The United States and United Nations Reform: In Brief

September 8, 2026

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
R49339

Contents

Contacts

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) system comprises a range of entities, including the United Nations, specialized agencies, peacekeeping operations, and funds and programs.[1] UN member states and past and current UN secretaries-general have repeatedly attempted to reform parts of the organization. These efforts tend to be cyclical, with new reform proposals considered every five to 10 years. Primary areas of focus have included inefficiencies and lack of accountability, duplication and redundancy in mandates and activities, and mismanagement of resources.[2]

The United States led in the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and has historically supported the organization, including UN reform efforts. Both Congress and the executive branch play key (and sometimes overlapping) roles in shaping U.S. approaches to UN reform. Over the decades, Congress has, at times, tied U.S. funding to progress on specific UN reforms and withheld funding from certain UN activities or entities with which it did not agree.[3] Some U.S. Administrations have fully supported U.S. participation in and funding of the United Nations, while others have sought to limit U.S. engagement. Most recently, the second Trump Administration has expressed support for UN reform while at the same time withdrawn the United States from more than 30 UN entities and delayed or halted payments to some UN bodies, including the UN regular budget and peacekeeping missions.

The most recent UN system-wide reform effort, referred to as the "UN80 Initiative" (UN80), was proposed by UN Secretary-General (UNSG) António Guterres in March 2025. It aims broadly to improve the effectiveness of the UN Secretariat, review the status of UN mandates, and realign certain UN programs and structures. Some UN80-related reforms have been adopted, while others are still being considered. UN80 is being pursued against the backdrop of shifting U.S. policy toward the United Nations and UN budget shortfalls due mainly to the accumulation of arrears (outstanding dues) by some UN members, particularly the United States. Looking ahead, Congress could consider whether to continue to tie U.S. contributions to certain UN reforms and whether other means of achieving U.S. goals for UN reform may be effective. Congress might also monitor the status and pace of UN80 reform implementation and determine to what extent, if any, the United States should support various reforms.

Background and Current Status

The process of changing or "reforming" UN policies, mechanisms, or structures varies depending on the UN entity and the type of action proposed. Within the United Nations, reform can be achieved by amending the UN Charter or through various non-charter actions. Amending the UN Charter, which is relatively rare, requires approval by two-thirds of the 193-member UN General Assembly (General Assembly) and ratification according to the constitutional processes of two-thirds of UN members, including all five permanent UN Security Council members (United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom). Past examples of charter amendment

---

[1] This report focuses primarily on reforms of the United Nations under the UN80 Initiative. Other ongoing reform activities include UN Security Council reform and a UN humanitarian agency "reset," among others.

[2] Past reform initiatives include "Agenda for Peace," under UNSG Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992); the 2000 Millennium Summit and the 2005 World Summit, under UNSG Kofi Annan; and "Delivering As One," under UNSG Ban Ki-moon.

[3] Some Members of Congress discussed UN efficiency and possible reform as early as 1948. For example, a Senate report noted, "There is a need for coordination between the United Nations and the specialized agencies and between the specialized agencies themselves." (Senate Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, United States Relations with International Organizations, 80th Cong., 2d sess., 1948, S. Rept. 1757, p. 11.)

include increasing the number of members on the Security Council and UN Economic and Social Council.

Non-charter reforms are more common and use a comparatively simpler process. The General Assembly has established various fora for discussing reform proposals and has implemented reforms on its own. In addition, the UNSG may institute reform as the UN chief administrative officer, including by reorganizing some departments and offices. The UN80 Initiative, described in more detail below, is an example of a non-charter reform effort.

The UN80 Initiative. UN80 was first proposed by the UNSG to help the United Nations become more cohesive and adapt to "complex global challenges" amid financial issues facing the organization (see **text box** below).[4] The initiative includes three overarching "workstreams" aiming to identify efficiencies and areas for improvement, review the implementation of UN mandates (of which there are nearly 4,000), and implement structural changes to reduce redundancy.[5] Reforms being considered or implemented across key parts of the UN system are underway in the following sectors:

- *Peace and security*, which includes a review and "reset" of UN peacekeeping operations, and a UNSG reorganization of Secretariat offices addressing peacekeeping and political affairs.
- *Sustainable development*, which includes "refiguring" UN Country Teams to better support host country needs, and the possible merger of UN Women with the UN Population Fund, as well as the potential merger of the UN Development Program with the UN Office of Project Services.
- *Human rights*, which includes establishing a standing, internal UN "Human Rights Group" to ensure human rights are fully coordinated and integrated into UN policies and activities.
- *Humanitarian action*, including a UN humanitarian "compact" that aims to simplify humanitarian planning, integrate supply chains and scale common services, coordinate humanitarian diplomacy, and clarify agency roles.[6]

---

[4] United Nations, "What is the UN80 Initiative?," https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/news/what-un80-initiative.

[5] "UN80 Initiative Action Plan, Advancing Reform with Transparency and Partnership," United Nations, November 2025. In the UN context, a "mandate" generally refers to a decision, statement, or other action that gives a UN entity authority to carry out its functions. Mandate review has been previously attempted; in 2005, UN members sought to review mandates over five years old, but progress was stymied due to disagreements on the review process and which mandates to eliminate. The United Nations established a mandate source registry for UN80 at https://mandates.un.org/.

[6] United Nations, "UN80 Initiative, Progress and Next Steps," April 2026.

UN Financial Situation

UN80 reform activities are occurring alongside broader UN financial challenges. Since at least 2019, the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets experienced funding shortfalls, including a liquidity crisis, which the UNSG attributed to delayed or nonpayment of assessed contributions from certain UN members, particularly the United States (see "U.S. Policy"). On June 30, 2026, the General Assembly adopted a resolution that revised UN financial regulations to help temporarily ease UN regular budget and peacekeeping cash-flow shortages.[7] According to the United Nations, UN80 does not attempt to directly address specific financial issues; it instead aims to make the UN entities more "cost-effective" and "agile" amid such challenges.[8]

Some UN80 reforms were incorporated in the 2026 UN regular budget, which totaled $3.45 billion and represented a 15% reduction from 2025—including a 19% cut in UN staffing. An estimated 2,900 positions are to be abolished, with more than 1,000 staff separations being finalized.[9]

Any current or future reforms would likely require adoption by the General Assembly, implementation by the UNSG and UN entities, or both. UN members are likely to consider UN80 and other related reform proposals at the 81st General Assembly session, scheduled to begin at UN Headquarters in New York City in September 2026. Possible reforms for consideration include establishing a common UN data system, assessing the humanitarian compact and status of humanitarian operations, and reviewing UN mandates, among others. UN member states will also likely appoint a new UNSG, who may have his or her own views and priorities on UN reform.[10]

Reform Challenges and Member State Perspectives. A significant challenge to achieving UN reform is finding common ground and agreement among UN member states. Each member state has its own political agenda and foreign policy goals and may also have its own reform priorities. Consequently, member states often hold different views on how to define and implement reform and how to evaluate reform successes or failures. The complex relationships that exist among UN members outside of the UN system may also be an obstacle to achieving reform. External conflict, religious and ethnic differences, trade and economic issues, and geography can all potentially affect reform cooperation among UN member states.

Some of the above dynamics are reflected in UN member state discussions on UN80. While most members generally support the overall concept of the initiative, their views differ on what issues and activities to prioritize. Under the second Trump Administration, for example, the United States has largely approached UN80 as an opportunity to reorganize, reduce, or eliminate UN programs and staff, to reestablish what it views as the core UN mandate of maintaining peace and security. At the same time, China and some developing nations have jointly argued that UN80 "is not simply about cutting budget or downsizing staff" and maintain that reform efforts should prioritize development and the needs of developing countries.[11] European Union countries have expressed support for UN80, while emphasizing the "importance of preserving the integrity and

[7] UN document, A/RES/80/270, June 30, 2026, and United Nations, "Statement by the Secretary-General on the General Assembly's Budget Vote," June 30, 2026.

[8] United Nations, UN80 Frequently Asked Questions, "Will this Solve the Organization's Financial Crisis?," https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/frequently-asked-questions.

[9] UN News, "General Assembly Approves $3.45 Billion UN Regular Budget for 2026," December 30, 2005.

[10] Under the UN Charter, the UNSG "shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council." As a permanent council member, the United States plays a key role in the selection process.

[11] People's Republic of China Mission to the UN, "Joint Statement Delivered by China on Behalf of the Group of Friends of Global Governance at the General Assembly Briefing on the UN80 Initiative," December 11, 2025.

balance" of the three UN pillars: peace and security, development, and human rights.[12] Some other UN member states have expressed concern regarding specific reforms; in December 2025, for example, over 40 countries issued a joint statement arguing that UN80-related budget cuts disproportionately affected UN human rights activities.[13]

U.S. Policy

The United States is a member of the UN General Assembly and is one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council. It has historically been one of the largest financial contributors to the UN system, assessed at 22% of the UN regular budget and 26.15% of the UN peacekeeping budget.[14] As such, the United States has demonstrated an ongoing interest in ensuring the United Nations operates as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Executive Branch Role and Selected Actions. The executive branch represents the United States in UN fora and shapes U.S. approaches to UN reform. Key U.S. government entities that address UN reform are the Department of State's Bureau of International Organization Affairs (IO Bureau) in Washington, DC, and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN) in New York, NY. The President nominates individuals for UN posts, including the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations and the U.S. Representative to the United Nations for Management and Reform, positions currently held by Ambassadors Mike Waltz and Jeff Bartos, respectively. Under the second Trump Administration, UN reform efforts are occurring alongside shifting U.S. policy toward the United Nations, including but not limited to

- an emphasis on what the Administration views as the United Nations' core mission of maintaining international peace and security;
- U.S. withdrawal from 66 international organizations (IOs), including more than 30 UN entities, under Executive Order (EO) 14199, which called for a review of IOs to determine those that are contrary to U.S. interests and whether such entities can be reformed;[15] and
- delaying, halting, or rescinding payments to some UN entities, particularly the UN regular budget and UN peacekeeping.[16]

The Administration has expressed some support for UN80 reform efforts. In March 2026, Ambassador Waltz stated that the United States would "work with the UN leadership to align our reform agenda with the [UN] secretary general's."[17] At the same time, he emphasized that the United States would cease participation in UN agencies that "undermine our sovereignty and

[12] For example, see European Union Delegation to the UN, "EU Statement - Briefing on the UN80 Initiative," July 29, 2026, and "EU Statement - Briefing on the Report of the Secretary-General on the UN80 Initiative," August 8, 2025.

[13] International Service for Human Rights, "Protect UN Human Rights Pillar from Devastating Funding Cuts, Dozens of States Warn," December 9, 2025 (the article includes a copy of the joint statement).

[14] The United Nations reports that in calendar year 2024 (the latest year for which data were available), the United States contributed $14.27 billion to the UN system in both voluntary and assessed funding. Other top contributors were Germany ($4.78 billion) and the United Kingdom ($3.08 billion). See UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination, Funding by Government Donor, https://unsceb.org/statistics/revenue-by-government-donor/.

[15] See EO 14199, "Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations," 90 *Federal Register* 9275, February 4, 2025.

[16] The Administration delayed some FY2025 and FY2026 payments to certain UN entities. It also requested recission of previously appropriated assessed and voluntary UN funding in 2025, which Congress enacted in P.L. 119-28.

[17] U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN), "Testimony of Ambassador Mike Waltz, U.S. Representative to the United Nations, at a Congressional Field Hearing on UN Reform," March 20, 2026.

cannot be reformed."[18] Stated Administration reform priorities include lowering UN staff compensation and benefits, modernizing the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund, ensuring that UN Special Political Missions are focused and aligned with their mandates, reducing UN peacekeeping missions, and strengthening internal oversight.[19]

Selected Congressional Perspectives and Tools. Congressional perspectives on UN reform often reflect underlying views about the role of the United Nations (and multilateralism as a whole) in U.S. foreign policy.[20] On the one hand, some Members maintain that the United States should pay its bills in full and on time to demonstrate U.S. credibility and leadership in UN fora; they contend that U.S. nonparticipation and financial withholdings make it challenging for the United States to advocate its UN reform priorities in UN fora. Some are particularly concerned that a decreased U.S. presence in UN bodies could provide a leadership vacuum that might be filled by countries, such as China or Russia, that have different reform policy priorities. On the other hand, some Members support the Administration's actions, including funding cuts and U.S. withdrawal from certain UN bodies. Some question whether U.S. participation in the United Nations is an efficient use of taxpayer dollars and, more broadly, whether the United States should fund or participate in any UN entities.

One of the primary congressional approaches to UN reform is placing financial conditions or limits on U.S. funding to UN entities. Congress has generally taken such actions to express disapproval of certain UN actions or to incentivize specific reforms. Members have tied U.S. funding to progress on UN reform and UN regular budget policies that favored the United States, including caps on U.S. assessment rates, changes to UN budget processes, and strengthening UN internal oversight. Over the years, Congress has also withheld funding from specific UN entities (such as the Human Rights Council) or UN activities (such as those related to the Palestinians). Congress has also enacted UN reform-related legislation in annual appropriations acts, aiming, for example, to improve UN whistleblower protection policies and UN audit transparency (see **text box** below). Additional congressional actions that can shape U.S. policy toward UN reform include sense of Congress resolutions, hearings to investigate UN programs or oversee Administration policies in UN fora, and reporting requirements on UN reform-related issues. The Senate also considers U.S. nominees for UN posts who may either directly or indirectly address UN reform.

Selected UN Reform Legislation

Congress enacted legislation in the National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs (NSRP) Appropriations Act, 2026, prohibiting obligation of 10% of appropriated funds to certain UN entities until the Secretary of State (the Secretary) determines and reports to Congress that certain actions are being taken (e.g., improving the transparency and availability of UN audits; enhancing whistleblower protection policies; combatting

---

[18] USUN, "Testimony of Ambassador Mike Waltz, U.S. Representative to the United Nations, at a Congressional Field Hearing on UN Reform," March 20, 2026.

[19] Drawn from various USUN and State Department remarks since January 2025. In April 2026, the Administration reportedly circulated a document to UN member states stating that the United States would pay a "significant" portion of its outstanding dues in 2026 if UNSG implements certain reforms, including making changes to the UN pension system and eliminating additional senior-level UN posts, among others. (Colum Lynch, Devex, "Exclusive: US Threatens to Halt UN Funding Unless Conditions Met," April 27, 2026, and "Special Report: The UN's Identity Crisis," September 1, 2026.)

[20] The following perspectives are drawn from a range of congressional remarks and statements at various hearings, including House Committee on Foreign Affairs (HFAC), "United Nations Accountability and Reform," July 22, 2026; HFAC Subcommittee on Oversight and Intelligence, "U.S. Accountability at the United Nations: Challenges and Opportunities for Reform," April 29, 2026; Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Reforming the UN: Assessing U.S. Efforts and Priorities," April 15, 2026; and Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs, "Accountability and Reform at the United Nations," March 20, 2026.

anti-Israel bias; and effectively vetting UN staff for any terrorist affiliations, among others). In addition, Congress required that the Secretary enter into written agreements with each IO that receives appropriated funds to provide "timely access to the U.S. Inspector General (IG) of the State Department and the Comptroller General (CG) to such IO's financial data and other information relevant to U.S. contributions," as determined by the IG and the CG, and report to Congress on the status of such agreements. In June 2026, the State Department reported to Congress that the United States and UN entities had not entered into any such agreements.[21] The legislation also states that the Secretary shall tie consideration of U.S. bilateral assistance to UN voting practices that align with U.S. interests, potentially leveraging foreign assistance in support of U.S. UN reform priorities.[22]

Status of U.S. Arrears. Over the decades, the United States has accumulated arrears (outstanding dues) to the UN regular budget, UN peacekeeping, and other UN bodies due primarily to U.S. financial withholdings.[23] The exact amount of U.S. arrears varies by the status and timing of U.S. payments. As of April 30, 2026, U.S. unpaid assessments were $2.037 billion for the UN regular budget (representing 73% of the total unpaid assessments) and $2.247 billion for UN peacekeeping (63% of total unpaid assessments).[24] In July 2026, the State Department reportedly notified Congress of its intent to pay down $725 million of these arrears.[25] In the past, Congress has linked the payment of U.S. arrears to progress on certain reform efforts (see below).

Selected Congressional Considerations

Past Congressional UN Reform Activities. Congress could explore previous legislative approaches to UN reform and whether they could be applied to current reform efforts. For example, in the late 1990s the United States owed significant arrears to the United Nations (as it does today) and was in danger of losing its General Assembly vote. Congress subsequently enacted the "Helms-Biden agreement," which tied the payment of U.S. arrears to UN reforms, leading to, among other things, a reduction in the U.S. assessment to the UN regular budget.[26]

UN Funding as a Tool for Reform. Some Members of Congress have expressed concern regarding how (or if) the Trump Administration is allocating funding to certain UN entities to promote UN reforms. Historically, Congress has not appropriated funding to specific UN bodies. Instead, it often has appropriated lump sum amounts to UN-related appropriations accounts. As a result, the executive branch has generally had leeway to determine how funds are allocated, often

[21] See Department of State, "Report to Congress on Any Obligation of Funds to International Organizations That Have Not Entered into Written Agreements (Unclassified)," June 2026.

[22] NSRP Appropriations Act, 2026 (Section 7048 of Division F of P.L. 119-75, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026).

[23] Other reasons for arrears include differences between the U.S. and UN fiscal years (which affects the timing of U.S. payments) and the State Department practice of paying its dues on a deferred basis due to withholdings by the Reagan Administration. Each UN entity has its own process for paying, defining, and tracking arrears. See United Nations, "Financial Situation of the United Nations," May 7, 2026 (charts 9 and 15). Under the UN Charter, a member shall lose its General Assembly vote if its regular budget and peacekeeping arrears are equal to or exceed the amount of contributions due in the previous two years. (Arrears do not affect membership in the Security Council.)

[24] United Nations, "Financial Situation of the United Nations, Statement by Catherine Pollard, Under-Secretary General of Management Strategy, Policy, and Compliance," May 7, 2026 (charts 9 and 15). Other countries in regular budget arrears as of May 2026 include China ($429 million) and Japan ($152 million).

[25] Humeyra Pamuk, "US Plans $725 Million Payment Towards Its Large UN Debt," Reuters, August 21, 2026.

[26] See Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY2000 (P.L. 106-113), November 19, 1999. Previously, Congress enacted the "Kassebaum-Solomon amendment," which required that the U.S. contribution to the UN regular budget be reduced to 20% unless the United Nations gave major UN financial contributors a greater say in the budget process. The General Assembly then adopted a new budget process that incorporated consensus-based budgeting as a decisionmaking mechanism. See Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1986 and 1987 (P.L. 99-93), Section 143, August 16, 1985.

with little or no congressional consultation. Some observers have expressed concern that Administrations may not fund some UN entities as Congress intended and have suggested that Congress could legislate funding levels for specific UN entities or activities. Others note that 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 sudden humanitarian crises. For its part, the Trump Administration maintains that the United States should fund only organizations that align with U.S. interests and reform priorities.

U.S. Monitoring of Reform Implementation. Some Members of Congress might assess how, if at all, the State Department monitors UN80 reform implementation. A January 2026 Department of State Office of Inspector General (OIG) report found that the IO Bureau "struggled to identify practical performance indicators to track progress and measure [UN management reform] outcomes," and recommended the establishment of a "consistent process to monitor and evaluate its efforts to advance … reforms."[27] The IO Bureau concurred with the recommendation and took steps to establish a reform tracking process, which some Members of Congress may wish to evaluate. Congress may also undertake its own efforts; for example, in past years Congress has requested that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) assess UN reform implementation.[28]

U.S. Efforts to Improve UN Transparency and Accountability. Some Members of Congress have demonstrated a long-standing interest in monitoring how UN member state contributions are spent. Accordingly, some Members might assess recommendations to improve UN oversight of voluntary contributions contained in a May 2026 memorandum from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) OIG.[29] Some Members may also consider the status and effectiveness of newly established UN funding transparency portals, including the Country-based Pooled Funds Data Hub (which tracks U.S. pooled humanitarian-related funding to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA]), and the broader UN Transparency Gateway, which publishes funding across both the UN system and UN Secretariat.[30]

Author Information

Luisa Blanchfield
Specialist in International Relations

[27] Department of State, Office of the Inspector General Report ISP-I-26-03, "Review of the Bureau of International Organization Affairs' Efforts To Advance United Nations Management Reform," January 2026.

[28] For example, see GAO reports NSIAD-00-150, "United Nations: Reform Initiatives Have Strengthened Operations, but Overall Objectives Have Not Yet Been Achieved," May 10, 2000, and GAO-08-84, "United Nations: Progress on Management Reform Efforts Has Varied," November 4, 2007.

[29] Recommendations include clarifying certain UN standards and terms that affect information sharing with UN members on possible misconduct and implementing UN databases for vetting and misconduct. See USAID OIG, Memorandum, "Priority Reforms for Strengthened United Nations Transparency and Accountability," May 18, 2026.

[30] The Country-based Pooled Funds Data Hub is available at https://cbpf.data.unocha.org. The Transparency Gateway is available at https://open.un.org/. Also see UNOCHA's Financial Tracking System (https://fts.unocha.org/), the UN Chief Executive Board for Coordination (https://unsceb.org/), and the UN Peace and Security Data Hub (https://psdata.un.org/).

Disclaimer