

THE UN SYSTEM

The UN Charter that established the United Nations in 1945 created six principal organs. Today, five remain active. The Trusteeship Council, designed to oversee colonial territories during transition to self-governance or independence no longer operates.

The UN also includes more than 30 affiliated organizations, programs, funds and specialized agencies, each with their own membership, leadership and budgetary processes. These entities work with and through the UN Secretariat to promote peace and prosperity.

5 Principal Organs of the UN System

General Assembly: The only universal institution in the world in which all 193 nations have an equal voice, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) makes critical decisions, including appointing the Secretary-General, electing members of the Security Council and approving the UN budget.

Security Council: The UN's premier decision-making body, of which the U.S. is a permanent member with veto power. They are responsible for maintaining international peace and security.

Secretariat: Responsible for the daily operations of UN programs and agencies.

Economic and Social Council: The central UN forum for discussing and formulating policy recommendations on international economic, social, cultural, educational and health issues.

International Court of Justice: The UN's judicial organ, tasked with settling legal disputes between states; the ICJ also gives advisory opinions on legal questions submitted by UN organs or agencies.

**Built in the U.S.
Based in the U.S
Better with US**

Founded in San Francisco and headquartered in New York, the UN has been central to American foreign policy since 1945. Celebrating its 80th year in 2025, the UN was created following World War II to safeguard global peace and ensure the horrors of the Holocaust would never occur again.

While the world has changed significantly since the UN's early days, the organization remains a force multiplier for the U.S. and a key platform for multilateral diplomacy to mitigate conflict and collectively address challenges that no country can resolve alone.

Spotlight on AI

In March 2024, the U.S. spearheaded the historic passage of the General Assembly resolution setting standards for safe use of AI – a growing concern for policymakers in Washington and worldwide.

The resolution was based on a framework adopted by UNESCO Member States in 2021, recommending ways to ensure that the increasing deployment of AI does not deepen societal inequalities, threaten fundamental human rights and freedoms or fuel division and violence.

A majority of countries vote with the U.S. roughly 80% of the time.

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Unlike the Security Council, the UN General Assembly (GA) has universal membership. All 193 UN Member States have a vote, and no country possesses veto power. Every year, Member States elect a president to govern the body for a one-year term.

While decisions are generally non-binding, GA resolutions carry important political and moral clout due to its unique universal membership, serving as a transparent and public marker of the views of the international community. Since 2022, for example, Member States have voted repeatedly to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and called for withdrawal of Russian troops. The body has also suspended Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and requested the creation of an international claims register to lay the groundwork for Russian reparations.

Voting Behavior and the U.S.

UN critics often cite frustrations with recipients of U.S. aid who vote against U.S. interests in forums like the GA. They argue that punishing the UN – by withholding institutional funding to the organization, for example – holds Member States accountable. A recent Heritage Foundation report, however, refutes this claim, stating that it is more effective for the U.S. to address such countries bilaterally rather than imperil the dominant position of the U.S. and cede ground at the UN to adversaries like China or Russia.

Other Responsibilities of the General Assembly

- Develop and approve UN regular and peacekeeping budgets
- Establish assessment rates for Member States
- Elect non-permanent members of the Security Council and other UN bodies
- Appoint the Secretary-General



UN SECURITY COUNCIL

The Security Council is the UN's decision-making body conferred by the UN Charter with "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security." Empowered to pass legally-binding resolutions impacting Member States, the Council has several tools at its disposal for conflict prevention and management. Chapter VI of the Charter authorizes the Council to make recommendations to resolve threats to international peace and security by peaceful means. Under Chapter VII, the Council can authorize measures that include sanctions and military force.

The Security Council consists of 15 members - five permanent and ten rotating. The rotating members are elected to two-year terms by the UN General Assembly. The five permanent members (known as the P5) are the U.S., U.K., France, China and Russia. The presidency of the Security Council rotates monthly. Presidents oversee operations, manage workflow, chair discussions and set the Council's agenda.

Resolutions of the Council must receive affirmative votes from nine of the fifteen members and not receive a negative vote from any P5 state. As such, the P5 can unilaterally veto any substantive decisions.

Since its establishment, the Council has served as a key forum for addressing international security challenges. These successes include authorizing more than 70 peacekeeping missions to stabilize conflict zones, establishing international sanctions for North Korea and ISIS and deepening international cooperation to achieve nuclear nonproliferation.

At times, the P5 veto power has prevented the Council from fully asserting its role as a guarantor of global order. This was especially true at the height of U.S.-Soviet tensions during the Cold War. While the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought on a period of increased cooperation, disputes over crises in the Middle East and Ukraine have exposed divisions among the P5 and limited the Council's effectiveness in some contexts. Generally, the P5 compartmentalize the Council's business, cooperating on most issues, while taking especially contentious topics into more narrowly focused forums.

America in the Security Council

In its most recent terms serving as President of the Security Council, the U.S. used its position to condemn the coup in Myanmar, speak out against Iran's human rights violations and build on efforts for ethical AI governance.

America is also spearheading efforts in the Council on the crisis in Haiti. In October 2022, the U.S. penned Resolution 2653 with Mexico, establishing an arms embargo, travel ban and asset freeze against individuals threatening "the peace, security or stability of Haiti." Adopted unanimously, sanctions were renewed.



UN SECRETARIAT

Headquartered in New York, the UN Secretariat is staffed by around 35,000 personnel worldwide - including nearly 6,000 Americans - who carry out day-to-day operations of the UN. This includes implementing mandates adopted by the General Assembly and Security Council. The reach of its many responsibilities are carried out with an annual budget of \$3.7 billion - equivalent to the state budget of New Hampshire.

Main Functions

- Planning and managing peacekeeping and political missions
- Mediating international disputes
- Assisting with implementation of Security Council sanctions
- Coordinating disaster relief across humanitarian agencies
- Promoting social and economic development
- Publishing statistics and research
- Setting the agenda for deliberative bodies of the UN
- Facilitating discussion and meetings among UN Member States

Secretary-General

The Secretariat is led by the Secretary-General, selected every five years by the Security Council and approved by a majority vote of the General Assembly. Although there is no formal limit to the number of terms a Secretary-General serves, they customarily serve no more than two.

The current Secretary-General is former Portuguese Prime Minister António Guterres, who assumed office on January 1, 2017. Guterres will end his tenure in December 2026. The selection process for his successor is anticipated to start in January 2026. Through consistent engagement, the U.S. will have the opportunity to influence the selection of candidates.

Bodies housed in the UN Secretariat fall into three categories

Functional Commissions

that deliver expertise on issue areas such as crime prevention, technology, science, narcotics and gender.

Regional Commissions

that focus on regional economic and social development in Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific.

Other Bodies

operating in the Secretariat include standing and ad hoc bodies created in response to emerging issues and needs for expertise.

\$1.2 B

UNICEF and the UN Secretariat are main procurers of U.S. goods and services, awarding a combined **\$1.2 billion to U.S. businesses in 2023.**

