

The United Nations System: Frequently Asked Questions

Updated September 10, 2024

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47715



R47715

September 10, 2024

Luisa Blanchfield

Specialist in International
Relations

The United Nations System: Frequently Asked Questions

The United Nations (U.N.) system is a group of interconnected entities that includes the United Nations itself, U.N. specialized agencies, U.N. peacekeeping operations, U.N. funds and programs, and other related bodies. Entities within the U.N. system may set international standards on various matters; provide humanitarian and development assistance to populations in need; monitor human rights situations; adopt sanctions; and establish peacekeeping missions, among other activities. The United States played a key role in establishing the United Nations in 1945, and remains its largest financial contributor. This report addresses frequently asked questions regarding the U.N. system, some of which are summarized below.

How is the U.N. system structured? U.N. system entities have different mandates, structures, leadership, and financing mechanisms. Key parts include the following:

- **The United Nations.** The United Nations is an intergovernmental organization composed of 193 member states. Its founding document is the U.N. Charter, an international treaty to which the United States is a party. The United Nations includes the 193-member General Assembly (the organization's plenary body); the 15-member Security Council (mandated to maintain international peace and security); and the Secretariat (the U.N. executive and administrative body), which is led by the Secretary-General.
- **U.N. specialized agencies.** The U.N. system has 15 specialized agencies, each of which is a legally independent intergovernmental organization with its own mandate, constitution, rules, membership, and budgets. Examples include the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Universal Postal Union (UPU), and World Health Organization (WHO).
- **U.N. funds and programs.** U.N. funds and programs are established by the General Assembly and have a specific purpose. Examples include the U.N. Children's Fund and the World Food Program.

How is the U.N. system funded? The U.N. Charter requires each U.N. member state to contribute to the expenses of the organization. Each body is funded through assessed or voluntary contributions from U.N. members (or a combination of both). Assessed contributions are required dues, the payment of which is a legal obligation accepted by a country when it becomes a member. The U.N. regular budget, U.N. peacekeeping, and U.N. specialized agencies are funded through assessed contributions. Voluntary contributions fund U.N. funds, programs, and other entities.

What is U.N. peacekeeping? The United Nations currently operates 11 U.N. peacekeeping missions worldwide, with more than 70,000 personnel from over 100 countries. The mandates of these missions vary; they may include protecting civilians, disarming violent groups, monitoring human rights violations, and/or assisting in delivering humanitarian assistance. The Security Council is responsible for establishing and renewing each operation, as well as determining the missions' mandates and budgets. The United States, as a permanent Security Council member, plays a key role in shaping U.N. peacekeeping missions. It is also the largest financial contributor.

What is U.N. reform? Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations has undergone a range of reforms as governments seek to improve the organization's effectiveness. Generally, U.N. reform is achieved by amending the U.N. Charter or undertaking various non-charter reforms. A charter amendment, which requires approval by two-thirds of the General Assembly and ratification of two-thirds of U.N. members (including the five permanent Security Council members), is rarely used and has been practiced on few occasions. Non-charter reforms, which include General Assembly action or initiatives by the U.N. Secretary-General, are more common and easier to implement.

How does the United States participate in the U.N. system? U.S. participation in and funding of the United Nations is authorized through the United Nations Participation Act of 1945 (P.L. 79-264, as amended). The United States is a member of the General Assembly and a permanent member of the Security Council. It is also a member of 12 of the 15 U.N. specialized agencies. U.S. representatives/nationals are often elected to leadership positions on U.N. boards, councils, and other bodies. Congress can influence U.S. policy at the United Nations by using a range of tools and mechanisms, the foremost of which is withholding or conditioning U.S. funding to U.N. bodies. In addition, Congress holds hearings on U.N. issues, enacts related reporting requirements, and confirms U.S. representatives to U.N. entities.

Contents

Overview	1
How Is the U.N. System Structured?.....	1
What Is the United Nations and the Role of the U.N. Charter?	2
What Is the U.N. General Assembly?	2
What Is the U.N. Security Council?.....	3
What Is the U.N. Secretariat?	4
What Is the U.N. Economic and Social Council?	5
What Is the International Court of Justice?.....	5
What Is the Trusteeship Council?	5
What Are U.N. Specialized Agencies?.....	6
What Are U.N. Funds and Programs?	7
What Other Types of Organizations Are in the U.N. System?	7
What Are Key U.N. System Activities and Coordinating Mechanisms?	7
How Is the U.N. System Funded?	8
What Are Assessed Contributions and How Are they Determined?	9
What Are Voluntary Contributions?	10
What Is U.N. Peacekeeping?	11
How Is U.N. Peacekeeping Funded?.....	11
Who Are U.N. Peacekeepers?	12
What Is U.N. Reform?.....	13
What Are Obstacles to U.N. Reform?	13
What Is the Reform Implementation Process?	14
How Does the United States Participate in the U.N. System?	15
What Are the Congressional and Executive Branch Roles?.....	15
How Has U.S. Policy Toward the United Nations Evolved?	16
How Does the United States Fund the U.N. System?	17
How Can Congress Shape U.S. Policy in the U.N. System?	18

Figures

Figure 1. U.N. Entities, by Type.....	6
Figure 2. Top U.N. Regular Budget and U.N. Peacekeeping Assessments	10
Figure 3. U.N. Peacekeeping Operations, 2024	12
Figure A-1. U.N. Organizational Chart	21

Appendixes

Appendix. U.N. Organizational Chart	21
---	----

Contacts

Author Information.....	22
-------------------------	----

Overview

The United Nations (U.N.) system is a collection of interconnected entities, which includes the United Nations itself, U.N. specialized agencies, U.N. peacekeeping operations, U.N. funds and programs, and other related bodies.¹ Congress has demonstrated an ongoing interest in the effectiveness of the U.N. system and its role in U.S. foreign policy and national security. The United States is the largest financial contributor to the United Nations; Congress authorizes and appropriates funding to U.N. entities and often directs U.S. participation in U.N. mechanisms to further U.S. foreign policy and national security objectives. Some Members maintain that the mandates or actions of certain U.N. bodies in some circumstances do not align with U.S. priorities, and that parts of the U.N. system are not operating as efficiently or effectively as possible. Congress has at times withheld funding from U.N. activities that it does not approve of, and some Members have supported U.S. withdrawal from certain U.N. entities.

Members of the 118th Congress may continue to debate the effectiveness of the U.N. system in addressing global issues and furthering U.S. foreign policy. This report answers frequently asked questions about the U.N. system, including its structure and funding, the evolution of U.S. policy toward the United Nations, U.N. reform efforts, and possible tools and options for Congress.

How Is the U.N. System Structured?

U.N. system entities have different objectives, budgets, leadership, and funding mechanisms. Many governments, including the United States, have long recognized that the U.N. system provides members with unique benefits, including its convening power, perceived neutrality, and universal membership. The United Nations provides mechanisms for governments to share the significant financial and operational burden of responding to global issues of concern, including peace and security, development, human rights, and humanitarian response efforts. The U.N. General Assembly (the Assembly) is the organization's plenary body. It provides a multilateral platform where each country possesses one vote, regardless of geographic size, population, or global influence.

U.N. organizations are composed of or funded by governments, making them inherently political bodies that often reflect the competing foreign policy and domestic priorities of their various members. As such, the overall effectiveness of some U.N. entities may be stymied by long-standing disagreements among member states, organizational and structural challenges, and funding and resource shortages. During the past decade, conflict, natural disasters, and global humanitarian and health crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine—have renewed concerns about the role and effectiveness of some U.N. bodies in addressing current and future global challenges.²

The following sections describe key parts of the U.N. system. An organizational map of the U.N. system is included in **Figure A-1** of the **Appendix**.

¹ This report uses the terms “U.N. entities,” “U.N. bodies,” and “U.N. organizations” interchangeably to refer to the United Nations, specialized agencies, funds and programs, and U.N.-affiliated or related organizations.

² For example, see United Nations, “We Must Come Together to Urgently Reshape, Strengthen Multilateral Institutions,” Secretary-General Tells General Assembly,” May 7, 2024; “Amid Strained Multilateral System, States Must Recommit to United Nations Charter Obligations, Prioritize Human Rights, Secretary-General Tells Security Council,” April 24, 2023; and Jeffrey Feltman, “War, peace, and the international system after Ukraine,” *Brookings*, March 28, 2023.

What Is the United Nations and the Role of the U.N. Charter?

Created in the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations today comprises 193 member states. The founding document of the United Nations is the U.N. Charter (the Charter), an international treaty ratified by the United States in 1945. Article 1 of the Charter states that the purposes of the organization are to (1) maintain international peace and security; (2) develop friendly relations among nations; (3) solve economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian problems; and (4) promote human rights. The Charter establishes six U.N. “principal organs” (or parts): the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Secretariat, the International Court of Justice (the Court), and the Trusteeship Council.

What Is the U.N. General Assembly?

The 193-member U.N. General Assembly is the organization’s primary deliberative body.⁶ The Assembly may discuss or make recommendations on any questions or issues within the scope of the U.N. Charter, including the powers and functions of any U.N. organs. Each U.N. member, including the United States, has one vote in the Assembly, with a two-thirds majority vote required for decisions related to important

How Are U.N. Membership and General Assembly Representation Determined?

Membership. The process and requirements for becoming a U.N. member are established in Article 4 of the U.N. Charter.³ Membership decisions are determined by the Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council. The Charter states that U.N. membership is open to all “peace-loving states” that accept obligations under the Charter and, in the judgment of the organization, are able and willing to carry out such obligations. The most recently admitted member was South Sudan in 2011.⁴

Representation. At the start of each Assembly session, representatives of each state are required to submit their credentials to the nine-member U.N. Credentials Committee, which examines credentials and makes a recommendation to the Assembly as to whether they should be accepted. The vast majority of credential submissions are not controversial, but over the years, some submissions have led to disagreements among governments over representation.⁵ The Security Council has a separate credentials process that includes a determination by the U.N. Secretary-General; however, in practice the Council often relies on Assembly decisions.

³ U.N. specialized agencies have their own membership processes and criteria, which are generally outlined in their constitutions or founding documents. For more information, see CRS Report R43614, *Membership in the United Nations and Its Specialized Agencies*.

⁴ Since the 2010s, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has sought to achieve international recognition for Palestinian statehood by changing the Palestinians’ membership status in the United Nations and other U.N. bodies. The United States has opposed such efforts, maintaining that Palestinian statehood can be realized only through direct negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians. In 2011, Palestine applied for U.N. membership, but its application remains pending before the Security Council. In November 2012, the Assembly voted to change the U.N. observer status of “Palestine” (as the PLO was known within the U.N. system) from “observer entity” to “non-member observer State status,” leading to its current designation of “State of Palestine.” In April 2024, the State of Palestine requested that the Council renew its consideration of the 2011 application, and the United States, on April 24, vetoed a draft Council resolution which recommended to the Assembly that the State of Palestine be admitted as a member. In May 2024, the Assembly adopted a resolution recommending that the Security Council reconsider Palestinian membership and granting the Palestinians new observer status privileges (such as the right to be seated among members in alphabetical order and make statements and proposals on behalf of a group). For more information, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*.

⁵ A notable example is China. Between 1950 and 1971, the representatives of both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) submitted credentials. During this period, the ROC represented China in the United Nations. The United States and the then-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), both of which sat on the Credentials Committee, disagreed on China’s representation, and the Assembly did not act. This continued until 1971, when the Assembly recognized the PRC’s representatives as the “only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations” (U.N. document, A/RES/2758(XXVI)).

⁶ The Assembly was established under Chapter VI of the U.N. Charter.

issues, admission of new members, and approval of the U.N. regular budget and U.N. peacekeeping operations budget.⁷ The Assembly may adopt recommendations concerning the maintenance of international peace and security, as well as political, economic, social, and human rights issues, but these are recommendatory in nature and nonbinding. Assembly resolutions nevertheless can hold political weight and may demonstrate the collective will of U.N. member states.⁸ The Assembly's annual regular session opens in September and runs for one year, with its meeting of heads of state and government held at the beginning of the session. (The President of the United States generally speaks before the Assembly, and Members of Congress may attend as U.S. representatives.⁹)

What Is the U.N. Security Council?

The mandate of the 15-member U.N. Security Council is to maintain international peace and security.¹⁰ Under Article 25 of the Charter, U.N. members agree to accept and carry out the Security Council's decisions.¹¹ Membership includes five permanent members ("P-5"): the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, and 10 nonpermanent members elected by the General Assembly for staggered two-year terms on the basis of equitable geographic distribution. Security Council decisions on substantive matters are made by an affirmative vote of nine members, including the concurring votes of the P-5. A negative vote from any P-5 member is said to "veto" the resolution or decision, preventing its adoption.¹² Security Council resolutions and decisions may address a range of peace and security issues, including authorizing peacekeeping operations; imposing sanctions on governments, groups, or individuals; and establishing fact-finding missions and investigations. The Security Council may also authorize the use of military force to restore international peace and security under Chapter VII of the U.N. Security Council, although such instances are rare.¹³ The Security Council presidency rotates each month, alphabetically by member. Its provisional "program of work" (or agenda) is approved by members on a monthly basis and provides a framework for its activities. Although the Security Council has acted to avert conflict or maintain peace in certain situations, it has come under increased scrutiny during the past decade for taking limited or no action to address global crises such as the Syria conflict, COVID-19, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁴

⁷ For more information on peacekeeping funding, see the "What Is U.N. Peacekeeping?" section of this report.

⁸ Assembly resolutions address a range of issues from both global and country-specific perspectives, including peace and security, disarmament, human rights, development, humanitarian relief, and the environment.

⁹ See CRS In Focus IF10464, *United Nations Issues: Congressional Representatives to the UN General Assembly*. The main part of the session, from September to December, includes most of the work of UNGA's six committees: (1) Disarmament & International Security, (2) Economic & Financial, (3) Social, Humanitarian & Cultural, (4) Special Political & Decolonization, (5) Administrative & Budgetary, and (6) Legal.

¹⁰ Council structure and authorities are established under Chapter V of the U.N. Charter.

¹¹ The extent to which, if any, Security Council resolutions and decisions produce binding obligations for member states under international law has remained a subject of debate among some scholars and U.N. practitioners. For more information, see "Are U.N. Resolutions Binding?" U.N. Dag Hammarskjöld Library, at <https://ask.un.org/faq/15010>.

¹² Since 1945, the P-5 have collectively exercised the veto 321 times (as of September 6, 2024) as follows: Russia (158), United States (92), United Kingdom (32), China (21) and France (18). Decisions on procedural matters are made by an affirmative vote of nine members and are not subject to the veto. Council members may also abstain from votes.

¹³ Chapter VII provides the Security Council with authority to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression" and to make recommendations (or to resort to nonmilitary and military action) to "maintain or restore international peace and security." For information on references to Chapter VII and case studies, see "Repertoire of Security Council Practice," at <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/repertoire/actions>.

¹⁴ The Security Council has authorized more than 70 peacekeeping operations since the first mission was established in 1948. It has also imposed sanctions more than 30 times since the first sanctions regime was created in 1996.

What Is the Relationship Between the General Assembly and the Security Council?

Overview. The General Assembly and the Security Council have distinct roles, but their work may at times overlap. Under the U.N. Charter, both the Assembly and Security Council report to each other on their activities on an annual basis. The Assembly is responsible for electing nonpermanent members of the Security Council and for approving some of its recommendations (including those regarding U.N. membership and appointing the Secretary-General). The Assembly may also convene a special session at the request of the Security Council, and may call its attention to situations that are likely to endanger peace and security. The Security Council and the Assembly have at times both established separate U.N. bodies, such as the Peacebuilding Commission.

Uniting for Peace Resolutions. At times, the Assembly has handled matters of peace and security under what is widely referred to as the “Uniting for Peace” (or U4P) resolution. Adopted in 1950 to respond to the then-Union of Soviet Socialist Republic’s (USSR’s) vetoes in the Security Council during the Korean War, the U4P resolution (General Assembly Resolution 377A(V)) sets out procedures for the Assembly to immediately consider matters of international peace and security when the Security Council is unable to act due to a lack of unanimity among its five permanent members. Meetings pursuant to U4P can be initiated by Security Council or Assembly resolution. The convening of an emergency session under the framework of the U4P resolution is relatively rare; since 1950, the Assembly has held 11 such sessions, including one addressing the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022.¹⁵ In the wake of the October 2023 conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Assembly decided to reconvene its 10th emergency session on Israeli actions in the “Occupied Palestinian Territory.”¹⁶

General Assembly Resolution on the Security Council Veto (2022). Many General Assembly members have expressed increasing frustration with the use of the veto by P-5 members, particularly on resolutions aiming to address mass atrocities, provide humanitarian access, and respond to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. On April 26, 2022, the Assembly adopted Resolution 76/262, often referred to as the “Veto Initiative,” which requires the Assembly to automatically convene a formal meeting to debate the situation on which any Security Council veto is cast. The United States cosponsored the resolution, calling it “a significant step toward the accountability, transparency, and responsibility” of all of the permanent members of the Security Council.¹⁷

What Is the U.N. Secretariat?

The U.N. Secretariat conducts the substantive and administrative work of the organization at the request of the General Assembly, the Security Council, and other U.N. entities.¹⁸ It is based at U.N. Headquarters in New York City, with additional offices in Vienna, Austria; Nairobi, Kenya; and Geneva, Switzerland. It includes over 35,000 staff members worldwide, hired both internationally and locally.¹⁹ The Secretariat is led by the U.N. Secretary-General (UNSG), the organization’s “chief administrative officer,” who is appointed by the Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for up to two five-year terms. The UNSG’s administrative responsibilities include recruiting and hiring staff, coordinating with U.N. entities, preparing the regular budget, and reporting to the General Assembly. At times, the UNSG may use his or her “good offices”—drawing on the perceived independence, moral authority, and impartiality of the position—to bring private or public attention to situations that threaten peace and security. The current UNSG is António Guterres of Portugal; his second term expires in December 2026.²⁰

¹⁵ See U.N. document, A/RES/ES-11/1, March 18, 2022.

¹⁶ An emergency special session can adjourn and reconvene over time; the 10th session was first convened in April 1997. For more information, see <https://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/emergency10th.shtml>.

¹⁷ U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN), “Statement by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on the UN General Assembly Resolution on the UN Security Council Veto,” April 12, 2022.

¹⁸ The Secretariat is established under Chapter XV of the U.N. Charter.

¹⁹ See U.N. document, A/78/569, *Composition of the Secretariat: Staff Demographics*, November 10, 2023.

²⁰ The political functions of the office often fall under Article 99 of the U.N. Charter, which authorizes the UNSG to (continued...)

What Is the U.N. Economic and Social Council?

The U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established under the U.N. Charter to promote economic and social development and human rights.²¹ It comprises 54 member governments selected by the General Assembly for staggered three-year terms on the basis of equitable geographic distribution, with no term limits. (The United States is generally elected as a member.) ECOSOC broadly serves as a U.N. forum for discussing, studying, and making recommendations on international economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and related matters, as well as promoting respect for human rights.²² It coordinates the work of U.N. entities, including the specialized agencies, functional commissions, and regional commissions. It also assists in preparing and organizing major international agreements and conferences in the economic and social fields, including implementation of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a group of 15 goals and targets that broadly guide U.N. development efforts.²³ ECOSOC is a venue for drafting treaties for General Assembly consideration, and it consults with more than 5,000 registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

What Is the International Court of Justice?

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the principal U.N. judicial body.²⁴ The Court's role is to settle legal disputes submitted to it by states and to provide advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by authorized U.N. organs and specialized agencies. Under the U.N. Charter, all U.N. members, including the United States, are parties to the Statute of the ICJ, which is an annex to and "integral part" of the Charter.²⁵ Based in The Hague, Netherlands, the Court comprises 15 independent judges, who are elected by both the General Assembly and the Security Council for nine-year terms. A U.S. citizen, Sarah H. Cleveland, currently serves on the court.²⁶

What Is the Trusteeship Council?

The now-defunct Trusteeship Council was created under Chapter XII of the U.N. Charter to supervise the administration of 11 trust territories, from colonies to sovereign nations. Examples of trust territories included Western Samoa (now Samoa), Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania), and Rwanda-Urundi (now Rwanda and Burundi). The Trusteeship Council completed its mandate in 1994 when Palau, the last of the trust territories, gained its independence. Although its work is

"bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security." Article 98 states that the UNSG shall perform "such other functions as are entrusted" to him or her by U.N. entities, which in practice provides the opportunity for the use of "good offices." For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10454, *United Nations Issues: Appointing the U.N. Secretary-General*.

²¹ ECOSOC is established under Chapter X of the U.N. Charter.

²² For example, ECOSOC holds periodic meetings on operational activities for development and humanitarian affairs. It also hosts an annual High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

²³ The SDGs were agreed to by U.N. member states, including the United States, in September 2015. The goals, which are aspirational and nonbinding, are often recognized as a blueprint for global development efforts. There are 17 SDGs and 169 sub-goals (called "targets"), including ending poverty, ending hunger, providing inclusive and equitable education, and achieving gender equality, among others. The United States generally supports the SDGs. Experts generally agree that SDG implementation has been uneven; a 2024 U.N. report notes that just 17% of targets are on track to be met by 2030, with nearly half demonstrating "minimal or moderate" progress, while advances on one-third have "stalled or even regressed." (See United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024*, pp. 1, 44-45.)

²⁴ The ICJ is established under Chapter XIX of the U.N. Charter.

²⁵ U.N. Charter, Chapter XIX, Article 97.











²⁶ For more information, see CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10206, *The United States and the "World Court."*

complete, the Trusteeship Council remains a principal organ of the United Nations; eliminating it would likely require amending the U.N. Charter.²⁷

What Are U.N. Specialized Agencies?

The U.N. system has 15 specialized agencies, each of which is a legally independent intergovernmental organization with its own constitution, rules, membership, organs, and assessed budget (see **Figure 1**). Several specialized agencies, including the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the Universal Postal Union (UPU), existed prior to the establishment of the United Nations. The United States is a member of all specialized agencies except for the U.N. Industrial Development Organization and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The United States withdrew from UNESCO in 2018 but rejoined the organization in 2023.²⁸

Figure 1. U.N. Entities, by Type

SPECIALIZED AGENCIES  	FUNDS AND PROGRAMS  	RELATED ORGANIZATIONS 
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	U.N. Capital Dev. Fund (UNCDF)	Intl. Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
Intl. Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF)	Intl. Criminal Court (ICC)
Intl. Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)	U.N. Dev. Program (UNDP)	Intl. Organization for Migration (IOM)
Intl. Fund for Agricultural Dev. (IFAD)	U.N. Environment Program (UNEP)	Intl. Seabed Authority (ISA)
Intl. Labor Organization (ILO)	U.N. Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT)	Intl. Tribunal for Law of the Sea
Intl. Maritime Organization (IMO)	U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA)	Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)
Intl. Monetary Fund (IMF)	U.N. Volunteers (UNV)	Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)
Intl. Telecommunication Union (ITU)	World Food Program (WFP)	World Trade Organization (WTO)
U.N. Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO)		
▶ U.N. Industrial Dev. Organization (UNIDO)	OTHER ENTITIES  	
▶ U.N. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)	U.N. Conference on Trade and Dev. (UNCTAD)	
Universal Postal Union (UPU)	U.N. Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNWOMEN)	
World Bank Group	U.N. Office for Project Services (UNOPS)	
World Health Organization (WHO)	U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	
World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)	U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)	
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)		
▶ = U.S. is not a member		Reports to...
		 U.N. General Assembly
		 U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
		 U.N. Security Council

Source: United Nations, adapted by CRS. Reporting information drawn from, "The United Nations System," at https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/un_system_chart.pdf.

Notes: "Reports to..." indicates the main U.N. organ(s) to which each entity reports.

²⁷ Trusteeship agreements were concluded between the United Nations and the administering power and approved by the General Assembly and the Security Council. For a full list of trust territories and agreements, see <https://research.un.org/en/docs/tc/territories>. In May 1994, the Trusteeship Council agreed that it would cease its annual meetings and "meet as and where occasion may require," as determined by the Trusteeship Council itself, its President, or the General Assembly and Security Council (see U.N. document, T/RES/2200(LXI)). For more information on Charter amendment, see the "What Is U.N. Reform?" section of this report.

²⁸ For more information, see the "How Does the United States Participate in the U.N. System?" section of this report.

What Are U.N. Funds and Programs?

U.N. funds and programs are entities generally established by the General Assembly that have a specific mandate. The Secretary-General appoints the head of each entity, while the governing boards (composed of U.N. member states) review policies and activities. Examples include the World Food Program (WFP), the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) (see **Figure 1** above). The United States serves on the executive boards of several U.N. funds and programs, including UNDP, UNICEF, the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA), and WFP.

What Other Types of Organizations Are in the U.N. System?

Several other U.N. bodies, referred to by the U.N. system as "U.N. entities," do not fall under the categories described above. These entities include the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Women, and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Depending on the organization, their heads are generally appointed by the UNSG or elected by the General Assembly.

Other organizations, often referred to as "related organizations," are part of the U.N. system but are not considered U.N. bodies; they may have special agreements with or report to principal organs like the General Assembly or the Security Council. Examples include the International Criminal Court (ICC), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (see **Figure 1** above).

What Are Key U.N. System Activities and Coordinating Mechanisms?

The mandates and activities of the aforementioned U.N. bodies are diverse and global in scope. Guided by the U.N. Charter, these organizations separately and collectively aim to address a range of cross-cutting and often overlapping global issues, including but not limited to the following:

- **Peace and security.** U.N. system efforts to address peace and security include peacekeeping operations, which work to transition countries from conflict to peace;²⁹ U.N. special political missions (country-specific and regional field operations focusing on addressing complex political situations); and peacebuilding activities (longer-term efforts to create conditions for sustainable peace). Some U.N. entities also work to promote disarmament and rule of law, among other related issues. Many of these activities are coordinated or implemented by the U.N. Secretariat's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Department of Peace Operations.
- **Development.** More than 30 U.N. entities, referred to as the "U.N. Development System," provide economic and social development assistance in 162 countries and territories. They work as part of U.N. "Country Teams" (UNCTs) that coordinate development and other U.N. activities with host governments and local communities.³⁰ U.N. bodies also collectively work to implement the

²⁹ For more information, see the "What Is U.N. Peacekeeping?" section of this report.

³⁰ UNCTs include all U.N. system entities working in specific countries (often referred to as "program countries"). The UNCT is led by a Resident Coordinator, who represents the UNSG and leads and coordinates U.N. activities in-country. See "Countries and Territories," at <https://unsdg.un.org/un-in-action/country-level?tab=countries-listing>.

aforementioned U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.³¹ The U.N. Development Program (UNDP) is the lead U.N. entity mandated with addressing global development issues.

- **Human rights.** U.N. members and entities aim to address and monitor human rights situations through several mechanisms, including the 47-member intergovernmental U.N. Human Rights Council, which adopts resolutions and appoints independent experts to address certain human rights situations, and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the council's administrative body, which includes 19 regional and standalone offices worldwide. Several global human rights treaties and agreements also operate under the umbrella of the U.N. system.³²
- **Humanitarian assistance.** A range of U.N. entities respond to global humanitarian needs driven by conflict and natural disasters. U.N. entities support displaced populations with emergency food, water, shelter, health services, and protection. Key humanitarian entities include UNHCR, WFP, and IOM. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) coordinates the U.N. response, which often includes implementing partners such as nongovernmental organizations. For 2024, the U.N. system aims to provide humanitarian assistance to 180.5 million people across 72 countries.³³

Recognizing the broad and sometimes overlapping scope of U.N. mandates, U.N. members and leadership have sought to coordinate U.N. system activities and sectors through mandatory reporting to select U.N. bodies; the creation of inter- and intra-agency working groups, commissions, and other bodies; and the establishment of management and organizational reforms.³⁴ The primary coordination body across the U.N. system is the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which comprises the heads of over 30 U.N. system entities. Chaired by the UNSG, the CEB meets twice a year to provide high-level and system-wide guidance.³⁵

How Is the U.N. System Funded?

Article 17 of the U.N. Charter requires each U.N. member to contribute to the expenses of the organization. Most U.N. entities are funded largely by contributions from governments.³⁶ Depending on their structure, U.N. bodies are funded through assessed or voluntary contributions from U.N. members (or a combination of both).

³¹ For more information on U.N. system implementation of the SDGs, see <https://sdgs.un.org/UNSDGimplementation>.

³² For more information, see CRS Report RL33608, *The United Nations Human Rights Council: Background and Policy Issues*; CRS In Focus IF11457, *United Nations Issues: U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*; and CRS In Focus IF10861, *Global Human Rights: Multilateral Bodies & U.S. Participation*.

³³ UNOCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview*, 2024, December 1, 2023. U.N. entities may also mobilize financial resources; for example, in 2024 the U.N. global humanitarian funding appeal is \$46.4 billion.

³⁴ Examples of sector-specific coordination include the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and UNOCHA, for humanitarian assistance; the U.N. Development Group (now part of the CEB), for development; and the International Civil Service Commission, for U.N. system personnel issues.

³⁵ For more information, see U.N. Chief Executive Board for Coordination, at <https://unsceb.org/>.

³⁶ In addition to governments, U.N. entities may receive funding from donors including other international or intergovernmental organization, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, and individuals.

What Are Assessed Contributions and How Are they Determined?

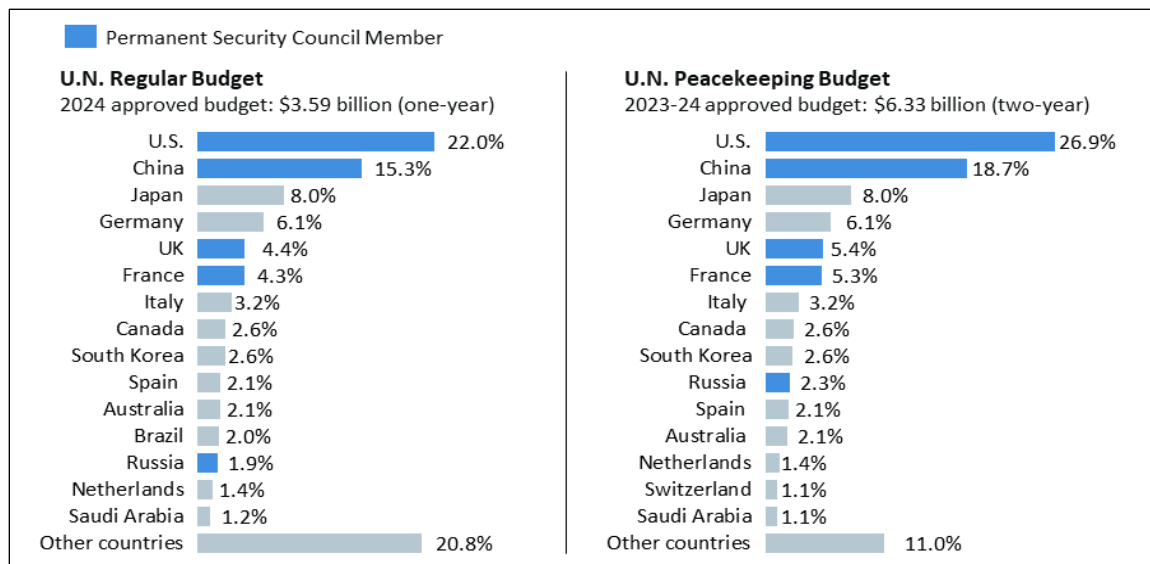
Assessed contributions are required dues, the payment of which is a legal obligation accepted by a country when it becomes a member of a U.N. entity. Assessed contributions often fund the core budget of the organizations (e.g., personnel, operations, key programs). Members of U.N. entities are assessed a percentage of the organization's total budget. These assessments, which are determined by the members of each organization, provide organizations with a regular source of income to staff and implement authorized programs. The U.N. regular budget, U.N. peacekeeping operations, and U.N. specialized agencies are funded mainly by assessed contributions, although some of these entities also receive voluntary funding. Specifically,

- The **U.N. regular budget** totaled \$3.59 billion in 2024.³⁷ The United States' assessed contribution is 22% of the regular budget, the largest of any U.N. member state (about \$707.0 million in U.S. FY2024). Other top contributors include China (15.25%) and Japan (8.03%) (**Figure 2**). The General Assembly approves assessment levels every three years based on a formula taking into account gross national income and other economic data (see **text box**).
- As noted above, **U.N. peacekeeping operations** are funded through annual assessments based on a modification of the regular budget scale, with the P-5 assessed at a higher level than for the regular budget. Countries with the highest assessments include the United States (26.94%), China (18.68%), Japan (8.03%), and Germany (6.11%) (see **Figure 2**). (Since the mid-1990s, Congress has capped the U.S. peacekeeping contribution at 25%, often below the assessed rate.³⁸)
- Each **U.N. specialized agency** agrees to its own financial structure and budget, including scale of assessments. When determining assessment levels, some agencies follow the assessments for the regular budget, while others use formulas based on their own criteria. For example, the U.S. assessment for WHO, which has a funding structure similar to the regular budget, is 22% in 2024. In contrast, the U.S. assessment to WIPO, which is a largely self-financing entity, is 6.5%.

Member states that do not pay assessed contributions in full or on time may accumulate arrears (outstanding dues) to U.N. entities. Each U.N. body has its own payment timeline and system for defining and tracking arrears, which are generally outlined in the organization's constitution, statutes, or financial regulations. In the United Nations, under Article 19 of the U.N. Charter, a consequence of accumulating arrears is the loss of voting rights in the General Assembly.

³⁷ U.N. document, A/78/662, December 22, 2023.

³⁸ For more information, see the "What Is U.N. Peacekeeping?" section of this report. Also see CRS In Focus IF10597, *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding of U.N. Peacekeeping*.

Figure 2. Top U.N. Regular Budget and U.N. Peacekeeping Assessments

Source: Adapted by CRS from U.N. documents A/RES/76/238 and A/76/296/Rev.1/Add.1.

Some observers have expressed concern regarding the ongoing funding shortfalls for the U.N. regular budget and U.N. peacekeeping. In a March 2019 report to the General Assembly, and in subsequent annual statements, UNSG Guterres noted the “deteriorating financial health” of the United Nations. He stated that these challenges were not only the product of U.N. member state “payment patterns and arrears,” but also “structural weaknesses” in U.N. budget methodology.³⁹ At times, these funding shortfalls have affected U.N. operations.⁴⁰

What Is the Process for Determining U.N. Regular Budget Assessments?

The General Assembly negotiates a scale of assessments for the regular budget every three years based on a country’s “capacity to pay.” The Assembly’s Committee on Contributions recommends assessment levels based on gross national income and other economic data, with a minimum assessment of 0.001% and a maximum assessment of 22%. (The current methodology for determining assessments is outlined in General Assembly resolution 70/245, February 8, 2016.) The Committee on Contributions, of which the United States is usually a member, is a standing committee of 18 members selected by the General Assembly. It advises the Assembly on the scale of assessments, recommending assessment levels for new members and reviewing appeals for a change of assessments. Every three years, the committee reviews the scale and, based on instructions from the Assembly, recommends revisions in the scale for the next three-year period. The Assembly will likely adopt new assessment rates for the 2025-2027 period in December 2024.

What Are Voluntary Contributions?

Governments provide voluntary contributions to U.N. entities at their discretion. Such contributions may fund the core budgets of some U.N. organizations, as well as special U.N. funds, programs, and offices. Voluntary funding finances special funds, programs, offices, and

³⁹ In response to such concerns, Guterres proposed a series of funding reforms, some of which were adopted by the General Assembly in July 2019, with support from the United States. See U.N. document SG/SM/19614-GA/AB/4327, June 14, 2019. For more recent U.N. funding updates, see U.N. document, A/78/524/Add.1, *Financial situation of the United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General, Addendum*, May 13, 2024.

⁴⁰ For instance, cash shortages led to delays in reimbursements to some U.N. peacekeeping Troop Contributing Countries. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10597, *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding of U.N. Peacekeeping*.

other entities of the U.N. system. No member is required to provide such funding, and governments may decide what, if any, contributions will be made during each budget cycle. Many U.N. entities, such as WFP, UNDP, and UNICEF, depend on voluntary funding; consequently, their budgets may fluctuate from year to year. Depending on donor preferences, contributions might be used to fund the core budgets of these bodies or may be earmarked for specific programs or activities. U.N. entities that received the most voluntary contributions in 2022 (latest available data) were WFP (\$14.3 billion), UNICEF (\$10.0 billion), UNHCR (\$5.9 billion), and UNDP (\$4.9 billion).⁴¹

What Is U.N. Peacekeeping?

In keeping with its purpose to maintain international peace and security, a significant component of the United Nations is peacekeeping operations.⁴² The United Nations currently operates 12 U.N. peacekeeping missions worldwide, with more than 80,000 personnel from over 100 countries (see **Figure 3**). The Security Council is responsible for establishing, renewing or terminating each operation, as well as determining the mission's mandate and budget. The concept of peacekeeping has evolved since the first mission was established in 1948. "Traditional" peacekeeping involves implementing cease-fire or peace agreements; however, in recent years, the Security Council has increasingly authorized "multidimensional" operations in complex and insecure environments where there is little peace to keep and no clear outcome. Peacekeepers may be required to protect civilians, disarm violent groups, monitor human rights violations, or assist in delivering humanitarian assistance.

How Is U.N. Peacekeeping Funded?

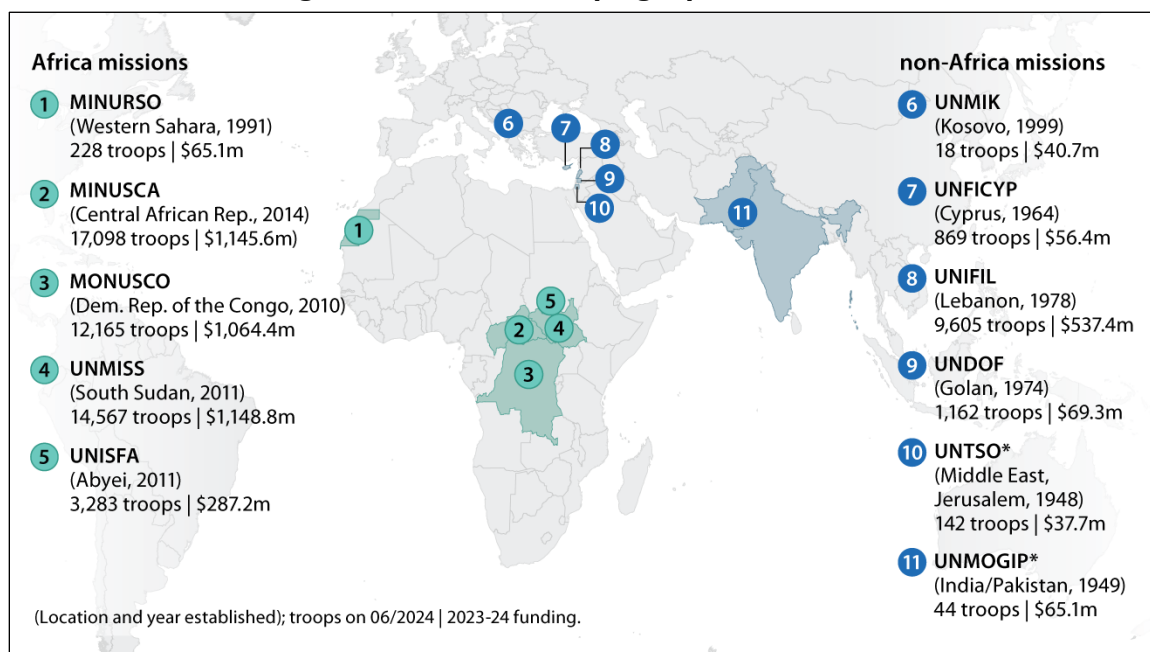
U.N. members fund U.N. peacekeeping through assessments based on a modification of the U.N. regular budget scale, with the P-5 countries assessed at a higher level than for the regular budget due to their role in authorizing and renewing peacekeeping missions. Historically, the Security Council has authorized the U.N. General Assembly to create a separate assessed account for each operation to be supported by member states' contributions. Since 2019, due to concerns about budget shortfalls, the General Assembly has pooled peacekeeping funding to allow for increased financial flexibility. The approved budget for the 2023-2024 peacekeeping fiscal year is \$6.33 billion.⁴³ Costs vary among the 11 operations, with three of the missions in Africa constituting over 50% of the budget (UNMISS in South Sudan, MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, and MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo).⁴⁴

⁴¹ U.N. System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, Revenue by Entity, 2022, at <https://unsceb.org/fs-revenue-agency>.

⁴² The U.N.'s three basic principles of peacekeeping are consent of the parties, impartiality, and nonuse of force (except in self-defense or defense of the peacekeeping mandate). See "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines," United Nations, 2008.

⁴³ U.N. document, A/C.5/78/30, February 14, 2024. The 2024-2025 approved peacekeeping budget is \$5.9 billion (see U.N. document, A/C.5/78/34, June 21, 2024).

⁴⁴ On June 30, 2023, the Security Council voted to terminate the mandate of MINUSMA (Mali) due to the host government no longer consenting to the mission; the mission closed on December 31, 2023.

Figure 3. U.N. Peacekeeping Operations, 2024

Source: Adapted by CRS based on U.N. document, A/C.5/78/30 and U.N. database on peacekeeping troop and police contributors, at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

Notes: “Troops” refers to peacekeeping troops, as well as experts on mission, formed police units, individual police, and staff officers. List of acronyms: (1) MINURSO=U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara; (2) MINUSCA=U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic; (3) MONUSCO=U.N. Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; (4) UNMISS=U.N. Mission in the Republic of South Sudan; (5) UNISFA=U.N. Interim Security Force for Abyei; (6) UNMIK=U.N. Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo; (7) UNFICYP=U.N. Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus; (8) UNIFIL=U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon; (9) UNDOF=U.N. Disengagement Observer Force; (10) UNTSO=U.N. Truce Supervision Organization; (11) UNMOGIP=U.N. Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan.

Who Are U.N. Peacekeepers?

Some U.N. members, often referred to as “troop contributing countries” (TCCs), voluntarily provide military and police personnel for each mission. Peacekeepers are paid by their own governments, which are reimbursed by the United Nations at a standard rate determined by the General Assembly (about \$1,428 per soldier per month). As of June 30, 2024 (latest available), the top TCCs included Nepal (6,093), India (6,040), Rwanda (5,918), and Bangladesh (5,614). The United States contributes 27 peacekeeping troops. Among other P-5 members, China contributes the most troops (1,844), followed by France (727), the United Kingdom (270), and Russia (83).⁴⁵

A key challenge facing U.N. peacekeepers, and U.N. peacekeeping more broadly, is continued allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by some U.N. peacekeepers. For nearly three decades, U.N. member states and U.N. secretaries-general have adopted reforms aiming to respond to the issue, including implementing a zero-tolerance policy; public reporting of SEA rates by mission; creating new U.N. positions to address SEA; establishing a U.N. trust fund to help victims; and repatriating full contingents when there is “credible evidence of widespread or

⁴⁵ See, *Data - U.N. Peacekeeping Troop and Police Contributors, Rankings of Contributions by Country*, at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>, accessed August 28, 2024.

systemic” abuse committed by that unit.⁴⁶ Despite these and other efforts, incidents continue to be reported.⁴⁷ The United States has generally supported U.N. efforts to combat SEA, with Congress linking U.S. funding to progress addressing the issue.⁴⁸

What Is U.N. Reform?

The United Nations has been in an ongoing state of development and change as international stakeholders seek ways to improve the efficiency of the organization and its overall effectiveness in addressing global challenges. Many member states have sought to institute management reforms, generally focused on four areas of concern: (1) perceived inefficiencies and lack of accountability in the U.N. Secretariat; (2) duplication and redundancy of U.N. mandates, missions, and programs; (3) perceived ineffectiveness of U.N. bodies; and (4) evidence of fraud, waste, abuse, or mismanagement of U.N. resources. These efforts tend to be cyclical, with members considering waves of new reform proposals every 5 to 10 years. The reform attempts are often initiated by a member state, groups of member states, or the UNSG.

What Are Obstacles to U.N. Reform?

A significant challenge facing U.N. reform advocates is finding common ground among U.N. members. Each member state has its own political agenda and foreign policy goals, and may also have its own priorities for U.N. reform. Consequently, member states often hold different views on how best to implement reform and how to evaluate the success or failure of a given reform activity.⁴⁹ Other related and often overlapping challenges include the following:

- **Competing priorities.** Some observers maintain that U.N. members and/or the Secretary-General should more effectively prioritize reform efforts. Instead of considering a large series of reform proposals that are often watered down to appease all U.N. members, some observers contend that member states should select a smaller number of reform priorities and work toward their effective adoption and implementation.
- **Organizational structure.** The U.N. system is a highly complex and decentralized organization, and therefore may be slow to consider or implement potential reforms. Some experts assert that some U.N. managers and staff are resistant to the implementation of new programs or changes to existing programs. Many observers contend that some reforms lack clear plans for implementation,

⁴⁶ U.N. document, S/RES/2272, March 11, 2016.

⁴⁷ For recent examples and further discussion of this issue, see U.N. document, A/78/744, *Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, Report of the Secretary-General*, February 14, 2024.

⁴⁸ For example, SFOPS acts since FY2008 have prohibited the obligation of U.N. peacekeeping funding unless the Secretary of State certifies that the United Nations is implementing effective policies and procedures to prevent employees and peacekeeping troops from human trafficking or acts of illegal exploitation or other violations of human rights. Since FY2017, SFOPS acts have also prohibited assistance to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country if there is credible information that such unit has engaged in SEA; assistance is prohibited until the Secretary of State certifies the country is taking steps to hold the unit accountable.

⁴⁹ For instance, many reform debates in the General Assembly, which often include management and personnel issues, have drawn attention to fundamental differences among some member states, particularly between developed and developing countries. Developed countries, many of which contribute the largest percentage of assessed contributions to the U.N. regular budget, would like the UNSG to have greater flexibility and authority to implement reforms, specifically those related to staffing and human resources. Developing countries generally object to policies that may enhance the power of the UNSG but decrease the power of the UNGA, which comprises all member states (including the Group of 77, or G-77, an influential voting bloc made up of more than 130 developing countries and China).

including deadlines and cost estimates. They stress that this overall lack of planning may affect the progress and ultimate success of reforms already implemented.

- **Resources.** A significant challenge for U.N. reform efforts may be the effective implementation of wide-scale management and other reforms within existing U.N. budgets (also referred to as “cost neutral” reforms). However, some experts maintain that money saved from other reforms (such as reviewing and/or closing existing U.N. mandates or consolidating business operations) could create a funding source for further reforms or U.N. activities.⁵⁰

More broadly, the complex relationships that exist among member states outside of the U.N. system may be another obstacle to achieving reform. Such relationships exist independent of the United Nations but can affect how countries work together within U.N. fora to achieve reform objectives. Conflict, religious and ethnic differences, trade and economic issues, and geography can all potentially impact reform cooperation among U.N. members.

What Is the Reform Implementation Process?

The process of changing U.N. policies, processes or structures varies depending on the type of reform proposed. Certain reforms might be achieved by amending the U.N. Charter or through various non-charter actions. Charter amendment is a rarely used practice and has occurred on three occasions.⁵¹ The amendment process is provided for under Article 108, which states that a proposed amendment must be approved by two-thirds of the General Assembly and be ratified “according to the constitutional processes” of two-thirds of U.N. member states, including all permanent members of the Security Council.⁵² Article 109 allows for a convening of a General Conference of U.N. members with the purpose of “reviewing the present Charter.” The date and place of the conference are to be determined by a two-thirds vote in the Assembly and an affirmative vote from any nine Security Council members. Potential Charter revisions are to be adopted by a two-thirds vote (with each country having one vote) and to take effect when ratified by the governments of two-thirds of U.N. member states. A Charter review conference has never been held.

Non-charter reforms are more common and comparatively easier to achieve. Since 1945, the General Assembly has authorized reforms of its own processes and procedures—as well as those

⁵⁰ The challenges and perspectives in this section are drawn from a range of sources including, but not limited to: Edward C. Luck, “Reforming the United Nations: Lessons from a History in Progress,” Academic Council of the United Nations System (ACUNS), 2003; General Accountability Office, GAO-08-84, *United Nations: Progress on Management Reform Efforts Has Varied*, November 14, 2007; Council on Foreign Relations, “The UN Turns Seventy-Five. Here’s How to Make it Relevant Again,” September 14, 2020; International Peace Institute, “Implementing the UN Management Reform: Progress, and Implications for Peace Operations,” September 17, 2020; U.N. documents, A/77/69-E/2022/47, “Operational activities of the United Nations for international development cooperation: follow-up to policy recommendations of the General Assembly and the Council,” July 22, 2022; U.N. document, GA/12452, “United Nations Reform Must Finally Become Reality, Speakers Stress, Demanding More Action to Address Compounding Crises, as General Assembly Wraps Up Annual Debate,” September 26, 2022; and Richard Gowan, “The Summit of Fearful Odds? - Validating the UN’s Struggle for Relevance in International Affairs,” International Crisis Group, 2024. More broadly, see Stephen Browne, “UN Reform: 75 Years of Challenge and Change,” (part of the ACUNS Series on the U.N. System), Edward Elgar Publishing: Cheltenham, U.K. and Northampton, MA, USA, 2019.

⁵¹ The Charter was first amended in 1963 to increase Security Council membership from 11 to 15, and ECOSOC membership from 18 to 27. It was last amended in 1973, when ECOSOC membership increased from 27 to 54.

⁵² Examples of possible reform initiatives that might involve amending the U.N. Charter include, but are not limited to, increasing permanent and/or nonpermanent Security Council membership, increasing membership on ECOSOC, and adding or removing a principal U.N. organ.

of the Secretariat—without Charter amendment. The Assembly has established various fora for discussing reform issues, including a Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and an Open-Ended Working Group on the Security Council (see **text box** below). The General Assembly has also implemented reforms on its own by adopting proposals introduced by member states or the UNSG. The UNSG may institute reform in his or her capacity as chief administrative officer, including changing the organization of some U.N. departments.

What Is the Status of U.N. Security Council Reform?

The overall role and effectiveness of the Security Council has been a matter of debate since its inception. Over time, many observers have expressed concern that the council takes insufficient action on certain peace and security issues. In addition, some member states, in particular those that have committed to what they consider council-imposed decisions, believe the entire U.N. membership needs to have a clearer understanding of Security Council actions and greater access to the council's work. This has prompted some U.N. member states to increasingly focus on the question of Security Council reform.

In 1993, the General Assembly established an open-ended working group to address the issue. Over the years, consultations and discussions have continued over various aspects of Security Council reform with little, if any, agreement. Key areas of discussion include (1) increases in the number of permanent members; (2) increases in the number of nonpermanent members; (3) the status of new permanent members, including extension of the veto to such members; (4) continuation of the veto; and (5) limits on veto use. Reform discussions have increased during the past two years, due in part to some U.N. members' objections to the Security Council's lack of action regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The United States has generally supported enlarging Security Council membership (both permanent and nonpermanent). In September 2022, President Biden reiterated U.S. support for such enlargement and specifically cited the importance of not only providing "permanent seats for those nations we've long supported" (Germany, Japan, and India) but also "for countries in Africa [and] Latin America and the Caribbean."⁵³

How Does the United States Participate in the U.N. System?

The United States played a lead role in establishing the United Nations. It is a member of the General Assembly and a permanent member of the Security Council. It is also a member of 13 of the 15 U.N. specialized agencies, and U.S. representatives/nationals are often elected to positions on U.N. boards, councils, and other bodies. U.S. participation in and funding of the United Nations is authorized through the United Nations Participation Act of 1945, as amended (UNPA; P.L. 79-264; 22 U.S.C. §§287-287e-4). Authorization for U.S. participation in other U.N. bodies is included in Section 301 the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-195, as amended). (FAA; P.L. 87-195; 22 U.S.C. §2221.)

What Are the Congressional and Executive Branch Roles?

Both Congress and the executive branch have key roles in furthering U.S. policy regarding the U.N. system. Congress authorizes and appropriates U.S. funding, while the executive branch represents and shapes U.S. policy in U.N. fora through the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN) in New York City and the Department of State's Bureau of International Organization

⁵³ See The White House, "Remarks by President Biden Before the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," September 21, 2022, and "Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at Debate on Cooperation Between the UN and the AU," U.S. Mission to the United Nations, October 11, 2022. Also see USUN, "Remarks by Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UNSC Open Debate on Addressing the Historical Injustice and Enhancing Africa's Effective Representation in the UNSC," August 12, 2024.

Affairs in Washington, DC.⁵⁴ The President nominates ambassadors for U.N. posts, and the Senate provides advice and consent for nominees, including the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations. The current Permanent Representative is Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who leads USUN and represents the United States on the Security Council and other U.N. bodies.⁵⁵ Depending on the Administration, the Permanent Representative may serve as a member of the President's Cabinet. Of the 31 individuals who have served since 1946, about two-thirds have been accorded Cabinet rank by Presidents, including Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield.⁵⁶

How Has U.S. Policy Toward the United Nations Evolved?

U.S. priorities regarding the U.N. system have shifted over time, often reflecting world events, domestic political conditions, and the preferences of individual policymakers. A number of recurring (and interconnected) U.S. priorities and issues have emerged over the past several decades, including

- the overall effectiveness of U.N. entities in both achieving their mandates and in advancing U.S. policy priorities;
- appropriate levels of U.S. funding to the United Nations, including identifying areas where the United States can leverage funding to increase efficiency and accountability or achieve the largest return on its investment;
- implementing U.N. reforms, particularly to improve U.N. transparency, accountability, and oversight; and
- countering the influence or role of certain countries and groups in U.N. fora (see the **text box** below for selected examples).

During the past two decades, congressional and executive branch policies toward the United Nations have varied. President Obama strongly supported U.S. participation in U.N. bodies. President Trump consistently proposed significant decreases in U.N. funding and withheld contributions to some U.N. bodies, although Congress funded most U.N. entities at higher levels than President Trump requested. The Biden Administration supports U.S. engagement with U.N. entities. President Biden's budget requests to date have proposed fully funding assessed contributions to U.N. bodies and paying selected U.S. arrears. For FY2024, Congress fully funded most U.N. entities but, as in previous years, withheld or conditioned funding for certain activities (see below more information on U.S. funding).

U.S. Policy in U.N. Fora: Selected Country-Specific Issues and Approaches

Israel and the Palestinians. The United States generally supports Israel, a long-standing ally, in U.N. fora. Some U.S. policymakers have asserted that some U.N. member states disproportionately focus on Israel in various U.N. bodies, including the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Human Rights Council.⁵⁷ Over the years, the United States has repeatedly vetoed or voted against resolutions involving Israel, opposed Palestinian membership in U.N. fora, and withheld funding to some U.N. entities that allegedly discriminate against Israel or support the Palestinians.⁵⁸

The People's Republic of China (PRC). During the past decade, some U.S. policymakers have expressed concern about what they view as China's efforts to increase its role and influence in the United Nations.⁵⁹ In the context of U.S.-PRC competition, the United States has sought to increase U.S. citizen representation in U.N. leadership and personnel positions. It has also rejoined UNESCO in an effort to counter PRC influence in the organization and is in general a supporter of Taiwan's participation in U.N. bodies.⁶⁰ In addition, both the Trump and Biden Administrations created State Department offices to counter the influence of China and other countries in multilateral fora, including within the U.N. system.⁶¹

How Does the United States Fund the U.N. System?

Most U.S. funding to the United Nations is authorized and appropriated through annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations legislation.⁶² Selected U.N.-related SFOPS appropriations accounts are outlined below:

- The **Contributions to International Organizations (CIO)** account funds assessed contributions to the regular budget, specialized agencies, and other international organizations. For FY2024, Congress provided \$1.54 billion to the CIO account.
- The **Contributions for International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA)** account funds U.S. assessments to most U.N. peacekeeping operations. For FY2024, Congress provided \$1.37 billion to the CIPA account (up to the 25% enacted peacekeeping cap; see below).
- The **International Organizations & Programs (IO&P)** account funds mostly core voluntary contributions to U.N. funds and programs and other international organizations, such as the U.N. Children's Fund and the U.N. Development Program. For FY2024, Congress provided \$436.92 million to the IO&P account.

⁵⁴ Other U.S. missions include the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, Switzerland; the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Vienna; and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Nairobi, Kenya.

⁵⁵ Other such positions include the Deputy Permanent Representative and representatives for ECOCOC, Political Affairs, and Management and Reform. The Senate also appoints representatives to WHO, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the U.N. Human Rights Council, and the U.N. food agencies (including WFP, Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], and the International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD]).

⁵⁶ See CRS In Focus IF11618, *United Nations Issues: Cabinet Rank of the U.S. Permanent Representative*.

⁵⁷ For example, Israel is the only country to have its actions scrutinized as part of the Human Rights Council's permanent agenda. Specifically, in a 2007 resolution on Council's working methods, members included the "human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories" as a permanent part of the agenda.

⁵⁸ For more information, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, and CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*.

⁵⁹ For example, policymakers making this case point out that in six of the seven years between 2015 and 2021, PRC citizens were elected to lead 4 of 15 U.N. specialized agencies: FAO, ICAO, ITU, and UNIDO. They portray these and other efforts as part of the PRC's broader effort to increase its global influence. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF12271, *China and the World: Issues for Congress*.

⁶⁰ The United States withheld over \$600 million in assessed contributions to UNESCO from FY2012 until its withdrawal in 2018 under restrictions in P.L. 101-246 and P.L. 103-236. (These laws prohibit funding to U.N. entities that accord the PLO the same standing as member states, or grant full membership as a state to any group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.) The FY2023 SFOPS Act waives the above restrictions if the Administration reports to Congress that doing so "would enable the United States to counter Chinese influence or to promote other national interests of the United States." The waiver sunsets in September 2025 and would cease to exist if the Palestinians "obtain the same standing as member states or full membership as a state in the [U.N.] or any specialized agency" through means "outside an agreement negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians." On June 5, 2023, President Biden waived the aforementioned restrictions, and the United States rejoined UNESCO on July 11.

⁶¹ In 2022, President Biden established a new State Department Office of Multilateral Strategy and Personnel. Members of Congress have also introduced and enacted legislation that aims to address U.N. personnel issues; for example, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (P.L. 117-263) authorizes the Secretary of State to, among other things, publish a strategy for "encouraging United States citizens to pursue careers with international organizations," and report to Congress on the number of U.S. citizens who are involved in relevant junior professional programs. In addition, Section 7048 of the FY2024 SFOPS Act provides not less than \$750,000 "to enhance the competitiveness of United States citizens for leadership positions in the United Nations system."

⁶² FY2024 SFOPS funding was enacted in Division F of P.L. 118-47, March 23, 2024.

The United States also provides voluntary contributions to U.N. entities through other SFOPS and non-SFOPS accounts. For example, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States contributed more than \$10.4 billion to U.N. entities through U.S. global humanitarian accounts in FY2022 (latest available), including Migration and Refugee Assistance, International Disaster Assistance, and Food for Peace, Title II Grants (P.L. 480). Funding supported entities such as UNHCR and WFP. U.S. funding is also provided through accounts supporting global health, security, and development objectives, including the Economic Support Fund and Global Health Programs accounts.

Congress does not specifically appropriate funding to certain U.N. bodies. Instead, it often appropriates lump-sum amounts to the above-mentioned U.N.-related SFOPS accounts. As a result, the executive branch has leeway to determine how funds are allocated, often with little or no congressional consultation. Some observers express concern that Administrations may not fund some U.N. entities as Congress intended, and suggest that Congress could legislate funding levels for specific U.N. entities. Some contend this approach would deviate from long-standing bipartisan practices intended to provide the executive branch with flexibility to respond to unpredictable circumstances, such as the outbreak of armed conflict or humanitarian crises.⁶³

An ongoing challenge facing U.S. policymakers is tracking and determining the full scope of U.S. funding to the U.N. system across all U.S. government agencies. There is no “one number” that represents total U.S. funding to the U.N. system at any given point in time. This uncertainty is due to the complicated nature of U.S. and U.N. budget processes, the decentralized structure of the United Nations, and the range of U.S. government agencies, departments, and offices that, either directly or indirectly, fund various U.N. entities and activities. Over the years, Congress has enacted a range of reporting requirements on U.S. funding to the United Nations (see below).

How Can Congress Shape U.S. Policy in the U.N. System?

Congress can use a range of tools and mechanisms to influence U.S. policy at the United Nations. Foremost among these is withholding or conditioning funding to U.N. bodies. Such withholdings generally fall into three categories:

- **Caps on payment of U.S. assessments.** In the past, Congress has limited U.S. payments to assessed budgets, citing concerns that U.S. assessments were too high. For example, in the 1990s, it capped the U.S. contribution to the U.N. regular budget at 22% and the U.N. peacekeeping assessment at 25%.⁶⁴
- **Full or partial withholdings from specific U.N. entities or activities.** Over the years, and for a range of reasons, Congress has withheld or placed conditions on funding to selected U.N. entities or activities, some of which have required executive branch waivers or certifications to release funds. Examples include withholding funding for U.N. activities related to the Palestinians, conditioning

⁶³ Drawn from CRS In Focus IF10354, *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding to the U.N. System*. In recent years, the role of Congress in authorizing and appropriating U.N. funding came to the fore when President Trump sought to withhold U.S. funding from WHO in 2020. For example, see Jonathan M. Bydlak, “Opinion: Congress should reassert its ‘power of the purse,’” *The Hill*, June 9, 2020; and Zachary Price, “Can President Trump Defund the WHO?” American Constitution Society, June 1, 2020. More broadly, see Alan L. Feld, “The Shrunk Power of the Purse,” in *Boston University Law Review* 487 (2009), Vol. 89, pp. 109-112.

⁶⁴ Some U.N. programs are funded from several budgets that may include the U.N. regular budget, specialized agency budgets, and separate conference and administrative budgets.

funding to U.N. entities based on management reforms, and restricting Human Rights Council funding.⁶⁵

- **Congressional holds.** Members of Congress have sometimes placed holds on the disbursement of appropriated U.N. funding for policy reasons. Holds are generally requested by Members of appropriations and foreign affairs authorizing committees, and in most cases, little information is publicly available on their details.⁶⁶

The overall impact of U.S. withholdings depends on the origin of the program's funding. If an activity is funded through the U.N. regular budget and the United States withholds a proportionate share of its contributions, the cost of the program will most likely be covered by surplus regular budget funds. In such cases, a U.S. withholding would have little or no immediate impact on the program's operation or funding levels and would be largely symbolic. But if the United States withholds funds from a program funded primarily by member state contributions, the impact of the United States withholding contributions could be greater and potentially impact operations and programs. The United States could also accumulate arrears and lose its vote in certain U.N. bodies if it withholds certain assessed contributions.

In addition to withholding or conditioning funding, Congress may oversee and influence U.S. policy at the United Nations through a range of mechanisms, including the following:

- **Executive branch reporting requirements.** Congress has enacted legislation requiring the executive branch to report to Congress on various U.N. issues, including *U.S. Participation in the United Nations*, *U.S. Funding to International Organizations*, and *Voting Practices in the United Nations*, among others.⁶⁷
- **Hearings and investigations.** Congress may hold hearings to consider U.N. issues; past hearings have focused on Administration priorities, budget issues, and the status of U.N. programs. It can also conduct U.N.-related investigations on issues of concern.
- **Resolutions.** Members of Congress may propose and enact simple or concurrent resolutions expressing an opinion, fact, or principle in one or both chambers of Congress. Some Members have used such resolutions to voice an opinion about U.S. policy in the United Nations or the U.N. system itself.
- **Consultations with U.N. officials and other governments.** More broadly, some Members of Congress meet or correspond with U.N. secretaries-general (or other U.N. representatives) to communicate U.S. priorities and perspectives. Members may also raise U.N.-related issues bilaterally with other government officials.

Looking ahead, Congress might monitor Administration policies and actions related to the planned 2024 U.N. "Summit of the Future" (the Summit), which is scheduled for September 22-

⁶⁵ Section 7048 in annual SFOPS bills generally includes provisions on U.S. withholdings and conditions for funding U.N. bodies. Most recently, see Section 7048 of Division F, the Department of State, Annual Appropriations, and Related Programs Act, FY2024, of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47).

⁶⁶ An additional category of withholding involves the executive branch. If Congress does not enact legislation that authorizes or appropriates funding to a specific U.N. entity, the Administration may unilaterally decide to withhold funding to such organizations, in some instances without being required to notify or consult with Congress.

⁶⁷ The *U.S. Participation* report is required by Section 4(a) of the UNPA (P.L. 79-264); the *U.S. Funding* report, by Section 4(b) of the UNFPA (P.L. 79-264); and the *Voting Practices* report, by P.L. 98-151, P.L. 98-164, and P.L. 101-246. Over the years, Congress has also required executive branch reporting on other issues, including U.S. participation in the Human Rights Council, the status of U.N. peacekeeping, U.N. transparency and accountability, the employment of U.S. citizens in U.N. bodies, and the status of U.N. arrears, among others.

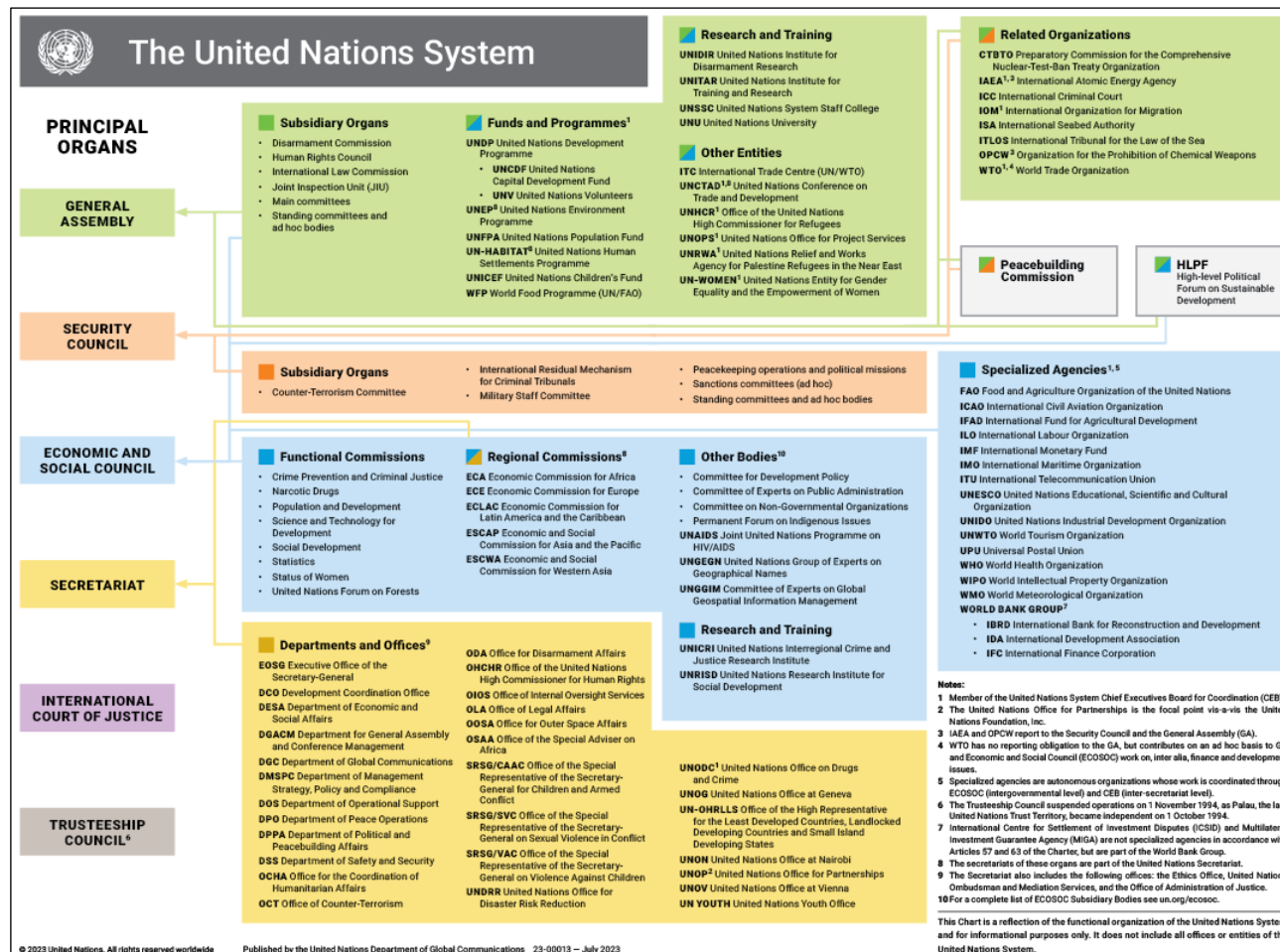
23 at U.N. Headquarters in New York City. At the Summit, participants plan to adopt a “Pact for the Future” (the Pact), which member states have continued to negotiate. The Pact is expected to reaffirm the U.N. Charter, reinvigorate multilateralism, boost implementation of existing commitments, and provide “solutions to challenges and restore trust among Member States.”⁶⁸ The Biden Administration has expressed overall support for the Summit, stating that its priorities should include preventing conflict, ensuring “a just global digital transformation,” strengthening the integrity of public information, and improving the “ability of the multilateral system to respond to complex crises.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ U.N. document, A/RES/76/307, September 12, 2022.

⁶⁹ In addition, as part of the Pact, the Administration emphasized the importance of addressing climate change; emerging security challenges (e.g., bio risks, cyber-attacks, and lethal autonomous weapons); outer space and technology; and “future complex global shocks.” It also supported language increasing the number of seats on the UNSC and the acceleration of the implementation of SDG implementation. One Administration official noted that, in some cases, “reaching consensus ... may ultimately require less detail rather than more.” Drawn from USUN, “Remarks by Ambassador Chris Lu at an Ambassador-Level Meeting on the Pact for the Future,” June 27, 2024.

Appendix. U.N. Organizational Chart

Figure A-I. U.N. Organizational Chart



Source: United Nations, at https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_system_chart_11x8.5_print_e.pdf.

Author Information

Luisa Blanchfield
Specialist in International Relations

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.