Why Is the Biden Administration So in Love With the United Nations?

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For a body created to end the kind of conflict now raging in Ukraine, the United Nations has done precious little to stigmatize Russia or support its victims. Even in an area where the U.N. excels—words and statements—the organization has embarrassed itself by endorsing the Russian [line](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-united-nations-and-ukraine-russia-invasion-antonio-guterres-11646770891) that the invasion is a “special military operation,” and not a war. But even that bit of Kafkaesque buffoonery is unlikely to deter the Biden administration from its mission to rejoin every United Nations specialized agency and transfer billions in taxpayer dollars to the bureaucrats of Turtle Bay.

Convinced that American influence within international organizations required urgent resuscitation post-Trump, the Biden administration brought the United States back into the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC). And now the administration is seeking to pay nearly a billion dollars in arrears to the U.N. for [peacekeeping](https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/time-new-helms-biden-agreement-reform-the-un) operations and to [rejoin and pay hundreds of millions](https://www.axios.com/israel-us-return-unesco-8ce6dfaa-efbb-42b1-8676-9f29ef02c17c.html) in arrears to the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This is nuts.

The past year offers ample proof that UN bodies remain as uninterested in American priorities as they were during the Trump years, despite President Biden’s recommitment to the WHO, the UNHRC, and the Paris Climate Agreement. Never mind that the WHO badly bungled the response to Covid-19, failed to credibly investigate the origins of a virus that has taken the lives of six million globally, or condemn China for its refusal to cooperate with an honest investigation. Indeed, the China-backed candidate running the WHO stood unopposed for a second term, and WHO members appear poised to [reward](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/exclusive-us-opposes-plans-strengthen-world-health-organization-2022-01-21) this failure with a massive increase in assessed contributions over U.S. objections.

Similarly, since reengaging with the Human Rights Council, the Biden administration has not even proposed, much less secured, reforms to address the pervasive anti-Israel bias of the body. Nor has it reformed membership standards that allow human rights violators like China and Russia as members. In fact, the HRC’s anti-Semitic agenda sunk to a new low when the Council last year adopted, over U.S. objections, a new, permanent [International Commission of Inquiry](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-n-s-israel-libel-machine-expands-11640648491) to investigate Israel. Ditto the Paris Agreement, which, notwithstanding America’s newfound faith, continues to fall woefully short of its own goal to solve the “climate crisis.”

Now, with support from the Democratic Congress, the Biden administration hopes to spend nearly a billion dollars for U.N. peacekeeping arrears and hundreds of millions in past dues to UNESCO with no strings attached.

But strings are necessary. U.N. peacekeeping operations have long suffered from insufficient oversight, falling short of expectations and even precipitating tragedies like the introduction of [cholera](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-haiti-cholera-un-feature-trfn/a-decade-after-u-n-linked-cholera-outbreak-haitians-demand-justice-idUSKBN2772RM) to Haiti; and that’s apart from their history of sexual abuse and other misconduct. Meanwhile, UNESCO, with its long record of anti-Israel bias, would receive hundreds of millions to spend as it likes while rewarding the Palestinian [campaign for de jure statehood](https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/palestinian-push-hurts-the-palestinian-people-and-the-un-organizations) absent a renunciation of terrorism or a peace agreement with Israel.

The reality the Biden administration refuses to accept is that U.N. organizations have little incentive to reform themselves, and too few member states care enough to fight for change. History has proven that financial leverage can help the U.S. impose needed reforms. President Biden should know this intimately: In the 1990s, the unlikely team of Senate Foreign Relations Committee conservative Jesse Helms and his Democratic counterpart, Joe Biden, successfully tied U.S. payments to specific reforms in the Helms-Biden Act.

Some in Congress [argue](https://sarajacobs.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=296) that U.S. arrears allow China more influence in the United Nations. China has indeed been gaining influence, infiltrating U.N. specialized agencies, and strategically placing Beijing loyalists in key positions. But U.S. arrears are a small part of that dynamic; American influence within the U.N. depends far more on the decisiveness of the president of the United States than on the status of bookkeeping arrears.

The Biden administration has an opportunity to be strategic in its approach. U.S. law precludes payments to organizations, like UNESCO, that grant full membership to the currently non-existent state of Palestine, and caps payments to U.N. peacekeeping at 25 percent of the total budget to incentivize reforms, diversify the funding base, address swelling spending, and tackle misconduct and poor performance.

These laws were passed to protect U.S. interests and taxpayer dollars. If the President and Congress believe U.S. taxpayers will be better served by overriding these laws and paying over a billion into U.N. coffers, the very least they must do is leverage those hard-earned American dollars to secure reforms that serve not only American values and principles, but the interests of the United Nations.