Why Congress Must Oppose Efforts to Withhold Funding to the United Nations

In the wake of the Security Council vote on Israeli settlements late last month, there have been calls from some quarters in Congress to withhold U.S. funding for the United Nations or switch to an entirely voluntary payment model. U.S. engagement with the UN—including through financial support—is essential to advancing U.S. foreign policy, national security, and humanitarian objectives. For example, each year, the UN:

- Provides food to 80 million people in 80 countries;
- Vaccinates 40 percent of the world’s children;
- Assists over 65 million refugees and people fleeing war, famine, or persecution;
- Keeps peace through 120,000 peacekeepers – the largest deployed military in the world;
- Fights poverty, helping to improve the health and well-being of 420 million rural poor;
- Promotes maternal health, saving the lives of 30 million women.

And through everything the UN does, it remains a good bargain for the U.S. Dues to the UN amount to only about 0.1 percent of the total federal budget. But conditioning funding would negatively impact UN activities and programs, dramatically reducing their scale and impact while undermining core American interests, including:

- **UN Peacekeeping Operations:** Each day, UN peacekeepers work to end violence and promote stability in the most conflict-affected regions by demobilizing combatants, facilitating humanitarian aid, protecting civilians under threat of violence, and creating conditions for political reconciliation and free and fair elections. These activities are a boon to U.S. interests, as they promote our foreign policy and national security goals and values abroad without requiring the commitment of U.S. troops (currently, the U.S. provides just 68 uniformed personnel to these missions, while developing countries, like Bangladesh, Ghana, Jordan, and Nepal, provide thousands).
  
  - As Admiral Mike Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Presidents Bush and Obama, said: “[United Nations] peacekeepers help promote stability and help reduce the risks that major U.S. military interventions may be required. Therefore the success of these operations is very much in our national interest.”
  - They are cost-effective – these missions are eight times cheaper than U.S. forces acting alone.
  - They are effective in preventing conflict from reigniting. Steven Pinker of Harvard University noted that research has made clear, “A country is much less likely to fall back in civil war if they’ve got armed peacekeepers. And the better financed and armed the peacekeeping force, the more effective they are.” With respect to financing, research has also made clear that poorly-financed and poorly-equipped missions struggle to fulfill their mandates. While other countries pay over 70 percent of the costs of UN peacekeeping missions, the U.S. remains the largest contributor. A U.S. decision to slash peacekeeping
funding would have far-reaching consequences in the field, making it much more difficult for peacekeepers to effectively manage conflict and protect civilians from harm.

- **Sanctions Monitoring for Rogue States and Terrorists:** The Security Council has adopted sanctions targeting terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda and rogue regimes like North Korea in recent years. U.S. dues to the UN help finance efforts to monitor international compliance with these measures, so that we can ensure they are being implemented effectively and adjust accordingly. For example, earlier this month, the Security Council’s North Korea sanctions committee launched a website to track North Korean coal exports, which were targeted by a new sanctions resolution adopted by the Council in November. The new sanctions are expected to lead to a decline in North Korean coal exports—a major source of revenue for the Kim regime—by 60 percent. Efforts to promote international compliance with these and other Security Council-endorsed sanctions regimes would be undercut by a U.S. funding reduction to the UN.

- **Political Missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia:** The UN operates a number of political missions working to stabilize fragile states, which collectively consume more than 20 percent of the UN’s annual Regular Budget. The bulk of this funding goes to relatively large UN missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Libya, where they work to promote free and fair elections, fight drug trafficking, facilitate critical humanitarian and development assistance, and support the development of strong and effective governing institutions. These activities are critical to U.S. national security objectives. Moreover, since they are funded out of the Regular Budget, other UN Member States pick up the tab for 78 percent of their costs.

  - With respect to the U.S. Regular Budget contribution, it is important to know that it is paid as a single lump sum every year (i.e. there is no differentiation made between the various activities covered by the account, whether it is political missions or sanctions or the range of other activities it funds). As a result, any attempt by Congress or the Executive Branch to reduce Regular Budget contribution funding for a specific program will not have the intended effect. Instead of hurting that particular program or activity, it will be applied across the board by the UN to the entire U.S. Regular Budget contribution, meaning that all entities will suffer, including activities that Congress supports.

  - Moreover, demands for the U.S to switch to a voluntary payment system would likely lead to other countries moving to an “a la carte” system. As a result, the U.S. could end up paying more as an assessed funding model requires other countries to share the load and to make contributions. For example, it is unlikely that other countries would pay the majority of the costs for the political missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Libya. If the U.S. were on the hook for those missions, additional costs could exceed $300 million annually. Alternatively, one could see a significant reduction in funding for programs the U.S. supports. In fact, the 2005 Congressionally-mandated Newt Gingrich - George Mitchell report on UN Reform argued against voluntary funding schemes for a number of reasons, including under-funding for Member-State priorities.
• **Lifesaving Humanitarian Assistance:** UN humanitarian agencies like the World Food Program (WFP), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), UN Children’s Program (UNICEF), and UN Population Fund (UNFPA), deliver lifesaving aid to tens of millions of people around the world affected by conflict and natural disasters every year. Currently, these agencies are working to provide food, shelter, vaccines, education, psychosocial support, and other critical materials and services to people in Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, and other countries affected by conflict and instability around the world. Given that the world is currently facing its largest forced displacement crisis since the end of World War II—with more than 65 million people driven from their homes by war or persecution—the humanitarian aspects of the UN’s work are more vital than ever. Cuts to UN agencies like WFP and UNHCR at this time only exacerbate the crisis, placing an immense burden on refugee-hosting countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon and threatening the stability of our allies and our ability to protect our national interests, particularly in the Middle East.

For example, after five years of the war in Syria, the World Food Program was forced to drastically restrict its food voucher initiative in 2015, leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees without a vital lifeline and driving many of them to flee their homes. This was one of the main drivers of the displacement crisis that affected Europe and the U.S. in 2015.

• **Vital UN Specialized Agencies:** The UN system also includes specialized agencies like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is currently playing a central role in efforts to verify Iran’s compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal; the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which helps enable safe air travel by promulgating global standards for navigation, communication, and airline safety; and the World Health Organization (WHO), which is responsible for coordinating the global response to public health emergencies, including the recent Ebola epidemic and ongoing Zika virus outbreak.

**Burden-sharing Role:** In a November 2014 speech at the American Enterprise Institute, then-Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power stated UN peacekeeping missions “get other countries to stand up, rather than stand by”. The same could be said not only about peacekeeping, but the entire UN system. As former George W. Bush Ambassador to the UN John Danforth noted, “Although imperfect, no other organization can provide the amount of global reach and influence offered by the UN. The U.S. accrues real national security returns when we participate as a reliable member. We multiply the impact of U.S. resources, save money and resources through burden-sharing with international partners, and advance issues on a global scale.” If the U.S. reduces funding for the UN, it will seriously undercut the effectiveness of the activities discussed above, and potentially set the U.S. up to shell out even greater quantities of funding to deal with these challenges unilaterally or bilaterally. Cutting funding also alienates our allies and reduces our influence at the UN, undercutting efforts to seek long-term reforms at the institution—a stated objective of both current Members of Congress and the incoming Administration.

**Advancing Reform:** Efforts to reform the UN from the “outside” – via threats to withhold dues or switch to a voluntary funding model – have been debated for years and shown to be counter-productive. In June 2005, for instance, the House of Representatives passed The United Nations Reform Act of 2005 which called for a switch to a voluntary funding model and automatically
withholding dues from the UN unless certain reforms are met. The Bush Administration issued a Statement of Administration Policy which said that it has “serious concerns” about the legislation because it “could detract from and undermine our efforts” at reform. Similarly, that same year, Jeane Kirkpatrick, former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, signed onto a letter saying that, “When we last built debt with the UN, the United States isolated ourselves from our allies within the UN and made diplomacy a near impossible task.” In 2011, former George W. Bush Ambassador to the UN, Mark Wallace, explained before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that it would not be “wise or beneficial to use withholding funds to implement change.”

We know from experience that staying engaged is the best way to advance American interests. Full U.S. funding to the UN is essential to ensure that the U.S. has the power to effect change and influence the international agenda.