



## Forum for American Leadership

### **Options Paper: U.S. Foreign Assistance and UN Voting**

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#### **Introduction**

During the Trump Administration, both President Trump and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley repeatedly advocated for using a country's voting record with the U.S. in the UN General Assembly as a metric for determining bilateral assistance levels. In his 2018 State of the Union Address, President Trump openly pushed Congress for legislation that would tie decisions on U.S. bilateral assistance to UN voting practices.

This is not a new debate: every year since 1984, Congress has mandated a report from the State Department on Voting Practices in the United Nations that specifically analyzes UN member states' voting coincidence with the United States. As elected leaders seek to streamline and adapt American foreign policy practices to reflect an increasingly multipolar world, it is important to revisit this argument to assess whether it is a solution that would allow U.S. foreign assistance to further support U.S. strategic interests.

*This options paper will present both sides of the argument for consideration.*

#### **Why Using UN Votes to Determine Bilateral Aid is a Good Idea**

As Congress looks to cut federal spending to manage the budget deficit, it is imperative that foreign assistance creates strategic value. Continuing to offer assistance to countries that blatantly, consistently, and overtly oppose U.S. interests in international forums is bad optics and wasteful spending.

According to the State Department, U.S. foreign assistance “advances U.S. national security and development objectives.” However, the historic, autopilot nature of U.S. foreign assistance is not focused enough on shifting behavior and has almost no consequences for countries that make decisions contrary to U.S. national interests.

Thinking strategically is imperative when it comes to maximizing the return on investment of foreign assistance programs. A clear and simple way to assess the extent of a country's foreign policy alignment with the U.S. is to examine their voting record in the United Nations and specifically their vote concurrence with the U.S. on the most important votes—those that the State Department defines as “Contested Votes.” Directly tying bilateral foreign assistance to UN voting records, and the associated threat of a policy such as this, will ensure the United States sheds the current ‘no strings attached’ status of its international aid.

It is undeniably a bad public look for the United States that the vast majority of our largest foreign aid recipients consistently vote against the United States on critical UN votes. For example, Ethiopia, which received \$2.1 billion in U.S. foreign assistance in FY 2022—the most in sub-Saharan Africa—voted with the United States only 31% of the time on ‘Contested Votes’ in 2021. As a result, it is clear that a more calculated approach is needed for the U.S. foreign aid budget that ensures taxpayer money is being used to further national security interests.

UN votes provide an easy data point for the American public, which is routinely skeptical of the value of spending tens of billions of dollars annually on international assistance programs, to point to when trying to assess the extent of U.S. global influence. Formally tying a country's bilateral foreign assistance to its vote concurrence in the UN General Assembly is a clear metric that will allow the U.S. to recapture control over its foreign assistance programs and ensure that taxpayer money is being used to further our strategic interests.

It stands to reason that the threat of removing hundreds of millions of dollars annually could impact the decision-making process of these governments and make them more likely to vote in line with the U.S. This approach would at minimum create a stringent opportunity cost for foreign governments when deciding to vote against U.S. interests in the UN. Additionally, it is likely that the mere threat of removing aid in and of itself is enough to cause a change in voting behavior and would provide more weight to U.S. diplomats' negotiations with foreign governments.

This does not have to be a uniform, wholesale approach taken to every country in the world—one or two pilot countries could be identified where the discrepancy between U.S. foreign assistance spending and host country foreign policy direction is assessed to be especially large—and they could be used to test the effectiveness of this approach. A demonstrated willingness to approach foreign assistance in a similar manner was taken when the Trump Administration cut all assistance to the UN Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNWRA) because the Palestinian Authority refused to meet with Trump Administration officials, including U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman. While the PA is not a UN member state, it frequently utilizes its observer status to undercut the American position on Contested Votes as they relate to Israel.

In conclusion, a stronger and more strategic approach must be utilized to allow the U.S. to gain strategic benefit from the billions of dollars it spends annually on foreign assistance. Formally tying bilateral foreign assistance to UN voting records would provide that approach.

### **Why Using UN Votes to Determine Bilateral Aid is a Bad Idea**

UN General Assembly votes are not an accurate representation of the totality of a country's relationship with the U.S., nor are U.S. national interests solely pursued through UNGA votes. Formally tying foreign assistance exclusively to a country's level of voting concurrence is oversimplistic and would make UN votes the only factor in foreign aid decisions—simultaneously ignoring the nuance present in every bilateral relationship and grossly overinflating the importance of predominantly symbolic UNGA resolutions.

Additionally, there is no uniformly agreed on method for calculating vote concurrence. There are two types of resolutions in the UN General Assembly—consensus and non-consensus—with the vast majority (74% in 2021) being consensus resolutions adopted without a vote. When consensus resolutions are factored into a country's voting patterns, the concurrence rate is remarkably high. The State Department's 2021 report on UN voting practices, for example, found that the average voting coincidence of all UN member states with the U.S. was 85% when consensus measures were included.

Finally, the vast majority of foreign assistance funds long-term development efforts where consistency and predictability are critical to success. Programs to build health systems, improve farmer productivity, or address youth unemployment take years and constant attention to produce results, which have benefits to the United States far beyond votes in the UN. These benefits include

creating economic resilience in poor countries which helps promote political stability and build a middle class that will advocate for open societies and free market policies. Having funding for such programs withdrawn or reinstated as countries make unrelated decisions on various UN votes undermines the entire effort at the outset.

To solely judge a country's level of voting concurrence from non-consensus votes, as the Trump Administration articulated, is to artificially adjust the concurrence rate and intentionally base it on a relatively small sample of votes—votes that fail to account for the myriad ways in which the U.S. works with broad coalitions of countries on issues that serve its national interests every day in the UN General Assembly.

Moreover, the data suggests that threatening to cut bilateral assistance does not lead to changes in voting patterns. Even if only recorded votes on “non-consensus” resolutions are counted, the average voting coincidence of all UN member states with the U.S. increased in 2021 versus the years of the Trump Administration when these threats were being made. In its report on 2021 voting practices, the State Department noted a voting coincidence rate on resolutions where a roll-call vote was taken of 41%, a full 10 points higher than the average from 2017-2019 (31%). The fact that the rate of voting coincidence is increasing at a time when the President and his Administration are not threatening to cut foreign assistance to countries based on their UN voting patterns suggests that the Trump Administration's strategy did not work. In fact, the data could potentially suggest that such threats were even counterproductive to the goal of getting other UN member states to support preferred policy positions more frequently.

A potential explanation for the ineffectiveness of the Trump Administration's threats, and a major reason why this approach is flawed, is the fact that the vast majority of U.S. foreign assistance money does not go to the governments of the recipient country. Instead, it goes directly to civil society and NGO implementing partners. Oftentimes it is explicitly stated in the appropriating language that funds cannot go through host country governments, and therefore it is mistaken to assume that foreign policy decisions that are made directly by a country's executive would be swayed by the threat of removing U.S. foreign assistance. In fact, many unfriendly regimes, where the leadership's sole priority is regime survival and not the wellbeing of their citizens, may take joy in having U.S. foreign assistance threatened. This would allow them to appeal to the nationalistic, anti-American and anti-imperialist sentiments in their country, whilst the consequences would be passed on exclusively to those most in need of the humanitarian assistance that the U.S. provides.

As a result, foreign assistance is not the bargaining chip for dealing with unfriendly regimes that many think it is, and threatening its withdrawal is likely to backfire and allow the ruling elites in these countries to consolidate their power (and anti-American views) while exclusively hurting the most vulnerable.

It is not misguided, however, to argue that we need to derive increased strategic value from foreign assistance. Yet, instead of using a blunt-force instrument like formally tying foreign assistance to UN votes, the United States needs to adopt a more flexible and targeted approach that identifies exactly where the United States has maximum leverage on a country-by-country basis. This is the most effective method by which the U.S. can entice behavioral change.

The proposition that the U.S. should slash international assistance to countries who fail to agree with us in the General Assembly at an arbitrary frequency is over-simplistic and ultimately self-defeating. The fact is, if we use votes on non-binding resolutions as a cudgel to punish those who disagree with us, we could end up hurting countries with whom we have important strategic relationships. In turn, this could negatively impact our own foreign policy and national security interests. This is especially risky in an era of increasing geopolitical competition with China, in which PRC diplomats are actively working to challenge U.S. influence on the world stage, both in terms of our bilateral relationships with individual countries and at international organizations like the UN.

In the end, beyond addressing humanitarian crises, promoting development, and supporting other activities that advance our country's values, international assistance promotes America's comparative advantage over geopolitical rivals. The United States ought to pursue policies which include value promotion globally, while contributing to its geostrategic interests. Removing foreign aid could easily result in reducing America's influence and ability to pursue its strategic priorities, leaving the door wide open for countries that have a different vision of geopolitical order—particularly China—to take our place.

### **Case Study—South Africa**

#### Why tying assistance to UN Votes could work

Once the beacon of economic strength and prosperity in Africa, South Africa's ruling ANC party has created a self-inflicted economic crisis through its combination of fiscal mismanagement, state capture, and misguided foreign policy. Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign assistance the United States has given the country annually since Apartheid ended in 1994, the country has sworn by its stated foreign policy stance of 'nonalignment.' This nonaligned posture, however, has more often than not resulted in votes against the United States in international bodies where South Africa maintains one of the lowest voting coincidence rates with the United States, placing it into a category with countries such as Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela.

In recent years, while still clinging publicly to this 'nonaligned' stance, South Africa has consciously and consistently sought closer relations with both Russia and China. This has been most evident in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine with South Africa hosting joint military exercises with the Russian and Chinese navies on the one-year anniversary of the invasion and allowing a sanctioned Russian military ship to dock in Cape Town to be resupplied with weapons. Additionally, South Africa has consistently voted against American interests in the United Nations, especially on votes regarding the war in Ukraine. According to a State Department report to Congress, South Africa had a voting similarity of only 32% with the U.S. on "Contested Votes" in 2021. Despite this, in Fiscal Year 2022 South Africa received \$650 million in foreign assistance from the United States.

Simply put, South Africa is actively, and very publicly, aligning with our two largest geopolitical adversaries while continuing to receive foreign assistance money from the United States and its citizens. The threat of removing this aid, and the domestic crisis it would cause for the South African government, could be an important bargaining tool for the United States.

### Why tying assistance to UN votes could be unsuccessful

The threat of removing U.S. foreign assistance funding (e.g. PEPFAR) is highly unlikely to motivate South African leadership to adjust its entrenched and long-held foreign policy views. Today's South African leadership is the same one that has overseen the country's economic and social descent while prioritizing state capture over raising living standards.

What *has* been proven to impact and motivate South Africa's leadership elite, and thus provides the United States leverage in encouraging a behavioral shift, is the country's continued eligibility for the African Growth & Opportunity Act (AGOA), a non-reciprocal trade program which provides duty-free access to the U.S. market for South African exporters. The threat of revoking AGOA eligibility throughout 2023 from various parts of the U.S. Government because of South Africa's foreign policy trajectory has caused multiple emergency high-level South African delegations to be sent to Washington D.C. with the sole intention of protecting this eligibility.

These specific points of leverage exist in every country's bilateral relationship with the United States, and adopting a strategy that identifies these on a country-by-country basis will make threats exponentially more powerful and more effective in enticing behavioral shifts.

*This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership's [International Development Working Group](#).*

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