



## U.S. Adopts Clear Interest-Based Approach to the UN system

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Donald Trump's second presidency will entail a return of the U.S. to more selective and assertive engagement with international organisations, including the UN system. One can expect pressure to pursue American interests, cuts in funding for a number of specialised agencies, and a U.S. exit of some UN organs, agencies, and formats. This will pose challenges to the EU and Poland, a country that attaches great importance to the activities of the UN system and multilateral institutions.

**Donald Trump and Multilateral Cooperation.** Trump's approach to the UN system stems from his [scepticism of multilateralism](#), already evident in his previous term. His administration's actions then were characterised by a focus on maximising benefits for the U.S. at the expense of compromise and good relations with partners, and limited predictability, linked to a strong reliance on the president's own opinion over that of his advisers. This was compounded by transactionalism (the expectation of concrete benefits in exchange for specific actions, e.g., maintaining funding for a particular organisation or keeping the U.S. in it) and the associated tendency to force changes, including in international organisations, through ultimatums.

This was reflected in, among other things, the proposal put forward in 2017 at the beginning of Trump's first term for a radical 44% cut in contributions to most international organisations, which was stopped by Congress, as it decides the budget in the U.S. The president also criticised the UN itself as ineffective, although he recognised the potential of the organisation and, for example, took an active part in the debate at its General Assembly (GA) every year. His first administration's stance towards UN agencies varied. It interacted constructively with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the International Atomic Energy Agency, among others. However, Trump also criticised a number of others, such as [the World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) as being pro-China, ineffective in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, and lacking the reforms

he wanted, albeit unspecified, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and [UNRWA](#), which supports Palestinian refugees, for being anti-Israel. The ultimatums formulated against international organisations have sometimes resulted in success for Trump, such as changes to international postal rates by the Universal Postal Union, and more often in the withholding of funding (UNRWA) or [a U.S. exit \(e.g., WHO, UNESCO\)](#). Most of the significant steps Trump took [were reversed by his successor Joe Biden](#), including terminating withdrawal from the WHO, restoring funding to UNRWA in 2021, and returning to UNESCO in 2023.

**Trump's Supporters.** During the 2024 election campaign, Trump supporters rallied around ideas in the [Project 2025 initiative](#) and called for pragmatism in his approach to international organisations. While the initiative recognises their potential for the implementation of U.S. foreign policy, it emphasises the primacy of American interests. Among other things, it proposes a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of American involvement in every organisation, abandonment if they act against U.S. interests (as interpreted by Project 2025 adherents, pointing explicitly to the WHO as an example) and more effective accountability for their actions using financial and institutional tools. It also identified the U.S. ambassador to the UN as one of several key administration positions that should be filled by those with a close personal relationship with the president and are therefore trustworthy.

# PISM BULLETIN

Trump's nominee for UN ambassador, Elise Stefanik, fits with the Project 2025 expectations. The congresswoman has been considered his loyal associate since 2019 when she sided with him during [his first impeachment](#). She has pledged to implement his ["America First" policy](#) at the UN and its agencies and to cooperate based on U.S. interests. While expressing support for reforming and improving the UN's effectiveness, she expects the UN to focus on maintaining international peace and security. Her statements suggest strong support at the UN for Israel and combating Chinese influence, and reluctance to coordinate climate and immigration policies, among others. Stefanik also seeks to ensure that U.S. funds go to those UN programmes that are effective according to the current administration and do not work against U.S. interests, nor are found to be involved in fraud, corruption, links to terrorism, or anti-Semitism.

**Prospects for the New Term.** Trump's first decisions in his second term are consistent with his past approaches and the Project 2025 vision. Withdrawal from the WHO was announced on his first day in office and will take effect in one year, while the termination of U.S. funding will hamper the organisation's activities and may derail the [ongoing negotiations of an anti-pandemic treaty](#). However, the withdrawal may serve as a negotiating tactic, as Trump in interviews has not ruled out cancelling it, rather highlighting the U.S. contribution as being too high compared to China (in fact, however, the contributions of all countries in the UN system are GDP-based, and almost three-quarters of U.S. contributions to the WHO were voluntary). [Withdrawal again from the Paris Agreement, in turn, confirms Trump's reluctance towards multilateral climate policy](#), although the U.S. will be able to continue to participate in the UN climate negotiations, as it has not left the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Termination of cooperation with the Human Rights Council and the ending of funding for it and UNRWA, announced on 4 February, are part of the administration's overt pro-Israel policy, as is the announced review of UNESCO activities. The president has also ordered a 90-day review and suspension of U.S. development assistance and a 180-day review of funding for all intergovernmental organisations and treaty obligations of the U.S. This has already hampered the activities of some of them, despite the UN's pledge in 2024 to be prepared for such perturbations.

The choice of Stefanik, though, indicates that Trump sees the UN as a vital tool for advancing U.S. interests. Although the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a bill in June 2024 eliminating U.S. contributions to the organisation's regular budget, amounting to about one-fifth of its annual revenues, which would severely complicate its operations, it is unlikely to pass in full in the new Congress,

and the president's statements do not indicate that he supports it for now either. U.S. policy in bodies such as the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the UNGA will be even more strongly pro-Israel and anti-China. This could exacerbate the already [serious tensions between some of the permanent members of the UNSC—China and Russia, and the U.S.](#), making it more difficult to make decisions, such as extending peacekeeping missions or electing a new UN Secretary-General in 2026. [The administration may push for, among others, ending the UNIFIL peacekeeping mission in Lebanon](#), the extension of which can be blocked by a U.S. veto in the UNSC. This also applies to other peacekeeping missions that the administration deems to be failing to fulfil their mandates.

It is quite probable that, once the review of international organisations is completed, the Trump administration will cut funding to a number of agencies and bodies (notably, for example, the International Organisation for Migration, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), and will again announce an exit from UNESCO and possibly other specialised organisations. Rejection of the [Global Compact on Migration](#) is also not excluded. On the other hand, one can expect the continuation of funding for UNICEF's child support and the World Food Programme's (WFP) fight against hunger, as Stefanik has pointed to them as being effective (and this despite their heavy involvement in aid to Gaza, which in Trump's optics gives rise to suspicion of anti-Israeli bias).

**Conclusions.** While the U.S. desire for greater influence over the UN and its agendas is understandable, the radical implementation of the "America First" policy could further weaken the credibility of the West as a bloc among developing countries. This would make it more difficult to build coalitions on important issues, including countering China's and Russia's initiatives in the UN system (e.g., in the UNGA or [ITU](#)) and in criticising their actions as contrary to international law, such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It could also lead to an increase in the influence of China and other countries in the UN system, especially if the U.S. was to attempt to implement some of Trump's radical ideas unrelated to multilateral policy (e.g., seizing control of Greenland through coercion) or if China were to significantly make up financial shortfalls after the loss of U.S. funds.

The new U.S. president's actions may challenge Poland and the EU to take greater financial commitments to some specialised organisations to make up for shortfalls caused by the U.S. withdrawing or cutting funding. Such actions may also nullify some of Poland's international peacebuilding efforts, such as [involvement in UNIFIL](#). However, Poland can count on the U.S. as an ally in reforming and improving the efficiency of the UN, which it considers one of the pillars of the international order.