# [Nikki Haley Threatened to Withhold Backing for U.N.’s Congo Mission, Then Blinked](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/30/nikki-haley-threatened-to-withhold-backing-for-u-n-s-congo-mission-then-blinked/)

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In her first major U.N. test as a negotiator, Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, gave her Security Council counterparts an ultimatum: Trim 1,500 troops from the U.N.’s largest peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the United States would withhold its support for a resolution extending the mandate of 17,000-strong mission, a move that could have imperiled the U.N.’s largest peacekeeping operation, according to three diplomatic sources familiar with the threat.

“We can reduce the troops tremendously,” Haley would later tell a gathering of foreign-policy mandarins and reporters at the Council on Foreign Relations. President Joseph Kabila’s “corrupt” government, she suggested, may be unworthy of international support from the United Nations. And the U.N. mission, she added, might be compromising its integrity by “aiding a government that is inflicting predatory behavior against its own people.”

The Security Council — fretting that an abrupt draw-down would create a security vacuum in a country roiled by violence ahead of presidential elections early next year — called her bluff, betting that the United States would not want the blame for cutting and running from a country in chaos. They were right. During weeks of closed-door Security Council negotiations that left it isolated, Washington scaled back its demand, agreeing to shrink the mission by fewer than 370 troops.

Haley did not emerge empty-handed: The cuts offer a few million dollars in savings for U.S. taxpayers. And Washington will be able to sell it as an even larger cut because the mission is authorized to deploy 19,815 troops, three thousand more than it actually has on the ground. The resolution, which will be adopted Friday, will lower the troop ceiling to 16,215. It also calls on the U.N. chief to conduct a strategic review of the mission with an eye towards pushing for further cuts after the election. And it includes a provision making the case for sending underperforming peacekeeping units home, a key U.S. demand.

The episode underscores the challenges Haley faces in meeting the White House’s goal of slashing the U.N. peacekeeping budget by more than $1 billion. But it also highlighted the willingness of America’s U.N. counterparts to work with Haley to bring costs down, but at a far more measured pace than the White House is seeking.

The broader American review of peacekeeping has alarmed some U.N. officials, foreign diplomats, and even some American officials. They view it as a hastily organized project concerned primarily with meeting budget targets by a hostile White House, not one rooted in a strategy for improving the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions.

For instance, Haley, who vowed to conduct a detailed review of every U.N. mission down to the performance of each peacekeeping battalion, has yet to hold a single meeting the U.N.’s peacekeeping chief. The radical cuts being sought by Trump “would mean the death of peacekeeping,” according to one council diplomat.

“Living up to this billion-dollar-cut rhetoric is going to end up hurting civilians on the ground,” said Aditi Gorur, a peacekeeping specialist at the Stimson Center.

In her confirmation hearing, Haley cautioned against the risks of “slash-and-burn cuts” to funding for the United Nations. But the White House has tasked her with doing precisely that, leading the effort to dramatically scale back U.S. funding to the United Nations. A prime target: The U.N.’s $8 billion-a-year peacekeeping budget, some 28 percent of which the United States has to pay for.

Some cuts are low-hanging fruit. The U.N. was already winding down missions in Haiti, Ivory Coast, and Liberia before Haley arrived in New York, offering the prospect of up to $170 million in total cuts. There is also growing fatigue over the continuation of the large peacekeeping mission in Darfur, which has often fallen short of its mandate of protecting civilians at a projected cost of $324 million to American taxpayers in 2017, making it a ripe target for shrinkage.

But the United States is facing resistance to cutting some of the U.N.’s largest and most costly missions, from the Central African Republic to South Sudan, where more than 200,000 civilians are seeking safety in U.N. compounds.

In Congo, Haley had hoped to send an early message about the seriousness of U.S. demands for belt tightening. But diplomats say that Haley was ultimately persuaded to accept a more measured approach.

The cuts to the Congo mission, known as MONUSCO, come at a perilous time for the country. President Joseph Kabila’s refusal to step aside at the end of his constitutionally limited second term last year reinvigorated rebel movements that have simmered for years across the vast central African nation. In the remote Kasai-Central province, the Congolese army has been engaged in fierce clashes with several local militias. Multiple mass graves have been discovered in recent weeks, which was what drew two U.N. investigators, who were found dead there this week.

Meanwhile, the political situation continues to deteriorate. Negotiations between the political opposition and Kabila’s ruling alliance appeared to break down this week as the two sides failed to agree on how to implement an earlier power-sharing deal meant to shepherd the country toward overdue elections in December. The country’s conference of Catholic bishops withdrew from its mediating role in the talks, and the opposition [called](http://in.reuters.com/article/congo-politics-casualties-idINKBN14C11V) for mass protests to “resist the dictatorship taking root in our … country.”

Similar protests in September resulted in the deaths of at least 66 people, when Kabila’s security forces responded with what the U.N. called “excessive force.”

“The elections, whenever they happen, are probably going to be destabilizing and bloody,” said Lise Morjé Howard, an associate professor of government at Georgetown University who has written extensively on peacekeeping in Congo. “It’s hard to keep the peace when there’s no peace to keep.”

MONUSCO, which is the only U.N. mission with a special offensive brigade mandated to “neutralize” rebel threats, succeeded in routing one high-profile group of insurgents known as the M23 in 2013. But since then its progress has been slower against the dozens of other rebel groups roaming in the east of the country.

It has succeeded in weakening some, notably the FDLR, a group with roots in the Rwandan genocide, but it has struggled to work cooperatively with the Congolese army, which stands accused of human rights abuses. The U.N. mission itself has also been sullied by allegations of abuse, with more victims pointing fingers at MONUSCO in 2016 than any other U.N. mission.

Some feel that withdrawing MONUSCO in the face of interference by the government would only reward bad behavior and, in many cases, expose innocent civilians to government abuses.

“The stakes are so high with the political transition and the protection of civilians that we absolutely need MONUSCO to be able to act and use force if needed,” France’s U.N. ambassador, François Delattre, told Foreign Policy. “U.N. peacekeepers are deployed to protect civilians against atrocities and they are often the last resort where civilians can seek shelter in front of an imminent attack.”

“We are 100 percent in favor of reforming the U.N. peacekeeping operations to make them more efficient, as long as we don’t jeopardize their core mandate which is protecting civilians,” he said.

In her remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, Haley said the administration’s top priority is building up the U.S. military, which will require cuts across the rest of the budget.

“Cuts are never fun. But what I will tell you, as someone who was in business and as an accountant, when you go through tough times you step back, you get smarter, and you start spending wiser,” she said. “We’re going to wind down the peacekeeping mission in Haiti. It’s not needed anymore. We’re going to wind it down in the Ivory Coast. We’re going to wind it down in Liberia.”

In South Sudan, Haley said, it may be time to “rethink that mandate” as the civil war burns on with little hope of a political solution to the country’s crisis. “The agreement of the host country to an operation is essential to its success,” she added. “Again, in South Sudan, the government openly opposes the mission, and the mission has suffered.”

“Again, I’m not just interested in cheaper peacekeeping operations. I’m interested in better and smarter peacekeeping operations,” she added.

Haley’s push for cuts in Congo put her at odds with U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, who recommended the mission there remain at its current strength of 17,000 for now, and even called for an increase of some 320 police officers. The United States opposed the hiring of new police, but supported a provision in the resolution that would allow the U.N. to borrow those officers from other U.N. missions.

But some observers said that Guterres could turn out to be a potential ally. The former U.N. refugee chief has long viewed U.N. peacekeeping missions as excessively cumbersome and is looking to focus his efforts on mediation and conflict prevention. But Guterres has not pushing for the kind of financial shock treatment prescribed by the White House.

“In the end, Haley and Guterres are the hare and tortoise of U.N. reform,” said Richard Gowan, a U.N. expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations. “Haley is dashing for cuts, while Guterres has been looking for more measured ways to downsize peacekeeping.”

For the time being, the Trump administration is holding off any decision on the fate of other large peacekeeping missions in [Mali](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/29/blue-helmets-in-mali-targeted-by-terrorists-and-by-trumps-budget-cuts/), southern Lebanon, and the Central African Republic, which are not scheduled to have their mandates renewed until June, August and November.

But the administration has signaled that no missions are untouchable, and it has have not ruled out the possibility of withholding financial contributions to some missions.

American planners have fixed their sights on two of the oldest U.N. missions for possible reductions or even closure: the peacekeeping force in Cyprus, which was established in 1974 to prevent fighting between the island’s Greek and Turkish inhabitants, and the mission in Western Sahara, which was created in 1991 to help pave the way for a referendum to determine whether local chose independence or integration into Morocco.