

Proposing cutting the US contribution to the UN is not a good idea

By John Mathiason, Adjunct Professor, Cornell Institute for Public Affairs, Cornell University

In her confirmation hearing on January 18, Ambassador to the UN-designate Nikki Haley noted efforts in Congress to cut US funding for the United Nations in response to the UN Security Council resolution 2334 on Israeli settlements, although she said “slash and burn” was not a good policy. The proposal that reached the news was the submission by United States Senator Ted Cruz of a draft bill.¹ While this response was not unexpected from political figures who basically do not like or understand international organizations, it is a bad proposal that is also illegitimate under international law. The draft bill says:

The United States Government may not make any voluntary or assessed contributions to the United Nations or any United Nations organization, including any United Nations specialized agency, fund, or program and any other body or entity affiliated with the United Nations or founded by a United Nations treaty, convention, or agreement, until the President certifies to the appropriate congressional committees that United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) has been repealed.²

This means **all** United States contributions to the thirty-four institutions in the United Nations system whose revenues are reported will be stopped. Based on the questions raised with Ms. Haley, the senator possibly thinks that he is focusing on the United Nations in New York, where the Security Council meets, but that is not the case. The idea is to put pressure on the fifteen other representatives of sovereign states who sit on the Security Council by basically cutting funds for victims of conflicts, food programs, refugees and peacekeeping.

As the draft bill notes, there are two types of US funding for the UN system: assessed contributions and voluntary contributions and they are very different. Assessed contributions are like country club dues. If you want to belong to Mar-A-Lago, you have to pay. The same is true of the UN. If you are a member, you are expected to pay and the amount is determined by your ability to pay (and on that basis, the US pays less than it should). Voluntary contributions are up to the country: you can give as much as you want, or nothing. The Cruz bill, however, covers both.

So, how much does the US contribute to the UN system? Complete recent figures for the whole system only exist for 2014, which were assembled by the Chief Executive

¹ https://www.cruz.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=2935

² [A Bill](#) To prohibit voluntary or assessed contributions to the United Nations until the President certifies to Congress that United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 has been repealed, 12 January 2017.

Board for Coordination of the United Nations System.³ The total amount of revenue, both assessed and voluntary, provided by all member countries to organizations of the UN system in 2014 was \$48.1 billion. Of this, the US provided a total of \$10.1 billion or 20.9 percent. Of this contribution, \$3.5 billion or 35 percent was assessed. Under the Cruz bill, all of this would be withheld. What would that mean?

Slightly over a fifth of the US money goes to UN Peacekeeping operations, for which the US has voted. Another fifth is for the World Food Programme, which is a major supplier of relief for humanitarian disasters. Another 12 percent is for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, for camps and other assistance to persons who have fled their countries (the US provides almost half of UNHCR's funds). Another 10 percent is provided to UNICEF. So, a total of 2/3 of what the US contributes goes basically to address major global human problems, all of which will be cut off if the Cruz bill passes. Only seven percent of the funds go to the budget of the UN Secretariat and even much of that is economic and social rather than political.

So, this bill hurts people and there is no reason to believe that it will have anything to do with repealing the Security Council resolution in question.

And it would also be illegitimate. When the US (and all other countries) joined the UN they took on a legal responsibility by treaty to pay the core costs of the organizations (mostly the staff costs). But what if a state doesn't pay? The only consequence of non-payment for two years total is that the country loses its vote in the UN General Assembly. A number of countries, usually poor, always have this problem. The only time that a member of the Security Council has almost lost its GA vote was in the 1960's when the Soviet Union disagreed with the UN operation in the Congo and refused to pay (and this was when peacekeeping was part of the regular budget). It was two years in arrears and, to avoid a crisis based on not allowing the Soviet Union to vote, there were no votes in that year's Assembly. There was also a time in the 1980's when the US withheld its contribution and almost lost its vote, but fortunately wiser heads prevailed in the US. And, even if a Permanent Member loses its vote in the Assembly, it does not lose it in the Security Council.

The only other way to avoid paying assessed contributions is to withdraw from the organization, which the US has done on two occasions: it withdrew from UNESCO in 1983 over a disagreement with the Director-General, and it withdrew from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in 1995. Of course, after withdrawal, the US had no influence over either organizations' policies or activities. But it would not be an easy thing for the US to withdraw from the United Nations itself, since its headquarters is in New York City and according to the Mayor's Office "the UN generates \$3.69 billion in total economic output to City of New York's economy. The 15, 890 individuals directly employed by the UN Community took home household earnings of approximately \$1.64 billion. These

³ <http://www.unsceb.org/content/un-system-financial-statistics>

household earnings and the operating expenses of the UN Community help to create and sustain 7,940 jobs for New Yorkers.”⁴

As Josh Rogin, a commentator on foreign policy put it recently “... most in Washington believe that despite the body’s problems, the United States is better off with a functioning United Nations and should seek as much influence there as possible.”⁵ But for those who are only interested in bottom lines, here is another figure: In 2015, the UN bought \$17.6 billion worth of goods using its resources. Of these \$1.647 billion were from the United States (9.4 percent), which means of the US’ total contribution of \$10 billion, some 16 percent came back in purchases.⁶ To this should be added the fact that of UN system employees about 16 percent are from the United States. Do we really want to cut funding? Not a good idea.

⁴ New York City Mayor’s Office for International Affairs, [United Nations Impact Report 2016](#), December 2016.

⁵ Rogin, Josh, “Inside the coming war between the United States and the United Nations,” *Washington Post*, 28 December 2016

⁶ United Nations Office for Project Services, *2015 Annual Statistical Report on United Nations Procurement*, 2016, p. 11.