



General Disassembly

Is the GOP trying to starve the United Nations into submission?

BY EMILY CADEI | 4 OCTOBER 2011



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To hear Republican politicians tell it, the failure of the United States to stop the Palestinians' headlong drive for member-state status at the U.N. Security Council was the result of employing too many carrots and not enough sticks. That line of reasoning was on full display this week, as Congress froze \$200 million in assistance earmarked for the Palestinian Authority in retaliation for its statehood bid. But a number of GOP figures are thinking even bigger -- or smaller, as it turns out: Seeking a tougher U.S. line on a U.N. system that they say allows rogue states to operate with diplomatic impunity, they are rallying support for measures that would fundamentally transform the U.S. relationship with the world's preeminent international body.

With the 2012 presidential campaign focused elsewhere, Republican candidates have been less explicit about their views of the U.N. system, though Rick Perry and Mitt Romney have both called for the United States to reassess its sizable contributions to the organization if the

Palestinians gain any sort of recognition at the U.N. General Assembly. Both GOP front-runners should be easy converts to the anti-U.N. cause: Romney called the United Nations "an extraordinary failure" in his previous campaign for president, and Perry refused to honor United Nations Day as Texas governor in 2004.

Meanwhile, House Republicans are pushing a slew of legislation that would do everything from block funding to certain U.N. bodies to withdraw the United States from the United Nations entirely. The most high-profile GOP proposal, a piece of legislation introduced by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), would completely restructure how - and how much -- the United States contributes to the international organization.

While none of the bills has any chance of becoming law during this Congress, thanks to opposition from Senate Democrats, the growing Republican antipathy to the United Nations has the potential to transform U.S. involvement with the world's premier international institution in the years ahead. For that reason, U.N. officials and their defenders in U.S. officialdom aren't taking any chances.

Several pro-U.N. advocacy groups had their rapid-response operations firing after Ros-Lehtinen's first hearing as House Foreign Affairs chair -- in a session titled "The United Nations: Urgent Problems That Need Congressional Action" -- back in January. And when her bill was introduced in late August, they countered with a grassroots and media campaign opposing the legislation. The State Department's International Organization Affairs Bureau has also stepped up its media outreach considerably ever since Ros-Lehtinen took office.

This week, a bipartisan policy group, Partnership for a Secure America, is running a one-day, full-page ad in Capitol Hill publications Politico, Roll Call, the Hill, and Congressional Quarterly stating that withholding funds to the United Nations hurts U.S. national security interests. The statement is signed by 30 former lawmakers and administration officials from both parties, as well as retired military generals.

From a congressional vantage point, the palpable level of concern over a bill that at this point amounts to little more than routine political posturing seems overblown. But in Turtle Bay, where every turn of phrase is freighted with meaning, Washington's rhetoric is taken very seriously, especially when coming from the government that foots the largest proportion of the U.N. bill. The United States each year contributes 22 percent of the U.N.'s regular budget, which amounted to \$583 million this year. Japan is the next largest contributor, funding 16.6 percent of the budget, followed by Germany at 8.6 percent.

Over the past 30 years, both U.S. funding and leadership at the United Nations have ebbed and flowed. Under President Barack Obama, the United States has paid up and anted up at the United Nations, reinvigorating American participation in the body and conducting aggressive diplomacy at the Security Council and in a range of U.N. bodies with which it had only limited involvement during George W. Bush's administration. But the nexus of spending pressures at home, doubts about interventionism overseas, and a rising conservative corps in Congress could presage another downturn.

Those defending a strong U.S. role at the United Nations have American public opinion on their side. A survey this spring conducted by a nonpartisan polling outfit for the pro-U.N. advocacy group the Better World Campaign found that 85 percent of voters think the United States should play an active role within the United Nations, and 60 percent of Americans say the country should pay its U.N. dues on time and in full.

Of course, the United Nations has long been criticized for offering a platform for Israel-bashing and anti-U.S. initiatives. That is perhaps the reason that a Gallup poll this year found that, though Americans did not want to withdraw from the body, only 31 percent of respondents answered that the United Nations was doing a good job in trying to solve the world's problems, while 62 percent said it was doing a poor job.

The Palestinian statehood bid will only exacerbate these divisions. If the United States is forced to veto the resolution to grant the Palestinians' member-state status at the Security Council, the Palestinians will likely appeal to the General Assembly -- providing an even larger forum for countries to criticize Israeli and U.S. policies. This in turn will allow Republican critics of the United Nations to paint their cause as a necessary step to advance Israel's security, thereby gaining further momentum in Congress.

U.N. supporters in Washington are thus, for good reason, on the defensive. But in much the same way Ros-Lehtinen and her allies in Congress sense a political opening from the intense reaction to the Palestinian statehood debate in New York, U.N. supporters say the recent spotlight on the organization can also be an opportunity.

"We have to use it as a moment to educate members about the economic and security and political interests of the United States," that the United Nations serves, says Peter Yeo, executive director of the Better World Campaign, which is funded by billionaire CNN founder Ted Turner.

Groups like Yeo's are aiming to reinforce to lawmakers just how much more there is to the organization than the anti-Israel demagoguery and peacekeeper abuses that make the news. Their point: Ros-Lehtinen's bill -- what Yeo calls "the most drastic U.N. reform measure ever introduced" -- would not only go after what is dysfunctional about the organization, but also weaken its very foundations.

Whereas past measures in the 1980s and 1990s were narrowly targeted -- withholding funding proportional to the cost of various controversial programs or blocking money until certain reform measures were taken -- Ros-Lehtinen's legislation would transform how the entire organization is funded.

"It would be problematic for the organization because its funding would not be predictable," said Abiodun Williams, a onetime advisor to U.N. Secretaries-General Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon who's now at the U.S. Institute of Peace. Ros-Lehtinen and her Republican allies say making country-by-country contributions 80 percent voluntary, rather than letting the body assign annual dues to each country as it does now, would make the United Nations more responsive. Critics say it would be unworkable -- destroying consensus and making anything other than short-term planning impossible.

It's a possibility that has made even some fire-breathing hawks queasy. Former Vice President Dick Cheney told conservative Pajamas Media in September that he did not think defunding the organization is "necessarily the right response here."

Bush's administration -- no cheerleader for the United Nations -- also resisted a similar House Republican effort in 2005. A bill sponsored by Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) would have withheld 50 percent of U.S. dues unless a long list of reforms were made. Although the bill passed the House, it never made it through the Senate, in part due to intense White House pressure.

Other GOP proposals could also gain traction if Republicans captured the Senate or the White House in 2012. The Republicans' funding proposal for the United Nations in the coming fiscal year is a particularly useful blueprint for how a GOP Congress might attempt to curtail U.S. involvement in the United Nations.

This House funding measure, which will need to be reconciled with the Senate version to become law, would slice more than \$276 million in contributions to international organizations -- more than three-quarters of which goes to the United Nations -- and another \$229 million from the administration's request for U.N. peacekeeping operations. If enacted, those funding levels would put the United States back in the red on its U.N. dues.

The spending bill would also withhold 70 percent of the funds for any U.N. organization or agency -- until the State Department certifies that the United States has access to its financial and performance audits. And it bars funding for the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, a controversial arm that assists Palestinian refugees, to which the United States has made voluntary contributions under both Obama and Bush.

The Obama administration points to the progress it has made on an array of issues at the United Nations as evidence that the country can accomplish much more working from within the system than from withdrawing.

"The goal of reform is one we are working to pursue every day of the week," U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice recently told reporters, "but we believe very strongly the way to do that is from the vantage point of a member in good standing that meets its obligation and is viewed as a constructive player where we influence as much as we can, rather than as a laggard and a debtor."

The U.N. reforms that Obama officials have hailed have not been significant enough for critics like Ros-Lehtinen, however. The U.N.'s problems "aren't anomalies, and they can't be swept under the rug," Ros-Lehtinen said recently in a statement. "Continuing to send the UN big checks with no strings attached doesn't help anyone: not the U.S., not our allies, and not anyone else who seeks a UN that upholds its founding principles."

Ros-Lehtinen's legislation faces a long, challenging road to becoming law, even if Republicans seize control of the Senate and White House in 2012. In part because of her agitation, however, the question of U.N. funding is now back on the U.S. political agenda. And should one of the Republican presidential challengers manage to unseat Obama next year, the United Nations is likely to find few friendly American faces around Turtle Bay.