**Inside the coming war between the United States and the United Nations**

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Even before Donald Trump’s inauguration as president, Congress is planning to escalate the clash over the U.N. Security Council’s anti-Israel resolution into a full-on conflict between the United States and the United Nations. If Trump embraces the strategy — and [all signals indicate](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/812390964740427776) he will — the battle could become the Trump administration’s first confrontation with a major international organization, with consequential but largely unpredictable results.

Immediately after the Obama administration abstained Friday from a vote to condemn Israeli settlements as illegal, which passed the Security Council by a vote of 14 to zero, Republicans and Democrats alike criticized both the United Nations and the U.S. government for allowing what Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) called “a one-sided, biased resolution.” Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), the chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee for the State Department and foreign operations, pledged to lead an effort to withhold the U.S. funding that makes up 22 percent of the U.N.’s annual operating budget.

“The U.N. has made it impossible for us to continue with business as usual,” Graham told me right after the vote. “Almost every Republican will feel like this is a betrayal of Israel and the only response that we have is the power of purse.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, never shy about working with Republicans against the Obama administration, told Graham: “Please stand with us, it’s time to take the gloves off,” according to Graham.

In the days since the vote, three Republican senators and their staffs have been working up options behind the scenes for how to convert their threat into action: Graham, Ted Cruz (Tex.) and Tom Cotton (Ark.). They believe they will have support for quick Senate action from both Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and incoming Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), a strong supporter of Israel.

There are several options under consideration, two senior Senate aides working on the issue told me. Some are considered “micro” options, such as passing a resolution that would bar any funding that might go to implementing the anti-settlement resolution. Other options include withdrawing the United States from U.N. organizations such as UNESCO or passing legislation to protect settlers who are American citizens and might be vulnerable to consequences of the resolution.

Withholding U.S. contributions to the United Nations could be done in different ways. There are discretionary funds Congress can easily cut off, but the bulk of U.S. support is obligatory, mandated by treaties that Congress has ratified, making them de facto U.S. law. Depending on how drastic the funding cuts are to be, Congress may have to pass new legislation to undo some of the obligations.

Senators are also looking at ways to withhold U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority or perhaps punish the Palestine Liberation Organization representative office in Washington. Republicans in the Senate don’t plan to wait until Trump is actually in office; aides said to expect action as soon as senators return to Washington next week.

“We will make a very strong attempt to do something immediately,” one senior GOP senate aide said. “It is a real moment to reexamine the relationship with the United Nations and what it really does.”

Not all involved agree on whether the effort is simply about pressuring the Security Council to reverse course on the settlements resolution, or to fundamentally challenge a broad range of U.N. practices and reorient the U.S. approach to the United Nations overall.

Rick Santorum, who served in the Senate the last time the United States refused to pay its dues in full, told me that the coming crisis in U.S.-U.N. relations is the perfect chance for those who want to dismantle the organization altogether.

“This has opened up the opportunity for those of us who are very anti-U.N., who think the it has passed its prime, it’s not serving any really good purpose, it’s not helping legitimate governments around the world and it’s outlived its usefulness,” he said. “To the extent we can deconstruct it, the better.”

During the presidential campaign, most observers predicted that if elected, Trump would focus his international-organization ire on NATO, which he often criticized as being obsolete and a burden on U.S. taxpayers. Now, Santorum said, the United Nations could be first up for action.

“The focus will come off NATO and will move squarely onto the U.N.,” he said. “It’s going to be a very raucous time. Barack Obama, with this move, did more damage to the United Nations than he did to Israel.”

Some Republicans in Congress are comparing the coming U.S. response to the anti-settlement resolution to the U.S. opposition in 1975 to a U.N. General Assembly resolution that equated Zionism with racism. U.S. Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan led the U.S. opposition to that resolution and [gave a famous speech](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2Hlg1-blE4) defending the Jewish state from international persecution. That resolution was eventually repealed.

Other Republican foreign-policy experts see the coming battle as more akin to the effort by then-Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) to withhold portions of America’s U.N. dues in order to pressure the body into reforms. After years of tension, Helms eventually joined with then-Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) to pass legislation restoring U.S. funding in exchange for a compromise on reforms.

President Clinton signed the Helms-Biden legislation, and the Clinton administration negotiated many but not all of the reforms with U.N. leadership. In January 2000, Helms became the first U.S. senator ever [to speak directly](https://www.c-span.org/video/?154824-1/usun-relations) to the U.N. Security Council, after the deal was struck.

“The interests of the United States are better served by demanding reform and seeing that reform takes place than by removing our influence from the U.N.,” Helms said at the time. “It may surprise people to know that I advocate the reform of the United Nations, not its abolishment.”

Danielle Pletka, who served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff under Helms, said the lesson of that episode is that taking on the United Nations can be done, but not without costs and the risk of retaliation. The United Nations could stop doing things that the United States sees as important. Allied countries that value U.N. operations will be upset if those programs are affected. Also, the dues don’t go just go away.

“When you don’t pay, it’s like a mortgage, the bill just racks up. At the end of the day, we negotiated with the United Nations, but we paid a tax,” Pletka said. “This is a great opportunity for Donald Trump to show us he can negotiate the art of the deal. The Congress can give him leverage.”

There are signs that the Trump administration might be willing to make that deal. Its nominees for secretary of state and U.N. ambassador, Rex Tillerson and Nikki Haley, respectively have no ideological baggage on the issue. Trump himself [tweeted](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/813500123053490176?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) that the United Nations “has such great potential but right now it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!”

The Security Council’s anti-settlement resolution has opened up a Pandora’s box in Washington, allowing anyone with a grievance against the world body to have their day in the sun. But 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. Congress and the Trump administration must be strategic and thoughtful as they chart out what seems to be an inevitable clash.