

Trump's Assault on the United Nations and the Decline of American Global Influence

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Abstract: *Wittner's commentary explores the Trump administration's approach to the United Nations in historical context and observes that it is out of step with U.S. public opinion. An introductory reflection considers what this means for U.S.-China relations and the potential for a China-centered challenge to U.S. primacy in the 21st century.*

Keywords: *United Nations, Trump, China*

Introduction by Mark Selden

In the following commentary, Lawrence Wittner pinpoints the disastrous impact of the Trump “America First” assault on the United Nations for American and global futures. In this brief reflection, I focus on the centrality of Trump’s attacks on China as the primary threat to American hegemonic aspirations. To be sure, while China has emerged as the major rival and frequent critic of American abuses of power and of Trump’s policies that undermine efforts to overcome global poverty and inequality, it remains second to the U.S. by many measures of wealth and military power. Yet its growing industrial and trade dominance, rising per capita income, and position as the anchor of a dynamic Asia-Pacific region including Japan, Korea, and India, suggest the potential for a China-centered challenge to U.S. primacy in the 21st century.

Trump’s assault on the UN includes a direct attack on and withdrawal from such key UN programs for international cooperation and global welfare as UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and the UN Human Rights Council as well as a rejection of UN peacekeeping efforts. It is also notable for

massive U.S. payment arrears, even refusing to pay a \$1 billion sum allocated by Congress, making the world’s richest nation the UN’s largest debtor nation. In all these ways, the U.S. is both weakening the UN by attacking international peacekeeping and welfare initiatives and alienating traditional U.S. allies while opening a path for the rise of China and Asia as challengers to U.S. primacy.

Over the last decade, China has accelerated its attempts to exercise global leadership through both the UN and its own framing of a development agenda. Not only is China now the second largest financial contributor to the UN but at a time when the U.S. explicitly derides and seeks to undermine major sustainable developmental goals associated with the UN, China is promoting poverty alleviation, climate change, sustainable energy and disarmament programs, as well as launching its own largescale international development program. As Mel Gurtov [points out](#), “The Chinese have become Global South leaders through their Belt and Road Initiative, which provides development loans, and through the export of goods, services, and production lines, particularly to Africa and Southeast Asia but increasingly to Latin America. The more trade pressure Trump exerts, the better the Chinese look to many developing countries.” For the first time in the postwar era, this constitutes a powerful challenge to American global priorities.

The UN has become one important fulcrum in the U.S.-China competition to define the international development agenda. By directly undermining the principles of previous administrations that created

the pivotal U.S. role in forming and leading the UN since 1945, the U.S. is now opening the way for China to play a central role in shaping the course of international relations for the 21st century.

Commentary by Lawrence S. Wittner

If one examines Donald Trump’s approach to world affairs since his entry into American politics, it should come as no surprise that he has worked to undermine the United Nations.

The United Nations is based on international cooperation, as well as on what the [UN Charter calls](#) “the equal rights . . . of nations large and small.” It seeks to end “the scourge of war” and to “promote social progress” for the people of the world.

By contrast, Trump has advocated a nationalist path for the United States. Campaigning for the presidency in 2016, [he proclaimed](#) that “America First” would “be the major and overriding theme of my administration.” In his 2017 inaugural address, [he promised](#): “From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first.”

Indeed, “America First” became his rallying cry as he championed an unusually aggressive nationalism. “You know what I am?” [Trump asked a crowd](#) in Houston. “I’m a nationalist, O.K.? I’m a nationalist. Nationalist!” Sometimes, his displays of super-patriotism—which had a strong appeal to rightwing audiences—included [hugging and kissing the American flag](#).

Given this nationalist orientation, Trump turned during his first administration to [dismantling key institutions](#) of the United Nations and of the broader system of international law. He withdrew the U.S. government from the Paris Climate Agreement, the World Health Organization, the UN Human Rights Council, and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He also had the

U.S. government vote against the Global Compact on Refugees, suspend funding for the UN Population Fund and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, and impose sanctions on a key international agency, the International Criminal Court, which investigates and prosecutes perpetrators of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression.



President Donald J. Trump embraces the American flag at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), March 2, 2019.

Source: Official White House photo by Tia Dufour

Nevertheless, many of these Trump measures [were reversed](#) under the subsequent presidency of Joseph Biden, which saw the U.S. government rejoin and bolster most of the international organizations attacked by his predecessor.

With Trump’s 2020 election to a second term, however, the U.S. government’s nationalist onslaught resumed. In January 2025, U.S. Representative Elise Stefanik (R-New York), testifying at a [Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing](#) on her nomination

to become U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, assailed the world organization, and promised to use her new post to promote Trump’s “America First” agenda. “Our tax dollars,” she argued, “should not be complicit in propping up entities that are counter to American interests.” Joining the attack, Senator Jim Risch (R-Idaho), the committee chair, sharply criticized the United Nations and called for a reevaluation of every UN agency to determine if its actions benefited the United States. If they didn’t, he said, the U.S. government should “hold them accountable until the answer is a resounding yes.” He added that “the U.S. should seriously examine if further contributions and, indeed, participation in the UN is even beneficial to the American people.”

In late February 2025, Republican legislators in Congress, charging that the United Nations failed to align with Trump’s “America First” agenda, [launched a legislative effort](#) to simply withdraw the United States from the world organization. Called the Disengaging Entirely from the United Nations Debacle Act, the measure, introduced by Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah), would terminate U.S. membership in the United Nations and its affiliate bodies. The world organization had become “a venue to attack America and her allies,” Lee charged, “and we should stop paying for it.” Representative Chip Roy (R-Texas), speaking on behalf of a group of House Republicans backing the legislation, argued that the United Nations didn’t advance American interests and “no sane country would stand for this.” It was time to dissociate the United States, he said, from “this corrupt globalist organization.”

Simultaneously, a new Trump administration steamroller began advancing upon UN entities and other international institutions viewed as out of line with his “America First” priorities. At his direction, the U.S. government withdrew from the [World Health Organization](#) and the [UN Human Rights Council](#), refused to participate in the [UN Relief and Works Agency](#), announced plans to withdraw from [UNESCO](#), and imposed new sanctions on the [International Criminal Court](#). In the UN Security Council, the

[U.S. government employed its veto power](#) to block a June 2025 resolution demanding a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and release of all hostages—a measure supported by the 14 other members of that UN entity.

In July 2025, Mike Waltz, the administration’s former U.S. national security advisor and Stefanik’s replacement as Trump’s nominee for U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, [told a meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) that U.S. financial support for the United Nations would henceforth be confined to select projects that benefited U.S. interests. Waltz was particularly critical of UN peacekeeping operations and what he called the “bloat” of the organization. Echoing Trump’s rhetoric, he declared with a twisted logic that, through cutbacks in UN operations and funding, “we can make the UN great again.”

In reality, the Trump administration, seizing upon the chronic underfunding of the United Nations, worked to cripple it by reducing its meager income. In July 2025, [rescissions legislation](#) sponsored by the administration and passed by the Republican-controlled Congress pulled back some \$1 billion in funding that Congressional legislation had allocated to the world organization in previous budgets. This action is predicted to have devastating effects on a broad variety of UN programs, including UNICEF, the UN Development Program, the UN Environment Program, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the UN Fund for Victims of Torture.

Moreover, the administration’s [fiscal 2026 budget](#) proposes ending UN Peacekeeping payments and pausing most other contributions to the United Nations. Although U.S. funding of the United Nations is actually quite minimal—for example, dues of only \$820 million per year for the regular UN budget—the U.S. government has now compiled a debt of \$1.5 billion (the highest debt of any nation) to the regular budget and [another \\$1.3 billion](#) to the separate UN Peacekeeping budget.

This full-blown attack upon the United Nations flies in the face of [a growing recognition](#), over more than a century, that it is necessary to address international problems through international law, including international organization. Thanks, particularly, to developments in modern science and technology, war became increasingly destructive, and pressure grew for establishing greater international security. Thus, the disaster of World War I was followed by the creation of the League of Nations. And the even greater devastation of World War II, capped off by the employment of nuclear weapons to annihilate Japanese cities, culminated in the emergence of the United Nations. Furthermore, in more recent decades, an onrush of destructive weaponry, plus the advent of new problems with global dimensions—including climate catastrophe, resource scarcity, poverty, and disease pandemics—have made international action to establish and safeguard a livable world ever more vital.

Social movements and public officials in the United States played leading roles in the creation of the United Nations and other international organizations. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was perhaps the world's best-known proponent of the League of Nations. Also, even though U.S. nationalists managed to block the United States from joining the League, Wilson's World War II counterparts, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman, worked successfully to establish the United Nations and to bring the United States into it in 1945. Indeed, the U.S. government built the headquarters of the new organization in New York City and, during the late 1940s, provided about 40 percent of [UN funding](#). The United States remained the largest single funder of the world organization, although, thanks to the growing prosperity of other nations, especially China, its share of UN funding gradually declined to 22 percent.

Although U.S. government ardor for the United Nations cooled somewhat as new nations joined it and sometimes voted in opposition to the U.S. position, Trump's full-scale assault on the world organization

represents [a dramatically new approach](#) for the U.S. government, decimating not only UN Peacekeeping operations, but UN efforts to alleviate global poverty, improve public health, and safeguard human rights.

The Trump administration's hostility to the United Nations is also sharply at odds with the American public's attitude toward the world organization. For example, a [Pew Research Center poll](#) in late March 2025 found that 63 percent of U.S. respondents said that their country benefited from UN membership—up 3 percent from the previous spring. And 57 percent of Americans polled had a favorable view of the United Nations—up 5 percent since 2024.

Furthermore, a [June 2025 public opinion survey](#) done by the Program for Public Consultation of the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy found that 84 percent of Americans it polled wanted the U.S. government to work with the United Nations at current levels (32 percent) or more (52 percent). Only 16 percent favored less engagement with the world organization. Asked to evaluate different UN agencies, 83 percent of American respondents to the survey supported U.S. participation in UNICEF, 81 percent in UN Peacekeeping, 81 percent in the UN World Food Program, 79 percent in the World Health Organization, 78 percent in the International Atomic Energy Agency, and 73 percent in the UN Environment Program.

Nor was this strong public backing for a global approach to global affairs a fluke. Even when it came to the International Criminal Court, an independent international entity that the U.S. government had never joined and that Trump had roundly denounced and twice ordered sanctioned, [62 percent of Americans surveyed](#) favored the U.S. government joining the world organization.

Trump's "America First" approach can certainly stir up his hardcore followers. But most Americans recognize that life in the modern world requires moving beyond a narrow nationalism.

About the Author

Lawrence S. Wittner (<https://www.lawrenceswittner.com/>) is Professor of History Emeritus at SUNY/Albany and the author of *Confronting the Bomb* (Stanford University Press) and other works dealing with international history. climate catastrophe, resource scarcity, poverty, and disease pandemics—have made international action to establish and safeguard a livable world ever more vital.