

Competing and Winning in the Multilateral System

U.S. Leadership in the United Nations

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The United Nations is a way for countries, including the United States, to burden-share global challenges—be they related to diplomacy, development, or security—that are too big for a single country to handle alone. As a leading world power, the United States must contribute a significant financial share, but it also receives benefits from distributing the burden on many issues. At the same time, the United Nations creates several challenges for the United States, both in terms of its operations and specific “pain points.” Ultimately, the United States needs to pay its membership dues and arrears, increase its personnel appointments, and strategically deploy the United Nations as a vehicle for achieving its foreign policy goals. Quitting the United Nations is not an option, and crippling our engagement by holding back money or ignoring key staffing issues is not only short-sighted but against our interests in the long run.

Today, the United Nation’s role in the international system is under debate. The United Nations has come under criticism for its perceived inefficiency and passivity, opaque processes, and lack of accountability. However, the United States should not distance itself from the organization but rather push for positive reforms and use the United Nations as a vector to carry out U.S. foreign policy objectives. Recent polls show that [83 percent of](#) Americans support U.S. engagement in the United Nations, and [88 percent](#) think that the United States should play an active role. Overall, [66 percent](#) of respondents believe the United Nations plays a necessary role in the world today, although only [34 percent](#) think the institution is doing a good job.

The Importance of the UN System

The United States has been a driving force in UN affairs since the body’s inception. Recognizing the need for a capable multilateral institution, the United States hosted several crucial meetings in [San Francisco](#) and Washington, D.C., before the official establishment of the United Nations on October

24, 1945. The United Nations Charter was ratified by key founding states such as the United States, China, France, and the former Soviet Union. Domestically, U.S. Senator Arthur Vandenberg's successful efforts to foster bipartisan congressional support for its ratification pushed the treaty into law.

For the 193 countries within the UN system, belonging to the United Nations “club” has its benefits. An important advantage of UN membership is the explicit acknowledgement that all member nations are [sovereign states](#). The United Nations also supports countries in several important sectors such as humanitarian assistance, economic development, global health, and human rights on four key fronts: maintaining peace throughout the world, developing friendly relations among nations, helping nations work together to improve the lives of people, and serving as a forum to discuss the actions of nations to achieve global goals.

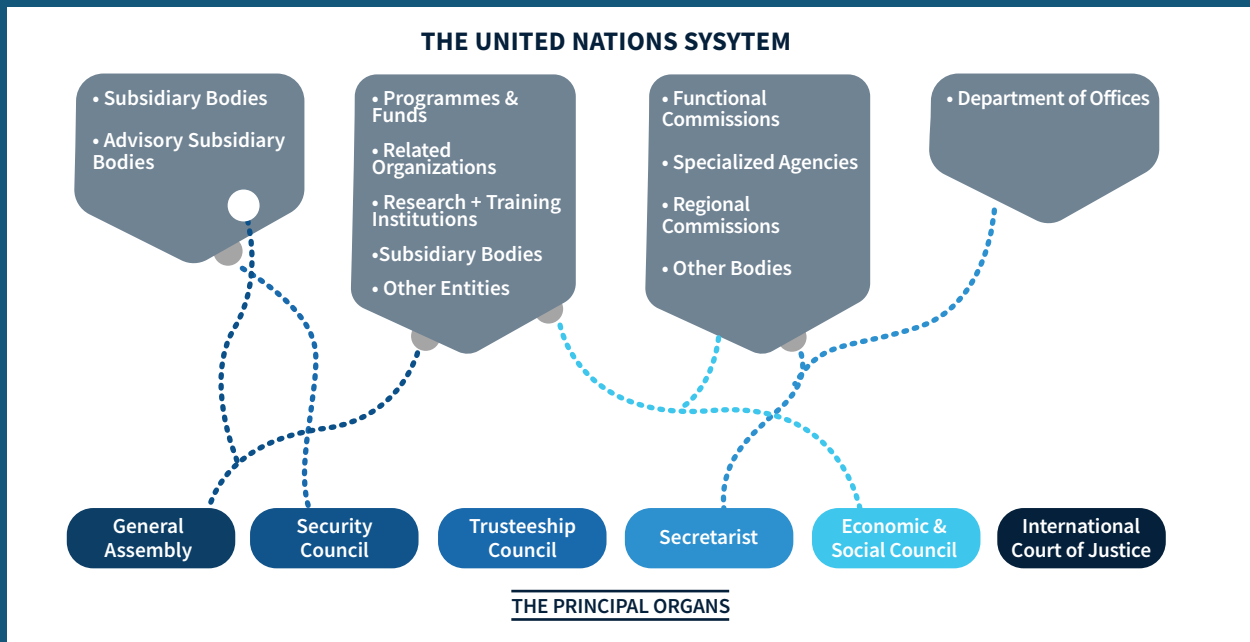
The [UN system](#) consists of six main organs, 27 departments and offices, 15 specialized agencies, and other funds, programs, and bodies (Box 1). [The Security Council](#) is the most powerful body and has primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security by responding to crises around the world and overseeing ongoing UN peacekeeping operations. [The council](#) is composed of 15 members: 5 permanent members (the P5—France, Russia, the United Kingdom, China, and the United States) and 10 non-permanent rotating members. The P5 were determined at the time of the United Nations' founding after World War II. The other 10 members are non-permanent and are elected for two-year terms by the UN General Assembly.¹ For a council [resolution](#) to be approved, it must secure at least nine “YES” votes and avoid a veto by any of the P5. Each council member has one vote, and a P5 veto kills the resolution.

Many people equate the United Nations with the Security Council, forgetting that it is a complex web of agencies and institutions that carry out important work beyond just security and peace issues. For example, the United Nations provides food to 80 million people, assists 70 million refugees, and vaccinates [45 percent of the children](#) in the world. Globally recognized agencies such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are also part of the UN system. Many people are also unaware that the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are also UN specialized agencies but operate independently.

The World Health Organization (WHO) works with 194 member states to combat communicable and non-communicable diseases. The WHO is currently headed by Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, an Ethiopian national who was elected for a five-year term beginning in May 2017. The WHO and its director-general have come under [increasing criticism](#) due to their response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which critics deem as too trusting of the Chinese government's dubious reports of the virus and the slow reaction to declare Covid-19 a global health emergency.

¹ Current non-permanent members (with the end of their terms in parenthesis): Belgium (2020), Côte d'Ivoire (2019), Dominican Republic (2020), Equatorial Guinea (2019), Germany (2020), Indonesia (2020), Kuwait (2019), Peru (2019), Poland (2019), and South Africa (2020).

Box 1: The United Nations System



The five active UN organs are²:

1. The General Assembly, which is the deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations, where all 193 member states are represented. Decisions on important questions, such as peace and security, new members, and other issues, require a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly, and decisions on other questions are decided by a simple majority. Each year a General Assembly president is elected for a year term.
2. The Secretariat, which consists of the secretary-general and all day-to-day staff members who carry out the work mandated by the United Nations' principal organs. The secretary-general is appointed by the General Assembly, by recommendation of the Security Council, and serves a five-year renewable term.
3. The Security Council, which is responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security, takes the lead on determining threats to peace or acts of aggression, and can impose sanctions or use force to keep international peace or security. The primary goal of the council is to avoid taking those measures by bringing parties together in meetings.
4. The Economic and Social Council, which oversees coordination, policy review, and dialogue and makes recommendations on economic, social, and environmental issues.
5. The International Court of Justice, which settles legal disputes, submitted by the member states, in accordance with international law and gives advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by authorized UN organs and other agencies.

Source: "Main Organs," United Nations, www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/main-organs/.

² The Trusteeship Council was previously an active UN organ which was established in 1945 with a mandate to provide supervision for 11 Trust Territories that were seeking self-government and independence. Once they all reached independence, the Trusteeship Council suspended its operations on November 1, 1994.

U.S. Engagement in the United Nations

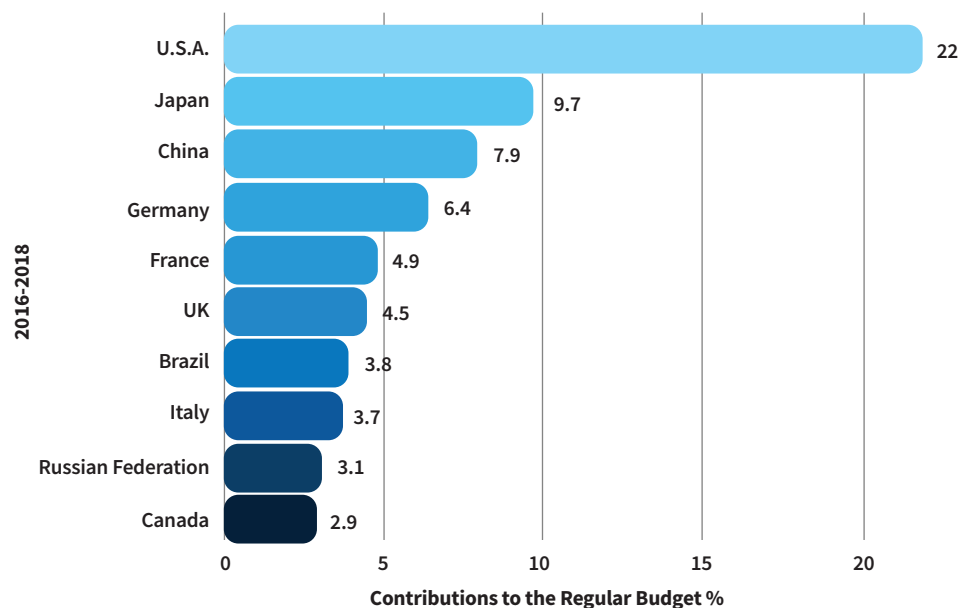
The United Nations' history and legacy has been shaped by U.S. ideals and foreign policy interests. As the leading proponent for a successor to the League of Nations, the United States spearheaded the creation of the United Nations. Since 1945, the United States has leveraged the United Nations as an important tool to further its foreign policy objectives and forge international consensus. The United States is also a major financial contributor (Figure 1). In 2019, it provided [22 percent of the UN regular budget](#) and paid 27.9 percent of the [UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations' budget](#).³ In terms of peacekeeping forces, the United States contributes about 70 personnel, on par with Russia.

The United States has been the [largest](#) financial contributor to the United Nations since 1945. In 2019, the 22 percent contributed by the United States amounted to over [\\$10 billion](#). China provided the second highest percentage at approximately [12 percent](#); in contrast, China provided less than 1 percent of the UN budget in 2000. While China's voluntary contributions have been rising, China has not increased its [voluntary contributions](#) to specialized organizations at the same rate. In some instances, however, China is gaining great influence through strategic investments in specialized UN agencies. China is the [only](#) contributor to the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, enabling China to fill four of its five committee seats. China is also investing in UN agencies that have upcoming elections. For example, China invested [\\$2.5 million](#) in UNESCO in 2019, while the United States did not contribute at all. China provided [\\$18 million](#) in 2019 to UNIDO, nearly equal to the U.S. contribution of [\\$21.3 million](#).

During U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley's tenure, the Trump administration had several accomplishments at the United Nations. The United States continued to put forth well-respected agency heads specifically at the WFP and UNICEF. Additionally, Ambassador Haley gained China's and Russia's support to pass Security Council Resolution 2397, which imposed harsh [sanctions on North Korea](#). These sanctions included a complete ban on top North Korean exports such as iron and coal and a ban on the sale of natural gas, which ultimately reduced the country's revenue by about \$1 billion. Ambassador Haley was also a vocal proponent of human rights, [calling out Myanmar](#) for denying that there was an ethnic cleansing campaign against its Rohingya minority and pressing State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's government to acknowledge that the military had committed these atrocities. Ambassador Haley has also called out Iran, Russia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua for committing or supporting human rights abuses.

³ The specific breakdown of which programs the United States contributes to can be seen here: <https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs>.

Figure 1: Percentage of Contributions to the UN Regular Budget



Source: Contributions received between 2016-2018 for the United Nations Regular Budget, United Nations “Assessment of Member States’ advances to the Working Capital Fund for the biennium 2016, 2017, and 2017-2018,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/contributions/budget.shtml>.

However, there are a series of pain points that the United States consistently has with the United Nations. The first pain point is the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and its treatment of Israel. The [UNHRC](#) is an inter-governmental body created by the General Assembly in 2006 to strengthen human rights and address violations and whose 47 member states are elected by the General Assembly. The United States withdrew from the UNHRC in 2018, [stating that](#) the “so-called human rights council cannot bring itself to address the massive abuses in Venezuela and Iran, and it welcomes the Democratic Republic of Congo as a new member.” This decision was fueled in part by the UNHRC’s commitment to “agenda item 7” which focuses on discussion of alleged human rights violations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by Israel, an agenda item which the United States has systematically opposed. The UNHRC passed [five resolutions](#) against Israel in 2018, more than the combined number against North Korea, Iran, and Syria. In the last term of the Obama administration, the United States abstained from a UN Security Council vote that stated Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem were illegal. This was the first time the Obama administration allowed the UN Security Council to openly criticize Israel without a veto. Some [legal scholars](#) believe that the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which condemned Israeli settlements and which the United States abstained from, could be used to sue Israel at the International Criminal Court.

Before pulling out of the council, Ambassador Haley tried to make several changes, advocating for increased efficiency and accountability to create a more results-based organization and for a decrease in the bureaucratic politics that hinder the institution’s ability to make and act on decisions. [One of Haley’s principal efforts](#) included an attempt to deny council spots to countries with a history of human rights abuses [such as Venezuela, which won a seat in 2019](#). This effort was stopped by Russia, China, Cuba, and Egypt. These are [not the first issues](#) the United States has had with the UNHRC—in 2006, the George W. Bush administration withheld membership because it felt the council was hypocritical. When the Obama administration decided to seek membership in 2008, it did so in hopes of reforming the council, not because it approved of the council in its current form.

One of the largest pain points for the United States is perceived corruption within the United Nations. In one notable example, the Oil-for-Food program was designed to allow Iraq to sell oil under UN oversight to purchase food and medicine for its citizens but prevent it from using money from those sales to acquire weapons. Due to lax oversight and corruption, Saddam Hussein was able to skim [approximately \\$11 billion](#) from the program through an elaborate system of kickbacks. [With the money from the scam](#), Iraq built a missile system that exceeded the range limits set by the United Nations. [The Volker Commission](#), a U.S.-led investigatory body, accused over 2,000 companies of paying bribes and receiving kickbacks. A massive investigation took place within and outside of the United Nations, but out of the countries implicated, [only the United States](#) and several other Western countries have taken steps to bring those named to justice.

This lack of oversight extends to UN peacekeeping, where the impact of UN malfeasance is even more devastating. At least [1,700 allegations of sexual violence](#) have been lodged against UN peacekeepers in countries such as Bosnia, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti—and these are only the reported cases. One reform the United States needs to pursue is for the United Nations to devise a strong accountability and punishment mechanism for peacekeepers. Additionally, there have been [numerous reports of sexual assault](#) and harassment within the United Nations itself and its field offices, and survivors describe an institutional culture of silence and intimidation where perpetrators are allowed to remain in high-level positions and oversee investigations. Though [the 2010 cholera outbreak in Haiti](#) that has sickened over 300,000 people and killed over 10,000 has been clearly linked to UN peacekeepers who carried the bacteria with them from Nepal, the United Nations has yet to take any measures to resolve the situation or even admit fault. The United States has spoken out against both scandals: 101 members of Congress [signed a letter to the United Nations](#) pushing for reparations for the cholera victims, and Ambassador Haley [proposed a Security Council resolution](#) focused on improving peacekeeper performance and holding troop-contributing countries accountable. The United States must work constructively and cooperatively with the United Nations to resolve the issues within these areas, which [would only help to further U.S. interests](#).

A fourth pain point is when UN resolutions touch upon issues in the United States that may be in opposition to American values and beliefs held by significant portions of the U.S. population. Many members of the U.S. government see these as issues of personal or national sovereignty and are uncomfortable with an international body dictating domestic policy. The [UN Arms Trade Treaty \(ATT\)](#) was hotly contested when President Obama agreed to it in 2013. At an [April 2019](#) National Rifle Association rally in Indianapolis, President Trump announced he would withdraw America's signature from a UN arms trade treaty because he believed it infringed on the Second Amendment rights of U.S. citizens. The Trump White House explained this was because the existing U.S. arms export controls are considered [the gold standard](#), and the ATT was not needed for the United States to continue engaging in responsible arms trade. Abortion has also been a hotly contested topic of discussion at the United Nations. In response to reports that the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) was supporting a family planning program in China that included forced [sterilizations and abortions along with China's controversial "one child policy,"](#) the Trump administration announced it would withhold [\\$32.5 million](#) from the organization. [The money intended for UNFPA was transferred to USAID](#) to support family planning and maternal and reproductive health. Previously, the United States was [the fourth-largest donor](#) to the fund.

Another example of the United Nations dictating national policy is in Australia. Australia is known for having extremely strict laws regarding [child incarceration](#) and has been under fire for mistreatment of children within the Aboriginal and indigenous population. In response, the United Nations has pushed for Australia to ban spanking, calling it corporal punishment. This was highly controversial, as some Australians see this as a violation of their civil liberties and an interference in their personal lives.

U.S. interests in the United Nations are much larger than the real pain points described above, and U.S. leadership is needed more than ever, as it must consolidate and affirm alliances and ties with countries that are increasingly being wooed by China and Russia. It would therefore not only make sense for the United States to maintain a strong influence in the United Nations for security purposes but also to counter the rise of China.

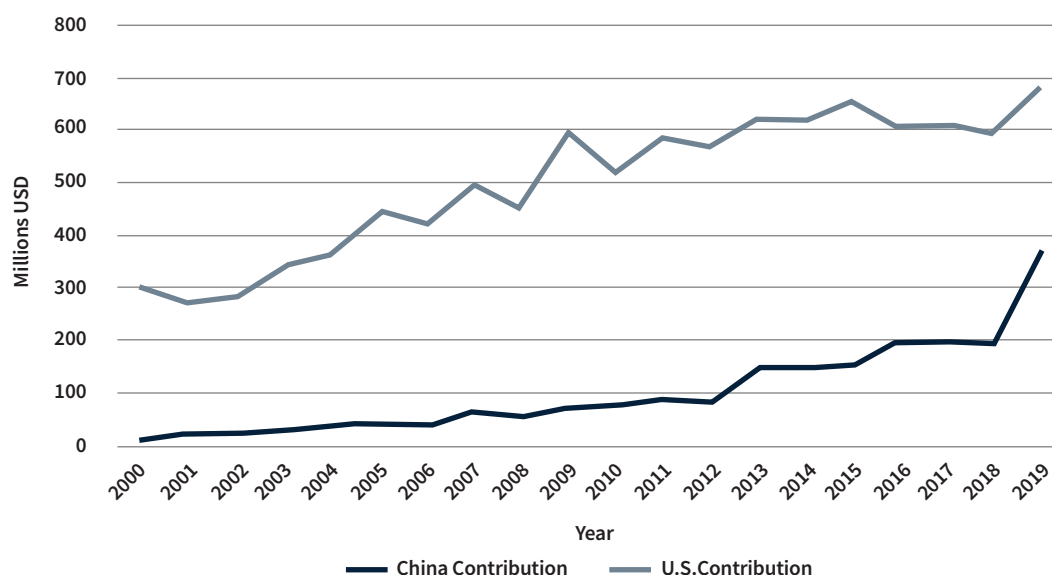
The United States, China, and Great Power Competition within the United Nations

China currently heads [four major](#) UN agencies. China holds the top job at the UN International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which decides global flight paths and who has control of what airspace. China ran a very effective campaign in 2019 to win the top position at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). China also holds the top position in the UN [International Telecommunication Union](#), which facilitates international connectivity in communications networks, and the UN [Industrial Development Organization](#), which promotes industrial development for poverty reduction, inclusive globalization, and environmental sustainability. In contrast, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France combined hold the [same number](#) of top positions in UN specialized agencies.

China is a permanent member of the Security Council and the Human Rights Council. Within the Security Council, [China's vetoes typically align with Russia's](#) or focus on its material and economic interests, often abstaining from or vetoing resolutions that impose sanctions on its trade partners or that hurt its strategic interests—especially when it comes to [Taiwan](#). Recently, China has stepped up its contributions to UN peacekeeping operations. The cuts made by the Trump administration to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operation's budget (from 28 percent down to 25 percent of the total budget) have been filled by China's increased contributions. [China contributes over 2,500 personnel](#), the most of any P5 member, and has committed to a 10-year, \$1 billion China-UN fund for peacekeeping operations (see Figure 2). This [fund targets](#) specific interests in the African Union and would almost double the number of existing peacekeeping training and capacity-building programs. The United States, conversely, [owes \\$776 million to the peacekeeping budget and \\$381 million to the regular budget](#). China's growth in this area becomes more prominent as the United States scales back its contributions.

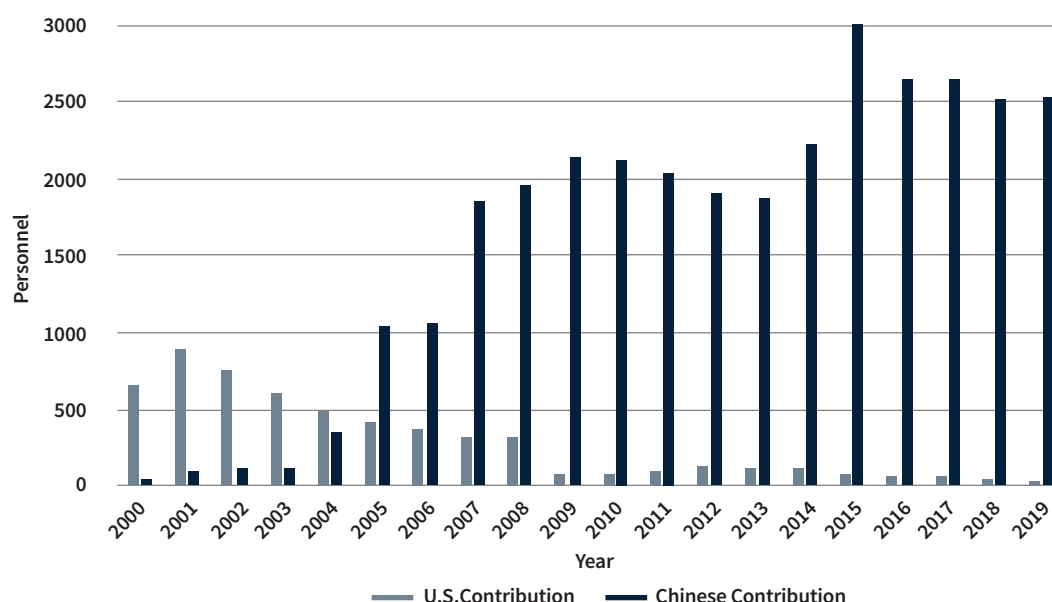
It is true that China's influence will grow in the Human Rights Council now that the United States has left, but the decision to leave was likely the right one for the Trump administration. The United States does not have to give a “blank check” to every UN action or every UN body. In the past, China [has passed interventions](#) that covered issues such as Syria, Eritrea, and Belarus. China has proposed several resolutions that focus on national sovereignty and quiet dialogue instead of investigations and international calls to action, which leads many critics to say China is trying to weaken the Human Rights Council to protect itself. At the most recent UN General Assembly (2019), China was condemned for its horrific treatment of the Uighurs, a Muslim minority ethnic group in northwestern China, and other Muslims, over a million of whom have been forcibly detained in so-called “vocational training centers” which are more likely re-education camps. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has called for immediate, unhindered access to the region in a motion that was supported by the United States, Canada, and over 30 UN states and other organizations outside the United Nations. At the same time, Hamid Sabi, a lawyer with the China Tribunal, pressed the United Nations to investigate [claims](#) that China has been committing crimes against humanity for years by harvesting organs from living prisoners, (including the Uighur minority and banned religious groups such as the Falun Gong) and selling them. [This evidence](#) was based on testimony from victims and evidence of extremely low donor wait time for organs in hospitals.

Figure 2: U.S. and Chinese Monetary Contributions to UN General Budget



Source: "Regular Budget and Working Capital Fund, Committee on Contributions," United Nations, www.un.org/en/ga/contributions/budget.shtml.

Figure 3: Personnel Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations



Source: "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations, peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors.

The [recent U.S. loss](#) in leadership at the FAO should serve as a wake-up call for U.S. officials. The election, which the United States thought was a guaranteed win, went to a former senior Chinese government official. His role at the FAO allows him to oversee the World Food Programme, a U.S.-led UN agency within the FAO that focuses on food insecurity and famine, and gives him the power to approve all high-level staff appointments, putting future U.S. efforts to maintain its dominant role in the organization at risk.

However, in March 2020, the Trump administration [won big](#) at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). WIPO is a UN specialized agency that is tasked with the protection of intellectual

property rights around the world. The position of director-general at WIPO came down to a two-way race between Singapore's Daren Tang and China's Wang Binying. Daren Tang won a resounding victory, with 55 votes for him and 28 votes for the Chinese candidate. Lessons learned from the WIPO victory can serve as a playbook for how the United States can successfully win these key roles. A crucial aspect of U.S. success was the United States and its allies coming to consensus around a candidate and recognizing the stakes and real possibility that China could win the position. This was due in no small part to senior White House staff, cabinet-level officials, and members of Congress that mobilized to signal the importance of the election to the Trump administration. Secondly, strong ambassadors, such as Ambassador Andrew Bremberg, and dozens of other U.S. diplomats were able to successfully engage counterparts in dozens of countries to vote for Mr. Tang.

It Is Time to Lead, Not Step Back

From [2021-2022](#), there will be 15 elections for the heads of UN specialized agencies and five for major UN funds and programs.⁴ With the exception of the World Food Programme, none are currently led by Americans. With authoritarianism and populism on the rise, the United States cannot risk creating a power vacuum for countries such as China to fill and build further influence over fragile and developing countries, which would ultimately weaken both the United States and the United Nations.

The United States stood up the United Nations and needs to be more engaged. Not paying our dues and not “playing” has significant costs for the United States. Unlike 10 years ago, China has the money and the diplomatic will to fill the void. There are concrete examples of the Chinese government using the UN system to pursue their goals, similar to what the Soviet Union used to do. The United States has not actively engaged enough in this competition and must step up its game on leadership picks. There are serious geostrategic repercussions if the United States cedes its influence. As the [2018 National Security Strategy](#) asserts, “We will compete and lead in multilateral organizations.” It is time for the Trump administration to make these words mean something.

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⁴ These 15 elections include: UN secretary-general, International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), International Monetary Fund (IMF), UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UN Development Program (UNDP), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), World Food Programme (WFP), UN Human Settlements Program (UN Habitat), UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and International Labor Organization (ILO).