the fourth round of sanctions on Iran's nuclear program. Shortly after its passage, U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice noted that the "resolution was a response to the threats to peace and security arising from Iran's refusal to comply with the requirements of IAEA and the [previous] demands of the [Security] Council." She went on to note that the measures were tough, smart, and precise.⁴

The administration used all its diplomatic assets to ensure the resolution was the strongest and most comprehensive possible. Assistant Secretary for International Organizations Esther Brimmer noted in a recent speech, that by "engaging multilaterally within the U.N. and with its members, we crafted a tough set of sanctions that all states must implement—even those Security Council Members that voted against them."⁵

These sanctions provided the administration—working in concert with other countries—with a new platform and a new set of tools to press the Iranian regime to uphold its international obligations.

The passage of a U.N. resolution authorizing sanctions on Iran was a sign of the administration's successful recommitment to engage the United Nations under President Barack Obama. Because of American leadership the U.N. resolution reflected a willingness to embrace U.S. priorities, including more punitive measures. It also aligned the international community at the rhetorical level while requiring that nations implement stronger measures at the national level.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates met with then-French Defense Minister Herve Morin shortly after the passage of the Security Council resolution and noted that it "provided a legal platform for individual countries to then take even more severe actions against the Iranian regime" and that "the sanctions have ended up being more effective and more severe than perhaps we might have expected before the U.N. resolution was passed."⁶

Representatives from other countries also acknowledged the importance of the U.N. resolution in generating action at the national level. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper noted on July 26, 2010, that:

Iran continues to ignore successive UN Security Council resolutions which call for it to cooperate fully ... and suspend its enrichment activities. Therefore, building upon last month's UN Security Council Resolution 1929, the Government of Canada is implementing new regulations aimed at restricting Iran's nuclear program and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.⁷

Another important win for the United States came with the U.N. Human Rights Council's decision on March 30, 2011, to establish a special rapporteur to monitor the human rights situation in Iran. This was a groundbreaking decision and is fully indicative of how U.S. engagement can be an important tool for change.

Because the United States worked multilaterally, the condemnation of Iranian actions came not just from the United States but the entire international community. The United States built a strong global coalition that made it possible to make a quantifiable impact on a top foreign policy priority.⁸

Libya

It is too soon to tell what will happen with the international military intervention in Libya. But it is abundantly clear that the United States has directly benefited from U.N. engagement on Libya across multiple areas. Consider the various ways in which the United Nations has assisted America and the world in dealing with the fallout from President Moammar Qaddafi's rampage against his own people.

First, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1970, which referred the situation in Libya to the International Criminal Court. This was an important step toward accountability that the United States clearly could not take by itself. The Security Council helped ramp up pressure on Qaddafi's inner circle and encourage the protection of civilians through these important measures.

Second, the same Security Council resolution imposed targeted sanctions on key members of the Qaddafi government and established an arms embargo. These measures would not have been nearly as effective if they were imposed on a unilateral basis by the United States because they would have been significantly less comprehensive.

Third, U.N. agencies—including the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, World Food Program, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and U.N. Children's Fund—are all providing critical life-saving aid to refugees, the internally displaced, and the many Libyans who have had food and water supplies disrupted because of sieges by government forces.

The U.N. Security Council authorized a sweeping, proactive military mandate to use all necessary means to protect civilians in Libya, which provided vitally needed credibility and legitimacy to the international military intervention currently underway.

This U.N. authority also made it easier for a larger number of nations and regional organizations to support the military action. Equally important, the diplomacy at U.N. headquarters that led up to the Security Council resolution helped the United States avoid a major foreign policy rift with either China or Russia regarding the use of force.

U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice and her team in New York worked to galvanize support among Security Council members throughout the crisis.⁹ Strong U.S. leadership at the Security Council enabled results that advance our interests, ensure political legitimacy throughout the broader region, and decrease the cost of engagement.

Libya is a good example of how it would be more expensive, not less, for the United States to act without the United Nations and like-minded partners at our side. This is true in the military campaign and in providing humanitarian assistance.

Afghanistan

The United Nations quickly established a political mission on the ground with the 2001 international military intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent ouster of the Taliban. This mission focuses on helping the Afghan government and its people build the foundation for sustainable peace and development, and it is a corollary to the United Nations' important aid and development work.¹⁰ The 5,000 U.N. employees on the ground provide an important complement to the more than 140,000 coalition troops in Afghanistan.

The 32 different agencies and organizations that comprise the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, or UNAMA, consult extensively with national and international partners and cooperate closely with a broad range of actors in undertaking their programs.¹¹ U.N. officials also contribute a deep cultural understanding and sensitivity that make their work on the ground more effective. The State Department, USAID and, notably, the Pentagon recognize the United Nations' key role as they seek to transition the process to an Afghan-led one.

U.S. Gen. David Petraeus, commander of the International Security Assistance Force and the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, noted in recent congressional testimony that as the United States draws down in Afghanistan, the State Department will shoulder important responsibilities for economic development and local governance capacity building as well as support for national ministry development in Afghanistan. He also noted the importance of fully resourcing the agencies that undertake these initiatives, which includes support for the corresponding role of the United Nations.

UNAMA is uniquely positioned to engage widely with civil society, the international community, and even the Taliban because of its historic presence, deep networks throughout the country, and tremendous experience in conflict mediation and negotiation. All of these contacts will prove essential to exploring and potentially leading a political negotiation process.

Moreover, the United Nations will play a central role in supporting and strengthening Afghan government institutions as Afghans take more responsibility for their own governance, thereby preventing state collapse following a U.S. and NATO-ISAF military drawdown.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a February 2011 speech, spoke of the important need to find a negotiated settlement to the war in Afghanistan if we are to see peace and security in the country over the long term.¹² Achieving this goal will not be easy given the potential for so many spoilers.

The United States certainly will play an active and engaged role as Afghans take on more responsibility for their own security and governance. But negotiations are more likely to be embraced by the local populace and key regional actors if they are under U.N. auspices because of the greater potential for objectivity and global legitimacy. They are also more likely to succeed and be dramatically less costly to the American taxpayer under U.N. leadership since the burden is shared.

It is simply not true that the United States can't afford the United Nations, as some policy-makers have been quick to say. Yes, the United States is the largest single contributor to the United Nations and is responsible for 22 percent of the organization's regular budget and 27 percent of the money for peacekeeping operations. In 2011 the United States' assessed contribution to the regular U.N. budget is \$587.2 million, and our assessed portion of U.N. peacekeeping is estimated to be about \$2.3 billion out of a \$7.3 billion total, annually.

But let's put these figures in perspective. The cost of the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan is \$5.8 billion a month. Without the United Nations we'd have to leave more of our forces in Afghanistan for far longer.¹³

Iraq

The establishment in 2003 of a U.N. mission in Iraq was not without controversy. The Bush administration's effort to push through a U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing military action in Iraq unsuccessfully; the American decision to invade Iraq with a coalition of the willing; and the ensuing efforts, post-Saddam, to significantly marginalize the United Nations dramatically soured the U.S.-U.N. relationship.

Nonetheless, the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, or UNAMI, has repeatedly played an important role directly aligned with our interests. This is particularly true in recent years.

UNAMI helped seed a number of important political dialogues from 2003 to 2005, including among and between individual coalition partners who were otherwise unwilling to meet. But the general lack of U.S. postinvasion planning made work on the ground much more difficult. This U.N.-led initiative opened up channels for more comprehensive political dialogue down the road.¹⁴

Still, it wasn't until early 2004—following the tragic bombing of U.N. headquarters that killed 22 U.N. officials, including Special Representative of the Secretary-General Sergio Viera de Mello—that the organization was able to make a more mainstream impact. American and U.K. officials acknowledged their deficit by asking the United Nations to take on an expanded role to help establish a viable Iraqi government.¹⁵

Since that time UNAMI's primary focus has been on the political and reconstruction process. The U.N. mission plays an important role promoting national dialogue, supporting logistical needs for elections, and negotiating border disputes through the provision of technical assistance to emerging institutions. Indeed, all of UNAMI's main issues are central concerns within Iraq's larger political process. The United Nations' continued engagement enables the broader international community and the Iraqis themselves to avert the derailment of Iraq's political progress by dealing with some of the most explosive issues of the day.

Baghdad's political progress is increasingly essential to stability in the country as the bulk of the U.S. military redeployes from Iraq.¹⁶ Consequently, the United Nations will need to assume a more central role on a range of nation-building and political transformation issues if we are to see long-term security.

The bottom line here is that partnerships with institutions such as the United Nations are a cornerstone of a sensible and effective foreign policy in today's complex world. And they directly serve U.S. interests abroad.

The United Nations saves us money

America remains the most influential country in the world. But we are at our strongest when we work collaboratively with our partners around the globe. Continued engagement at the United Nations helps enable this cooperation, and in the current climate of fiscal restraint, it also helps us do more with less.

By meeting our financial obligations at the United Nations, we keep the door open for building global alliances, reducing the cost of doing so, and improving our chances of success in responding to transnational threats. We close an important door by ridding ourselves of those same financial obligations. We are also merely passing the bill down to future generations as the United Nations doesn't stop requiring assistance just because we've stopped paying.

Peacekeeping missions are a particularly good example of how the United Nations helps us save money while achieving our goals, as is the streamlining approach outlined in the Global Field Support Strategy.

Peacekeeping

The United States holds a veto-wielding seat on the U.N. Security Council. This means no peacekeeping mission is authorized without our consent.

Ambassador Rice recently noted in congressional testimony, “We are judicious about when and where we establish new peacekeeping missions.” Peacekeeping involves burden sharing and resource savings in regions where stability is at stake and the world community, not just the United States, sees a grave danger. The historic support for U.N. peacekeeping—across Democratic and Republican administrations—shows how important burden sharing is despite Congress’ chronic tendency to underfund what can be considerable cost savings to American taxpayers.

A 2007 Government Accountability Office report estimated that U.N. peacekeepers can deploy at a fraction of the cost it would take for the United States to lead such a mission. Specifically, the report noted it would cost \$428 million for a U.N. mission in Haiti while it would cost the United States \$876 million—twice as much—to conduct a similar operation on its own.¹⁸

It is actually *eight* times cheaper for the United Nations to run such an operation than it is for the United States because the United States only pays a quarter of the overall price tag for this kind of U.N. peacekeeping mission.

U.N. peacekeeping also plays an important role in overall stability operations in places that are a high priority for the United States but are not likely to see U.S. boots on the ground. In these cases, U.N. peacekeeping is best option for such engagement—particularly when the deployment of troops is tied to a broader political strategy that tackles the underlying causes of conflict.

In countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, and Sudan, U.N. peacekeeping helps address immediate crisis concerns and contributes to broader U.S. foreign policy and strategic objectives, which includes bolstering regional peace and stability, shoring up economic growth and development opportunities, and strengthening the rule of law.

Global Field Support Strategy

Another important potential cost-saving measure is the Global Field Support Strategy. The 2010 report outlines an innovative approach that will dramatically improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery for peacekeeping missions. It draws on lessons learned from several decades of operational experience to make peacekeeping more efficient and cost effective.

It was released in July 2010 and penned by the U.N. Department of Field Support, which provides logistics, administrative, information, and communications technology support for 32 peacekeeping and field-based special political missions, including to the African Union Mission in Somalia.

The ultimate goal of this approach is to use resources more efficiently by transforming the way missions are deployed and supported in the field. This strategy, developed after significant consultation with all U.N. member states, untangles conflicting priorities and duplicative efforts so peacekeeping can be more rapidly and effectively deployed.

The strategy is now under discussion at the U.N. General Assembly. It has the potential to save an initial \$45 million in its first year of implementation by establishing a “pooled resource” bank of funds and logistical equipment for peacekeeping missions in Southern Sudan, Darfur, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as support efforts to the African Union mission in Somalia, which collectively received some 65 percent of all peacekeeping funds. By creating a single administrative and logistics center based out of Entebbe, Uganda, the United Nations would be able to ensure a more streamlined and effective operation to the most critical peacekeeping missions.

Another priority for the field support strategy report is to decrease mission overhead costs. By updating the model for base-camps creation and purchasing reusable shipping containers with a standardized design, the United Nations could see at least an immediate 10 percent decrease in the cost of building and maintaining base camps.¹⁹

Does it sound sexy and make headlines? No. Will it save money? Yes. And that’s what matters. Ambassador Rice repeatedly notes that the United States cannot afford to shirk its responsibility to U.N. peacekeeping operations even in a time of economic crisis because of its role as the one truly global enterprise that can serve shared interests and offer millions of people the prospect of a more secure, prosperous, and dignified future.

The United Nations contributes to the U.S. economy

The United Nations’ benefits to the U.S. economy beyond the foreign policy savings just outlined are stunningly underreported. Some of the more noteworthy gains include the Capital Master Plan, or CMP, a project to renovate the U.N. headquarters; peacekeeping operation procurement; and the revenue generated by contracting with the humanitarian and development agencies.

Prior to renovation the U.N. building did not conform to building codes. It was a potential hazard to those who worked there, those who visited, and the surrounding area. A 2008 report from the Government Accountability Office noted that while the United States had a substantial interest in the CMP's success, it also had a lot to gain. Case in point: The CMP awarded all but two contracts for renovations to American companies.

These contracts have generated \$1.4 billion in revenue to companies large and small such as Certified Moving and Storage, LLC; Firecom; and HLW.²⁰ All bidding has been open and competitive. The renovation is expected to be finished on time (2013) and to maintain its approved budget despite some initial delays and a few setbacks related to security concerns.

There are other economic benefits that come from the United Nations, too. It contracts with a number of U.S. companies to provide significant logistical support such as telecommunications lines, building materials, and construction equipment for work in countries that traditionally receive little foreign direct investment.

U.N. peacekeeping operations procured nearly \$319 million of their goods and services from American businesses in 2009—a number considerably higher than any other country.²¹ Collaborating with U.N. peacekeeping missions also exposes American companies to nontraditional markets and could open the door to increased business opportunities down the road.

Finally, the U.N. agencies—which are not part of the regular U.N. budget—procure many of their goods and services from American companies. This longstanding partnership results in nearly \$2 billion in revenue.²² More than 20 U.N. agencies do business with U.S. companies covering a wide range of goods and services including telecommunication services, pharmaceuticals, and food supplies. The UNDP procured more than \$110 million in business from U.S. companies in 2009 while WFP procured nearly \$200 million.²³

We also gain because these agencies undertake significant programming in the areas of global health and development, which means the corresponding U.S. priorities receive a significant boost from complementary U.N. programs.

Conclusion

This report shows that the United States benefits from the United Nations in many ways. America's leadership at the United Nations has enabled us to secure greater alignment on Iran, build support for the political missions in Iraq and Afghanistan so we can transition to civilian-led frameworks and address an unfolding crisis in Libya. Our engagement with the United Nations has also meant significant economic benefits for the greater New York area and for companies across the country.

During a tough economic period, the United Nations has achieved demonstrable impact without overburdening any single donor country. To pull back from our multilateral commitments now would leave the United States shouldering more responsibility and spending down the road—an ill-advised prospect that would have a devastating impact on our economy and our national interests.

Endnotes

- 1 Only some of these reforms were mandated under the Helms-Biden Act of 1999; many others had been underway for years. Still others were recommended by Paul Volcker's report in the wake of the oil-for-food scandal and the congressionally mandated Gingrich-Mitchell U.N. task force from 2005.
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- 8 During 2011 the Human Rights Council, also suspending Libya, established a Commission of Inquiry for Cote d'Ivoire and dropped the "defamation of religions" concept which has raised serious concerns restrictions to free expression.
- 9 State Department official, interview with author, March 2011.
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- 13 As another point of comparison, during the height of fighting in Iraq, the cost to American taxpayers was approximately \$12 billion per month.
- 14 Former UNAMI official, interview with author, March 2011.
- 15 James Dobbins and others, "The UN's Role in Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq" (Arlington, VA: Rand Corporation, 2005), page 193, available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG304.pdf.
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