

Background Guide
General Assembly
Topic: Nuclear Proliferation



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I. Introduction to the Committee

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations. It is the organization's central deliberative body. Established in 1945 in the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly has served as the main policy-making organ of the United Nations. The General Assembly is headquartered in New York City. It is comprised of all Member States, and each member state has an equal vote.

The General Assembly also makes key decisions for the UN, including appointing the Secretary-General on the recommendation of the Security Council, electing the non-permanent members of the Security Council, and approving the UN budget. The Assembly meets regularly in sessions from September to December, and thereafter as required. They discuss specific issues through a dedicated agenda, which then leads to the adoption of resolutions. The issues brought before the Assembly range from concerns regarding sustainable development to international disputes over territory, and also global security concerns.

Every one of the 193 members of the United Nations has a seat in the General Assembly, though there are also several non-member observers including the Holy See and the State of Palestine. Seating arrangements in the General Assembly Hall change for each session. During the 77th Session (2022-2023), Belize will occupy the first seat in the Hall, including in the Main Committees (followed by all the other countries, in English alphabetical order). The Assembly's role as an advisory body allows it to recommend courses of action and to refer matters to other United Nations organizations, offices, programs, and commissions. Resolutions passed by the General Assembly are legally non-binding; however, they provide a powerful framework for global change and cooperation. The General Assembly's ability to create subsidiary organizations and delegate responsibility for the management and implementation of international agreements is the foundation of enacting positive change on an international level.

II. Statement of the Problem

Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union ignited over the threat of nuclear weapons, but the nuclear threat facing the world has not diminished. Decades of arms control negotiations and treaties have not halted the proliferation of nuclear weapons technology. There are multiple nuclear non-proliferation agreements, including the Iran Nuclear Deal. Formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it was signed in 2015 by Iran and several world powers, including the United States (Council). The JCPOA placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief (Council).

However, the spread of nuclear arms technology is not the only matter of concern to the global nuclear threat. Nuclear terrorism has been a concern of the international community since the 1970s and continues to persist. Terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda target nuclear facilities and try to buy, build, or steal nuclear weapons (Litwak, 2016). Currently, despite its significant setbacks in Ukraine, Russia remains a major nuclear threat to the United States. Moscow possesses a larger and more modern nuclear arsenal than most countries (UN Press, 2023). Russia can also build numerous additional nuclear weapons in short order. Nuclear sharing is also a more recent issue. The Russian Federation plans to station non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus, which represents the first time of this happening (UN Press, 2023).

History/Past UN Action

In August 1942, the Manhattan Project was established in the United States to develop the first nuclear weapon. By July 16, 1945, the United States conducted the first ever nuclear test in New Mexico. A short time after that, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, then later on Nagasaki. This was just the beginning of nuclear weapon technology. This became a central point of the Cold War following the Soviet Union's first nuclear test in 1949. Nuclear proliferation was very prevalent during the Cold War, and in the following years several more states would acquire nuclear weapons technology. The United Kingdom tested nuclear weapons in 1952, France first tested in 1960, and the People's Republic of China later in 1964. India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in the 1970s and 1980s, and North Korea in 2006. Israel is also believed to have obtained nuclear weapons (ICAN).

There is a long history of nuclear disarmament. In its first resolution in 1946, the UN General Assembly calls for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and sets up a commission to address nuclear weapons. Later, in 1959, the Antarctic Treaty was signed, which bans the testing and presence of nuclear devices in Antarctica, as well as the disposal of nuclear material on the continent (ATS). The Antarctic Treaty was the first arms control agreement during the Cold War, and despite the fact that it was a multilateral treaty created without the involvement of the United Nations, its articles form the foundation of further non-proliferation agreements and the language within them (ATS). Following the Antarctic Treaty, the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union would ratify the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (PNTB) in 1963, which banned all nuclear tests except for those taking place underground where the risk of radioactive fallout is greatly mitigated (NTI).

The United Nations has been involved in promoting nuclear disarmament and safe use of nuclear weapons since they first started. Many resolutions have been passed regarding nuclear weapons and its issues. The General Assembly signed Resolution 1653, which declared the use of nuclear weapons to be contrary to the Charter of the United Nations. In 1967, the General Assembly then passed the Outer Space Treaty, which bans the testing and placement of nuclear weapons in space and on celestial bodies. The following year, the General Assembly would

support the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The NPT is a landmark international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote co-operation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament (UN). After this, in 1996, the General Assembly adopted the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which served to further the restriction of nuclear testing by banning in full all nuclear explosions, for all purposes in all environments. However, the treaty is not currently in force, as its conditions are as of yet not fulfilled. For the CTBT to enter into force, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, North Korea, and the United States must ratify the treaty. Otherwise, it remains binding only on the states who have already ratified it.

Progress has been made in the past several decades in regard to nuclear proliferation to states, the issue of proliferation to non-state actors remains largely unaddressed by the international community. Non-state actors are a threat because they might be able to obtain radiological material. With this, they could construct a weapon of mass destruction. It is clear that the global community must take greater care to ensure the security of materials that are of importance to the construction of nuclear and radiological weapons. To help prevent this, the Security Council passed Resolution 1540 in 2004, mandating that “all States shall refrain from providing any form of support to non-State actors that attempt to develop, acquire... or use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons and their means of delivery.” Resolution 1540 also requires all states to “adopt and enforce appropriate effective laws” in the pursuit of the aforementioned and establishes the 1540 Committee as pursuant to the resolution from which it draws its name (UN).

A multilateral treaty aimed at combatting nuclear terrorism is the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (Nuclear Terrorism Convention, NTC), and was created in 2005 through the United Nations General Assembly to criminalize acts of nuclear terrorism (NTI). The NTC provides mechanisms for parties to cooperate in the prevention, investigation, and punishment of acts or attempted acts of nuclear terrorism.

III. Latest Developments

In 2016, the Security Council passed Resolution 2325, emphasizing the nature of Resolution 1540 and encouraging all states to fulfill their obligations to create effective nuclear safety programs (UNSCR). The resolution addresses proliferation to non-state actors and to states who wish to develop nuclear weapons. However, nuclear proliferation remains as a threat to international security, as is evidenced by North Korea’s 2017 nuclear test. President Trump withdrew the United States from both the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). This caused a serious setback in the global campaign for the elimination of nuclear proliferation.

In 2017 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the first legally binding legal instrument aimed at the complete ban of nuclear weapons. It includes a comprehensive set of prohibitions on participating in any nuclear weapon activities. These include undertakings not to develop, test, produce, acquire, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons (UNODA).

Problems a Position Paper and Resolution Should Address

A position paper and resolution should address the continuing issues with nuclear proliferation. It should go into detail about any nuclear programs a country might have today. A position paper and resolution could also discuss disarmament and giving up any weapons.

1. Is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty still relevant to the world today?
 2. Are there ways to mitigate the spread/proliferation to both state and non-state actors?
 3. Does the International Atomic Energy Agency have the authority and resources it needs to do its work of monitoring compliance of state actors with the NPT?
 4. Are we getting any closer to a world without fewer or no nuclear weapons?
 5. Does the country you are representing have nuclear weapons?
 6. Is your country located in a region of the world that is a designated nuclear-weapons free zone (NWFZ)?
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IV. Helpful Sources

Nuclear Weapon History: https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_weapons_history

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: <https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/#:~:text=The%20Treaty%20on%20the%20Prohibition,threaten%20to%20use%20nuclear%20weapons.>

NTI Website: <https://www.nti.org/>

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