

UN so self-defeating. Credibility is a depletable asset, slower to amass than to spend, and collecting the stamp of legitimacy without reinvesting in the institution that issues it leaves less for the United States to draw on in the future. The United States has seen what happens when that credibility lapses. In 2020, having lost a vote to extend the arms embargo on Iran, US diplomats tried to trigger a snapback mechanism the Trump administration had already forfeited by quitting the Iran nuclear deal two years earlier, and 13 of 14 Security Council members refused to treat its claim as legitimate. The Iran deal itself is the counter-case — a text co-authored by Russia and China, adopted unanimously within a week — and the standard against which any future Iran deal will be measured.

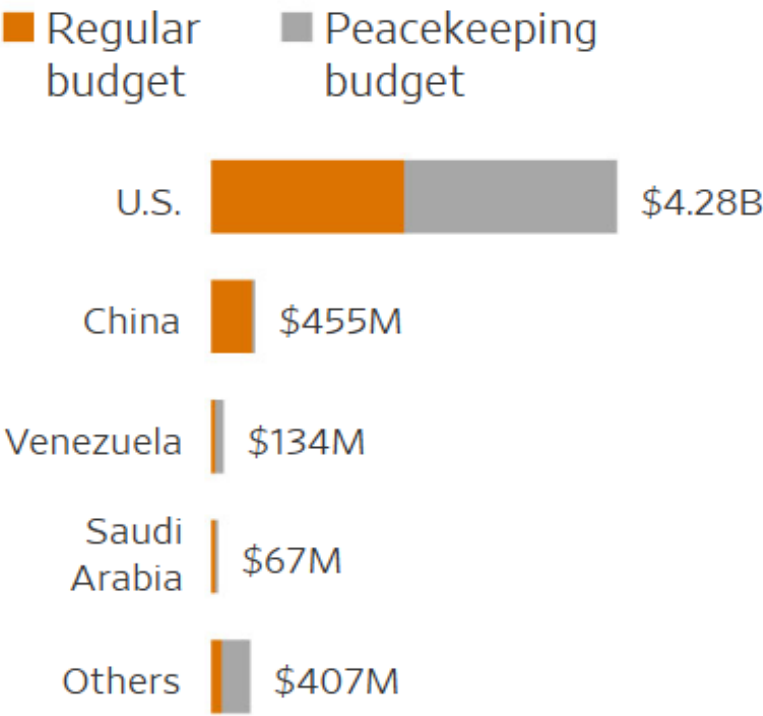
Decomposition
Trump's candor lies in refusing to subsidize what he does not want while keeping council-conferred legitimacy. His error is treating that stamp of approval as separable from the system backing it. Selectivity is not a uniquely American habit, but US disregard for the same prohibition normalizes the sense that it binds no one. In this permissive environment of impunity and violence, a new cast of middle power peacemakers

is emerging (among them Turkey and Pakistan), and they are picking which parts of the UN to contract for their own diplomatic purposes and leaving the rest to fend for themselves. In parallel, other countries are picking which peace efforts to bolster. For example, Lebanon is already courting bilateral deployments from Italy, France, and Spain to backfill the long-standing peacekeeping mission, which the council voted, under sustained US pressure, to start winding down. The UN is not declining so much as decomposing — what was a one-stop shop for peace and security is becoming a bundle of boutiques. This is not the first time this has happened. The League of Nations' machinery for both refugees and health outlived its own irrelevance, absorbed wholesale into the UN before the league had even dissolved. The question today is not whether selectivity and instrumentalism will be fatal to the UN, but which pieces can outlast the whole, as demand for each survives independently of the bundle. The General Assembly, empowered since 1950 at the urging of the United States to backstop a receding Security Council, may assume more of this strain — its 2023 resolution demanding a humanitarian truce in Gaza being the clearest recent case of it stepping up where the council fell down. Certainly, the Veto Initiative — spearheaded by tiny Liechtenstein to require any permanent member that wields its veto to explain itself to the plenary chamber — suggests a General Assembly that still draws breath.

The way forward
Restoring the UN's promise of peace means treating it as more than the sum of its shiniest parts, and seeking the Security Council's stamp of approval alone means presiding over an empty UN. The tell will be which functions Trump admits are worth paying for, if any. The United States owes the UN roughly \$4 billion, arrears that Guterres warns have brought the organization to the brink of "imminent financial collapse". Getting "back to basics" is a slogan that does not substitute for strategy. Agreeing that the UN should maintain peace and security still requires those at the State Department, and US diplomats posted in New York and Geneva, to do a real accounting of which levers of engagement serve that end and merit US support. Indiscriminate cuts will cost Trump more than they will save before he leaves office — and he's already paying for them, in lost allies, lost trust, and lost leverage.

The article was first published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Largest unpaid arrears by U.N. members to May 28



● ANDREW BARNETT/WSJ



By Moncef Khane
Former United Nations official

OPINION

The annual general debate of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) started on September 22 in New York amid dire circumstances. Besides traffic gridlock and overpriced hotel rates, cavalcades of motorcades and successive dignitaries delivering calibrated speeches, this session heard Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's last speech on the state of the UN. Guterres headed the UN for 10 years, and during that time, he repeatedly failed to defend it when it came under attack. He passes on his post at the top of a world organisation on the verge of financial collapse and more marginalised than ever before. Paradoxically, Guterres has the United States, the host government of the UN, and its mercurial president, Donald Trump, to thank for this dismal state of affairs. Earlier this year, the Trump administration withdrew from dozens of UN agencies and organs and, in an extraordinary move, ceased all payments of its dues to the regular and peacekeeping budgets of the UN. But these drastic policy decisions did not spring out of nowhere. Trump's unhappiness with the UN is multifaceted, and his decision to stop fulfilling Washington's legally binding financial obligation may well be the logical culmination of decades-long US policy. In the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration accused the UN of being a third-world, anti-US forum. To compel the organisation to better serve its interests and under the guise of the ubiquitous need for reform, which all secretaries-general fell for, the US started to withhold a share of its assessed contribution, which accounted for a quarter of the regular budget and a third of the peacekeeping budget back then. By 1987, the US relaxed its payment withholding policy, but the precedent was set. Washington continued to use the threat of withholding payment to maintain its grip on an organisation it viewed and continues to view as a vehicle serving its national interests rather than a multilateral agent serving the whole of humanity. Ever since the Reagan years, the US has kept the UN on a short financial leash,

Undermining UN not new US policy



● CHLOE CUSHMAN/FOREIGN AFFAIRS

and to this day, has been deliberately accruing arrears. It currently owes an estimated \$4.2 billion — that is equivalent to 120 percent of the regular UN budget for 2026. Trump has readily embraced this policy of financial blackmail. His administration has slow-walked mandatory payments, although in early September, it paid \$827 million towards its outstanding dues so it could preserve its voting rights in the UNGA. The president's ambivalent view of the UN may be rooted in a lesser-known detail. In 2001, Trump, then a real estate developer, lobbied then-secretary-general Kofi Annan to be awarded the billion-dollar renovation project of the

UN headquarters, but he did not get his way. That was probably not forgotten. But just like during the Reagan years, there is another major factor driving Trump's assault on the UN: US congressional politics. As Israel faced growing backlash at the UN for its genocide in Gaza, pressure from the Israeli lobby in Washington mounted. The Iron Dome diplomatic cover the US provided to Israel in the UN Security Council (UNSC) was no longer sufficient. By 2025, two years into the genocidal campaign, Guterres's tepid and overdue criticisms of Israeli policies, critical UNGA resolutions and scathing reports by special rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council — including Francesca

Albanese, whom Washington placed under sanctions in violation of its host country obligations — became too much for Trump, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the US Congress. In the 1980s, Washington deemed the UN a third-world anti-US forum; today, it is deemed anti-Israel and anti-Semitic. The US's blind and unconditional support for Israel has brought its growing isolation at the UN as has its decision to launch a war of aggression against Iran. Against the backdrop of these developments, the selection of the next secretary-general is dominating the behind-the-scenes agenda. Guterres's lacklustre tenure at the helm of an organisation on the verge of financial bankruptcy and political demise will soon be forgotten. But what should be remembered is that his appeasement policy vis-a-vis Washington since the first Trump administration has evidently failed. The new secretary-general will inherit the modus vivendi under which all secretaries-general since Javier Perez de Cuellar have had to operate — chronic cash flow problems due to US arrears. That should motivate the new UN leadership to consider an overhaul of how the UN budget is put together and how member states' contributions are allocated. Leaving the power of the purse in Washington's hands is a self-inflicted perpetual wound that could prove lethal for the organisation. Another fundamental question is whether the UN would be better off had its headquarters not been in the US. For too long, Washington has seen the UN either as a vector of its national interests or in adversarial terms. It has even used its position as a host to exclude world leaders it has viewed as hostile or undesirable, such as PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and today, the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) Mahmoud Abbas. Evidently, those are decisions only the UNGA can take. But a secretary-general with foresight and political backbone ought to provide views and leadership on those seminal questions to save the organisation from further marginalisation and possible demise.



The US president's ambivalent view of the UN may be rooted in a lesser-known detail. In 2001, Trump, then a real estate developer, lobbied then-secretary-general Kofi Annan to be awarded the billion-dollar renovation project of the UN headquarters, but he did not get his way. That was probably not forgotten. But just like during the Reagan years, there is another major factor driving Trump's assault on the UN: US congressional politics.



Palestinian and other diplomats celebrate after a Palestinian-drafted, non-binding resolution demanding Israel to end "its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory" within 12 months was passed by 124 votes to 14, with 43 abstentions, on September 19, 2024. ● GETTY IMAGES



The article first appeared on Al Jazeera.