

SPECPOL

Background Guide

GWCIA XXXI

Topic A: The South China Sea Dispute
Topic B: International Election Integrity

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Conference Policies

Misconduct Policy

GWCIA acknowledges that collegiate Model UN spaces often echo or perpetuate real-world discrimination towards various historically marginalized communities. As such, GWCIA enforces a zero tolerance policy for harassment or discrimination based on race, color, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual identity, national origin, religion, age, disability, or any other identity-based designation. Additionally, GWCIA practices a zero tolerence policy for sexual misconduct of any kind, including sexual harassment and sexual assault. This includes, but is not limited to, inappropriate 1) content in notes passed or documents created during committee sessions, 2) conversations throughout GWCIA, and 3) conduct at The George Washington University campus or at any GWCIA-sponsored programming. If a delegate experiences any kind of discrimination, social discomfort, or sexual misconduct, they are urged to bring it to the attention of any GWCIA secretariat member or report the instance via our anonymous misconduct form, which can be found on our Conduct Policies website page and in each committee room. Any potential cases of discrimination or sexual misconduct will warrant immediate investigation and may result in disqualification from awards and/or dismissal from the conference at the sole discretion of the Secretary-General.

Technology Policy — General Assembly

Using technology is prohibited in GWCIA general assembly committees, unless a delegate has an approved accommodation. GWCIA will provide delegates with one white legal pad and a pen that they may use to write clauses and contribute to resolutions. Delegates are free to bring their own additional notepads, staplers, Post-Its, or other supplies, as these will not be provided.

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All pre-written, plagiarized, or AI-generated content, which can include working papers, draft resolutions, directives, or crisis notes, is strictly prohibited at GWCIA. Pre-writing constitutes any language or content that was written outside of unmoderated caucuses in General Assemblies and outside of when debate is formally opened in crisis committees. This means that creating content before or after committee sessions or during moderated caucuses in Assemblies & Specialized committees is pre-writing. Writing during USG feedback, announcements, or during guest speakers equally constitutes pre-writing. All dais members and undersecretaries general are specifically instructed to monitor for pre-writing by checking typed and written materials that delegates may have prepared before the conference if potential pre-writing is suspected.
By participating in GWCIA, your delegation acknowledges that they understand this policy and the consequences if it is broken. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, verbatim or near-verbatim copying and pasting from academic sources or other websites. Any delegate found guilty of pre-writing, plagiarism, or flagrant AI usage will be immediately disqualified from any award in their committee. The GWCIA Secretariat reserves the right to search computers and laptops, notebooks and binders, USBs, and any form of electronics for Model UN specific documents in response to allegations. They additionally reserve the

discretion to run any content through an AI detector. In order to report a case of substantive misconduct, please see the anonymous misconduct form on our Conduct Policies page or contact a member of the Secretariat.

Awards Policy

While GWCIA recognizes that the core value of participating in any Model UN committee is education in international affairs and the development of related skills such as productive collaboration, public speaking, and critical thinking, we also recognize the value of rewarding delegates who are exceptionally prepared and proficient in these skills. At GWCIA, we value delegates who can leverage creativity, diplomacy, substantive knowledge, and critical thinking skills to debate effectively, lead negotiations and blocs, and write comprehensive clauses. We especially look favorably towards delegates who individually develop meaningful solutions to the committee's main issues while keeping in mind the realistic diplomatic dynamics of our world, as well as those delegates who are able to advocate for their solutions and ideas to be adopted. The dais encourages delegates to lead in a manner that uplifts and respects their competitors while also introducing strong, unique solutions that consistently anchor their group's directive or working paper. On the other hand, attempts to undermine the goals of the committee without reason or acting without detailed thought of consequences are discouraged. Any rude, disrespectful, or demeaning conduct towards other delegates' ideas will not be tolerated.

Letter from the Chair

Dear Delegates,

Hey guys, my name is Nikolai Prykupenko, and I'm your chair for SPECPOL! I'm currently a freshman at GWU's Elliot School, majoring in International Affairs and minoring in Philosophy. Aside from MUN, I'm also on our school's club tennis team. I've been doing model UN since middle school, just like you guys, so I'm excited to see you learn and grow throughout this conference. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out.

Best,

Nikolai Prykupenko
n.prykupenko@gwmail.gwu.edu
Chair, SPECPOL

Reminder: Delegates must CC their advisor on any email sent to the Chair.

Introduction to the Committee

The Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL) is the fourth committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). SPECPOL has some of the most diverse sets of issues to discuss, including the effects of atomic radiation, UN peacekeeping operations, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, and outer space matters.[1] This committee operates under the standard legal authorities of the United Nations, meaning that its resolutions passed by this body are not legally binding to member states. Rather, these resolutions act as recommendations for member states to act upon based on their willingness to follow UN recommendations. When tackling the complex international disputes and intricate internal political networks of the challenges this committee will face, it is important to remember that the UN must also work to convince member states to take action on the resolutions the body passes.

[1] General Assembly of the United Nations, "Special Political and Decolonization (Fourth Committee)," United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/en/ga/fourth/.

Topic A: The South China Sea Dispute

Background

The South China Sea (also referred to as the West Philippine Sea and the East Sea) has been a major area of potential conflict in recent years. The region is a critical link to the major trading routes from Northeast and Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean to reach the wider global market. Furthermore, the region holds a significant market share of global fishing, alongside critical natural gas and oil reserves. The immense economic value of this region, alongside the actions of the countries in the region, has led to the current dispute facing it.

UNCLOS

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the fundamental international legal framework determining the sovereignty and control a nation has over its waters. This includes the legal statute determining what is considered territorial waters for states.

The People's Republic of China ("China") and the Republic of China ("Taiwan") claim around 90% of the South China Sea as their sovereign waters based upon the historic "nine-dash line." China claims much of the South China Sea (SCS) based upon what it refers to as its "historic presence" in the region, which does not follow any standards of international law. Rather, China's expansive claims in the region are considered illegal under UNCLOS and broader international maritime law.[2] This claim overlaps with the claims of the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia.

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled on the case, Republic of the Philippines v. People's Republic of China, determining that China's 9-dash claim (and associated

[2] Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China Is Bending the Rules in the South China Sea," *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute, February 17, 2021), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea.

activities in that area) that overlapped with the Filipino claim was unlawful. However, China has not accepted nor followed this ruling.[3]

Current Situation

The dispute in the region remains unresolved among all parties in the region; however, each nation has had differing approaches to China's claim in the region. The Philippines and Vietnam have been the most confrontational with China over this dispute, and there have historically been many clashes between Vietnamese/Filipino vessels and China Coast Guard ("CCG") vessels.[4] The vast majority of these clashes have focused on the Spratly Islands in the region, which Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and China all claim parts or all of.[5] In contrast to the Philippines and Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have had very few physical confrontations with China over the dispute and generally maintain cordial relations in-spite of it.[6] Similarly, Indonesia's dispute with China over the North Natuna Islands has not been subject to major disputes.[7] Thus, the primary risk of conflict exists between Vietnam, the Philippines, and China. However, this does not mean that the disputes of the other regional actors don't matter.

The dispute has prompted greater international involvement in the region, most notably by the United States, a treaty ally of the Philippines and a comprehensive strategic partner of

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[3] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?," *Www.Uscc.Gov*, July 12, 2016, https://www.uscc.gov/research/south-china-sea-arbitration-ruling-what-happened-and-whats-next.

[4] Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," *Global Conflict Tracker* (Council on Foreign Relations, September 17, 2024), https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea.

[5] Caitlin Campbell, Ben Dolven, and Ronald O'Rourke, "China Primer: South China Sea Disputes," Congress.Gov, August 21, 2023, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10607.

[6] Ian Storey, "Asian Angle | Why Malaysia Has Stayed Quiet but Firm on South China Sea: 'Let Sleeping Dogs Lie'," South China Morning Post, September 2024, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3276601/why-malaysia-has-stayed-quiet-firm-south-china-sea-let-sleeping-dogs-lie.

[7] Evan A. Laksmana, "Indonesia'S Response to China'S Incursions in North Natuna Sea Unsatisfactory: Indonesian Academic," *ThinkChina - Big Reads, Opinion & Columns on China*, December 10, 2021, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/indonesias-response-chinas-incursions-north-natuna-sea-unsatisfactory-indonesian-academic.

Vietnam. The US began Freedom of Navigation Operations ("FONOPS") in 2016, which involved the deployment of U.S. naval assets in the South China Sea, which UNCLOS designates as "international waters," in an effort to "protect free navigation in international waters."[8] The dispute has prompted greater efforts by the Philippine government to engage in diplomatic and military cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia, coinciding with increased development of Filipino naval and coast guard capabilities. [9]

Vietnam has been less overt in its dispute with China than the Philippines, given their Communist Party ties; however, they have increased cooperation with the United States as a balancing act with China's widening power and interests in the region.[10]

As China claims the Spratly and Paracel islands as its territory, they have begun construction of bases for maritime assets, alongside the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. This has been viewed as an effort to not only strengthen China's ability to exert power in the region through maritime presence, but also to legitimize its claim to the region. These base-building efforts have been determined to be unlawful by many, and few recognize its artificial islands as a legitimate legal basis to their control of the sea. [11]

The Philippines, for its part, has stationed Marines on the grounded Philippine Navy Ship, BRP Sierra Madre. The ship was purposely run aground by the Philippines to maintain a physical presence in the region. The Philippines regularly sends resupply vessels to the station, to

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[8] Lynn Kuok, "The U.S. FON Program in the South China Sea," *Brookings*, June 7, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-u-s-fon-program-in-the-south-china-sea/.
[9] Shi Jiangtao, "How Japan and the Philippines Are Building a Maritime Security Front Against China," South China Morning Post, June 3, 2026, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3355849/how-japan-and-philippines-are-building-maritime-security-front-against-china; George Beebe, "Right-Sizing the Russian Threat to Europe," *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, September 25, 2024, https://doi.org/10/17211809/logo-1.
[10] Ian Storey, "Conflict in the South China Sea: China'S Relations with Vietnam and the Philippines - Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, April 2008, https://apjjf.org/ian-storey/2734/article.
[11] Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 2025, https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/.

the anger of China, which often maintains patrols around the vessel to prevent these missions. However, due to the risk of conflict, China has yet to fully prevent a supply ship from reaching the Sierra Madre; many collisions and disputes have occurred over it. [12]

Questions to Consider

1. How can nations work together to ensure that international law and norms are respected by all nations?
2. Why do the Philippines and Vietnam have such stronger policies towards the dispute compared to Malaysia and Indonesia?
3. What role do outside parties have in ensuring free passage in international waters and
4. mediating international disputes?
5. Why are the disputed islands so important to the nations that claim them?

[12] Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Why the Rusting Wreck of a Second World War Ship Is So Important to China," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2023, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/30/sierra-madre-phillippines-ship-china-blockade.

Topic B: International Election Integrity

Background

In 1992, now-legendary academic Francis Fukuyama argued in his book *The End of History and the Last Man* that history had "ended" with the fall of the Soviet Union. He asserted that Western-style liberal democracies had won out as the "final" form of human governance. In the decades since, Fukuyama's hypothesis has come under intense scrutiny as the world has seen the rise of autocratic regimes and increasing doubt in democracy in countries around the world. Democracy, and the advocacy of such, is a core value of the UN, and the organization has worked to support the development of democracies through the promotion of human rights and development.[13]

However, as pointed out by many of Fukuyama's critics, democracy is increasingly under scrutiny by both autocrats and everyday citizens. A fundamental issue surrounding this doubt in democracy is the issue of declining electoral integrity around the world. A functioning democracy requires free and fair elections to successfully represent the interests of the people, and when confidence in free and fair elections is weakened, it weakens democracy.[14] Many authoritarian countries operate under the veneer of democracy, and it is an open secret that elections are not free and fair. Countries like Russia and Syria are examples of this.[15] However, other countries, such as Indonesia, Poland, and Turkiye, that maintain semi-sophisticated democracies, still struggle with election integrity.[16] At the same time, leading democracies have

[13] United Nations, "Democracy | United Nations," United Nations, 2025, https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/democracy.
[14] "Election Integrity," Brennan Center for Justice, September 18, 2025, https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections/election-integrity.
[15] Freedom House, "Russia," Freedom House, September 16, 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia; Freedom House, "Syria," Freedom House, September 16, 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria.
[16] Brent Kallmer, "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding | Journal of Democracy," Journal of Democracy, July 2024, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/misunderstanding-democratic-backsliding/.

increasingly been threatened by the rise of far-right and far-left groups and the degradation of democratic norms. The Presidency of Donald Trump in the United States has created dramatic shifts in the democratic consensus, as independent democratic institutions are eroded and human rights violations increase.[17] Far-right parties in Europe like *Rassemblement National,* Reform UK, and *Alternatif fur Deutschland* have steadily risen in popularity in the democratic bastions of France, the UK, and Germany, and threaten democratic rule there.[18] Many of these groups have disputed elections and attempted to overturn and/or delegitimize the existing political norm to their anti-democratic benefit.

Current Situation

For the last decade, researchers have identified democratic backsliding as a global trend, with nations increasingly leaning toward and/or reinforcing authoritarian tendencies. This has not been confined to any geographical region, with prosperous liberal democracies in Europe and North America experiencing a rise in democratic backsliding as countries in the Global South stagnate or regress in their democratic development.[19] Dissatisfaction with the democratic system is one of the many factors shifting people towards more authoritarian regimes. Increasingly difficult financial and economic conditions have caused resentment among more and more

[17] Lydia Khalil et al., "Entrenched Division: Backsliding Deepens Under Trump'S Second Term," The Lowy Institute (Lowy Institute, July 12, 2026), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/democratic-erosion-report/entrenched-division-backsliding-deepens-under-trump-s-second-term.
[18] Javier Carbonell, Tabea Schaumann, and Levente Kocsis, "Two Years on: Why Europe's Far Right Keeps Growing," Www.epc.eu, 2026, https://www.epc.eu/publication/two-years-later-why-europes-far-right-keeps-growing/.
[19] Brent Kallmer, "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding | Journal of Democracy," Journal of Democracy, July 2024, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/misunderstanding-democratic-backsliding/.

everyday citizens. In times of rough economic conditions, people have resorted to alternative parties over the establishment that they view as having failed them. [20]

However, another factor to consider is the everyday citizen's plummeting trust in the electoral system. In many countries in the global south, people recognize that elections are rigged to varying degrees to ensure a certain outcome. In the Philippines, decades of patronage politics have created a corrupt electoral system dominated by the same political dynasties.[21] Meanwhile, in other countries, elections are based purely on financial resources, rather than electoral popularity, through election rigging. In more established democracies, there has been increasing criticism of the fairness of the electoral system, even if they are free and fair. For example, the UK constituency-based system allows for a party to win a significantly larger portion of the seats in parliament in relation to their overall share of the national vote. [22]

A global decrease in trust in electoral systems contributes to the international trend towards authoritarianism. If people don't trust their votes to matter, their political efficacy decreases, and they will be unwilling to engage with political participation in the future. Large political participation among everyday people is critical for the health of a functioning democracy, and without it, it creates room for authoritarians to rise up and erode further democratic norms and institutions. Thus, it is necessary for nations to support electoral integrity to rebuild trust in the democratic systems of these countries.

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[20] Eli G Rau and Susan Stokes, "Income Inequality and the Erosion of Democracy in the Twenty-First Century," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 1 (December 30, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2422543121.
[21] Andrea Chloe Wong, "Philippine Elections and the Politics Behind It," *Www.Lowyinstitute.Org*, 2022, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/philippine-elections-politics-behind-it.
[22] William Chislett, review of The UK Needs a Fairer Voting System, Elcano Royal Institute, May 18, 2026, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/commentaries/the-uk-needs-a-fairer-voting-system/.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the means by which governments can influence the outcome of elections to the benefit of one side? How can they be prevented?
2. How can International actors support democratic institutions and elections without the support of the host countries?
3. Are certain electoral systems better than others? How can the world work to implement systems to best serve democratic interests?
4. What are the driving factors of electoral mistrust and democratic backsliding? What actions can be taken to combat this?

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