



Introduction:

Special Political and Decolonization Committee, or SPECPOL is the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. SPECPOL is largely in charge of addressing decolonization, peacekeeping, outer space use, and atomic radiation. It also interacts and advises several subsidiary committees. In this committee you will engage with several aspects including the ethics of existing systems regarding human rights, environmental impacts, and new technological advancements.

TOPIC 1:

Ethics of UN Peacekeeping: Mandate Designs and so-called Civilian “collateral damage”

- a) Discusses the chapters in the [UN Peacekeeping charter](#) (VI, VII, VIII) and if peacekeepers should be allowed to have offensive capabilities to better protect civilians

Introduction

United Nations peacekeeping is intended to help countries move from conflict towards peace. Modern peacekeeping missions monitor ceasefires, support political agreements, assist elections, and protect civilians. Yet these missions face a severe ethical challenge; peacekeepers are expected to protect civilians with rules about when force should be used, while also avoiding escalating conflict, or undermining trust in the UN.

This topic asks delegates to consider whether peacekeepers should be granted more proactive or offensive military capabilities to prevent and retaliate against attacks on civilians. Supporters argue that peacekeepers cannot fulfill their protective duties if they can only act after violence has begun. Critics warn that stronger military action can cause more civilian casualties, blur the line between peacekeeping and fighting, and can threaten the UN’s status as impartial in international conflicts.

The term “collateral damage” generally refers to unintended civilian death, injury, or city destruction caused during operations. Even when unintended, civilian harm raises legal and ethical concerns about whether the operation genuinely improved civilian safety or not.

Historical Background

The UN Charter does not contain a separate chapter specifically addressing peacekeeping. Instead, peacekeeping mandates are commonly connected to Chapter VI, VII, and VIII of the charter. Chapter VI addresses the peaceful resolution of political disputes, practices negotiation, mediation so that parties generally accept the UN’s mission and presence. Chapter VII allows the Security Council to act when there is a threat to international peace, a breach of peace or an act of aggression. Missions characterized under Chapter VII may have more authority to use force. Chapter VIII concerns cooperation with regional organizations, such as the African Union, when responding to conflicts. Traditional peacekeeping rests on three principles: consent of the main parties to the conflict, impartiality, and limited use of force which is limited to self-defense and defense of the mandate. Over time, conflicts became more complex and involved groups targeting civilians directly. As a result, the Security Council mandated Protection of Civilians (PoC) missions, which authorize peacekeepers to use all necessary means to prevent and respond to threats against civilians.

Current Situations

Today’s peacekeeping missions often operate where governments have limited control, armed groups are active, and civilians may face displacement, sexual violence, mass killings, or attacks on schools, hospitals and camps.

A key contention is the balance between robust peacekeeping and aggressive peacekeeping. Effective peacekeeping may involve force or self-defense or to protect civilians from an imminent threat. Aggressive peacekeeping goes further by using force to defeat or neutralize a designated enemy. A common argument is that robust peacekeeping really isn’t the most effective option, and that aggressive peacekeeping is the better alternative to ensure civilian safety. Delegates should consider the difference between legal authorization and ethical responsibility.

UN peacekeeping missions currently operate in several regions. The most relevant missions to this committee are those that currently have PoC mandates. MONUSCO, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo operates due to armed groups and recurring threats to civilians. MINUSCA, in the Central African Republic works in a country affected by armed group violence, political instability and displacement. UNMISS, in South Sudan, protects civilians during political violence and has sheltered many displaced people at UN sites. These examples demonstrate what constitutes a UN peacekeeping mission and are prime examples of where the difference between robust and aggressive peacekeeping missions would affect effectiveness.

Questions to Consider

1. Should UN peacekeepers be allowed to use proactive or offensive force to stop attacks on civilians?
2. How can a peacekeeping mandate protect civilians without causing collateral harm, escalating the conflict or threaten the UN's impartiality?
3. What is the difference between protecting civilians and becoming an active party to a conflict?
4. What non-military approaches, such as mediation, early-warning systems, civilian evacuation and humanitarian aid/coordination, can reduce the need for force?
5. How should the Security Council define "imminent threat" or "necessary force" that determines when peacekeepers can use offensive tactics?

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TOPIC 2:

Responsibility and Equity: Should nuclear developments in outer space be allowed?

b) Discusses the ethics of nuclear developments in space, interacting with the subsidiaries COPUOS and UNOOSA, as well as the previous [space regulation treaties](#) established.

Introduction

In Topic 1, you were able to research and develop your understanding of issues that have

been prominent and discussed for many years. Topic 2, focuses on a field that has significant room to develop and expand in the near future: nuclear development in outer space.

It is important to discuss the development of nuclear energy as it expands to an entirely new scale with even larger implications. Both the domains of nuclear energy and space territory have been a prominent focus and source of competition for many countries across the globe. It is essential to consider the new power and advantages that access to nuclear energy in space will offer. If this opportunity is not handled **responsibly**, several issues regarding **equitable** access will arise. As delegates in SPECPOL, it is your responsibility to discuss strategies moving forward. You may engage with how access to space and nuclear development should be handled, even discussing to the extent of asking *if* nuclear developments in outer space should be permitted.

SPECPOL acts as the primary legislative body offering administration and regulation to smaller organizations dedicated to SPECPOL's subdivided responsibilities. Given this, you may need to engage with the foundations established by the subsidiary UN organisations: COPUOS (Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space) and UNOOSA (United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs).

Historical Background

After WWII, from the late 1950s to mid-1970s the space race occurred, sending large countries such as the United States and Russia into a race of space technological advancements, ultimately with the United States being the first country to ever set foot on the moon. During this time The Outer Space Treaty of 1966 was created, largely to establish that outer space would not be used for militaristic purposes during the Cold War.

The Outer Space Treaty was signed by the United States, Soviet Union, and United Kingdom at the time and was enforced in 1967. The Outer Space Treaty “provides the basic framework on international space law” (UNOOSA, n.d.). This includes regulations that center around the idea that the exploration and use of space should be for the “benefit of mankind,” all countries, and liability for contamination or damage. Most significantly to Topic 2 UNOOSA's website states that “States shall not place nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit or on celestial bodies or station them in outer space in any other manner.”

Only a year later The Outer Space Treaty was implemented, another agreement was established in 1968. The Rescue Agreement was created by UNOOSA and the Legal Subcommittee (COPUOS). This ensured that each State would assist astronauts in distress despite the territory.

Another significant treaty relating to the use of Nuclear energy in space, was the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963, which banned nuclear testing in outer space, the atmosphere, and underwater. The Moon Agreement in 1979 also established that the Moon belongs to “all humanity” (United Nations, n.d.).

Current Situation

Currently, many countries plan to establish developments in outer space. For example, countries such as Russia, the United States, China, Japan, and India have made recent lunar developments and proposed developments on the moon within the past decade (Yukari Sekiguchi, 2020). Additionally, Highly Enriched Uranium, or HEU technology is being developed and could offer countries a more powerful energy source for space exploration. “Currently, there is no international norm or nuclear watchdog specifically for the usage of HEU in outer space” (Yukari Sekiguchi, 2020).

There is also currently an emerging race to establish a nuclear power reactor on the moon, and to implement other nuclear energy technologies (like controversial HEU). The China National Space Administration and Russia’s Rocosmos plan to deploy a nuclear power reactor on the moon. The United States also has a similar plan to establish a reactor by 2030, before China and Russia (American Nuclear Society, 2025). This emerging strive for leverage in space technology opens many doors to accessibility issues for countries unable to participate in space. This is why it is essential to discuss this issue **now**, before the inequalities deepen, pollution concerns arise, and space is transformed into a competitive environment—rather than a resource for humankind.

Questions to Consider (For Your Position Papers and Discussion)

- 1) How can space access be handled so that all countries are able to participate?
- 2) How can countries work together to make sure space development is handled responsibly?
- 3) How can countries be held accountable?
- 4) Should outer space be divided by country or shared proportionally?
- 5) What disadvantages do nuclear power plants and energy in space have to your country?
- 6) How effective are the current regulations and establishments in space control?

Research Tip: Make sure you understand your country’s position on this topic by researching their history with nuclear energy and development, space exploration experience, and which treaties they have signed in the past (see some above in background). It is a good idea to write your position paper, and participate in discussions with the goals of your country in mind.

It may also be helpful to look at this guide’s bibliography for research sources (especially about the current-day events).

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