



# THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOURTH COMMITTEE

## SPECIAL POLITICAL & DECOLONIZATION

### PURVIEW OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOURTH COMMITTEE

The Fourth Committee is charged with addressing a variety of political and peacekeeping issues. Its political work covers aspects of decolonization, mine action, and Palestinian refugee issues. Its recommendations should address political aspects of an issue and not focus on the economic, social, or development aspects of the topic. For example, while the Fourth Committee may discuss the political problems of the Syrian Golan, it cannot discuss the details of how to promote development in the area, a task better suited for the Second Committee.

The Fourth Committee is also charged with the coordination and operational aspects of UN peacekeeping missions and the oversight of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. This is an important distinction from the Security Council, which develops peacekeeping missions and objectives. For more information concerning the purview of the UN's General Assembly as a whole, see page 25.

**Website:** [www.un.org/en/ga/fourth/](http://www.un.org/en/ga/fourth/)

### PROMOTING THE PEACEFUL USE OF OUTER SPACE

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the very first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, into outer space. The ability to place objects in orbit around the earth, while a terrific milestone in human development, also expanded the scope of man's existential threat by opening a whole new arena to competition from a bitterly divided international community. By the end of 1958, driven primarily by the concern that Cold War rivalries would spill over into this new arena, the General Assembly created an ad hoc Committee designed to ensure that outer space was used exclusively for peaceful purposes. The work of the UN has spurred cooperation and information sharing amongst the international community, furthering scientific discovery, weather monitoring and meteorology, and disaster preparedness and response. Today however, the growing presence of commercial and private enterprise and the expansive deployment of non-weaponized military hardware into space could destabilize the regime providing for the so-far peaceful use of space.

In 1959, the General Assembly established the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) as a permanent body and expanded its work. In addition to non-proliferation efforts, the COPUOS was charged with promoting productive international cooperation on space-based projects. COPUOS also established that benefits from outer space exploration should benefit States regardless of the stage of their economic or scientific development. Mapping and predicting global weather patterns via satellite offers tangible benefits to all countries, and COPUOS consequently cooperates with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Most recently, the Legal Subcommittee of COPUOS has been charged with developing consensus on a legal definition of outer space and continues to work with Member States on this challenging issue. As the number of UN agencies involved in outer space issues expanded, the UN created the UN Coordination of Space Activities (UNCOSA) program, which coordinates the efforts of more than 25 organs and specialized agencies of the UN.

In 1963, the General Assembly called for the total prohibition of the placement of nuclear weapons platforms (or any other weapon of mass destruction) into space or upon any celestial object to further promote the goal of maintaining outer space as a weapons-free zone. Moreover, the General Assembly adopted the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (the "Outer Space Treaty") in 1966, explicitly prohibiting the placement of such weapons in outer space and the establishment of military bases and the conduct of military activities on celestial bodies. The Treaty has been interpreted to prevent territorial claims of sovereignty in outer space or on celestial bodies. With 102 parties and 27 other signatories, the Outer Space Treaty and four subsequent treaties expanding upon provisions of the Outer Space Treaty are widely considered the foundation of international law concerning outer space.

Additionally, the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) has led efforts to track and coordinate the placement and orbit of objects launched into outer space for both commercial and public purposes, such as communications satellites. The UN Secretariat has maintained a registry of launches since 1962. Currently, such registration is conducted pursuant to the Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space (the Registration Convention). Under the Registration Convention, launch States (States from whose territory a space object is launched and that has taken responsibility for the launch) report any launches conducted under their jurisdiction to UNOOSA, which in turn maintains a record of all registered space objects in orbit.

At its most recent meeting, the Fourth Committee focused on two major themes. The first was the usage of extant technology for disaster detection and response. Being able to share high-quality imagery from around the globe in real-time conditions is a significant boon to first responders, while weather system detection allows for more time to prepare and even evacuate ahead of life-threatening weather events. Both can save lives, especially in less-developed nations. The second topic of discussion was the mitigation of space debris. Debris poses a threat to both spacecraft as well as to those on land via unexpected re-entry. This issue has been on the agenda since 1994, and the Committee has developed guidelines to reduce the accumulation of space debris. These guidelines include a focus on reducing or eliminating ejected waste material during a mission, end-of-life planning for decommissioned objects, and improving collision avoidance systems. All of these initiatives are voluntary measures, though they do carry strong recommendations.

In spite of these successes, the United Nations and the broader international community face many challenges to preserving outer space as a peaceful sphere for the benefit of all mankind. While outer space remains free of any known conventional offensive weapons, communications, surveillance and intelligence collected from satellites have all changed modern armed conflict. These technologies are not explicitly prohibited by convention or treaty, but the continuing advancement of space-deployable military hardware will almost certainly be an area of future contention.



Additionally, there is a great deal of concern surrounding the registration of space objects, which entails sharing some information about technologies used to develop them. Many developed countries are hesitant to be completely transparent about their technologies, because space is still a highly competitive field. Consequently, they are concerned about intellectual property rights. Protecting these rights for those States that disclose the technology, developed under their space programs, will be essential for increased cooperation in registering space objects.

Finally, with the advent of the use of private spacecraft in national space programs and increasing commercial interests in the bounty of natural resources in outer space, private actors are beginning to add a new dimension to the complex relationship between outer space and humankind. In the not-too-distant future, the international community will be required to deal with the question of private property rights in outer space. How we deal with these challenges will shape the future of humankind in very real and existential ways. Human aspirations have already reached beyond the sky's limit, yet the heights of what we may achieve together remain uncharted.

Questions to consider from your government's perspective on this issue include the following:

- How can the concerns of nations regarding intelligence-gathering imagery be balanced against benefits of high-resolution imaging for weather monitoring and disaster detection/response?
- How should commercial exploration and use of space be regulated?
- Should international organizations offer incentives to private entities to engage in research and exploration of outer space?

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## EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION

Whether from the generation of electricity, medical devices and diagnostics, nuclear weapons or natural background radiation, we are all exposed to varying degrees of radiation over our lives. The harmful effects of radiation were not fully understood at the dawn of the Nuclear Age in 1945. As society grew to understand the harmful effects of radiation exposure, including nausea, burns, increased risks of cancers and death, the international community agreed that coordinated action was necessary to better understand the effects of atomic radiation and to collect information about exposures of civilian populations to atomic radiation.

In 1955, the UN General Assembly established the Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) to standardize collection of data on exposure and disseminate information about its effects. UNSCEAR reports to the General Assembly Fourth Committee. In 1957, the United Nations created the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to oversee safeguards and confidence-building measures and to implement verification measures as States pursue nuclear technologies. Together these bodies provide knowledge and assistance to States, most recently highlighted in the technical and scientific assistance rendered during and in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.

Since its creation, UNSCEAR has played a significant role in shaping the public debate on the effects of atomic radiation. Shortly after its inception, the Committee published two landmark reports that served as the scientific basis for the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty. In the decades that followed, UNSCEAR emerged as the de facto standard-setting authority on safe levels of radiation and the effects of ionizing radiation on people and the environment. This complements the IAEA's work, which focuses on how nuclear technology is applied for secure, peaceful and safe uses. For example, the IAEA studies the engineering processes and safeguards that worked or failed, updating best practices and international standards accordingly.

On 26 April 1986, a series of explosions destroyed the Chernobyl nuclear power plant located in present-day Ukraine. After the accident



authorities evacuated approximately 115,000 people in the immediate area surrounding the plant, and later another 220,000 people in Belarus, the present-day Russian Federation and Ukraine. UNSCEAR has followed sample groups from the exposed population for evidence of the effects of their potential exposure. Their studies after the Chernobyl disaster estimated that about thirty workers died as a result of acute radiation exposure and six thousand cases of thyroid cancer have been linked to exposure from Chernobyl. With an estimated direct and indirect cost of over \$200 billion U.S. dollars, the disaster crippled an entire region with economic, health and environmental damages that continue to this day.

Over the past two years the subject of the effects and costs of atomic radiation have once again come to the forefront following the 9.0 magnitude earthquake off the eastern coast of Japan on 11 March 2011. In the aftermath of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami, a disaster unfolded as the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant experienced a series of failures. UNSCEAR mobilized to assist the Japanese scientific and medical communities to address the repercussions of the meltdown at Fukushima, lending its expertise and knowledge. A preliminary study by UNSCEAR found that the general public was largely protected due in large part to prompt evacuation orders. Scientists hope that this report will alleviate some of the fear of widespread nuclear fallout. UNSCEAR expects to provide a final report to the Fourth Committee this year. The international community should use the report as a point of reflection, examining the costs of radiation exposure and possibility of new safeguards. The general public's faith in nuclear energy has been shaken, with many States vowing to abandon the technology altogether. A sudden and dramatic shift in the method of energy generation in the aftermath of this single disaster has serious implications, especially for climate change.

Ahead of the General Assembly, UNSCEAR will issue two reports: one providing its final findings from Fukushima and a second detailing the unique risks to children from atomic radiation. The Fourth Committee is expected to consider the information provided by UNSCEAR and determine if action is required. Most imminently, UNSCEAR must review and address the findings of the final report on Fukushima. With an estimated cost of over \$250 billion, this disaster has dire ramifications far beyond the immediate and future health effects.

There also are lingering questions about the risks unique to children from atomic radiation as well as the scope and effects of naturally occurring sources of radiation. While less publicized than Fukushima, Member States will also be expected to evaluate the report provided by UNSCEAR and determine if any actions are required. With a sudden renewal of focus on the question of the effects of atomic radiation, the international community must prioritize its concerns, increase cooperation and appropriate resources accordingly. An international debate and standardization of nuclear liability laws could renew faith in the safety of nuclear power if people believe that the threat of damages would spur companies to maintain the highest safety standards.

Questions to consider from your government's perspective on this issue include the following:

- What steps should the international community take in the wake of events at the Fukushima reactor?

- What more can the international community do to limit the risks of atomic radiation? How can this risk be balanced against other issues, like the need for energy resources?
- Who is financially responsible for assisting those harmed by the effects of atomic radiation?
- Are additional measures necessary to protect children from the effects of atomic radiation?

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