

The Washington Post

U.N. budget cuts highlight new U.S. approach

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December 26, 2017

When the Trump administration claimed credit this week for budget cuts at the United Nations, some critics of the organization saw the prudent oversight of taxpayer money, while others questioned Washington's determination to be seen wielding a big stick.

The U.S. mission to the United Nations on Sunday hailed the operating budget of \$5.396 billion for 2018 and 2019, slightly less than the \$5.4 billion requested by Secretary General António Guterres. In a statement, the mission said the United States had negotiated \$285 million in cost savings as well as reducing "bloated" management and support functions.

"We will no longer let the generosity of the American people be taken advantage of or remain unchecked," said U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley, calling the cost-cutting historic and promising more to come.

Using a calculation based on the size of its economy, the United States pays 22 percent of the United Nations' operating budget, and 28 percent of its peacekeeping operations. That makes it the largest contributor among member nations, followed by Japan, China, Germany, France and Britain.

The Trump administration has been highly critical of spending at the United Nations, but it is not alone in its concern about costs. Guterres, who took office shortly before President Trump, has vowed to bring efficiencies and reform to the bureaucracy.

"This is all so misleading," tweeted [Bathsheba Crocker](#), who under President Barack Obama headed the State Department office responsible for international organizations such as the United Nations. "The U.S. fights hard, together with other countries, every year to cut UN budget & regularly does. This is neither new nor a U.S. 'decision.'"

Negotiations over the U.N. budget were months in the making. A U.S. official said U.S. pressure helped bring about cuts to peacekeeping missions in Darfur and Haiti, freeing money to create a new special envoy for Burma to focus on returning the Rohingya people to their homes. It also involved a number of more esoteric reforms, such as a flexible workplace initiative and pension fund oversight to increase accountability.

"These cuts are positive news for the U.S.-U.N. relationship," said Peter Yeo, head of advocacy for the United Nations Foundation, which supports U.N. causes, noting that they were not imposed unilaterally but in negotiations with member states.

"The cuts demonstrate that the U.N. is capable of tightening its belt to reflect budget constraints in donor capitals, including the U.S.," he added. "Ambassador Haley has formed a real partnership for reform with the Secretary General."

The budget was finalized Sunday, days after Haley and Trump suggested that the United States would link U.S. aid to countries that supported it in significant votes. That rankled several countries that did not side with the United States in a 128-to-9 vote condemning Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

"This reflects a bias in the administration that we see elsewhere in its foreign policy," said John Glaser, director of foreign policy at the libertarian Cato Institute. "Namely, that the way to elicit compliance from both adversaries and allies is to browbeat them, threaten them and economically coerce them. No one in the White House seems to understand how to use the carrots of international diplomacy. It's all sticks."

Glaser said the administration's approach is isolating the United States from its allies, even though U.S. leadership at the United Nations can be helpful in pursuing American interests.

"They are throwing this U.N. budget cut out as red meat for Trump's base, which loves the idea that Trump is a successful businessman imposing efficiency on wasteful government elites and anti-American international institutions," he said.

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When Haley first became ambassador, she said the United States would be looking for ways to make the organization more efficient, and could cut U.S. contributions to causes and agencies it considers hostile to U.S. interests, such as those that have leveled a disproportionate share of criticism on Israel.

Mark Dubowitz, head of the nonpartisan Foundation for Defense of Democracies, called that a legitimate use of U.S. resources and power.

"It's been quite successful" as a tactic, he said. "There were 66 countries that opposed, abstained or didn't show up for the U.N. vote on Jerusalem. Those were historic numbers. It worked. It should not be a shock the U.S. has decided to play power politics at the U.N., like all other countries."