

# THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSED FUNDING FOR THE UN

U.S. financial contributions to the UN system makes up just over 0.2 percent of the federal budget. In any given year, the majority of these contributions are voluntary. For example, during Calendar Year 2018, the U.S. made approximately \$3 billion in dues payments to the UN regular budget, peacekeeping operations, and specialized agencies. This represents less than one-third of all U.S. contributions to the UN that year, which totaled \$9.9 billion. By contrast, five UN humanitarian and development agencies—World Food Programme (WFP), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), International Organizations for Migration (IOM), and UN Development Programme (UNDP)—all of which are voluntarily funded, collectively received nearly \$5.4 billion from the U.S. in 2018, 54 percent of the total.



Despite their relatively small slice of an already modest pie, however, assessed contributions have been an object of scorn for some, and proposals to have the U.S. adopt an effectively a la carte approach to funding core UN programs have been repeatedly bandied about in Washington over the years. An entirely voluntary funding structure for the UN is unlikely to save the U.S. money in the long-run and could lead to significant budgetary shortfalls for UN activities that are squarely in our national interest. More detail is provided below.

- **Assessed funding structures require other countries to share the financial burden.** A major advantage of assessed funding is that it ensures the financial burden for core UN activities is spread across the entire international community, rather than being the primary responsibility of a single country. Because the U.S. is both an economic powerhouse and permanent member of the UN Security Council, we are assessed a sizable chunk of the UN’s regular and peacekeeping budgets. Nevertheless, the UN’s 192 other Member States shoulder the vast majority of these costs—78 percent of the regular budget and 72 percent of the peacekeeping budget. The fact that all Member States, even the least developed, are required to contribute to the organization at specified levels prevents the U.S. from being saddled with the burden of financing these activities alone. By contrast, the U.S. often pays more under voluntary funding arrangements, one reason why past U.S. administrations and Congress have rejected this idea.

- **U.S. leaders and experts agree that voluntary funding is problematic.** Successive administrations and outside experts have recognized the limitations inherent in voluntary funding structures. The 2005 Congressionally-mandated Newt Gingrich-George Mitchell report on UN reform noted that such schemes are often slow and lead to U.S. priorities being underfunded. Later that year, the House passed the United Nations Reform Act of 2005, which proposed that the U.S. automatically withhold dues from the UN unless certain specific reforms were met, including switching to a system of voluntary financing. The Bush Administration issued a Statement of Administration Policy which said that it had “serious concerns” about the legislation because it “could detract from and undermine our efforts,” requesting “that Congress reconsider this legislation.”
- **Voluntary financing could lead to shortfalls for U.S. priorities.** The UN's assessed budgets fund a number of the organization's most consequential and politically sensitive activities that support U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives, including special political missions in strategically significant countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Somalia, as well as peacekeeping operations that seek to protect civilians and bring stability to hotspots on four continents. The reality is that any government or large organization needs stability and predictability in its budget. In particular, planning for massive logistical operations like peacekeeping efforts require significant lead time and preparation that can only happen with assured funding streams.

Adoption of voluntary funding arrangements for the UN's regular, peacekeeping, and specialized agencies budgets would almost certainly lead to underfunding. For example, the UN's voluntarily-financed humanitarian and global health activities, far less politically sensitive than the UN's peacekeeping and human rights work, have long been short of need. For example, in 2018, UN humanitarian agencies and partner organizations needed a total of \$25 billion to provide aid to 98 million people in 41 countries. At the end of the year, however, they had only received \$15.2 billion, or 60.4 percent, of the total. A similar situation played out several years ago with funding for the World Health Organization, which has a relatively small assessed budget and relies on voluntary contributions for the majority of its work. In 2009, due in part to donor countries turning their interests elsewhere, WHO's epidemic and pandemic response department was dissolved. As a result, when several West African countries experienced an unprecedented Ebola outbreak in 2014, the problem was magnified because sufficient resources and infrastructure did not exist.

By creating a more level playing field and requiring all Member States to contribute, assessed funding structures help to prevent these types of gaping shortfalls, which would likely be even deeper for more politically fraught activities that are crucial to U.S. interests.