



Testimony of Peter Yeo, President, Better World Campaign

“Challenges and Opportunities for Advancing U.S. Interests in the United Nations System”

Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and International Economic, Energy, and Environmental Policy

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Chairman Young, Ranking Member Merkley, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today about an issue of great importance to U.S. foreign policy: the effectiveness of the United Nations and the state of U.S.-UN relations. I’m Peter Yeo, President of the Better World Campaign, a Washington, DC-based organization whose mission is to support a strong and constructive U.S.-UN relationship by educating American policymakers and members of the public alike about the importance of the UN’s work and how it advances U.S. interests.

2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the San Francisco Conference and the entry into force of the UN Charter, the treaty that gave birth to the United Nations. Over the past three-quarters of a century, the UN has been one of the bedrock international institutions of the post-World War II international order. Established in the wake of that devastating conflict at the initiative of the United States and its Allies, the organization was conceived in order to “save humanity from the scourge of war” and provide a framework for international cooperation on efforts to address challenges in the security, humanitarian, development, economic, and human rights spheres.

I have seen first-hand what this ideal means in practice. Over the past decade, I’ve been fortunate to see the life-saving work of the UN up close in more than two dozen field presences:

- Last November, I traveled to **Mali**, a country twice the size of Texas, where UN Peacekeepers are opposing no less than *six terrorist groups*--offshoots of ISIS and al Qaeda—each vying for territory and the overthrow of a democratically elected government in a strategic region;
- In Jordan, the UN Refugee Agency provides shelter for more than a half-million Syrian refugees, while the UN Population Fund, working in the largest refugee camp there, has **safely delivered more than 10,000 babies with zero maternal mortality**;
- In Mexico, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has helped in the **fight against opioids** and the increase in heroin coming from the country over the border. Through a UNODC initiative, they are using satellite imagery and aerial photographs to depict where illicit crops are grown and then sharing that information with the Mexican government. This information in turn helped the Mexican army destroy nearly 200,000 plots of poppy in 2017, up 22 percent from the previous year.

- In Yemen, one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters, the World Food Program is **feeding twelve million people per month**, while UNICEF and the World Health Organization are operating treatment facilities and vaccinating the population in response to a massive cholera epidemic.

But the UN has a broader reach than these global hot spots. The UN Security Council – despite the inability of its members to reach consensus on some foreign policy issues – is the preferred vehicle to impose global sanctions, which it has done in a comprehensive way against North Korea. And as you know from your meetings with your local Rotary Club, the UN vaccinates more than 45% of the world’s children and helps more than two million women per month overcome pregnancy-related risks and complications.

The member states of the UN finance many of these operations through “assessed” contributions—a percentage of money owed the UN based on a country’s gross national income and other factors—as well as voluntary contributions. While the U.S. is the largest single financial contributor to the UN system, the current model is beneficial to the U.S. because it requires all UN member states, no matter how big or small, rich or poor, to help shoulder the UN’s regular and peacekeeping budgets at specified levels. Some have suggested that moving to an entirely voluntary funding model would lead to more accountability and cost effectiveness. It won’t. It’s more likely to *increase* the amount of money spent by U.S. taxpayers as they’ll be saddled with more expenses.

Our country – under Democratic and Republican Administrations alike – has a broad definition of its foreign policy and national security interests. That’s why we support peacekeepers in Mali, and the UN’s negotiators in Yemen. It’s also why we believe in investigating human rights violations in North Korea and supporting UN programs that stop the flow of opioids into the U.S. All of these efforts are funded by our “assessed” contributions to the UN. Few UN member states – including Russia and China--share this expansive view of national interests and would not shoulder the burden.

As it stands though, we are one of the few member states not fully paying our assessed contributions for either the regular budget or peacekeeping. These shortfalls have contributed to what the Secretary-General has deemed a “financial crisis” at the UN. Right now, on peacekeeping alone, we are \$776 million in arrears; a shortfall that the Senate Appropriations Committee stated last year “damages U.S. credibility and negatively impacts UN peacekeeping missions.”

At the same time that the U.S. is underfunding these operations, the stock of our rivals—particularly China—is rising at the UN. China is now the second largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping; its assessment rate having increased to 15 percent this year from just over 3 percent ten years ago. It is also one of the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, providing more uniformed personnel than the rest of the permanent members of the Security Council combined.

In the UN context, increased Chinese support for the UN has boosted Chinese influence – similar to any large organization with dues-paying shareholders. But that influence brings challenges that the U.S.—due to its accrual of debt on its financial obligations and withdrawal from key UN bodies—may be unable to adequately address.

It is our view that by working through the UN system, the U.S. helps share the burden for tackling a range of issues, harnessing the resources and political will of most of the world to achieve common diplomatic objectives, while also allowing us to marshal coalitions against those who have objectives that stand in stark contrast to our own. I will provide more detail on how specific aspects of the U.S.-UN relationship advance U.S. interests, as well as some of the challenges currently facing U.S. engagement with the UN, below.

Peacekeeping Operations

UN peacekeeping operations are among the most visible, impactful, and complex activities undertaken by the UN in the field. Multiple academic studies have confirmed that peacekeeping is an effective tool for saving lives and ending wars. One new book, which analyzes more than two dozen different statistical studies of peacekeeping, states that, “The vast majority of quantitative studies of peacekeeping come to a similar conclusion: UN peacekeeping is effective. Using different data sets, leveraging different time periods and controlling for everything one can imagine, the most rigorous empirical studies have all found that peacekeeping has a large, positive, and statistically significant effect on containing the spread of civil war, increasing the success of negotiated settlements to civil wars, and increasing the duration of peace once a civil war has ended. **In short, peacekeepers save lives, and they keep the peace.**”¹

In addition, a 2013 study by Swedish and American researchers found that deploying large numbers of UN peacekeepers “significantly decreases violence against civilians.” Their findings were striking: in instances where no peacekeeping troops were deployed, monthly civilian deaths averaged 106. In instances where at least 8,000 UN troops were present, by contrast, the average civilian death toll fell to less than two. The paper concluded that ensuring UN peacekeeping forces “are appropriately tasked and deployed in large numbers” is critical to their ability to protect civilians.²

What is also remarkable is that all of this lifesaving work is being done at such a relatively low financial cost. Currently, there are more than 100,000 peacekeepers—soldiers, police, and civilians—deployed to 13 missions around the world, making UN peacekeeping the second-largest military force deployed abroad (after the U.S.). And yet, the total budget for the UN’s peacekeeping activities this year is just \$6.5 billion, less than 1% of what the U.S. spent on its own military in FY’19. Moreover, a 2018 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that deploying UN peacekeepers is eight

¹ Howard, Lise. “Power in Peacekeeping.” Cambridge University Press, 2019.

² Hultman, Lisa, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon. “United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57(4). 8 May 2013. pp. 875-91.

times cheaper than U.S. forces.³ It's hard to think of many other programs where the cost-benefit ratio is that favorable.

Right now, peacekeepers are playing a critical role promoting stability in a number of contexts, including Mali in the restive Sahel region of West Africa, where extremist groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have proliferated in recent years. Since the peacekeeping mission began, the peacekeepers have facilitated free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections, helping the country return to democracy after a 2012 military coup. They have also overseen a shaky peace agreement between the government and Tuareg separatists in the north, and—most importantly—kept the extremists at bay, preventing them from reasserting control over northern population centers like Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal.

Peacekeeping in Mali is not a panacea. But things would arguably be much worse if blue helmets weren't on the ground working to promote security and stability. Indeed, the last thing that the region needs is a proto-state run by jihadists emerging in that country. The UN, by virtue of its presence and its activities in the country, is preventing that from happening, at a significant cost—dozens of peacekeepers have been killed in Mali since the mission began six years ago.

Peacekeepers are working to promote stability and civilian protection in a number of other theaters of operation as well. In South Sudan, for example, which was plunged into a devastating civil war in 2013, peacekeepers have been protecting more than 200,000 civilians who fled their homes and sought shelter at UN bases. Given the exceptionally brutal nature of the violence in South Sudan and the fact that civilians have been targeted on the basis of their ethnicity, it is likely many of these people would have been killed had the UN not intervened to protect them. Further south, peacekeepers are also playing a critical role in eastern Congo, a region that has been ravaged by several decades of conflict and is currently experiencing the second worst Ebola outbreak in history. In addition to their normal stabilization activities, peacekeepers have stepped in to provide protection to health care workers and treatment centers, which have been targeted in attacks by armed groups, as well as provided logistical and operational support to Ebola response efforts. The U.S., for its part, has endorsed the efforts of both missions, by continuing to support the reauthorization of their mandates on the Security Council.

Providing Lifesaving Humanitarian Relief

The UN's work in the field extends far beyond peacekeeping missions though. Every year, UN humanitarian agencies provide lifesaving aid to tens of millions of people around the world who have been driven from their homes or had their lives turned upside-down by conflict, famine, and other calamities. These activities have long enjoyed bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, and for good reason: the provision of food, shelter, medical care, education, and protection to people in need reflect our deepest values as a nation. Moreover, there is an important national security imperative to this type of work, as the desperation caused by humanitarian crises can provide openings for extremists and other bad actors to exploit.

³ "UN Peacekeeping Cost Estimate for Hypothetical U.S. Operation Exceeds Actual Costs for Comparable UN Operation." Government Accountability Office GAO-18-243. February 2018.

Currently, one of the UN's largest humanitarian responses is to the **civil war in Syria**, which over the last 8 ½ years has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions. While the UN Security Council—largely because of Russia's willingness to deploy its veto in support of the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad—has mostly been sidelined from dealing with the conflict, particularly on the issue of chemical weapons, UN agencies are on the ground working to save lives and provide a measure of hope in the bleakest of circumstances.

The **World Food Program**, for example—led by former South Carolina Governor David Beasley—distributes food aid to several million displaced civilians inside Syria every month, and provides electronic vouchers that allow more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees to purchase food in local markets, providing a much-needed cash infusion for host communities in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Overall, WFP is the world's largest humanitarian organization addressing hunger and promoting food security; it provides food assistance to an average of 91 million people in 83 countries each year. Around the world on any given day, WFP has 5,000 trucks, 92 aircraft, and 20 ships on the move. It is a humanitarian logistics operation of unrivaled proportion.

The **UN Children's Fund** does equally vital work in size and scale. As noted, the agency supplies vaccines reaching 45 percent of the world's children under the age of five as part of its commitment to improving child survival. Immunization is one of the most successful and cost-effective public health interventions, saving an estimated two to three million lives every year. In Syria, UNICEF is working to help children gain access to vaccines, as well as clean water, hygiene and sanitation services, and education. In addition, the **UN Refugee Agency** (UNHCR) is a provider of shelter for Syrian refugees and works to find durable solutions to their plight, including through resettlement in third countries. And the **UN Population Fund** (UNFPA), a critical provider of sexual and reproductive health care in emergency situations, operates a maternal health clinic in Za'atari—Jordan's largest Syrian refugee camp—that has safely delivered more than 10,000 babies with zero maternal mortality, a huge feat given that 60 percent of all maternal deaths occur in the context of humanitarian emergencies.

The lifesaving work of the UN is also in full force in **Yemen**, which is currently facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than 80 percent of the population reliant on some form of aid. Here, WFP is working to reach twelve million people per month with food and nutritional assistance; UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) did critical work responding to a massive cholera epidemic, operating treatment facilities and vaccinating people across the country; and UNFPA has integrated nutrition assistance for pregnant women into its reproductive health and safe delivery services in the country. These activities have undoubtedly saved many thousands of lives, even as the country's brutal civil war continues to grind on.

But the UN's work in Yemen is not merely confined to addressing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. The UN is also deeply involved—through the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths—in efforts to navigate a negotiated, political solution to what has become a complex and multi-faceted conflict involving an array of local interests and factions, with the increasingly intense rivalry between Gulf Arab monarchies in the region and Iran layered on top. The UN was instrumental in brokering talks that took place in Sweden in December of last year between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, the first time the two sides had met face-to-face in nearly 2 ½ years. While relatively modest in scope, the agreement they reached on a ceasefire and military redeployment from

Hodeidah and several other key ports could—if fully implemented—contribute much to alleviating the suffering of the Yemeni people and set the stage for further diplomatic efforts to peacefully end the conflict. [In a recent op-ed published in *The Washington Post*](#), Ambassador William J. Burns, a former U.S. diplomat and current President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, endorsed the UN’s efforts, recommending that the Trump Administration “throw our full support behind” the UN-led framework for peace talks between the parties.

Promoting and Advancing Human Rights

The UN’s work on conflict mitigation dovetails with another key pillar of the organization: the promotion and protection of universal human rights. This has been baked into the UN’s ethos from the very beginning: Article I of the Charter establishes one of the UN’s core purposes as “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” These principles were further elaborated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. This seminal document, which Eleanor Roosevelt played a key role in crafting, lays out a litany of basic human rights standards to which all human beings are entitled, including the right to life, liberty, and security of person and the right to freedom of thought, association, expression, and religion.

Seventy-one years later, the UN works to advance human rights through a number of tools, mechanisms, institutions, and partnerships, including perhaps most prominently the **Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**. Established in 1993 with U.S. backing, this office conducts fact-finding missions and provides support to independent investigative mechanisms established by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that probe serious violations in specific countries. These activities help raise public awareness of human rights violations, magnify the voices of dissidents and civil society organizations on the ground, and provide a tool for pressuring repressive governments and holding abusers accountable. The Office also has a Rapid Response Unit which can swiftly deploy to the field in human rights emergencies. This mechanism has recently supported fact-finding missions for DR Congo, Myanmar, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria, Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Sri Lanka, and Venezuela, among other countries.

Another key component of the UN human rights system are the more than 50 special procedures— independent experts who do not receive a salary and serve in their personal capacity—who work to promote human rights around the world. Existing special procedures include mandates for country-specific human rights monitoring, as well as the special rapporteurs focused on thematic human rights issues, such as freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; freedom of religion and belief; freedom of expression; and combatting human trafficking. Once referred to by the late former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as the “**crown jewel**” of the UN human rights system, these independent experts regularly speak truth to power, calling out governments by name for violating international human rights standards, and supporting the work of local advocates on the ground. In June, for example, Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, released a report on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which found evidence suggesting premeditation for the killing at the highest levels of the Saudi government. **This report was an important touchstone in efforts by a number of parties—including this body—to hold the Saudi government to account for Mr. Khashoggi’s brutal slaying.**

Unfortunately, the UN's human rights advocacy has at times been a source of controversy and tension in the U.S.-UN relationship. In recent years, there has been understandable concern in Congress about the activities and composition of the **UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)**, a body made up of 47 member states (elected to three-year terms by the General Assembly) that seeks to advance international human rights standards.

To be clear, I'm not here to defend the UNHRC's disproportionate focus on Israel, or the human rights records of some of its member states. Those are valid criticisms, and areas where there is bipartisan agreement on the need for improvement. What I think is clear though is that when the U.S. reversed course and decided to engage actively with the Council from 2010-2017, the record of the Council improved markedly, in ways that benefited and advanced U.S. interests and core values. With strong U.S. diplomatic engagement, the Council:

- Established a Commission of Inquiry (COI) to investigate human rights violations in **North Korea**. As a result of a landmark report drafted by the Commission, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights established a field office in Seoul, South Korea to continue to track rights violations in North Korea;
- Created a COI on the human rights situation in Syria, which has helped gather evidence against specific individuals in the Assad regime for their involvement in crimes against humanity, and **created a "perpetrators list"** to be shared with international judicial bodies;
- Established a special rapporteur to investigate human rights **violations in Iran**, which has issued strong denunciations of Iranian government policy on a number of issues, including arbitrary arrests, executions, persecution of religious minorities, and efforts to curb press freedom;
- Passed three historic resolutions on combatting discrimination and violence based on **sexual orientation and gender identity** in 2011, 2014, and 2016. The most recent resolution established an independent expert focused on combating violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, which allows for unprecedented global-level reporting on international human rights challenges facing LGBTI individuals.

In addition, during the period when the U.S. was a member of the Council, we saw positive movement on Israel's treatment as well. Just to provide some additional context, the UNHRC was created in 2006 to replace a previous UN human rights body. During its first several years, the U.S. refused to run for a seat on the new Council, fearing it would be no better than its predecessor. In fact, it was during this period when the U.S. refused to participate that the Council voted to place "the human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories" on its permanent agenda (known as "Item 7").

The Council's record began to shift in 2009, when the U.S.'s posture towards the Council changed and the U.S. won its first term. While Item 7 remains in place, there have been noteworthy improvements in other areas. According to the American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, there was a 30 percent decrease in the proportion of country-specific

resolutions focused on Israel during U.S. membership on the Council versus the period when we were off. In March 2018, the State Department itself reported that the Council saw “the largest shift in votes towards more abstentions and no votes on Israel-related resolutions since the creation of the [Council].”

In 2018 though, the Trump Administration decided to walk away from the U.S. seat on the Council, as it could not convince others about the proposed U.S. reform agenda. It was a decision welcomed by nations, like China, that do not share our views on human rights.

In addition to our decision to leave the Council, since Fiscal Year 2018, the State Department has withheld a portion of our Regular Budget dues directed towards the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). While amounting to about \$19 million each year, this money nevertheless has an impact: earlier this year, OHCHR was almost forced to suspend the activities of a number of human rights treaty monitoring bodies—including those overseeing member state compliance with the Convention Against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—due to funding shortfalls caused in part by the U.S. withholding. Ironically enough, the U.S. is a party to both of these treaties. **Plus, for the first time in nearly a quarter century, beginning in 2020, no American will have a seat on any UN human rights treaty body, which weakens our ability to influence international law and fundamental freedoms at the global level.** It also provides an opening to other member states, particularly China, who are working to increase their own profile at the UN and use it to weaken the organization’s human rights pillar.

The Challenge of a Rising China and U.S. Retreat from Multilateralism

In addition to key human rights bodies, other parts of the UN system are witnessing a U.S. retreat from the basic tenets of multilateralism as well. With regards to peacekeeping operations, the U.S. is currently in debt on its peacekeeping assessments—by \$776 million—because of Congress’s decision to reimpose a 1990s-era cap on U.S. contributions. In part because of these underpayments, the UN is facing a major cash shortfall, which has serious consequences. **The State Department itself has weighed in on this issue, outlining—in a report to Congress this past June—the following impacts of growing U.S. arrears to the UN:** “(1) Loss of vote or inability to be a member of governing bodies; (2) Diminished U.S. standing and diminished ability to pursue U.S. priorities; (3) Reduced U.S. ability to promote increased oversight and accountability through reforms that promote efficiency, cost savings, and improved management practices; (4) Reduced standing needed to successfully promote qualified U.S. citizens to assume senior management roles; and (5) Impairments of peacekeeping missions to operate, including addressing objectives that may directly impact the national security of the United States.”

With respect to peacekeeping, this also means that troop-contributing countries are not being fully reimbursed for their contributions of personnel and equipment, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars. This can create significant challenges for troop-contributors, most of whom are lower-income countries that rely on reimbursements to help sustain complex longer-term peacekeeping deployments. For example, last year, Rwanda—a major provider of troops to UN operations in sub-Saharan Africa—reportedly had to withdraw a planned rotation of one of its troop contingents to the Central African Republic because it had not received reimbursements sufficient to make necessary updates to military equipment. If the U.S. keeps accruing arrears, these cash flow challenges will only grow, potentially denying peacekeepers the resources necessary to project force and conduct patrols, discouraging

countries from providing troops and equipment in the first place, and threatening the long-term sustainability of UN peacekeeping as a whole.

The knock-on effects of these policies are not solely confined to the effectiveness of the programs in question, however. At the same time that the U.S. is underfunding peacekeeping mandates that it votes in favor of on the Security Council, withdrawing from the Human Rights Council, withholding funding for OHCHR, and abrogating its participation in other UN institutions and initiatives, including the Paris Climate Agreement, other countries—particularly China—are taking a far more active role. As noted, China is now the second largest financial contributor and one of the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping operations. It has also aggressively pushed to expand its role in a range of UN-affiliated institutions, and **Chinese nationals currently holding the top job in four of the organization’s fifteen specialized agencies**: the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

While greater Chinese participation at the UN, and a greater share of the financial burden for its costs, are not necessarily negative outcomes in their own right, the way China has sought to use its growing clout is far from benign, particularly in terms of the organization’s work on human rights. According to a recent report by the Center for a New American Security, the Chinese government has become increasingly aggressive in recent years in seeking to promote a particularist view of human rights at the UN—one which devalues minority rights, elevates a narrow conception of “**state sovereignty**” **over the rights of the individual**, gives primacy to economic and social rights over civil and political rights, and seeks to mute criticism of individual countries’ human rights records, particularly its own.⁴ Naturally, the Human Rights Council has been ground zero for many of these efforts. In 2017 and 2018, for example, China tabled its first-ever resolutions before the Council, on “The contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights” and “Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights.” While seemingly innocuous on the surface, both proposals encapsulate Beijing’s hostility to universal human rights norms. According to a September 2018 report by Ted Piccone, formerly of the Brookings Institution, an expert on the UN human rights system, “Both resolutions emphasized national sovereignty, called for quiet dialogue and cooperation rather than investigations and international calls to action, and pushed the Chinese model of state-led development as the path to improving their vision of collective human rights and social stability. **They also represent an important changing of tides toward a Council where China is both an active participant and a key influencer of other countries’ votes, at a time when its chief protagonist, the United States, has absented itself from the field.**”⁵ Given our absence from the Council, these efforts are likely to only accelerate.

China’s efforts on this front extend beyond the UNHRC, however. In June 2018, during negotiations at the UN on the 2018-2019 peacekeeping budget, China pushed for the elimination of a number of important human rights monitoring and civilian protection posts in UN peacekeeping missions. While ultimately unsuccessful, the fact this was even tried in the first place is evidence of an emboldened China that is increasingly willing to use its influence—particularly, in this case, its large financial

⁴ Lee and Sullivan. “People’s Republic of the United Nations: China’s Emerging Revisionism in International Organizations.” Center for a New American Security. May 2019

⁵ Piccone, Ted. “China’s Long Game at the United Nations.” The Brookings Institution. September 2018. p. 4.

contribution to UN peacekeeping—to tilt the field in order to achieve the policy outcomes it desires. Of note, China’s efforts in this case were premised on the budgetary limitations caused by the U.S. focus on funding cuts.

U.S. policy has unwittingly aided and abetted China’s rise in other ways as well. As previously noted, a central pillar of China’s strategy is filling senior posts with Chinese nationals in order to extend and solidify its influence throughout the UN system. Unfortunately, this is happening at a time when the State Department, and especially the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, has been hollowed out, thereby limiting our ability to push back against China’s efforts or support our own preferred candidates for these positions. For example, there has long been a unit within the Bureau responsible for helping to promote jobs for Americans in international organizations. According to Foreign Policy, that office has shrunk from five employees to zero, **putting the U.S. at a severe disadvantage in the competition over coveted posts in the UN system.**⁶

Beyond these examples, China has also sought to use the UN system to promote Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy effort—the Belt and Road Initiative—which carries a host of unique strategic, human rights, and environmental challenges; sought to deny UN accreditation to civil society organizations critical of Chinese policies; and, through the ITU, support its “Digital Silk Road” initiative, which according to a recent piece by the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), “has the capacity to spread authoritarianism, curtail democracy, and curb fundamental human rights.”⁷

If the U.S. continues to draw down its engagement with the UN—by withdrawing from key UN bodies, unilaterally cutting funding to core UN programs and agencies, or abrogating its obligations under multilateral treaties or agreements—it will leave a void that countries like China have shown they are more than willing, and increasingly able, to fill. That could mean a very different UN than the one the U.S. sought to create in the aftermath of World War II—one where U.S. national security interests and foreign policy objectives, as well as our longstanding commitment to advancing universal human rights, are increasingly sidelined. Preventing such a scenario requires more engagement, not less, and that means, in part, honoring our financial obligations to the organization, which account for a tiny fraction of the federal budget.

Reform & The Way Forward

Before I wrap up my testimony, I would like to say a few words about the issue of reform. In recent years, the UN has undertaken a number of measures to make its operations more transparent and efficient. With regards to peacekeeping, for example, earlier in the decade the UN initiated efforts that reduced the cost per peacekeeper by 18 percent and cut the number of support staff on peacekeeping missions by 4,000 to save on administrative costs, even while the number of uniformed personnel deployed to the field, and the complexity of the activities they were expected to undertake, increased. The UN also undertook important efforts to combat sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel,

⁶ Lynch and Cramer. “Senior Officials Concede Loss of U.S. Clout as Trump Prepares for U.N. Summit.” Foreign Policy, 5 September 2019.

⁷ Cheney, Clayton. “China’s Digital Silk Road: Strategic Technological Competition and Exporting Political Illiberalism.” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-digital-silk-road-strategic-technological-competition-and-exporting-political>. 26 September 2019.

including an unprecedented policy calling for the repatriation of entire units whose members engaged in widespread instances of abuse. More recently, under the leadership of current UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the UN has made significant progress on achieving gender parity in its senior leadership, promulgated stronger whistleblower protections, and sought to strengthen the role of Resident Coordinators—officials responsible for heading up the UN’s development work on the ground—in order to make the UN’s delivery of development assistance more streamlined and accountable. In a Wall Street Journal op-ed, the Secretary-General was praised for taking the lead against anti-Semitism.⁸ As with so many other things at the UN, the achievement of these reforms would not have been possible without strong U.S. support and engagement, and while there remains much work to be done on a range of reform-related issues, it’s clear that the organization is moving in the right direction. Put simply, the UN of today is a world away from the UN of nearly 75 years ago.

Nevertheless, that has not stopped some in Washington from advancing certain theories for spurring further progress on reform that, while perhaps well-intentioned, would cripple the organization and nullify our efforts to achieve meaningful and realistic reforms. One such proposal would have the UN move from a funding structure that relies on both mandatory assessments and voluntary contributions from member states to an entirely voluntary financing scheme. This approach is problematic for a number of reasons:

- The fact that assessed funding structures require other countries to share in the financial burden is actually beneficial to the United States. All UN member states are required to help shoulder the UN’s regular and peacekeeping budgets at specified levels. This, in turn, prevents U.S. taxpayers from being saddled with the majority of these expenses. By contrast, the U.S. often pays more under voluntary funding arrangements.
- Successive administrations and outside experts have recognized the limitations inherent in voluntary funding structures.
 - In June 2005, the House passed The United Nations Reform Act of 2005 which would automatically withhold dues from the UN unless certain specific reforms are met, including switching to a voluntary system. The Bush Administration issued a Statement of Administration Policy (SAP) which said that it has “serious concerns” about the legislation because it “could detract from and undermine our efforts,” and “asks that Congress reconsider this legislation.” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated that “the Administration doesn’t support those bills.”
 - The 2005 Congressionally-mandated Newt Gingrich-George Mitchell [report on UN reform](#), for example, noted that such schemes are often slow and lead to U.S. priorities being underfunded.

⁸ Foxman and Lasensky. “A Righteous U.N. Secretary-General.” Wall Street Journal, June 27, 2018.



While the U.S. must continue to push hard for progress on reform at the UN, it is critical that Congress avoid proposals that will substantially underfund key UN activities that are critical to U.S. interests, and could lead to U.S. taxpayers footing a higher proportion of the bill for certain activities.

The U.S.-UN relationship has gone through its share of ups and downs over the years. But one constant has been the importance of positive U.S. leadership, and its capacity to steer the organization in a way that both advances U.S. national interests and helps the UN live up to the ideals upon which it was founded. Now is no different: this is the time to work cooperatively with UN leaders and like-minded UN member states to focus on implementation of the Secretary-General's ambitious reform agenda, which has been approved with active U.S. support. It is also the time to ensure that America's voice and presence continues to be heard in New York. Without our steadfast diplomatic engagement and financial support, it is difficult to see how the UN will be able to continue all of the important responsibilities it was first invested with nearly 75 years ago.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about UN effectiveness and the importance of a strong U.S.-UN relationship.