Experts: Next Ambassador to the UN Should Prioritize Cutting Waste

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## Experts say a top priority for the next United States ambassador to the United Nations in 2019 should be to reduce waste of taxpayer funds at the UN.

They say the UN has ballooned in size and budget beyond what is necessary and lacks proper oversight, resulting in duplicate staff, programs, and waste.

With the U.S. paying for the lion’s share of the UN’s budget, they say the U.S. should make sure that necessary reforms are undertaken, and that the money is spent more wisely.

The U.S. contributes more to the UN than the next three nations combined, according to a September 2018 [Quartz](https://qz.com/1396994/where-does-the-un-get-its-money-a-simple-explanation-of-a-complex-system/) article.

In 2016, the U.S. paid more than $10 billion for the UN — about one-fifth percent of the UN’s total budget, according to the [Council on Foreign Relations](https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs) (CFR). Of the $10 billion U.S. contribution, about $4 billion went to mandatory “assessed contributions,” and $6 billion went to “voluntary contributions,” according to CFR.

Assessed contributions go towards the UN secretariat’s day-to-day operating costs, or its “regular budget,” as well as towards peacekeeping operations and some UN specialized agencies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The U.S. pays more of the UN’s regular budget than any other of the body’s 193 members, at 22 percent. When the UN was first established in 1945 as a body deliberating peace and security matters, the regular budget was $19.39 million in nominal dollars, according to a Heritage Foundation [report](https://www.heritage.org/report/the-history-the-bloated-un-budget-how-the-us-can-rein-it). In 2016, it was [$5.4 billion](https://www.politifact.com/global-news/statements/2017/feb/01/rob-portman/us-contribution-un-22-percent/) biennially.

Experts say three-fourths of the regular budget is spent on staffing and administrative costs. The U.S. will spend [$639 million](https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/02/united-nations-budget-process-reform-needed/) on the regular budget in 2019, according to the Heritage Foundation’s Brett D. Schaefer

U.S. assessed and voluntary contributions also fund the lion’s share of the UN implementing agencies’ budgets. According to [CFR](https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs), the U.S. pays for about 40 percent of the budget for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Program (WFP), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the IAEA.

Experts point to the UN’s regular budget as a particular area of wasted funds and duplication.

“If you really want to reduce the UN budget, you have to arrest, or constrain UN staffing, and you can do that in a number of ways. One is by reducing the number of staff. And another, however, is by reducing the cost of those staff,” said Schaefer.

Americans are a relatively small percentage of overall staff, so staff cuts would have to be across nationalities, he said. According to Schaefer, UN civil servants are paid 28.7 percent higher than equivalent-level U.S. civil servants in Washington, D.C.

“Many countries see UN jobs not as serving the international community, but as jobs programs for their own citizens,” he said. “They’re plum job assignments.”

Experts also say there is a lot of duplication of programs.

For example, the UN has economic commissions in every region of the world to provide economic development advice to the region. However, there are other international bodies that already do that, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), regional banks, and bilateral aid agencies.

“There is not a lack of development advice available to governments around the world. And the idea that the UN should be providing and funding these economic commissions on a regional basis I think is a prime example [of] duplication,” Schaefer said.

He said each UN regional economic commission employs about 2,000 people, for more than $250 million out of the regular budget each year.

“Those are resources that could be used much more effectively if they were given, for instance, to the High Commissioner for Refugees to help deal with the Syrian refugee crisis,” he said. “Or to give it to the UN Development Program to help actually implement the economic advice they’re getting from each of development banks, right?”

Michael Rubin, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, said it was “time to reverse mission creep” at the UN.

“The UN should not be involved in anything which private NGOs can accomplish. The value of the UN was to be a place where everyone could come and talk; it was not to spawn off endless agencies,” he said. “The Secretary-General has got to return to managing the organization rather than using its resources to jet set around the globe.”

Experts also say there is a lot of waste in peacekeeping missions. The UN peacekeeping budget in 2016 was $8.9 billion, according to the [Quartz](https://qz.com/1396994/where-does-the-un-get-its-money-a-simple-explanation-of-a-complex-system/). The U.S. pays for 28 percent of that budget annually. In 2016, the U.S. spent $2.4 billion, according to [CFR](https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs).

Schaefer said he expects the U.S. to review peacekeeping operations to see if some can be closed so that resources could be allocated to more urgent priorities. He pointed specifically to peacekeeping efforts in Cyprus, Kosovo, Western Sahara, and Morocco.

“These are all places where UN peacekeeping operations have been in place for quite awhile now,” he said. “Ideally those issues could be shepherded to peace, and I hope that happens in the near future. Certainly our resources could be better allocated someplace else, to more urgent priorities.”

For example, he said, the Kosovo peacekeeping operation costs $38 million per year. “What do you get for that? You have a number of buildings around the country, but you’re only talking about eight military observers and ten police,” he said.

He said there are also paid UN volunteers and civil servants, but that there is also a NATO mission there. “You don’t need a peacekeeping operation,” he said. “That money could be better spent on other UN peacekeeping operations where there is a shortage of troops.”

However, he said, the peacekeeping mission continues because there is no expiration date, and Russia wants the operation to continue.

Experts also say that the next U.S. ambassador to the UN needs to make sure UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres follows through with his reform agenda that was passed last year.

“The UN General Assembly approved it last year, but now it’s about implementation,” Schaefer said. “In particular, I think [the U.S. is] going to press him on a promised impact in terms of staffing at the UN.”

“These reforms are supposed to improve efficiency by overcoming duplication, which means that there should be a post realignment within the Secretary General and within the UN secretariat, hopefully leading to some reduction in staffing costs,” he said.

Experts say the U.S. ambassador should also seek to improve accountability at the UN, particularly on enforcing zero tolerance for sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers and civilian officials and protecting whistleblowers.

“Part of the problem is that we don’t have a truly independent inspector general. You get the situations where allegations are either not pursued or reports are downplayed internally before being released in a way that reduces accountability within the UN system. You certainly see that in terms of the whistleblower protection policies within the UN,” Schaefer said.

While cutting waste at the UN has been a goal of both Republican and Democrat administrations since the 1990s, experts say it has not been easy, due to a resistant UN bureaucracy. Part of the reason is how little some member states currently pay, versus how much they get out of it, Schaefer said. In 2019, two-thirds of all UN member states will pay 1.633 percent of the regular budget combined.

“Because most member states have little skin in the game, they have little financial incentive to fulfill their oversight role and seriously consider budgetary restraint. This a key reason why multiple U.S. administrations, Democratic and Republican, have struggled to get support from other member states to rein in U.N. salaries, eliminate outdated mandates, and enact other budgetary reforms,” Schaefer wrote recently in the [National Review](https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/02/united-nations-budget-process-reform-needed/).

Experts say the next U.S. ambassador to the UN should seek to reduce these inefficiencies, and not just be a spokesperson who delivers tough speeches. And, they say, he or she should not be afraid to stand up to the UN and put U.S. interests first.

“First and foremost, the US ambassador must be more loyal to U.S. interests than UN institutional interests. The notion that an ambassador must be sympathetic to the entity to which she is ambassador is nonsense,” said Rubin.

Trump on Friday evening announced he has nominated U.S. Ambassador to Canada Kelly Craft for the position, but she will have to be confirmed by the Senate first.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who recommended her, called Kraft “an exceptional choice for this critical post.”

“Kelly Craft is a strong advocate for American interests and will be a powerful representative of our great nation at the U.N. She has a long record of service to her state and the nation and I’m confident she will continue to serve with distinction as America’s voice to the world at the United Nations,” he said in a statement.