

United Nations Day: The UK and the UN

United Nations Day takes place on 24 October annually. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, António Guterres, states that the day “marks the birthday of our founding Charter—the landmark document that embodies the hopes, dreams and aspirations of ‘we the peoples’”.¹

On 31 October 1947, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring that 24 October be officially called ‘United Nations Day’. In 1971, the General Assembly recommended that United Nations Day be observed by member states as a public holiday. It is not a public holiday in the UK.

United Nations Day is marked globally, including in the US whereby the President has issued an annual proclamation since 1948.

The UK is one of the founding members of the UN. This Library briefing will examine the United Kingdom’s (UK) involvement in both the creation of the UN and its role today.

UK and the United Nations

1941–45

Plans to establish the UN were drawn up during the Second World War. In June 1941, London was the base for nine exiled governments, including Belgium and Poland. On 12 June 1941, representatives of the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa, along with the nine exiled governments, met at St James’s Palace. They signed a declaration outlining that “the only true basis of enduring peace” was through the “willing cooperation of free peoples in a world in which, relieved of the menace of aggression, all may enjoy economic and social security”.²

On 14 August 1941, US President, Franklin D Roosevelt, and the UK Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, proposed a set of principles for international collaboration on peace and security in a document, known as the Atlantic Charter.³ In 1942, during the Second World War, representatives from the 26 Allied nations (led by the UK, the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR)) signed the UN declaration. The declaration pledged a maximum war effort against the Axis powers (the three principal partners being Germany, Italy and Japan) and bound the Allied nations against making a separate peace agreement with any of the Axis countries.⁴

On 30 October 1943, the foreign ministers of the UK, the United States, the Soviet Union and the Chinese ambassador to the Soviet Union agreed to begin working on proposals for an international organisation to maintain peace and security.⁵ This work took place the following year. Representatives of the countries met at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, USA, to discuss the creation of a world organisation. This included discussions on the: structure; roles and responsibilities; methods of voting; and the use of armed forces in the service of peace.⁶ On 7 October 1944, a proposal for the structure of a world organisation was submitted by the four governments to all the prospective UN governments. In June 1945, 50 nations met in San Francisco, USA, to draft and adopt the UN Charter.⁷ The charter

came into force in October 1945, when the governments of China, France, UK, the Soviet Union, the United States, and a majority of other signatory states, had ratified and, as part of their obligations, deposited notification of their ratification with the US State Department. Consequently, the UN came into existence.⁸

Today, the mission and work of the UN continue to be guided by the purposes and principles contained in the charter. According to article I, the purposes of the UN are to:

develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace; achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.⁹

In addition, member states are required to “maintain international peace and security” by taking collective measures to either prevent or remove threats to peace and conforming with international law and the principles of justice to settle international disputes or situations which could breach such peace.¹⁰

Security Council

The UK is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which has “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security”.¹¹ Under the UN Charter, all member states are obligated to comply with Security Council decisions.

As part of its duties, the Security Council’s mandate provides for it to:

- take the lead in determining the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression;
- call upon the parties to a dispute to settle it by peaceful means, and recommend methods of adjustment or terms of settlement;
- and in some cases, impose sanctions or authorise the use of force to “maintain or restore international peace and security”.¹²

As a member of the Security Council, the UK is also heavily involved with the selection of the UN Secretary-General. The appointment process involves the Security Council putting forward a single candidate for the UN General Assembly to endorse.

Peacekeeping

As part of its commitment to maintaining international peace and security, the UK also participates and funds UN peacekeeping operations worldwide. The UK currently has around 600 personnel deployed on peacekeeping operations and was the 6th largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget for 2018.¹³ In addition, the UK is the lead contributor (sending 246 troops) to the UN mission in Cyprus. This involves supervising ceasefire lines, maintaining a buffer zone, undertaking humanitarian activities, and supporting the ‘good offices’ mission of the Secretary-General.¹⁴

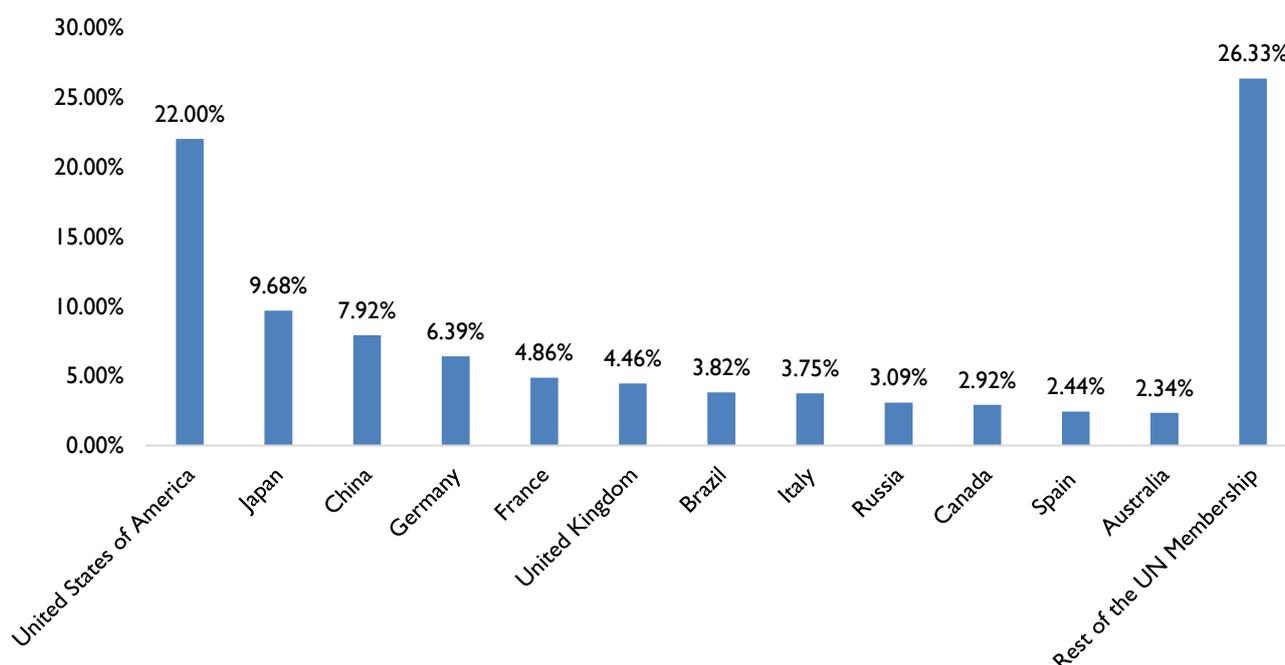
In July 2019, the then Secretary of State for Defence, Penny Mordaunt, announced that the UK would be deploying 250 members of the armed forces to Eastern Mali in support of the UN’s peacekeeping mandate in the country.¹⁵ This includes “continuous communication” with the Malian population and tackling human security issues, for example, operating a zero-tolerance policy on sexual violence and supporting the rights of women and children.¹⁶ In 2020, the UK will conclude a four-year peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.¹⁷

UK’s Contribution to the UN Regular Budget

The UK remains among the largest contributors to the UN. For example, in 2018, it was the sixth largest contributor towards the UN’s regular budget, providing a net contribution of US\$108 million.¹⁸ The amount paid by each UN member state is calculated according to a formula that allocates costs to member states according to their ability to pay. It does this by apportioning costs proportionately according to an average of the Gross National Income of each state over the past 3 years and 6 years. However, adjustments are made to ensure that no member state contributes less than 0.001% or more than 22% towards the budget.¹⁹

The following table outlines the top UN regular budget contributions for 2018:

Chart One: Top UN Regular Budget Contributions for 2018, Percentage



(United Nations, [Assessment of Member States’ Advances to the Working Capital Fund for the Biennium 2018–2019 and Contributions to the United Nations Regular Budget for 2018](#), 29 December 2017)

Further Information

- United Nations, ‘[United Nations Day](#)’, accessed 27 September 2019
- House of Lords Library, [The United Nations](#), 17 June 2015

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- ¹ United Nations, '[United Nations Day: Secretary-General's Message for 2018](#)', accessed 12 September 2019.
- ² United Nations, '[1941: The Declaration of St James' Palace](#)', accessed 12 September 2019.
- ³ United Nations, '[1941: The Atlantic Charter](#)', accessed 13 September 2019.
- ⁴ United Nations, '[1942: Declaration of the United Nations](#)', accessed 13 September 2019.
- ⁵ United Nations, '[1943: Moscow and Teheran Conferences](#)', accessed 13 September 2019.
- ⁶ United Nations, '[1944–1945: Dumbarton Oaks and Yalta](#)', accessed 13 September 2019.
- ⁷ United Nations, '[1945: The San Francisco Conference](#)', accessed 13 September 2019.
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ United Nations, '[UN Charter \(Full Text\)](#)', accessed 14 September 2019.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹¹ United Nations, '[UN Security Council](#)', accessed 14 September 2019.
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ United Nations Peacekeeping, '[How We Are Funded](#)', accessed 14 September 2019.
- ¹⁴ United Nations Peacekeeping, '[UNFICYP Fact Sheet](#)', accessed 18 September 2019.
- ¹⁵ Ministry of Defence, '[UK to Deploy 250 Troops to Mali on Peacekeeping Operations](#)', 22 July 2019.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ United Nations, '[Assessment of Member States' Advances to the Working Capital Fund for the Biennium 2018–2019 and Contributions to the United Nations Regular Budget for 2018](#)', 29 December 2017, p 12.
- ¹⁹ General Assembly of the United Nations, '[Regular Budget and Working Capital Fund](#)', accessed 18 September 2019.

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