

The World Drug Problem: UNGA Convenes for a Special Session

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The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has convened in New York for a [special session on "The World Drug Problem."](#) It is the third time the UNGA will convene such a session on global drug issues. [Previous special sessions](#) on drugs were held in 1990 and 1998.

The 2016 special session builds on work by the U.N. Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the primary U.N. policymaking body on drug matters, including

- the 2009 ["Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation Towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem"](#) and
- the 2014 ["Joint Ministerial Statement"](#) of the CND High-Level Review of the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action.

Global Debate

The UNGA special session is occurring in the context of a global shift in the drug policy arena. Reported unresolved [tensions in global drug policy](#) have been percolating for several years, as various policymakers, particularly from countries in Latin America, question the soundness of the entire U.N. drug control regime and consider prospects for change.

- In 2011, the [Global Commission on Drug Policy](#)—composed of former presidents, high-level policymakers, and public intellectuals—declared that the ["global war on drugs has failed"](#) and that "fundamental reforms" are

required.

- In 2013, the [Organization of American States](#) issued a [multipart report on "The Drug Problem in the Americas"](#)—a project that emerged from regional frustration over the flow of drugs and the impact of drug trafficking-related violence on citizen security. Countries involved in the report, including [Colombia](#) and [Mexico](#), continue to build on the report's momentum and advocate for further dialogue on nontraditional policy approaches.
- In December 2013, in a possible break with its international drug commitments, [Uruguay](#) signed into law a bill that fully legalized and regulated marijuana—the first country in the world to do so. Developments elsewhere, including [Canada](#), are also invigorating the debate and raising concerns about the [limits to flexibility contained within U.N. drug treaties](#) for experimentation with legalization and decriminalization.

Meanwhile, countries including the United States, Russia, and China continue to advocate for the preservation of the current international drug control system. Also defending the current system are countries with robust prohibitionist policies, including, controversially, the use of the death penalty for drug-related offenses.

U.S. Objectives

This 2016 special session on the world drug problem is taking place in the context of a renewed domestic battle in the United States against illicit opiate abuse, including heroin, and the unabated emergence of new psychoactive substances (NPS). [President Barack Obama](#) has called addressing the current drug situation in the United States a "top priority" for promoting the "safety, health, and prosperity of the American people." Others question U.S. leadership on international counternarcotics matters, particularly in light of state-level measures to legalize marijuana. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), for example, has called U.S. actions ["inconsistent with the provisions of the international drug control treaties."](#)

In a press statement outlining the U.S. government's core positions for the U.N. special session on the world drug problem, [Secretary of State John Kerry](#) remarked:

In New York this week, the United States will seek international consensus on an approach that upholds the [three UN drug conventions](#)—which continue to provide a solid foundation for international cooperation on drugs—and that fully integrates public health priorities, recognizing drug abuse as a chronic disease. This means implementing alternatives to incarceration where appropriate, the use of drug courts, and sentencing reform to channel those who suffer from substance use disorder into recovery and treatment, not just prisons. Finally, it means strengthening international law enforcement cooperation to combat violent drug trafficking organizations who threaten all nations and all peoples.

U.N. Outcomes

Although prospects for significant policy change at the special session [appear unlikely](#), observers view this as an opportunity to exchange ideas. Some reformers had hoped that the special session would provide an opportunity to overhaul or amend aspects of the U.N. drug treaties but Members [adopted](#) at the outset a 24-page consensus document entitled ["Our Joint Commitment to Effectively Addressing and Countering the World Drug Problem,"](#) which

- recognizes that the world drug problem persists, despite ongoing international efforts;
- reaffirms the centrality of the three U.N. drug treaties;
- recognizes the inherent flexibility in the treaties to allow national discretion in the design and implementation of drug policies; and
- continues to support the goals, established in the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action, "to eliminate or reduce significantly and measurably" by 2019 global drug supply, demand, and trafficking, as well as money laundering related to illicit drugs.

Issues for Congress

International counternarcotics policy has been a longstanding policy area of interest for Congress. Although decisions made during the 2016 special session do not appear to trigger any domestic obligations, the outcome document calls for additional resources, particularly to developing countries, to address the world drug problem. Congressional policymakers may be called upon to consider what responsibility, if any, the United States may bear in providing

counternarcotics assistance to foreign countries. For FY2017, [the President requested](#) more than \$31.1 billion for federal drug control programs, of which \$1.6 billion was requested for international activities.

The outcome document for the 2016 special session also advocates for a "comprehensive, integrated and balanced approach" to the current world drug problem. As Congress continues its oversight of foreign affairs issues, including international counternarcotics policy, a key question may center on the extent to which countries can practically achieve a desired policy balance—between supply and demand reduction policies, public health and law enforcement policies, and efforts to ensure legitimate drug availability with controls against drug diversion, trafficking, and abuse.

Finally, policymakers may continue to explore themes broached at the 2016 special session linking drug policy with crosscutting issues. These include achieving complex development outcomes, particularly poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihoods; criminal justice sector reform, including proportionality in drug offence sentencing, alternatives to mass incarceration, and access to drug dependency treatment in prisons; and considerations related to human rights, gender, youth, other vulnerable populations, and the environment.

For further discussion, see CRS Report RL34543, [International Drug Control Policy: Background and U.S. Responses](#), by Liana W. Rosen.