

# SPECPOL

<b>Letter from the Chairs.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction to Committee.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Topic 1: The Arctic.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Historical and Recent Background.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Legal and Institutional Framework.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Questions to Consider:.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Topic 2: The Status of Non-Self-Governing Territories.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction:.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Questions to Consider.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Sources.....</b>	<b>11</b>



## Letter from the Chairs

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL)! Topic – the Arctic, combines law, security, environment, indigenous rights, and development. This guide gives you a neutral, evidence-based foundation to research, negotiate, and draft pragmatic resolutions. Focus on legal instruments (UNCLOS), institutional practice (Arctic Council), indigenous participation, environmental safeguards, and realistic mechanisms for interstate cooperation.

Sincerely,  
Your Chair



## Introduction to Committee

The mandate of SPECPOL includes decolonization, questions of sovereignty, and other special political issues. Arctic governance raises core questions relevant to this mandate, including the rights of Indigenous peoples, self-determination, state sovereignty, and the peaceful use of shared spaces. While the General Assembly cannot impose binding outcomes, it plays a critical role in shaping norms, encouraging cooperation, and influencing state behavior through resolutions and recommendations.

### Topic 1: The Arctic

The Arctic is undergoing profound transformation. Rapid warming—occurring at more than twice the global average—has led to shrinking sea ice, opening access to previously unreachable maritime routes and natural resources. Shipping corridors such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage are becoming increasingly navigable, while interest in hydrocarbons, critical minerals, and fisheries continues to grow.

These changes have elevated the Arctic from a remote region to a focal point of international attention. States face unresolved questions regarding maritime boundaries and continental shelf claims, while environmental risks intensify in a region with limited response capacity. At the same time, increased military presence and strategic competition risk undermining a long-standing tradition of Arctic cooperation. Indigenous communities, whose livelihoods and cultures are closely tied to the Arctic environment, face disproportionate impacts from climate change and development pressures.

#### Historical and Recent Background

Indigenous peoples have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years, developing sophisticated knowledge systems adapted to extreme environments. European exploration and territorial claims expanded during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gradually integrating the Arctic into global political structures.

A major legal milestone occurred in 1982 with the adoption of UNCLOS, which established maritime zones and procedures for determining continental shelf rights beyond 200 nautical miles. In 1996, the Arctic Council was created as a high-level intergovernmental forum to promote cooperation on environmental protection and sustainable development, including formal participation by Indigenous organizations as Permanent Participants.

Over the past two decades, scientific consensus has confirmed accelerated Arctic warming, with significant implications for ecosystems, navigation, and infrastructure. Arctic coastal states have submitted claims to extend their continental shelves, while military modernization and strategic interest have increased. Cooperative agreements on search and rescue and oil pollution response demonstrate practical collaboration, yet no binding security framework governs the region.

## **Legal and Institutional Framework**

### **Principal Legal Instruments**

The **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** provides the primary legal basis for maritime governance in the Arctic. It defines territorial seas, Exclusive Economic Zones, continental shelf rights, and procedures for extended continental shelf submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).

The **International Maritime Organization (IMO) Polar Code** establishes mandatory safety and environmental standards for vessels operating in polar waters.

The **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)** guides rights-based approaches to consultation, participation, and self-determination for Indigenous communities affected by development and governance decisions.

### **Key Institutions**

The **Arctic Council** serves as the central regional forum for cooperation on environmental protection, sustainable development, and scientific research. While notable for Indigenous participation, it lacks authority over military or security matters and cannot adopt binding regulations.

The **Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS)** reviews scientific submissions regarding extended continental shelves but does not resolve overlapping political claims.

### **Stakeholders**

#### **Arctic States**

Arctic coastal states seek to protect sovereignty, manage natural resources, ensure security, and uphold environmental responsibilities. While approaches vary, most combine national development goals with participation in cooperative regional frameworks.

#### **Non-Arctic States**

Non-Arctic actors engage through research, investment, shipping, and observer status in Arctic institutions. Their involvement raises questions about access, responsibility, and governance beyond traditional regional actors.

#### **Indigenous Peoples**

Indigenous communities, including Inuit populations across Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Russia, hold deep cultural, social, and economic ties to Arctic lands and waters. Indigenous

organizations participate in regional governance and increasingly advocate for meaningful consultation, co-management of resources, and recognition of traditional knowledge.

### **Private Sector and Civil Society**

Energy, shipping, and mining companies view the Arctic as an emerging economic frontier, while international organizations and NGOs emphasize environmental protection, climate research, and human rights.

### **Key Disputes and Challenges**

#### **Continental Shelf and Seabed Claims**

Overlapping claims, particularly concerning features such as the Lomonosov Ridge, create long-term uncertainty over jurisdiction and resource access. Although addressed through UNCLOS procedures, political resolution remains pending.

#### **Navigation Rights**

Disagreement persists over the legal status of the Northwest Passage, reflecting broader tensions between sovereignty, environmental protection, and freedom of navigation.

#### **Militarization**

Increased military and surveillance activity, often framed as defensive or logistical, raises concerns about miscalculation and escalation in a sensitive region.

#### **Environmental Risk**

Fragile Arctic ecosystems face heightened risks from shipping accidents, oil spills, and industrial activity, compounded by limited emergency response capacity.

#### **Indigenous Inclusion**

Ensuring meaningful participation, benefit-sharing, and protection of cultural practices remains a central challenge as development accelerates.

#### **Previous International Actions**

International efforts have emphasized pragmatic cooperation rather than binding regulation. Key agreements include Arctic Council-led cooperation on search and rescue and oil pollution response, as well as global instruments such as UNCLOS, the Polar Code, and UNDRIP. National Arctic strategies further reflect diverse state priorities regarding security, development, and environmental protection.

#### **Policy Options and Areas for Cooperation**

Delegates may consider:

- Clarifying norms and expectations for Arctic governance within existing legal frameworks
- Strengthening cooperative mechanisms for environmental protection, search and rescue, and scientific research
- Promoting transparency and dialogue to reduce security tensions
- Enhancing Indigenous participation in decision-making processes
- Balancing responsible development with long-term environmental sustainability

### **Questions to Consider:**

- What is your country's Arctic policy, and how does it balance security, development, and Indigenous rights?
- How does UNCLOS apply to your country's maritime claims, and has an extended continental shelf submission been made?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the Arctic Council?
- How can cooperation be promoted while respecting sovereignty?
- What realistic mechanisms exist for funding, monitoring, and enforcement in the Arctic context?
- How can Indigenous participation be effectively operationalized in governance and development projects?

## **Topic 2: The Status of Non-Self-Governing Territories**

### **Introduction:**

Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs) are defined in Chapter XI of the United Nations Charter as territories “whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government.” At the founding of the United Nations in 1945, seventy-two territories were classified under this category. Through successive waves of decolonization, that number has been reduced to seventeen today. Nevertheless, these remaining territories continue to face political, economic, and administrative dependence on administering Powers.

The central issue confronting SPECPOL is how the international community can support the right of peoples in NSGTs to self-determination while ensuring stability, human rights protection, and sustainable development. The possible political outcomes— independence, free association, or integration—each present distinct legal, economic, and social implications. Additionally, unresolved sovereignty disputes and geopolitical interests complicate efforts toward peaceful resolution.

### **Historical and Recent Background**

The modern framework for decolonization emerged with the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. Chapter XI of the UN Charter imposed obligations on administering Powers to promote political advancement, protect the welfare of inhabitants, and develop self-government. A pivotal moment followed in 1960 with the adoption of General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), which affirmed the right of all colonial peoples to self-determination and called for the end of colonialism in all its forms.

Throughout the 1960s to 1980s, the majority of NSGTs achieved independence, and the UN Trust Territory system was fully dismantled. By the late twentieth century, remaining NSGTs were largely small island territories or regions with complex sovereignty disputes. Today, oversight continues through the Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24) and the Decolonization Unit of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), with attention focused on political status, economic viability, human rights, and dispute resolution.

### **Legal and Institutional Framework**

#### **Principal Legal Instruments**

The **United Nations Charter (Articles 73–74)** establishes the responsibilities of administering Powers to advance self-government, respect the political aspirations of peoples, and ensure economic and social development.

**General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV)**, adopted in 1960, articulates the principle of self-determination as a fundamental right and provides the normative foundation for decolonization.

**General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV)** clarifies the three legitimate outcomes of self-government: independence, free association with an independent state, or integration with an existing state, provided the choice is freely expressed.

### **Institutional Mechanisms**

The **Fourth Committee (SPECPOL)** reviews decolonization issues, considers reports, and drafts resolutions related to NSGTs.

The **Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24)** monitors the situation in NSGTs, engages with administering Powers and territorial representatives, and reports annually to the General Assembly.

The **Decolonization Unit (DPPA)** provides technical assistance, legal analysis, and monitoring support, facilitating dialogue and reporting on developments in NSGTs.

### **Gaps and Constraints**

Compliance with decolonization obligations remains largely voluntary, with no binding enforcement mechanism. Political disputes, strategic interests, and economic dependency can delay or complicate transitions to self-government, particularly in territories with small populations or contested sovereignty.

### **Stakeholders and Typical Positions**

#### **Administering Powers**

Administering Powers retain responsibility for governance, security, and development. While some support gradual self-determination, others emphasize strategic, economic, or political considerations that may slow progress.

#### **Populations of NSGTs**

Territorial populations seek varying degrees of autonomy, independence, or continued association, often prioritizing political participation, economic stability, and cultural preservation.

#### **Other UN Member States**

Many states advocate strongly for self-determination and decolonization, while others adopt more cautious positions due to concerns about territorial integrity or precedent.

#### **International Organizations and Civil Society**

UN agencies, NGOs, and advocacy groups monitor compliance with international law, promote human rights, and provide development assistance.

## **Disputes and Key Problem Areas**

### **Western Sahara**

Western Sahara remains one of the most prominent unresolved decolonization cases. Disagreements between Morocco and the Polisario Front over sovereignty and the conduct of a referendum have stalled progress. Human rights concerns, refugee displacement, and natural resource governance remain central issues.

### **Falkland Islands / Malvinas**

The dispute between the United Kingdom and Argentina highlights tensions between territorial integrity and the principle of self-determination. Competing interpretations of international law and historical claims continue to divide Member States.

### **Small Island Territories**

Many NSGTs are small, geographically isolated, and economically dependent. Climate change, natural disasters, and limited administrative capacity complicate governance and decision-making regarding political status.

### **Additional Considerations for Delegates**

Delegates should consider issues such as natural resource governance, human rights protections, militarization and strategic use of territories, cultural and Indigenous identity, the legitimacy of referenda and consultations, economic dependency, and climate resilience. These factors increasingly shape contemporary debates on decolonization and self-governance.

### **Previous International Actions and Precedents**

Key international actions include the adoption of the UN Charter's decolonization provisions, General Assembly Resolutions 1514 and 1541, and ongoing monitoring by the C-24 and DPPA. These frameworks emphasize peaceful transition, respect for rights, and international cooperation.

### **Policy Options and Areas for Cooperation**

Delegates may explore:

- Strengthening normative guidance on self-determination and governance
- Enhancing institutional coordination and technical assistance
- Supporting peaceful mediation in disputed territories
- Promoting inclusive political participation and human rights protections
- Encouraging sustainable development and climate resilience strategies

## Questions to Consider

1. What is your country's position on self-determination in NSGTs?
2. How has your country historically engaged with decolonization issues?
3. What mechanisms best ensure free, fair, and transparent expressions of political will?
4. How can the UN support development and governance while respecting sovereignty?
5. How should SPECPOL balance administering Powers' interests with the rights of dependent peoples?

## Sources

### UN & International Legal Documents

- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) – full text and Division for Ocean Affairs resources. See: *United Nations, Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea*. (Convention text and commentary).  
[https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm)
- UN – Oceans & the Law of the Sea (overview) – summarizes UNCLOS and ocean governance. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/oceans-and-the-law-of-the-sea>
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) – outlines rights of Indigenous peoples (self-determination, consultation)  
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

### Regional & Institutional

- Arctic Council –About & Agreements – background on mandate, working groups, and key agreements (SAR Agreement, Oil Pollution Preparedness & Response Agreement).  
<https://arctic-council.org/about/>

### Policy, Research & Data

- CLCS & Continental Shelf Submissions –technical procedures and submissions by coastal states. CLCS resources via UN Division for Ocean Affairs.  
[https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/clcs\\_home.htm](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/clcs_home.htm)
- IPCC Reports & Arctic Climate Data – for climate impacts on sea-ice and permafrost (relevant for environmental risk sections). <https://www.ipcc.ch>

### Indigenous Participation & Rights

- Inuit Circumpolar Council – official position statements, policy documents on Arctic governance and Indigenous rights. <https://iccalaska.org> (or regional ICC sites)

### Supplementary / Credible Policy Analysis

- Arctic Portal – Law of the Sea & Arctic – region-focused explainers:  
<https://arcticportal.org>
- United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) – Decolonization & SPECPOL links– for connections between decolonization and indigenous rights: <https://dppa.dfs.un.org/en/decolonization>

- United Nations. *The United Nations and Decolonization – Past to Present*. DPPA/Decolonization Unit, 2025. <https://dppa.un.org/en/decolonization>
- United Nations. *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, GA Resolution 1514 (XV), 1960. <https://www.un.org/en/decolonization/declaration>
- United Nations. *Principles Which Should Guide Members in Determining Whether or Not an Obligation Exists to Transfer Powers to the People of a Non-Self-Governing Territory*, GA Resolution 1541 (XV), 1960. <https://www.un.org/en/decolonization/docs/resolutions>
- United Nations. *Non-Self-Governing Territories – Table of Territories*, 2025. <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/content/table-non-self-governing-territories>
- Research Guides, UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library. *Decolonization / Non-Self-Governing Territories*. <https://research.un.org/en/docs/decolonization>