

Benny Nguyen

Mr. Moreno

AP English Language and Composition

26 March 2025

The United States and International Agreements: Balancing Autonomy and Responsibility

On November 9, 2021, nearly two hundred countries participated in what could have become the foundation for securing a universal human right as the United Nations (UN) held a vote on the Right to Food. But to the surprise of the world, two countries voted against it: the State of Israel and the United States of America, a nation long considered a leader in protecting and promoting human rights. Their decisions have sparked outrage and confusion across international forums and among citizens worldwide. Just a century ago, it was unheard of for countries to come together to discuss issues related to human rights or environmental concerns. But after the atrocities of two World Wars, in which the coin of the term “genocide” was the result, nations began to value international laws and agreements as tools for promoting peace and stability. Over the years of integration and progress, UN member states have proven themselves to be more responsible for international obligations as outlined in treaties or agreements. That said, some governments remain skeptical of the language used in these documents, fearing that they compromise national interests or security. Throughout its modern history, the United States has consistently displayed its considerateness in the international arena, ranging from analyzing sentences that are susceptible to multiple interpretations, to examining contradictions to its foreign policy. Voting against the Right to Food was not the first instance of the United States

opposing a major resolution; the list of treaties and agreements not signed or ratified by the United States has grown significantly over the years. Nevertheless, the United States has presented the world a unique approach to global concerns through its established position and persistent actions. The United States government demonstrates that countries do not necessarily need to be bound by international agreements, not only because of concerns about ambiguous language but also due to their strategic commitment to maintaining national autonomy and security. The United States' stance sends a clear message that, rather than enforcing legal mandates, the focus should be on proactive engagement and strategic leadership that allows the United States and other countries to address global challenges on their own terms.

Before analyzing why the United States refuses to sign documents or votes against resolutions, it is necessary to understand the dangers of interpreting ambiguous language in international politics. The reason why the United States is so aware of the use of vague language is not solely because it cares about national interests and security but also because the United States itself has exploited the ambiguous language of documents to achieve its goals, thus understanding the importance of precise word choice. Take a look at the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China in 1972. This landmark document is one of the elements of what is known as the "One China" policy in the United States. In this document, the United States stated that "all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China," affirming that "Taiwan is a part of China" and that the United States "does not challenge that position" (U.S. Department of State). To many people, it seems like the United States is agreeing with the narrative of the People's Republic of China, also known as Beijing's One China Principle, that it is the only rightful government that can

represent China and that it can assert its sovereignty over the island of Taiwan. But there is a catch. First, there are actually two governments with “China” in their name: the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China, which people know as Taiwan. And second, the United States never clearly stated which “China” it is referring to in the phrase “one China.”

Another example of diplomatic ambiguity regarding the One China policy is highlighted by Steven M. Goldstein, a leading expert on Taiwan-China relations and director of the Taiwan Studies Workshop at Harvard University. He pointed out that, while the United States recognizes the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, it only “acknowledge[s]” Beijing’s One China principle, rather than accepting or recognizing it (Goldstein). The United States is illustrating to the world the fragility of ambiguous language in international documents and how such language could be misinterpreted to achieve one’s goals. Clearly, the United States has a reason to beware of vague language, because it understands the danger of such a practice and how it can be a threat to the country itself if the world decides to misuse the language of international documents to pursue actions that go against the interests of the United States. While the United States is a country that greatly respects international law, it must also protect itself against legal concerns related to international documents being interpreted in many different ways. As a “master” of interpreting international language to its advantage, the United States is understandably cautious about accepting international documents due to concerns about national security issues arising from language that lacks precision and specificity.

Having understood the dangers of ambiguous language in international politics, consider how the United States explains the decisions regarding international matters to assert its position

while still respecting established conventions and independently implementing international obligations. One example is the response of President Ronald Reagan regarding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a document completed in 1982 with the purpose of establishing a legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas, including maritime rights, resource management, and dispute resolution (United Nations). The president acknowledged that, while UNCLOS “contains many positive and very significant accomplishments” that are “consistent with United States interests and serve well the interests of all nations,” “the deep seabed mining part of the convention does not meet United States objectives” and some provisions would “allow amendments to enter into force for the United States without its approval” (Reagan). From this presidential statement, it is certain that the government had evaluated the document carefully while also having their own stance and being willing to reject it when it compromises U.S. policy. In the context of the Cold War, phrases such as “common heritage of mankind” caused the United States to raise questions about whether or not it was favoring the communist system (United Nations). Although not stated explicitly, it can be inferred that President Reagan was also concerned about the possibility that such a document would allow foreign forces to enter U.S. soil and seas against its will, which contradicts American values and beliefs in independence and perhaps superiority. Such vague terms caused the United States to doubt the clarity of the document, strengthening their claim that the ambiguous language of the UN could pose a danger to the United States and that they had carefully considered all possibilities before making a decision. The United States demonstrated a persistent viewpoint that when it could not find a common ground with an international agreement, even due to a small vague provision, not being a party to it while still respecting

established international conventions would be a safer and better option. It is by no means because the United States disagreed with the document as a whole or opposed the progressive intention of all state members. Rather, it suggests that the United States was able to balance recognizing international principles with guaranteeing its national interests and security. This pattern of skepticism towards diplomatic ambiguity continued in 2021 when the United States voted against the Right to Food resolution, citing concerns over vague language and the overreach of the United Nations. By standing firm on its position, the United States justifies that voting “against” the right to food is not a decision against humanity but rather a demonstration of its independence in proactively addressing humanitarian issues in line with its foreign policy and established principles. The United States is wise and careful in considering whether the language in international documents is consistent with U.S. policy or other international conventions, demonstrating experience in foreign affairs while promoting proactive action for human rights and global issues.

Those on the other side of the debate will argue that the United States not signing the progressive treaties would leave a negative impact on resolving humanitarian and ethical concerns. Anya Wahal, a writer for the Council on Foreign Relations, an American think tank specializing in U.S. foreign policy and international relations, shared her opinion on the topic. She argued on the future of the United States that if it continues to refuse to ratify international treaties, it “remains unwilling to commit to action on issues like human rights and arms control” (Wahal). While this concern is valid to some extent, the evidence suggests otherwise. The World Food Programme, the world’s largest humanitarian organization, published a report on the contributions to the organization by countries and political entities in 2024. The report indicates

that the United States is at the top of the table displaying total contributions, with more than four billion dollars in contribution, out of a total of nearly ten billion dollars (World Food Programme). Note that the United States has always been leading the chart since 1998 with outstanding contributions. Billions of dollars in contributions from the United States and other countries are, according to the programme, used to “sav[e] lives” and “build a pathway to peace, stability and prosperity, for people recovering from conflict, disasters and the impact of climate change” (World Food Programme). The contributions of the United States prove that the country has always been the leader when it comes to advocating humanitarian actions. Another example to rebut the argument is the humanitarian aid to the West Bank and Gaza by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). According to the press release, USAID has provided over 600 million dollars in economic support for the Palestinian people since 2021, along with more than 2.1 billion dollars in humanitarian aid since the start of the Gaza war on October 7, 2023 (U.S. Office of Palestinian Affairs). The press release also revealed that USAID was providing 230 million dollars in additional funding, more than one year after the conflict broke out (U.S. Office of Palestinian Affairs). These significant financial commitments prove that the United States actively supports humanitarian efforts, even without formal treaty obligations. Again, the United States demonstrates the ability to resolve humanitarian issues with practical and essential actions. It is safe to affirm that, while the United States has indeed not signed or ratified many treaties that are progressive, its independent actions represent the commitment of the United States to resolving issues such as human rights. While the United States may disagree with international documents due to their ambiguity, its actions have consistently demonstrated that it has never forgotten its international obligations and remains

ready to address humanitarian issues. The United States sends a message to the world about its independence but also its respect for international law, and emphasizes that practical actions are often more important than signed agreements.

All things considered, the United States has proven that nations do not need to be bound by international agreements in order to fulfill their obligations, especially when the United States has consistently made independent decisions that align with broader economic and humanitarian goals. By looking at the United States as an exemplar in international relations and responsibility, governments of the world should know how to be clever in fulfilling international responsibilities while also ensuring national security and interests. In a world where there is not really a powerful and neutral entity that is able to force all state members to act in a specific manner, people should focus on strategic, voluntary cooperation, turning words into action, and turning promises into reality. At the same time, to prove that the United States is still, and will always be, a country that respects, promotes, and protects humanitarian principles while being able to act independently to fulfill its responsibilities, the United States government must demonstrate these commitments. Unfortunately, recent actions from the new administration of the United States contradict this position, sending one troubling message. To the world: do not rely on the signature or the vote of the United States as a guarantee of security or prosperity. True leadership is defined not by the agreements a nation signs, but by the principles it upholds and the actions it takes to support the stability and justice of the world. To the people of America: in the crucial years ahead, the United States must reassert its leadership by taking decisive action, whether through treaties or independent commitments. As a nation proud of its dedication to

freedom and democracy, the United States must put its claim of moral responsibility into practice.

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