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# The Liquidity Crisis at the United Nations

How We Got Here and Possible Ways Out

Center on International Cooperation  
New York University

Eugene Chen  
Senior Fellow

August 2024

**Center on  
International  
Cooperation**

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## Acknowledgments

This paper was funded thanks to the generous support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The author also thanks Céline Monnier and Sophie Rutenbar for their inputs and support of this paper. Editorial support was provided by Thibault Chareton and Symphony Chau.

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# 1. Introduction

**The United Nations (UN) is suffering from an acute liquidity crisis because its member states have not been paying the assessed contributions required to finance the budgets they have approved. A major part of the problem is the fact that the United States does not pay in full or on time. However, late payments in recent years by China and the closure of several large peacekeeping operations are exacerbating the liquidity challenges. The Secretary-General has proposed several measures to improve the financial position of the organization, but these are stopgap measures at best. The ongoing financial difficulties can only be resolved by member states paying in full and on time but getting there requires understanding the policy decisions and member state dynamics that led us to the current situation and developing recommendations designed around the constraints of the intergovernmental process.**

In May 2024, the negotiations over a resolution granting the State of Palestine additional rights and privileges of participation led to some concern that the adoption of the resolution could trigger the withholding of assessed contributions by the United States on the basis of 1990s-era US legislation prohibiting the funding of any organization that affords Palestine either full membership or the same standing as member states. In the end, the specter of US withholdings on account of Palestine was avoided in part through the inclusion of a paragraph in the resolution underscoring the fact that Palestine remains an observer state, does not have the right to vote in the General Assembly, and cannot put forward its candidature to UN organs.

US withholding—and the threat of further withholding—are unfortunately not a new development at the UN. For decades, the United States has neither paid its assessed contributions to the UN in full nor on time, creating severe cash management challenges for the organization. The UN is no stranger to liquidity crises, but a confluence of factors over the past few years has made the cash crunch particularly acute, such as a new practice of late payment by China, the second largest financial contributor to the UN, and the ongoing retrenchment of peacekeeping operations. The UN has not only been forced to delay reimbursement to its troop- and police-contributing countries and postpone some of its mandated activities<sup>1</sup>, but it has also made headlines for some of the cost-cutting measures it has taken to address the late payment of assessed contributions from its member states, such as temporarily closing its Geneva office and turning off the heat at UN headquarters in New York in the middle of winter.<sup>2</sup>

Current trends show no sign of relenting, and developments over the next year may further worsen liquidity challenges at the UN.

“Sign at the Palais des Nations,”  
Geneva, Switzerland, July 2024. Photo  
courtesy of author.



## 2. Basics of UN Financing

The fundamental problem here is that UN member states approve budgets that they expect the Secretary-General to implement but which they fail to pay for in full or on time. At the same time, the UN financial regulations and rules do not account for the possibility of late payments. Successive Secretaries-General have had to exercise creativity and make hard decisions on what activities and expenses to prioritize—and which to defer—in order to make ends meet.

Payment of assessed contributions is an obligation of all UN member states under the UN Charter. Article 17 of the Charter specifies that the General Assembly approves the budget and how expenses are apportioned among member states. The share of the budget each member state is responsible for is set out through scales of assessments, one for the program (or “regular”) budget and one for peacekeeping budgets. Both scales are reviewed by the General Assembly every three years. The regular budget scale is based on each country’s share of gross national income, with modifications to account for the reduced capacity of developing countries to pay based on their level of external debt, per capita income, and least-developed country status. The regular budget scale also includes a maximum assessment rate (or “ceiling”), set at 22 percent since 2001. The United States is the only member state benefitting from the ceiling. Rates under the peacekeeping scale of assessments are based on the regular budget scale, with additional discounts provided to developing countries based on their per capita income. These discounts are offset by increases in the share paid by the five permanent members of the Security Council, given their “special responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security.”<sup>3</sup>

Once a budget has been adopted, the amount each member state is responsible for is spelled out in assessment letters prepared by the Secretariat. Under the UN financial regulations adopted by the General Assembly, assessments are due in full within 30 days of the receipt of assessment letters.<sup>4</sup> Payment within this 30-day window is considered “on time,” but there is no penalty for late payment unless a member state is significantly behind on its contributions. Article 19 of the Charter indicates that any member state whose arrears equal or exceed the amount due over the past two years cannot vote unless the General Assembly decides that the

failure to pay is due to conditions beyond the control of that member state.<sup>i</sup> The threat of losing the ability to vote in the General Assembly is the primary incentive for UN member states to meet their financial obligations to the organization.

The budgets approved by the General Assembly establish not only the amount of funds to be provided by member states but also the expected accomplishments, indicators of achievement, and outputs to be delivered by the UN. The UN, however, is not able to fully implement the budget if it does not receive funds from member states in full or on time, as required under the UN financial regulations. When contributions are received towards the end of the year, the Secretariat may not have the capacity to spend them before the end of the financial period. Delays in the receipt of contributions may mean that the Secretariat may be forced to undertake cost-cutting measures, which can include hiring freezes, delays in reimbursements to troop- and police-contributing countries, and reduction in expenses such as travel and consultancies. If such measures are insufficient to address cash shortfalls, the UN may be forced to delay, reduce, or cancel budgeted activities. In the 1980s, the UN was forced to go as far as to suspend the payment of certain staff benefits entitlements.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Origins of the Liquidity Crisis

Most UN member states do not pay in full and on time. Of the 193 UN member states, only 51 paid their 2024 regular budget assessments in full within the 30-day timeframe.<sup>6</sup> This is, unfortunately, not an aberration; the UN has had to deal with late payment of assessed contributions from the earliest days of the Organization.<sup>7</sup> There are many explanations for why at least some member states have maintained arrears. One is the lack of penalty for late payment and the relatively generous two-year threshold for the application of Article 19, which several member states abuse by maintaining their arrears just below the level that would trigger the loss of their vote. In 2019, the Secretary-General noted that reducing the Article 19 threshold from two years to one year would have resulted in the collection of an additional \$262 million for 2019 from 48 member states that would have faced a loss of vote under Article 19.<sup>8</sup>

Another explanation comes from principal-agent literature, in which budget reductions are understood as an option available to member states to bring

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<sup>i</sup> As of January 1, 2024, there were 10 countries in arrears under Article 19, of which three countries—the Comoros, Sao Tome and Principe, and Somalia—had been granted a waiver, under General Assembly resolution 78/2, permitting them to vote through the end of the 78<sup>th</sup> session.

international bureaucracies into line, particularly when the latter are perceived to be pursuing their own preferred outcomes at the expense of those of the former. In many ways, this framing is a concise description of the relationship between politicians in the United States—the largest financial contributor to the UN—and the Secretariat over the past half-century.

## 4. Shifts in US Policy and Practice

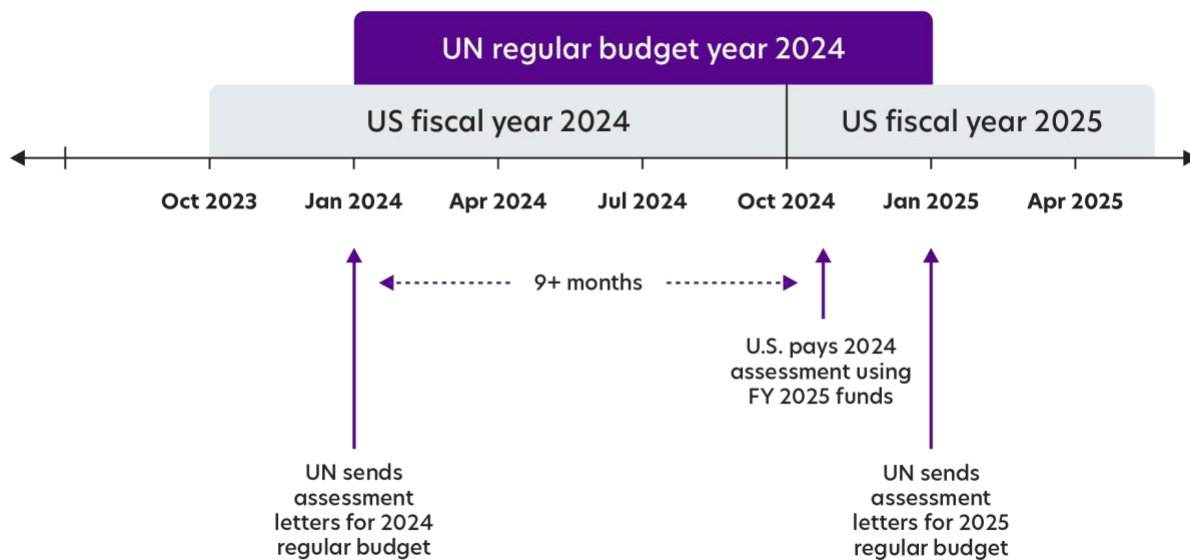
Although most member states fail to fully meet their financial obligations to the UN, the practice of the United States, given that it is assessed the largest amounts under the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets, has a disproportionate impact on the financial situation of the UN. The United States consistently maintains the highest level of arrears of any UN member state. As of May 10, 2024, the US had \$994 million in unpaid regular budget assessments (a level significantly in excess of its 2024 assessment of \$762 million)<sup>9</sup>, over \$1.6 billion in unpaid peacekeeping budget assessments, and \$34 million in unpaid assessments to the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals.<sup>ii</sup>

The level of US arrears is in large part the result of persistent late payment, a practice that began in the 1980s under the Reagan administration. Prior to 1980, the US Government budgeted its UN contributions to the regular budget for a particular UN calendar year in the same US fiscal year. As the US fiscal year begins on October 1 of the previous calendar year, the United States “was always in a position to pay its contribution early and it regularly did so”.<sup>10</sup> In fiscal years 1981 and 1983, however, the United States phased in a new payment pattern whereby the United States paid its UN assessment for a calendar year at the start of the subsequent US fiscal year, therefore essentially guaranteeing the late payment of contributions to the regular budget. This practice of deferred payment by the United States begun in the 1980s persists to this day.

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<sup>ii</sup> Half of the budget for the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals is assessed using the regular budget and the other half through the peacekeeping scales of assessments.

Figure 1: US payment pattern for the UN regular budget



In addition to not paying on time, the United States fails to pay in full. This was not always the case. During the hearings that led to a landmark 1962 advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on UN assessments that concluded that the financial obligation of UN member states included the costs of UN peacekeeping operations, the US Government submitted a statement which stressed the following:

“The language of Article 17 is mandatory: ‘expenses shall be borne’. It answers the prescription of the Advisory Committee of Jurists at the San Francisco Conference for a ‘clear statement of the obligations of Members to meet the expenses of the Organization.’ The Charter adopts the language of the corresponding article of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which has been authoritatively construed to empower the League Assembly to create a binding legal obligation.”<sup>11</sup>

After the issuance of the ICJ advisory opinion, the US Congress adopted legislation stating that “it is the sense of the Congress that the UN should take immediate steps to give effect to the advisory opinion of the ICJ on the financial obligations of members of the UN in order to assure prompt payment of all assessments...”.<sup>12</sup> By the 1980s, however, the position of the United States changed dramatically and Congress began a practice of selectively withholding—or threatening to withhold—



funds. This shift was driven by a growing skepticism towards the UN that had been building in the United States through the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

## 4.1 Types of US withholding

US withholdings of assessed contributions have generally fallen into two categories. The first type of withholding is triggered by certain conditions. Some of these have been used to drive reforms at the UN. One such example was the Kassebaum-Solomon Amendment, passed by Congress in 1985, which would have reduced US contributions to the regular budget unless consensus-based decision-making were to be adopted for budgetary decisions. As a result, the General Assembly adopted [resolution 41/213](#) in December 1986, which established the principle of decision-making in the Fifth Committee on the basis of “the broadest possible agreement.” Despite the fact that this decision-making standard is in place, therefore helping ensure that budget decisions are not taken over US objections, Congress has continued the practice of conditionally withholding assessed contributions.

Other conditional withholdings reflect Congressional policy priorities, many of which relate to Israel and Palestine. These included legislation adopted in 1983 that withholds a portion of US assessed contributions for the UN regular budgets for programs benefitting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO),<sup>14</sup> legislation adopted in 1990 prohibiting making funding available to the UN or any specialized agency “which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states,”<sup>15</sup> and legislation adopted in 1994 blocking voluntary and assessed contributions to the UN or any affiliated organization “which grants full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.”<sup>16</sup>

As noted earlier, the adoption of General Assembly [resolution ES-10/23](#) of 10 May 2024, which granted the State of Palestine additional rights and privileges beyond those generally available to non-member permanent observers, does not afford the PLO the same standing as member states and therefore does not trigger these provisions. The adoption of the resolution and the lack of applicability of existing funding restrictions, however, prompted the introduction of legislation by a group of Republican senators to block funding to any organization providing the PLO with “any status, rights, or privileges beyond observer status”.<sup>17</sup>

The second type of Congressional withholding is unconditional. These include the “legislative cap” instituted by Congress in 1994 limiting US contributions to 25 percent of the budgets of peacekeeping operations.<sup>18</sup> Between 2001 and 2016, Congress consistently provided authorization to pay at a level above 25 percent (a so-called “cap lift”), though, at times, the cap lift was insufficient to fully meet the US assessment rate, as was the case between 2013-2016.<sup>19</sup> No cap lift has been enacted since fiscal year 2017. As the US assessment rate remains above 25 percent, this has contributed to the accumulation of US peacekeeping arrears, which reached \$1.1 billion in 2024.<sup>20</sup> A separate legislative cap also exists for the regular budget; as the level of the cap corresponds to the existing 22 percent ceiling under the scale of assessments, the United States has not been accruing cap-related arrears under the regular budget.

In the late 1990s, concerns about the continued effectiveness of withholding as a tool to drive reform, given the high level of US arrears, prompted Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE) and Jesse Helms (R-NC) to spearhead the adoption of bipartisan legislation popularly known as the Helms-Biden agreement. This legislation, adopted in 1999, provided for a phased repayment of a significant portion of US arrears—\$926 million—if certain conditions were met, including a reduction of US assessment rates to 22 percent (down from 25 percent) under the regular budget and 25 percent (down from 31.5 percent)<sup>21</sup> under peacekeeping budgets. Negotiations led by Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke succeeded in reducing the regular budget ceiling to 22 percent and instituting a new approach to calculating the peacekeeping scale of assessments that reduced the amount paid by the United States, though not to the 25 percent required under Helms-Biden. Nevertheless, Congress concluded that sufficient progress had been made on UN reform to allow the repayment of the arrears. Although this was intended as a “reset” of the relationship between the United States and the UN, its impact was mixed, as some member states resented the approach taken by the United States and having to pay more to cover the US discounts. Moreover, the agreement did not include approximately \$500 million in “contested” arrears, including withholdings resulting from the 25 percent legislative cap. In the end, however, member states accepted the agreement not just because of intense political pressure from the United States but because they concluded that ensuring the continued engagement of the United States at the UN was worth the price.<sup>22</sup>

## 4.2 Other member states

Over the years, other member states have also followed the example of the United States in delaying or withholding payment. China, currently the second largest financial contributor to UN assessed budgets, has asserted in its formal statements in the Fifth Committee that it fulfills its financial obligations to the UN and has blamed the United States for the liquidity crisis.<sup>23</sup> This, however, is not strictly correct, as China does not pay its assessments on time even if it eventually pays in full. Since 2022, during the biannual presentations by the Secretariat to the Fifth Committee on the financial situation of the UN, the level of Chinese arrears has increased significantly such that it currently has the second highest level of unpaid assessments (after the United States) under both the regular budget and the peacekeeping budgets.<sup>24</sup>

Chart 1: Unpaid assessments to the regular budget (2022-2024)

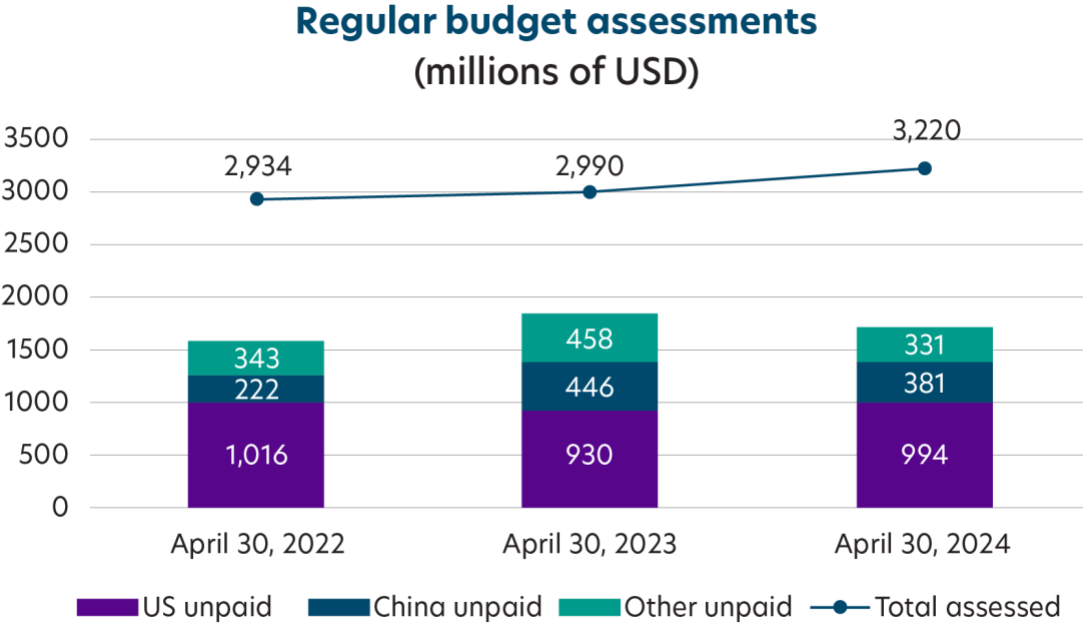
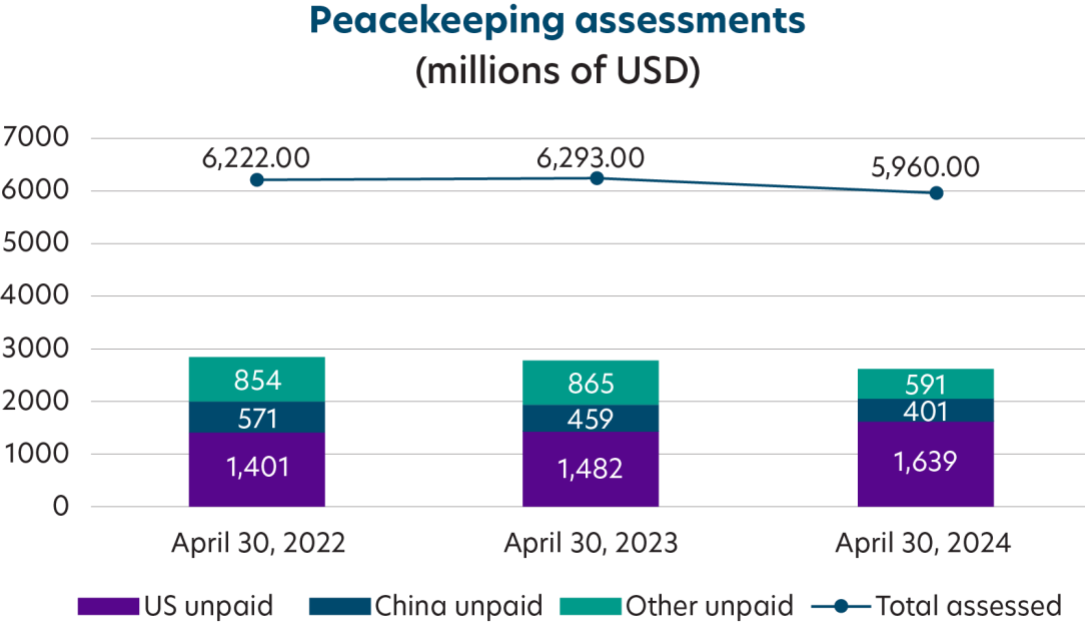


Chart 2: Unpaid assessments to peacekeeping budgets (2021/22–2023/24)



Other member states have also followed the example of the United States in exercising selective withholdings. Over the past decade, the practice of delegations “disassociating” themselves from the funding of specific elements of the regular budget has become commonplace. For example, numerous delegations disassociated from the funding of various provisions in the 2024 regular budget, including the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism and resolutions of the Human Rights Council, after their proposed amendments to the relevant draft resolutions failed.<sup>25</sup>

# 5. Recent Developments

## 5.1 General Assembly approval of liquidity mechanisms

Significant liquidity challenges in 2018 prompted the Secretary-General to issue a report<sup>26</sup> to the General Assembly on improving the financial situation of the UN, which included concrete measures to ameliorate the liquidity situation under both the regular budget and peacekeeping budgets. The General Assembly approved some of these measures related to peacekeeping in [resolution 73/307](#) of July 3, 2019, including the management of cash across the separate special accounts for peacekeeping missions as a single pool on a trial basis and the issuance of assessment letters for the full year.<sup>iii</sup> Although these measures provided some relief, continuing liquidity challenges prompted the Secretary-General to renew his request for measures to improve the financial situation of the organization. In its [resolution 76/272](#) of June 29, 2022, the General Assembly approved an exceptional transfer of \$100 million in unspent funds from the regular budget to the Working Capital Fund, renewed the cash pool arrangement for peacekeeping for a further five years, and approved the use of the Peacekeeping Reserve Fund as a liquidity mechanism for active peacekeeping operations, designating it as the first choice for borrowing before resorting to the cash pool arrangement.

The peacekeeping liquidity mechanisms approved by the General Assembly have allowed the UN to satisfy its financial obligations to troop- and police-contributing countries. Prior to the approval of additional liquidity arrangements in resolutions [73/307](#) and [76/272](#), the primary means by which peacekeeping missions managed cash shortfalls was through the delay of reimbursements to troop- and police-contributing countries.<sup>iv</sup> As a result, peacekeeping missions suffered fewer

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<sup>iii</sup> Previously, assessment letters for individual peacekeeping missions only covered the period from the start of the financial period (1 July) until the end of the current Security Council mandate; a second assessment letter was issued after the renewal of the mandate.

<sup>iv</sup> To help defray the costs of deploying military and police contingents to UN peace operations, member states are reimbursed by the UN for common and essential additional costs incurred in relation to their deployment of personnel and contingent-owned equipment.

liquidity-related disruptions to their activities than activities funded primarily through the regular budget, though at the expense of the member states contributing personnel to peacekeeping operations, often in extremely difficult environments.

## 5.2 New challenges for liquidity in peacekeeping operations

Two recent developments, however, may create additional liquidity pressures on peacekeeping operations. The first is the closure and ongoing liquidation of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Historically, this mission has had a strong cash position, and—since the introduction of the cash pool arrangement in 2019—was a source of borrowing by missions with cash deficits. The mission currently has an approved budget of \$867 million<sup>27</sup>, but with in-situ liquidation tasks scheduled to conclude by the end of March 2025, its budget is expected to shrink to around \$200 million from July 1, 2024, therefore reducing the extent to which it can contribute to the cash pool arrangement.

Second, the adoption of Security Council resolution 2719 (2023) establishing a framework for the financing of African Union (AU)-led peace support operations authorized by the Security Council can potentially have an impact on the liquidity situation for peacekeeping operations.<sup>v</sup> If an eligible AU peace support operation is not able to secure the entirety of its resource requirements, its access to the approved liquidity mechanisms can mean that it is unable to fully replenish the Peacekeeping Reserve Fund or fully reimburse ongoing missions as part of the cash pool, therefore affecting the ability of the UN to deploy future missions and sustain existing operations. As such, it is critical for the AU peace support operations to secure an adequate, predictable, and sustainable source of funding for the portion not financed by UN assessed contributions.

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<sup>v</sup> Although the resolution stipulates that the UN Financial Regulations and Rules and the established UN peacekeeping budgetary process applies to African Union-led operations authorized under this framework, it is not clear whether the mission start-up and liquidity arrangements for peacekeeping operations would apply as most of these are not contained in the Financial Regulations and Rules and because most relate to financing—rather than budgetary—arrangements.

# Concluding Thoughts

Beyond the technical measures proposed by the Secretary-General to address the liquidity challenges facing the UN, various measures have been floated over the years to address the funding challenges of the UN, including by changing the methodology for the scales of assessment to reduce the US share of assessed budgets.<sup>28, 29</sup> These proposals, however, fail to take into account the impossibility of achieving such outcomes through the normal process of consensus-based decision-making in the Fifth Committee. The scales of assessments are, by definition, zero-sum games in which gains by one member state (i.e., reduction in assessment rates) are offset by all other member states. Other suggestions to avoid the scales of assessments altogether and simply peg the amount contributed by each member state to a percentage of their gross domestic product<sup>30</sup> (in a manner more similar to the NATO defense spending targets) are political non-starters for member states.

Ultimately, the only solution to the persistent liquidity challenges that affect the UN is payment by all member states in full and on time. This is easier said than done, given the lack of real consequences for late payment short of the loss of vote under Article 19. Measures such as the charging of late payment fees or a reduction of the Article 19 threshold could potentially create incentives to make more member states pay in full and on time, but transitional measures would have to be put in place to delay or mitigate the impact of the associated sanctions to provide affected member states sufficient time to adjust their payment patterns accordingly.

Member states will only change their practices if they see it in their interest to do so. The Secretariat should work to make a better case for meeting financial obligations in full and on time, including by more clearly demonstrating to individual member states the impact of late payment on the activities and programs of particular interest to those member states. It can also work to more directly counter the narrative that conditional withholding can promote increased effectiveness in the UN by better illustrating the counterproductive nature of this practice and showing how late payment not only reduces the effectiveness of the organization but also complicates its ability to engage in continuous improvement or to develop and implement more wide-ranging reforms.

For the United States, which has become increasingly isolated at the UN over its stance on Gaza, a decision to publicly embrace international obligations—including

those related to the financing of the UN—could be part of a broader package of measures the US can take to increase confidence in American leadership and respond to accusations of double standards when it comes to adherence to international obligations.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, financial support to the UN could be a powerful signal that a Democratic administration could take to publicly demonstrate commitment to multilateralism and the concept of the rules-based international order, with both symbolic and tangible effects.

However, if Donald Trump were to win the election in November 2024, the liquidity situation is likely to worsen significantly. The Trump administration (2017-2021) not only significantly reduced voluntary contributions to the UN system, including by reducing or eliminating funding to entities and organizations such as the UN Population Fund and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, but also reduced assessed contributions by failing to push for the legislative cap lift waiver that would have allowed the United States to pay above the 25 percent legislative cap for peacekeeping assessments. In the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), mounting arrears led to the suspension of the US vote in the UNESCO General Conference in 2013. The accumulation of arrears was one of the principal justifications for the decision by the United States under the Trump Administration to withdraw from UNESCO in 2017.<sup>32</sup> A second Trump administration is likely to double down on an a la carte approach to the UN, selectively funding and retaining membership in UN activities and organizations based on an assessment of ideological alignment with the conservative base.<sup>33</sup> An outright withdrawal from the UN in the manner of the previous US withdrawal from UNESCO is unlikely—even if the level of US arrears were to grow high enough to trigger a loss of vote in the General Assembly under Article 19—as the US would most likely remain in the UN to be able to exercise its veto in the Security Council as a defensive mechanism or as a spoiler. This possibility should be part of contingency planning by the Secretariat and member states to ensure that the UN is able to function under a US administration hostile to the UN and which has had time to reflect on and learn from its past efforts to disrupt UN activities it is unfavorable toward.

At the end of the day, participation in the UN facilitates collective responses to global challenges, serves the interests of member states, and represents burden-sharing at its best.<sup>34</sup> The purposes of the UN reflected in the preamble of the Charter remain as relevant and necessary today as they were when the organization was established nearly eight decades ago, but the UN can only rise to



the challenge if its member states entrust it with the resources necessary to meet the mounting global challenges.

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