



**General Assembly, First Committee:
Disarmament and International Security
Background Guide**

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In 1945, when the United Nations was founded, DISEC was created as one of the six main committees of the UN General Assembly. Despite the committee originally focusing its efforts on political and security matters, the Cold War switched that focus to disarmament. DISEC currently stands as the main deliberative policymaking and representative organ of the UN, and deals with a wide array of issues relating to disarmament. This includes global challenges and threats to international peace and security. DISEC also seeks to solve these challenges in the international security regime.¹ DISEC is among the largest committees in the United Nations, because all UN member states have an active presence on the committee. As a result, DISEC brings together various perspectives on current issues.

I. Regulating the Flow of Small and Light Arms

Statement of the Issue:

As of 2020, approximately 1 billion small arms were in circulation worldwide². The current light and small arms industry is massive. Since 2002, nine countries have regularly reported that their annual small arms exports were worth over \$100,000,000³. Seven countries are estimated to regularly purchase over \$100,000,000 in small arms imports⁴. These figures also include equipment needed to use small arms, such as ammunition, but do not include all weapons generally classified as light arms.

There is no universal definition for what weapons qualify as small arms and light arms, but the UN generally recognizes weapons meant to be used by one person as small arms and weapons designed to be used by two to three people as light arms⁵. The main defining characteristic of these arms is their portability⁶. Examples of small arms include assault rifles,

revolvers, and light machine guns. Light arms include heavy machine guns, portable anti-aircraft guns, and mortars with calibers that do not exceed 100 millimeters⁷.

Small arms can be produced through one of two processes. The first is industrial production, where they are mass-produced by companies. Countries with high rates of small arms production are also usually major exporters⁸. They can also be made by artisans in a small-scale arms production process known as craft production. Weapons used by criminal and terrorist groups are usually made through craft production⁹.

Small and light arms present a major threat to UN goals. Small arms create challenges for peacekeeping efforts¹⁰. They are a convenient weapon for criminal and terrorist groups¹¹, and they are the most commonly used weapons by perpetrators of gender-based violence¹². Egregious human rights violations, such as genocides, are generally perpetrated with small and light arms¹³. They also play an important role in the outcome of conflicts. While the presence of small arms in a region does not guarantee that a conflict will occur, the presence of small arms is associated with prolonged conflict. In regions such as Africa, the proliferation of small arms in the area appears to be one of the leading factors in causing prolonged conflicts¹⁴.

Regulating small arms flows is essential to minimizing the harm these weapons cause. While the illegal arms trade is a contributor to the current small and light arms problem, most weapons that are sold illegally are bought legally before they go on the black market. Furthermore, states that use their weapons inappropriately typically acquire their small arms through legal channels¹⁵.

The data available on small and light weapons sales is currently limited, which presents a challenge for regulation. Not all countries make information publicly available about their arms sales¹⁶. Weapons sold to non-state actors are generally not reported. Illegal arms sales are extremely difficult to track due to their covert nature¹⁷. Improving global arms movement reporting is part of the 2030 sustainable development agenda, but it is an area that still needs to be improved¹⁸.

Individual small and light arms may not present as much danger to global security as major arms or weapons of mass destruction, but their collective numbers and use make them a threat to international peace and UN goals, particularly in regions with existing conflicts. It is essential for international peace and security that their movement be better regulated.

History:

During the Cold War, a massive proliferation of small and light arms took place. The United States and USSR frequently sold weapons to rebel groups, young states, and other

parties to advanced their political interests which resulted in an increase in the amount of small arms available in areas such as Africa¹⁹. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, small and light arms stockpiles were left behind in former Soviet states. The presence of these weapons in politically unstable regions made it easier for bad non-state actors to acquire them, with organized crime groups such as the Camorra based in Italy successfully purchasing large quantities of weapons from the Communist parties in collapsing Soviet states²⁰. Weapons in former Soviet stockpiles have also been illegally shipped to countries under UN arms embargoes²¹.

The small arms available to prospective buyers also changed during the Cold War. In 1947, Mikhail Kalashnikov developed the AK-47²², a weapon that would go on to make small arms more accessible and easier to use. Because AK-47s are portable and easy to use, most people, even children, can be trained to use one which increases the number of people who can use small arms²³. Consequently, AK-47s have made terrorists, rebel groups, and other non-state actors more dangerous than they were prior to their invention and increased the importance of acquiring arms rather than training fighters for such groups²⁴.

The rapid increase in the number of small and light arms available in regions such as Africa has changed life in these areas. Western Africa has seen an increase in problems such as terrorism and crime due to the high rate of regional small arms trafficking²⁵. In Kenya, the presence of weapons in refugee camps have made them a popular site for extremist groups to recruit members from²⁶.

During the 1990s, small arms drew the attention of the international community because of their use in atrocities such as the Rwanda Genocide. People armed with machetes and AK-47s killed approximately 1 million people in less than a month during the genocide. Prolonged conflicts fought with small arms, such as a civil war in Liberia, also contributed to new concerns about small arms²⁷. Prior to this point, the UN had taken measures to try to minimize the flow of arms into conflict zones, with UN-mandated arms embargoes dating back to an embargo placed on Zimbabwe, then called South Rhodesia, in 1966²⁸. However, the conflicts in the 1990s led to a different approach to managing global arms flows. In 1996, the UN and regional organizations began working to address the problems presented by small arms, with the UN hosting a panel of experts who created an agenda to better manage global small arms flows²⁹.

Since the 1990s, small and light arms regulations have increased significantly. In 2001, the adoption of the Program of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (abbreviated PoA) created a valuable framework for managing global arms flows³⁰. The PoA also asks that signatories submit

voluntary reports of their arms sales, which 84% of signatories have complied with³¹.

Subsequent additions to the PoA have worked to strengthen it and better manage international cooperation on regulating the small and light arms trade. Since 2008, the UN secretary-general has submitted biannual reports to the security council on the state of the small and light arms trade³², improving the UN organ with enforcement power's access to information.

Regional organizations are also playing an important role in managing the global arms trade. To better manage small and light arms flows in the Western hemisphere, the Organization of American States adopted its Firearms Convention and Model Regulations³³. Similar regional agreements are in place in Africa and Europe, with the African Union launching its Silencing the Guns in Africa initiative in 2013³⁴ and in 2000, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe passed regulations for weapon exports³⁵. Regions may also take measures such as imposing arms embargoes on countries, people, or groups to minimize the flow of arms. For example, European regional arms embargoes have been used since 1986, starting with an embargo placed on Libya³⁶.

While these international and regional agreements are helping regulate the small and light arms trade, determining the extent of the small and light arms trade is challenging which makes it hard to regulate³⁷. Furthermore, illegal arms sales not only remains an issue, but they are also hard to track because of their secretive nature³⁸.

Analysis:

Managing the small and light arms trade is essential to accomplishing UN goals. With that being said, they can be difficult to regulate. Part of the appeal of small arms to criminals, terrorists, and other non-state actors is that they are hard to trace and easier to acquire or make than other types of weapons. Because of their size, small and light arms are easier to smuggle and hide than other arms³⁹. Small arms can also be easy to disguise. For example, the *'o tubo*, an extremely simple model of handmade gun discovered by Italian police in 2005, was easily mistaken for a toy because it was very simple and could be collapsed into a pair of metal tubes⁴⁰. Small and light arms are also far less expensive than other types of weapons⁴¹ which lowers the barriers for non-state actors to access them.

Regulating both future arms sales as well as existing small and light arms supplies is essential to global peace and stability. Not only do countries need to work together to combat the illegal arms trade, but legal arms sales need to be regulated as small arms acquired through existing legal channels can be either resold illegally or used to cause harm⁴². There are measures countries can take at the national level to reduce the likelihood of illegal international

arms sales. For example, countries can manage their internal arms sales by using licensing systems to better regulate the movement of arms within their boundaries⁴³. In turn, good domestic management can reduce the likelihood of illegal arms being sold from the country with a licensing system.

Another factor to consider is how small arms impact conflict zones. Keeping small and light arms from entering conflict zones can help reduce the length of the conflict⁴⁴, but if there is already a high rate of arms proliferation in an area of conflict, encouraging people to give up their arms may be more important. Furthermore, conflict zones often have high rates of illegal arms trafficking⁴⁵ which impacts of the nature of how arms flows need to be controlled.

One way to better regulate international arms flows is to improve arms movement reporting. As of 2017, nearly 30% of PoA signatories had either failed to submit a report or only submitted one report over a 15-year period. In 2011, changes were made to the reporting form that it made reporting an easier and more streamlined process; however, the revised form resulted in some countries submitting less information than they had previously which raises questions about how reporting forms should be used to collect information⁴⁶.

Conclusion:

Small and light arms are undermining UN security, human rights, and development goals. Managing small arms flows is a multifaceted process that needs to be looked at holistically in order to implement effective management processes. The international community needs to work to address both legal and illegal small and light arms sales through processes such as reporting standards. Existing weapons need to be considered as well, such as stockpiles from the Cold War and other conflicts.

Questions:

1. How can current gaps in the information available about the arms trade be filled?
2. What should the General Assembly First Committee do to keep small and light arms out of conflict zones?
3. What should neighboring states do to manage regional arms flows?

Resources:

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II. Arms Race in Outer Space

Statement of the Issue:

The current international treaty on space activities, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, embodies a space-as-a-commons principle, stating that space should be available for the use of all mankind.¹ It calls upon member states to “refrain from placing in orbit around the earth any objects carrying nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction or from installing such weapons on celestial bodies.” The ban of WMD was especially pertinent at the beginning of the Cold War when the United States (US) and Soviet Union (USSR) were testing nuclear weapons in outer space. However, in the recent decades the use of conventional weapons, which are not mentioned in the treaty, has been more common. So far, proposed treaties that create a code of conduct and limit the development of space weapons have failed to gain consensus among the key nations, namely the US, Russia, China, India, and the EU, needed for such an agreement to be effective. As more countries develop technology that could be used to create space weapons, it is imperative that the international community formulate a comprehensive treaty on space weapons. Otherwise, there is the possibility of the development of a space race and the weaponization of space, where outer space emerges as the battleground.² This has the potential for devastating consequences around the world.

History:

The history of space weaponization dates back to the 1950s when the United States and Soviet Union began weaponizing space and testing the first anti-satellite systems. Roughly a decade later, the UN passed the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which governs the activities of states in the exploration and use of outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies.³ While the treaty provides the foundation for the regulation of space activities, it is very vague and does not include any restriction on conventional weapons in space. In 1978, the Committee on Disarmament (CD) was created as a single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community.⁴ The CD is a UN disarmament negotiating forum that handles topics

¹ United Nations General Assembly. Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies. NASA, [Outer Space Treaty of 1967 \(nasa.gov\)](https://www.nasa.gov/outer-space-treaty).

² Note, this is separate from the militarization of space, where space becomes a conventional battlefield where armies fight.

³ Formally known as 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 of 1967 \(nasa.gov\)](https://www.nasa.gov/outer-space-treaty)

⁴ The Committee on Disarmament (CD) was renamed the Conference on Disarmament in 1984. “Conference on Disarmament,” *United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs*, [Conference on Disarmament – UNODA Conference on Disarmament – UNODA](https://www.unodh.org/conference-on-disarmament) (accessed July 13, 2021).

including nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction, conventional weapons, and disarmament and international security.

In 1981, the UN passed a resolution named Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) that reaffirms the principles of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty and calls for a ban on the weaponization of space.⁵ It calls on the CD to take further actions to confirm a weapon-free space. Four years later, the CD established an ad-hoc committee on PAROS regarding a potential PAROS treaty, however the committee was dissolved in 1994 due to opposition, particularly from the United States who argued that PAROS was unnecessary because there were no weapons (and thus no arms race) in outer space at that time.⁶

Beginning in the late-1990s, there was a shift in the language nations used to discuss the space domain. For example, in 1997 a United States Space Command publication emphasized the importance of space superiority to military operations, battlefield success, and future warfare.⁷ As a result, there has been increasing concern about the weaponization of space and the start of an arms race in space.

In 2005, the UNGA approved an annual resolution on “Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in Outer Space Activities,” however the issue was unresolved due to opposition from countries like the US that denied the presence of an arms race in space.⁸ On the other hand, China and Russia have produced several working papers on PAROS, offering suggestions for different confidence building measures and verification measures including exchange of info, demonstrations, notifications, and consultations.

In 2008, China and Russia submitted a draft treaty - Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Object (otherwise known as the PPWT) - to the CD that reiterates the importance of a weapon-free outer space, defines relevant terms, and proposes the creation of an additional protocol.⁹ The treaty was reintroduced in 2014, but rejected by the US again. Also in 2008, the European Union proposed a “Space Code of Conduct,” which called for states to “refrain from intentional destruction of any on-orbit space object.”¹⁰ It also provided a voluntary set of rules regarding

⁵ “Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space,” *Federation of American Scientists*, [Federation of American Scientists :: Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space \(fas.org\)](https://www.fas.org/publications/paros/).

⁶ “Proposed Prevention of an Arms Race in Space (PAROS) Treaty,” *NTI*, [Proposed Prevention of an Arms Race in Space \(PAROS\) Treaty | Treaties & Regimes | NTI](https://www.nti.org/our-work/paros-treaty/) (accessed July 13, 2021).

⁷ “Vision for 2020” United States Space Command, 1997, [visbook \(archive.org\)](https://www.usssc.com/visbook/) (accessed July 21, 2021).

⁸ “Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space,” *Federation of American Scientists*

⁹ David C. DeFrieze, “Defining and Regulating the Weaponization of Space,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 74: 2014, [Defining and Regulating the Weaponization of Space \(ndu.edu\)](https://www.ndu.edu/publications/jfq/2014/defining-and-regulating-the-weaponization-of-space/). (accessed July 21, 2021).

¹⁰ “Space Code of Conduct,” Council of the European Union, December 17, 2008, [GEN \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.eu/press-communications/infobox.cfm?id=11414) (accessed July 21, 2021).

issues including space debris and operation of crafts or satellites in space, though it was rejected by the US, China, Russia, and India.¹¹

Despite repeated US claims that there is no arms race in outer space, in the past few years the country has taken significant action to build up its space force. On August 2, 2019, the US officially withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, claiming that Russia failed to comply with its obligations.¹² Rejecting the existing “space-for-peace” agreements, on December 20, 2019 President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act, which formally created the newest military service since 1947.¹³ The law states that the Air Force Space Command, the major space command of the US Air Force and de facto space force of the US Armed Forces, will be immediately re-designated as the US Space Force. At the London Summit on December 4, 2019, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) officially declared space an “operational domain” for NATO alongside air, land, sea, and cyber.¹⁴ NATO stated that it has no intention to put weapons in space, but recognizes its importance in keeping us safe and tackling security challenges, while upholding international law, and in defending Western satellites from growing threats.

Analysis:

The international community has become increasingly concerned about the weaponization of space as an arms race could have dire consequences for the defense, civil, and commercial activities around the world that rely on space-based technologies (SBT). SBT are used for peaceful purposes such as communication, transportation, and weather.¹⁵ They also provide nations with self-defense against military buildup, invasion, or missile attacks as these actions are very visible from space and thus serve as a deterrent against these actions. There are roughly 3,000 satellites operating in Earth’s orbit, owned by more than 60 countries, government consortiums, and other entities.¹⁶

¹¹ Michael Listner, “U.S. Rebuffs Current Draft of EU Code of Conduct: Is There Something Waiting in the Wings?” *The Space Review*, January 16, 2012, [The Space Review: US rebuffs current draft of EU Code of Conduct: is there something waiting in the wings?](#) (accessed July 21, 2021).

¹² C. Todd Lopez, “U.S. Withdraws from Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty,” U.S. Department of Defense, August 2, 2019, [U.S. Withdraws From Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#) (accessed July 21, 2021).

¹³ [With a signature, Trump brings Space Force into being | CNN](#)

¹⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization. London Declaration. [NATO - Official text: London Declaration, 04-Dec.-2019](#) (accessed July 21, 2021).

¹⁵ DeFrieze, “Defining and Regulating the Weaponization of Space,” 111.

¹⁶ Michael Anissimov, “How Many Satellites are Orbiting the Earth,” *Infobloom*, [How Many Satellites are Orbiting the Earth? \(with pictures\) \(infobloom.com\)](#) (accessed July 21, 2021).

The Outer Space Act of 1967 provided the international community with a basic legal framework for regulating activity in outer space. However, as there is no common framework or comprehensive treaty for discussing space weapons, there is no international consensus on the definition of space weapons and the weaponization of space. Though several treaties have been proposed, they provide different scopes of weapons as there are at least four ways in which the characterization of space weapons can differ: nuclear or conventional weapons, where the weapons are stationed, whether the weapons produce orbital debris, and whether the weapons are for self-defense or offensive purposes. For example, the Chinese-Russian PPWT would only ban weapons stationed in space, whereas the EU's Space Code of Conduct would limit weapons stationed on both earth and in space.

International agreement on the definition of space weapons is also crucial as more countries begin to test potential space weapons. Though India remains opposed to the weaponization of space, in 2019 they tested an ASAT weapon, suggesting that India does not believe that the ASAT weapon is a space weapon or represents the weaponization of space.¹⁷ Clarifying whether ASAT weapons are space weapons is important as the debris that ASAT weapons create can lead to the destruction of other satellites and could cause problems for future space travel. Furthermore, destroyed or damaged satellites re-entering earth's atmosphere also spill hydrazine fuel which can harm humans near the crash site if exposed, including damage to the lungs, central nervous system, and kidneys.¹⁸

India, China, and Russia have advocated for the need to formulate a comprehensive treaty for preventing outer space from becoming a domain for testing destructive devices. It is imperative that this treaty include the creation of a code of conduct or norms of behavior for space weapons and have the support of key nations, namely the US, Russia, India, China, and the European Union. This treaty should also close any loopholes that allow nations to circumvent restrictions on the development and testing of space weapons. For example, parties that ratified the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty agreed to not develop, test, or deploy ABM systems or components which are sea-based, mobile land-based, space-based, or air-based, but it does not prohibit the research and development of anti-satellite weapons.¹⁹ Since ABM and ASATs use much of the same technologies, R&D on ASATs can be used to develop ABMs.

¹⁷ India Ministry of External Affairs, Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations New York, [India United Nations new.pdf \(mea.gov.in\)](#) (accessed July 21, 2021).

¹⁸ Keith Veronese, "What weapons could be used in a real-life space war?" *Gizmodo*, January 27, 2012, [What weapons could be used in a real-life space war? \(gizmodo.com\)](#) (accessed July 22, 2021).

¹⁹ "The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty at a Glance," *Arms Control Association*, December 2020, [The Anti-Ballistic Missile \(ABM\) Treaty at a Glance | Arms Control Association](#) (accessed July 29, 2021).

As space is a global common, it lacks a regulating body that has the means to enforce regulations on space weapons, unlike say the armed forces. As such, merely defining terms is not enough to maintain space as a peaceful area. A treaty should create a mechanism to identify who is responsible when unallowed behavior is observed. It should also create a forum for addressing claims of aggressive activity, and handling compensation for damage to property, and a peaceful dispute mechanism to prevent escalation of conflicts. Lastly, it should create a means of enforcement and consequences for violations of regulations as without it, states will not be incentivized to adhere to the treaty.

Conclusion:

The weaponization of space poses a threat to all nations. To prevent the weaponization of outer space, the international community needs to create a comprehensive framework to regulate the use of space weapons with the support of key leading nations. Space is an international common and easier to protect through international cooperation. International community has a strong incentive to maintain space as a peaceful arena. If leading nations are going to continue on the trajectory of building up what could be construed as a space weapon, there could be serious consequences.

Questions:

1. How should space weapons and the weaponization of space be defined?
2. What should space be used for?
3. What is the best way to prevent global powers from weaponizing space?
4. How can the international community build off of previous conferences and treaties on space weapons to create a comprehensive framework?