

General Assembly First Committee: Disarmament and International Security

The [General Assembly First Committee](#) addresses the disarmament of conventional weapons, weapons of mass destruction and related international security questions. The First Committee makes recommendations on the regulation of these weapons as they relate to international peace and security. The First Committee does not consider legal issues surrounding weapons possession nor does it address complex peace and security issues addressed by the Security Council. Note: if the Security Council, which is given the primary task of ensuring peace and security by the Charter, is discussing a particular issue, the General Assembly First Committee will cease its own deliberations and defer to the Security Council. Additionally, only the Fifth Committee is able to set or discuss the United Nations budget. No other body, including the First Committee, is able to do so.

Topic #1: Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours

Space, the final frontier. Since the 1950s, humanity has engaged in race with itself to explore and conquer outer space beginning with the race to the moon. Today, [the race has shifted to include multiple Member States, but also private actors](#). While space exploration can provide humanity [with groundbreaking discoveries that boost the economy and provide new technology](#), unrestricted use of space is dangerous. Outer space is becoming a contest for supremacy [through the use of space-based communications and anti-satellite weaponry](#). State actors are not the only threat to rapid proliferation, non-state actors and private entities have quickly commercialized space, [creating a 596 billion USD industry that is expected to grow to 944 billion USD by 2033](#). In addition, private actors are not just commercializing space, they are also [actively engaged in providing military services to Member States, often with little oversight](#). Moreover,

with over 20,000 objects orbiting the earth, the risk of a catastrophic collision is quickly becoming inevitable. Even more concerning is the proliferation of anti-satellite weaponry, which has resulted in thousands of pieces of debris littering space. While treaties such as the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) exist, establishing norms, rules and principles surrounding the use of outer space is an essential step as they are based on a normative framework. This makes norms, rules and principles more flexible than existing legal frameworks and oftentimes easier to implement.

Following the launch of the first artificial satellite, the United Nations established an [ad hoc Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space \(COPUOS\)](#) in 1958 to facilitate international cooperation and address potential legal problems with space exploration. The following year, COPOUS became a permanent body that [would encourage capacity building and cooperation between Member States to ensure a peaceful use of outer space](#). Throughout the late 50s and early 60s, the United Nations considered early proposals prohibiting the militarization of outer space including the enactment of the [Declaration of Legal Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space](#) in 1963, which laid out early norms and principles surrounding the use of outer space such as cooperation and mutual assistance. These efforts resulted in the creation of the [Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies \(Outer Space Treaty\)](#). While the treaty expressly prohibited weaponizing space, it also established principles surrounding the purpose and goals for using outer space. Through the Outer Space Treaty, the United Nations called for the exploration and use of outer space to be carried out for the economic and scientific benefit of all humanity. At the same time, the United Nations viewed outer space as an opportunity for Member States to collaborate in pursuit of peaceful purposes.

As Member States [continued to launch objects and people into outer space](#), the United Nations became concerned about potential damage resulting from these activities. In 1972, the United Nations adopted the [Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects](#), which established that a Member State is liable for damage its space object causes to the object of another Member State. Two years later, the United Nations adopted the [Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space](#). This convention required

Member States to register objects launched into outer space with the Secretary-General. To date, [88 percent of all satellites, probes, landers, crewed spacecraft and space station flight elements](#) launched into Earth's orbit or beyond have been registered with the Secretary-General.

As the space race came to a conclusion, the United Nations continued its efforts of establishing outer space as a peaceful arena. In 1979, the United Nations adopted the [Agreement Governing the Activities of the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies](#). This agreement aimed to provide Member States with a list of prohibited activities, such as establishing military bases on the Moon, while encouraging Member States to utilize the Moon for peaceful uses including scientific research. Member States continued to utilize space for a variety of scientific purposes. Likewise, technology became increasingly sophisticated both in its use and design. In response, the [United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Use of Outer Space \(UNISPACE\)](#) reconvened for a second time in 1982. Rather than focusing exclusively on the harm posed by rapid technological advancement, the conference highlighted the mutual benefit of increased satellites and remote sensing provided Member States. Between 1982 and 1996, the United Nations adopted a series of declarations and principles addressing [broadcasting, remote sensing, nuclear power and international cooperation](#). Unlike prior treaties and declarations, which focused solely on the harms of space usage and exploration, these principles emphasized the mutual benefit of space technology including natural disaster mitigation and economic benefits.

In 2006, the United Nations established the [United Nations Platform for Space-based Information for Disaster Management and Emergency Response \(UN-SPIDER\)](#). UN-SPIDER serves as an open-network for Member States to collaborate on disaster management and capacity building and continues to provide access to Member States to space-based information for risk reduction. Despite this, Member States still criticized the United Nations efforts in regards to space due to [a lack of a definition and delimitation of space, but also ineffectiveness of international space law](#). In an effort to clarify the goals and objectives of space use and exploration, the Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space (COPOUS) created the [Guidelines for the Long-Term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities of the Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space](#)

in 2021. While voluntary in nature, these guidelines address concerns surrounding emerging technology such as lasers and potential threats including space debris. At the Summit of the Future in 2024, the United Nations adopted the [Pact for the Future](#), a comprehensive declaration focused on development, global governance and international security. Action 56 of the Pact focuses on strengthening international cooperation on the use and exploration of outer space, [including increased engagement with the private sector and other relevant actors ensuring outer space remains a safe and sustainable environment](#).

While norms, rules and principles are a key first step in creating long term policies, especially in a rapidly changing environment such as space, [they are insufficient without permanent, binding agreements](#). While Member States can be held accountable through international agreements, [jurisdictional issues, limited resources and overall lack of enforcement against private actors](#) creates a unique challenge for the United Nations. One area where existing norms are insufficient is in addressing the activities of private actors involved in space exploration and the provision of technical assistance to Member States. In an effort to establish stronger norms for private actors to abide by, the [Space Law for New Space Actors](#) program provides assistance to Member States in revising existing national space law frameworks to conform with international normative frameworks. Moreover, the United Nations plans on reconvening UNISPACE IV in 2027, [where it plans on discussing enhanced space sustainability, increased accessibility and capacity building for developing Member States and international cooperation](#).

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- What steps can Member States take to move the Guidelines or the Long-Term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities of the Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space from a purely voluntary program to binding law?
- How can Member States assist in bolstering international space law while still remaining flexible in addressing emerging technologies and concerns?

- How can UN-SPIDER be utilized to encourage compliance with norms, rules and principles of space?

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Topic #2: The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects

According to the 2018 Small Arms Survey, [over one billion small arms and light weapons](#) (SALW) are currently in circulation worldwide. These weapons—defined generally as [those that can be carried by one to three people and shoot projectiles](#)—are transferred across international borders through both licit channels involving authorized manufacturers and regulated trade and illicit networks operating within the black market. The estimated economic effects are substantial—the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that [240 billion USD in gross domestic product](#) will be lost to SALW-related deaths between 2018 and 2030. Illicit firearms fuel violence,

especially when they fall into the hands of criminal networks and terrorist groups, [posing risks to institutions](#) and [hampering sustainable development](#). In regions emerging from conflict or governed by fragile institutions, the lack of oversight makes it even harder to control the spread of weapons. The United Nations recognizes the urgent threat that SALW pose, with explicit commitments in the 2015 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) and the 2024 [Pact for the Future](#).

The United Nations has long recognized the necessity of tracing the global movement of SALW as part of its broader commitment to disarmament. An early initiative in this effort was the establishment of the [United Nations Register of Conventional Arms](#) (UNROCA) in 1991, which represented the first multilateral attempt to monitor legal arms transfers, including SALW. [The underlying rationale](#) was that the registration of legally-traded firearms would limit diversion of arms into illicit markets without detection while helping States and international bodies monitor any significant movement or accumulation of arms. However, UNROCA [was not designed](#) with SALW explicitly in mind, and information submission is voluntary, limiting its utility.

Renewed momentum to combat the illicit trade in small arms emerged in 2001 with the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. This conference culminated in the adoption of the [Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects](#) (the Programme of Action, or PoA). The PoA [outlined key measures](#) for Member States to coordinate their efforts globally. First, States were urged to enhance enforcement against the unlicensed manufacture of firearms—a major contributor to black-market supplies. Second, the Programme recommended that all legally-produced firearms be marked with a serial number and country of origin. These markings—combined with improved international and regional information-sharing mechanisms—were intended to strengthen the ability to trace the movement of small arms across borders.

In 2005, the General Assembly recognized the [International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons](#) (the International Tracing Instrument, or ITI). The ITI strengthened the PoA in providing specific guidelines for the marking of weapons

by manufacturers and States, as well as the tracking and destruction of illicit arms. It also established a framework for communication both between States and Interpol. These strategies were bolstered by the 2013 [Arms Trade Treaty](#) (ATT), which further codified control strategies for conventional weapons, including SALW. While the ATT was a significant step forward as the first treaty to explicitly govern arms transfers, reviews by [non-governmental organizations](#) (NGOs) and [think tanks](#) have indicated that its impact on the actual volume of illicit arms transfers has been limited at best.

The United Nations maintains several active mechanisms for reviewing international action on the illicit arms trade. A regular series of conferences held by the Office of Disarmament Affairs (ODA) actively reviews progress on the PoA and ITI. The [Fourth Conference](#) (RevCon4), held in 2024, addressed concerns regarding escalating global armed conflict, regional strategies for combating illicit arms movement, and the unique effects of SALW on women and girls. They also discussed new concerns regarding technological advancements, such as [privately-made weapons or illicit modification accessories](#) for manufactured SALW, which make it [more difficult to identify and track](#) the flow of weapons by creating new distribution avenues or modifying existing weapons.

As the international community continues to grapple with the illicit trade in SALW, several major obstacles remain. Data-gathering, record-keeping and information-sharing—the bedrock of the international mechanisms—[remain inconsistent](#). Many developing States particularly struggle to maintain their commitments due to resource limitations or technology gaps, creating holes in the SALW life cycle. The United Nations has attempted to respond through the creation of programs like the [Modular Small-arms-control Implementation Compendium](#) (MOSAIC), the [Fellowship Training Programme on Small Arms and Light Weapons Control](#), and [a project](#) by the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (ODA). Additionally, the United Nations and NGOs have [increasingly focused on “demand-side” responses](#) that emphasize prevention of armed violence and human security over “supply-side” responses that focus primarily on tracking and seizure of SALW. These responses include implementing more [regional](#) and [gender-responsive approaches](#).

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- How can States adapt to new technologies in the manufacturing and modification of small arms?
- How can the international community improve reporting under the International Tracing Instrument, particularly within developing states?
- How can Member States build capacity and technical expertise in managing the trade of small arms and light weapons, particularly when resources are limited?
- How can Member States implement preventative approaches to the illicit arms trade?

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