



Committee History and Structure
General Assembly First Committee¹

September 19, 2011

The United Nations General Assembly (GA) was established in 1945 by the Charter of the United Nations.² Each member state has a permanent seat on this committee. Thus the GA is the congress or parliament of the United Nations. It “occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations.”³

In the GA, each UN member state has one vote. No matter how different in military and economic power, all are equal. Thus the United States’ vote counts the same as Egypt’s, and Bolivia has the same voice as China. This is opposed to some other UN committees, such as the Security Council, which have limited membership or special voting rules. This feature gives the General Assembly a great deal of legitimacy on the world stage. It is a place where world public opinion can be expressed.

The GA covers all issues of global importance. Article 14 of the United Nations Charter gives the GA the power to “recommend measures for the peaceable adjustment of any situation, regardless of origin, which it deems likely to impair the general welfare or friendly relations among nations.” According to the Charter, the GA “may discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs” except “any matters relative to the maintenance of international peace and security which are being dealt with by the Security Council.”⁴

The majority of GA resolutions originate in one of the GA’s many subcommittees, such as GA-1 (disarmament and security), GA-2 (economic and financial), GA-3 (social, humanitarian, and cultural), and ECOSOC (economic and social). Thus, the relationship between the GA and its subcommittees is akin to that between the US Senate and its subcommittees. Resolutions passed by subcommittees are simply working papers. Only when the GA passes a resolution does it go into effect.

The GA-1 is a forum for UN member states to discuss and take action on security and disarmament issues.⁵ Like the other main committees of the GA, the GA-1 was established in 1947.⁶ Until 1993, the GA-1 was called the Political and Security Committee. General Assembly Resolution 47/233 (1993) renamed it the Disarmament and

¹ This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, faculty advisor, with contributions from William Selph (2007), Samantha Schorzman (2008), Samantha Stephens (2010), and Evan Laskowski (2011). Copyright 2011 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV, available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter>.

³ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website, <http://www.un.org/ga/about/background.shtml>. This quotation is from the General Assembly’s 2000 Millennium Declaration, Resolution A/res/55/2, Chapter VIII, Article 30, available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

⁴ United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

⁵ UN General Assembly First Committee website, <http://www.un.org/ga/first/index.shtml>.

⁶ UN General Assembly, “Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly,” A/520, 2 December 1947, Rule 90, page 17, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F520&Lang=E.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

Security Committee.⁷ Like the other GA committees, the GA-1 meets each fall at UN headquarters in New York, as well as in special sessions as deemed necessary.

The mandate of the GA is limited by the existence and powers of the Security Council. As mentioned, it can address issues related to international peace and security only if they are not currently under consideration by the Security Council.⁸ In principle, this provision would seem to enable the Security Council to completely dominate the UN's deliberations on security matters. In fact, however, disagreements between P-5 members mean that the Security Council is often stymied. For example, the Security Council has never reached agreement on how to respond to North Korea's November 2010 shelling of a South Korean island.⁹

In 1950, during the Korean War, the US led an effort to clarify this power in General Assembly Resolution 377. This resolution, known as the "Uniting for Peace" resolution, states that:

if the Security Council, because of lack of unanimity of the permanent members, fails to exercise its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security in any case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, the General Assembly shall consider the matter immediately with a view to making appropriate recommendations to Members for collective measures, including in the case of a breach of the peace or act of aggression the use of armed force when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security.¹⁰

This is a key power of the General Assembly. Because each of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the US, UK, France, Russia, and China) has only one vote and no veto in the General Assembly, they cannot dominate the GA like they do the Security Council. But the power of the General Assembly to call emergency special sessions has only been used ten times.¹¹ Historically, these sessions have been most often convened at the request of the US.¹² The most recent emergency special session, however, was called by Qatar in 1997 to address the "Illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory." Unlike previous emergency special sessions, this session has never been adjourned. Instead debate has been repeatedly suspended and reopened.¹³

The GA has called so few emergency special sessions on security matters because it is rare for security issues to be completely ignored by the Security Council. In addition, it is often difficult for the GA to obtain the two-thirds majority required in Article 18 of the UN Charter to pass resolutions with respect to "the maintenance of international peace and security."¹⁴ Even when such resolutions are passed, they are not binding on member states.

⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution 47/233, "Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly," 17 August 1993, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/47/233&Lang=E.

⁸ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 12.

⁹ Louis Charbonneau, "U.N. Security Council deadlocked on Korean crisis," Reuters, 19 December 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/20/us-korea-north-un-idUSTRE6BJ08A20101220>

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 377 (1950), available at <http://www.un.org/documents/resga.htm>.

¹¹ For a list of emergency special sessions and related resolutions, see <http://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/emergency.shtml>

¹² Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 30.

¹³ United Nations General Assembly, "Tenth Emergency Special Session," available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/emergency10th.shtml>

¹⁴ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, Article 18.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

Unlike Security Council resolutions, GA resolutions are simply recommendations. As a result, it can be difficult for the GA to persuade states with large and capable militaries to carry out enforcement measures to reverse an act of aggression.

Thus although both the GA and the Security Council are charged with addressing international peace and security, the Security Council has more authority on particular breaches of the peace. Nevertheless, the GA-1 can be an effective voice for world public opinion on overarching security and disarmament issues.¹⁵ In particular, draft resolutions passed by the GA-1 often inspire treaties and conventions that are binding on the states that sign them.¹⁶ In addition, because of the GA-1's role as a subcommittee of the GA, which controls the UN budget,¹⁷ the GA-1 can initiate projects related to disarmament and security that have a good chance of being funded.

Membership, Voting, and Leadership

The membership of the GA-1 includes all 193 UN Member States. In addition, non-member states and other entities recognized by the UN as permanent observers may attend and participate in meetings, but they cannot vote. At present, permanent observers include Palestine and the Holy See (Vatican City), as well as a number of international organizations.¹⁸

Each UN member state has one vote. Resolutions and reports pass the committee and go on for General Assembly consideration if approved by a simple majority of member states.

Regional blocs and other alliances play an important role in building consensus. Blocs consist of both countries in the same region and countries from different regions that face similar problems. For example, the Group of 77 is a group of less-developed countries that often vote together.¹⁹

The Chair of the GA-1 chairs the meetings and corrects any procedural mistakes. The chairs of the GA-1 and other five main GA committees are elected annually by the members of their committees, with one chair from each world region. Elections are held at least three months before the beginning of the annual session. The other officers of the GA-1 (three vice chairs and a rapporteur) are elected at the beginning of each annual session.²⁰

History and Challenges

In 1945, the founding members of the UN expressed their goals for the organization in Article I of the UN Charter. The first two of these goals falls into the category of security. They are:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of

¹⁵ UN General Assembly First Committee website, <http://www.un.org/ga/first/index.shtml>.

¹⁶ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 33.

¹⁷ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV.

¹⁸ United Nations, "Permanent Observers: Non-Member States and Entities," available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/nonmembers.shtml> and "Permanent Observers: International Organizations," available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/intergovorg.shtml>.

¹⁹ "The Group of 77 at the United Nations," available at <http://www.g77.org/>. For more information on voting blocs, see Soo Yeon Kim and Bruce Russett, "The new politics of voting alignments in the United Nations General Assembly," *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No 4 (1996), pp. 629-652.

²⁰ UN General Assembly, "Rules of Procedure," Section V, Rule 30, and Section XIII, Rules 99 and 103, available at http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_prez.shtml and http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_ctees.shtml.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.

2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.²¹

Responsibility for these goals is shared between the General Assembly, especially the General Assembly First Committee (disarmament and security), the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council (which suspended operations in 1994), and the General Assembly Second Committee (special political and decolonization). As explained above, there is a complex relationship between the GA and the Security Council. Nevertheless, GA-1 can be effective.

A good example of the GA-1's contribution to international peace and security is its work in promoting the landmine treaty. As early as 1993, non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights called for a ban on antipersonnel mines, which have killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of civilians over the past several decades. But it was not until the end of 1996, when the General Assembly passed a US-sponsored resolution "calling on states to 'pursue vigorously' an international agreement to ban use, stockpiling, production, and transfer of antipersonnel mines" that there was enough momentum to draft a treaty.²² The report calling for this resolution originated in the GA-1.²³ By the end of 1997, the Ottawa Treaty was written and opened for signature and ratification. The treaty entered into force on 1 March 1999 after it had been ratified by 40 states. Today, more than 150 states have signed the treaty.²⁴

The success of the landmine treaty demonstrates both the GA's role as the "conscience of the Security Council"²⁵ and the GA's limitations as an enforcement body capable of regulating the behavior of the most powerful states. Among the states that have not signed the Ottawa Treaty are the United States, China, and Russia, which are three of the five permanent members of the Security Council.²⁶

Tension between the GA and GA-1, on the one hand, and the Security Council, on the other, are also evident in the GA's numerous resolutions regarding nuclear disarmament. Because GA resolutions are simply recommendations, they have not been effective in encouraging nuclear weapons states to disarm.²⁷

²¹ United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter I, Article 1.

²² International Campaign to Ban Landmines, "Chronology of the ICBL and the Ban Movement," May 2004, <http://www.icbl.org/campaign/history/chronology..>

²³ UN Chronicle, "First Committee recommends forty-eight disarmament related texts - General Assembly 51," Spring 1997, p. 2 [online magazine], available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1309/is_n1_v34/ai_19897996/pg_1?tag=artBody:col1.

²⁴ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, "States Parties," <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/members>.

²⁵ Courtney B. Smith, *Politics and Process at the United Nations: The Global Dance*, 2006 (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006), p. 161.

²⁶ States that are not signatories are listed at International Campaign to Ban Landmines, "States not Parties," <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/snp>.

²⁷ For an analysis of the voting records of nuclear states on nuclear disarmament resolutions considered by the GA, see David Krieger, "UN Voting on Nuclear Disarmament Shows Abysmal US Record," Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, 2008, available at http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2008/02/13_krieger_abysmal_record.php?krieger.

Montana Model UN High School Conference

Recent and Current Work

As mentioned, if the Security Council has failed to act on an international security issue and has failed to indicate that it is interested in such an issue, the GA and its subcommittees can step in to deal with the matter. In recent years, the GA-1 has dealt with issues such as: nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; separatist groups; the creation of nuclear-free zones and demilitarized zones; illegal arms distribution; state disarmament; and the prevention of an arms race in space.²⁸

In 2008, the GA-1 responded to the urgings of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon²⁹ and a UN Disarmament Commission Meeting³⁰ and passed a draft resolution calling on states to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.³¹ The treaty cannot enter into force unless ratified by 150 countries, including:

all 44 of the States mentioned in Annex 2 of the Treaty – those which possessed nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons technology at the time it opened for signature in 1996... So far, 35 of these nations, including France, Russia and the United Kingdom, have ratified it, but China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the United States and Iran, among other nations, have not.³²

In 2009, the Disarmament Committee recommended that the General Assembly hold a conference in 2012 to establish a legally binding arms trade treaty “on the highest possible common international standards for conventional arms transfers.”³³

In 2010, the First Committee session lasted for four weeks. During that time, the Committee met 23 times and considered 55 draft resolutions. All of those draft resolutions passed in the GA-1 and went on to pass in the GA Plenary as well.³⁴ Topics included: preventing terrorists from obtaining radioactive materials (A/RES/65/74); reducing the risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East (A/RES/65/88); preventing illicit arms brokering

²⁸ UN General Assembly First Committee, Agenda, 60th session, available from http://www.un.org/ga/60/first/first_themes.html.

²⁹ Ban Ki-moon, “Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Report of the Secretary-General,” 3 July 2007, available at <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/ctbt/SGreportCTBT2007.pdf>

³⁰ “Report of the Disarmament Commission for 2007,” 1 May 2007, available at www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/dc/statements07/2007Report.pdf. The Disarmament Commission is a subsidiary body of the GA-1.

³¹ “Increasing Pressure on the Nine CTBT Holdouts at the United Nations,” CTBTO Preparatory Commission website, 29 October 2008, <http://www.ctbto.org/press-centre/highlights/2008/increasing-pressure-on-the-nine-ctbthold-outs-at-the-united-nations/29-october-2008-page-1/?Fsize=a>.

³² “Ratification of UN-backed nuclear treaty nears milestone of 150 countries,” UN News Centre, 19 August 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=31809&Cr=Nuclear&Cr1=>.

³³ “Sending Six Drafts to General Assembly, First Committee Calls for International Day for World Free of Nuclear Weapons, Conference on Arms Trade Treaty in 2012,” General Assembly First Committee, 30 Oct. 2009 available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/gadis3402.doc.htm>.

³⁴ United Nations General Assembly, “Sixty-fifth session, 60th plenary meeting, Wednesday, 8 December 2010,” Meeting summary A/65/PV.60, pages 1-2, available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/680/40/PDF/N1068040.pdf?OpenElement>

Montana Model UN High School Conference

activities (A/RES/65/75); and preventing an arms race in outer space (A/RES/65/44). In addition, states that have not yet ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention were urged to do so (A/RES/65/57).³⁵

One of the challenges of the GA-1 is to link its work on disarmament and security to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) advanced by the General Assembly in 2000.³⁶ The aim is to reach the following goals by 2015:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. A global partnership for development

Since 2000, the General Assembly has demanded and received annual reports quantifying country and regional progress towards the MDGs. In this way, the GA encourages both short- and long-term progress on the goals. The GA has also repeatedly urged all developed member states to commit to donating 0.7 percent of their country's gross domestic product toward overseas development assistance.³⁷ Although progress has been uneven, both in terms of developed country assistance and less-developed country progress, the MDGs have given the world clear goals for its discussions and efforts regarding development.

Because of the devastating effects of conflict and war on human security and development, the GA-1's work is clearly vital to achieving the MDGs by the target date of 2015.

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2011 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly First Committee will consider the following topics:

1. Preventing an Arms Race in Outer Space
2. Controlling the Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons
3. The Situation in Afghanistan

When writing your position papers and resolutions, think broadly about these issues, remembering both the overarching goals of the United Nations General Assembly and the perspective of the country you represent. In addition, remember that the GA-1 can address only aspects of these issues that are not being addressed by the Security Council.

³⁵ For the full text of these and other 2010-2011 GA resolutions related to disarmament and security, as well as press releases summarizing their debate, see United Nations General Assembly, "Resolutions, 65th Session," available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/65/resolutions.shtml>

³⁶ United Nations Development Programme, "About the MDGs: Basics," available at <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.

³⁷ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Security, Solidarity and Sovereignty: The Grand Themes of UN Reform," *The American Journal of International Law* 99, no. 3 (2005): p. 630. On the .7% goal, see "The 0.7% target: An in-depth look," Millennium Project website, available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm>.

Recommended Reading

Annan, Kofi. "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All." Report of the Secretary General. 21 March 2005. Available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>.

The "Strengthening of the UN" sections of this report by the former secretary general summarizes some of the problems of the General Assembly. In addition, the "Freedom from Fear" sections summarize many of the contemporary issues related to disarmament, peace, and security.

"Charter of the United Nations." Available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

This document lays out the purposes and procedures of the UN. Delegates should be familiar with this document, especially Chapter IV, which addresses the GA.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). "Armed Conflicts and Conflict Management" and "Arms Control and Disarmament Documentary Survey." Website. Available at <http://www.sipri.org/>.

SIPRI is prominent non-governmental organization that provides detailed information on the number, types, and locations of contemporary wars; the military forces, expenditures, and agreements of various states; the status of arms control treaties; and contemporary security challenges. It is an excellent resource for learning about many issues related to disarmament and security.

United Nations. "The General Assembly of the United Nations." Available from <http://www.un.org/ga>.

This is the official website of the General Assembly. It is the best place to start for information on the General Assembly's actions and duties, as well as the agendas and resolutions of its various committees.

United Nations. "General Assembly First Committee." Available at <http://www.un.org/ga/first/index.shtml>.

This is the official website of the GA-1. It provides access to the GA-1's recent draft resolutions and reports.

United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2011." Available from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/reports.shtml>

This report uses graphs and photos to show the work that has been done to meet the MDGs in various countries and regions since 2000. It also provides suggestions for meeting the goals by 2015.