

STABMUN 2026

General Assembly Background Guide

Topic A: Combating Modern Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea

Topic B: The Militarization of Outer Space and Prevention of an Arms Race

Meet the Chairs



Liam Gundersen and Grace Browne are juniors at St. Anne's-Belfield School and serve as Co-Secretary-Generals of STABMUN and heads of the Internal Affairs team of STAB's Model United Nations club. They have competed in Model UN together for two years, primarily as partners in General Assembly committees. Together, they have received Outstanding Delegate awards at VAMUN and ODUMUNC and Best Delegate at Harvard Model United Nations (HMUN).

Outside of MUN, Liam is interested in economics and is a rower. Grace works with refugees in the Charlottesville community and participates as a fashion designer in STAB's annual Wearable Art runway show. As chairs, Liam and Grace value collaboration, thoughtful listening as much as strong speaking, and creative approaches to problem-solving. They hope to create a committee where delegates feel comfortable contributing, working with one another, and taking creative approaches to the topics at hand.

Topic A: Combating Modern Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea

Introduction

Piracy may be associated with wooden ships and buried treasure, but it remains a real threat to international shipping. Modern pirates and armed robbers target commercial vessels for cargo, money, equipment, or control of the ship itself. Crewmembers may also be taken hostage or kidnapped for ransom.

The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) recorded 137 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in 2025, up from 116 in 2024. Of the vessels involved in 2025, 121 were boarded, four were hijacked, two were fired upon, and ten attacks were attempted. Forty-six crewmembers were taken hostage and 25 were kidnapped. Although many incidents were relatively low-level, violence against crews remains a serious concern.

Piracy also matters far beyond the ships that are directly attacked. Around 80 percent of international trade in goods by volume is carried by sea. Threats to major shipping routes can therefore affect countries thousands of miles from an attack by disrupting trade, increasing security and insurance costs, and endangering the seafarers who operate the global shipping system.

For the international community, the challenge is not simply catching pirates. Delegates must consider who has authority to stop them, who should pay for maritime security, how suspects should be prosecuted, and how the conditions that allow piracy to develop can be addressed.

What Counts as Piracy?

International law makes an important distinction between piracy and armed robbery at sea.

The primary international legal framework is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Article 101 defines piracy as certain illegal acts of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends by people aboard a private ship or aircraft against another ship, aircraft, persons, or property on the high seas or another place outside any state's jurisdiction.

This means that, legally, not every attack commonly described as “piracy” is actually piracy.

An attack occurring on the high seas, outside national jurisdiction, may fall under the UNCLOS definition of piracy. A similar attack within a country's territorial waters is generally classified as armed robbery against ships and is primarily subject to that coastal state's jurisdiction. The distinction matters because states have unusually broad powers against piracy on the high seas.

Under Article 100 of UNCLOS, all states are required to cooperate to the fullest possible extent in repressing piracy. Under Article 105, states may seize pirate ships on the high seas, arrest those aboard, and seize property. The courts of the state carrying out the seizure may then determine penalties, subject to international law.

Piracy is therefore unusual: a pirate ship does not necessarily have to attack a vessel belonging to the country that eventually stops it.

Where Does Modern Piracy Occur?

Piracy and armed robbery are not concentrated in only one part of the world.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) received reports of 146 actual or attempted incidents in 2024. The largest concentration was in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, where 91 incidents were reported. The Indian Ocean recorded 19, West Africa 17, the South China Sea 10, and the Arabian Sea seven.

Different regions also experience different forms of maritime crime. In some areas, attackers board ships primarily to steal easily accessible property. Elsewhere, organized groups may target cargo or kidnap crewmembers.

Somalia and the Gulf of Aden

Somali piracy became one of the world's most prominent maritime-security problems during the late 2000s and early 2010s. Somalia's long coastline lies beside shipping routes connecting the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

International naval deployments, improved security aboard commercial vessels, regional cooperation, and greater law-enforcement capacity helped dramatically reduce successful Somali pirate attacks.

The decline, however, did not mean that piracy became impossible. Recent incidents have demonstrated that Somali pirate groups retain some ability to threaten ships when conditions allow.

The experience of Somalia demonstrates an important lesson for this committee: piracy can be suppressed without necessarily eliminating the circumstances that made it possible.

Southeast Asia

Today, one of the world's largest concentrations of reported incidents is around the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

These waterways are particularly important because they connect the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and wider Pacific. Large numbers of commercial vessels travel through a relatively narrow maritime area.

Many incidents in this region differ from the long-range hijackings historically associated with Somali piracy. Some involve perpetrators boarding vessels to steal property before escaping.

West Africa

The waters off West Africa, particularly around the Gulf of Guinea, have also been a major focus of international maritime-security efforts.

Piracy and armed robbery in this region have included theft, attacks on commercial vessels, and kidnapping of seafarers. Regional governments and international organizations have consequently emphasized information sharing, stronger maritime law enforcement, and cooperation among neighboring states.

Why Does Piracy Happen?

There is no single cause of piracy.

Piracy is more likely to flourish where governments have difficulty monitoring large maritime areas, criminal organizations can operate with limited consequences, and legitimate economic opportunities are weak.

Several factors may contribute:

- weak maritime law-enforcement capacity;
- political instability or weak governance;
- corruption;
- unemployment and limited economic opportunities;
- organized criminal networks;
- valuable shipping routes near poorly controlled coastlines; and
- difficulties prosecuting suspects across national borders.

These causes are important because military patrols alone may suppress attacks without resolving the conditions that allow piracy to return.

At the same time, poverty should not be treated as a complete explanation for piracy. Millions of people live in economically disadvantaged coastal communities without becoming pirates. Modern maritime crime can involve organized criminal networks and requires law-enforcement responses as well as economic development.

The International Response

Naval Operations

One response has been international naval cooperation.

Warships can patrol vulnerable shipping routes, respond to vessels in distress, escort ships through dangerous areas, and deter attacks. International naval cooperation was particularly important in responding to Somali piracy.

However, maintaining naval forces over enormous ocean areas is expensive. Naval operations also raise questions about how responsibilities should be divided between wealthy maritime powers and the coastal states closest to piracy.

Delegates must therefore decide whether maritime security should primarily be the responsibility of coastal states, flag states, regional organizations, major trading powers, or the international community as a whole.

Regional Cooperation

Regional agreements have become another major part of anti-piracy efforts.

In 2009, states in and around the western Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden adopted the Djibouti Code of Conduct under the auspices of the IMO. It encouraged cooperation against piracy and armed robbery through measures including information sharing, training, legislation, and capacity building.

In 2017, participating states adopted the Jeddah Amendment, expanding cooperation to other maritime crimes, including human trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal fishing, and other organized criminal activity.

These agreements demonstrate that states do not necessarily need to surrender control of their waters to cooperate. Instead, neighboring countries can share information, coordinate enforcement, and build their own maritime capabilities.

Information Sharing

Pirates can move between jurisdictions faster than governments can exchange information.

In 2025, the IMO Maritime Safety Committee adopted a resolution encouraging greater use of national and regional maritime information-sharing centers. Such centers can allow governments to exchange information about suspicious activity, criminal networks, and threats to shipping.

For delegates, information sharing presents another question: how much sensitive maritime information should governments be expected to provide to other countries?

Prosecution

Catching suspected pirates creates another problem: what happens next?

UNCLOS gives states authority to seize pirate ships on the high seas, but successful prosecution still depends upon domestic legal systems. States need laws criminalizing piracy, evidence that can be used in court, detention capacity, and procedures for transferring suspects and witnesses.

A successful international response therefore requires courts and legal institutions as well as ships.

The Root-Cause Debate

One of the largest disagreements facing this committee is whether the international community should concentrate resources on stopping attacks or on preventing people from entering piracy in the first place.

Supporters of stronger enforcement may argue that governments have an immediate responsibility to protect ships and crews. Naval patrols, coast guards, surveillance, information sharing, and criminal prosecution can directly reduce opportunities for piracy.

Others argue that enforcement is only a temporary solution if coastal communities lack functioning government institutions and legitimate economic opportunities. They may support investment in fisheries, ports, education, employment, government institutions, and other forms of development.

These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The question for delegates is how limited international resources should be divided between them.

Questions a Resolution Should Address

1. Who should bear the financial and military burden of protecting international shipping?
 2. How can states improve cooperation without violating national sovereignty?
 3. Should international funding strengthen the coast guards and judicial systems of states most affected by piracy?
 4. How should captured piracy suspects be prosecuted?
 5. What information should governments and commercial shipping companies share?
 6. What role should economic development play in anti-piracy policy?
 7. How can the international community prevent piracy from returning after international naval forces leave a region?
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Topic B: The Militarization of Outer Space and Prevention of an Arms Race

Introduction

Space is no longer only a place for scientific exploration.

Satellites support navigation, communications, weather forecasting, disaster response, financial systems, scientific research, and military operations. Modern societies have therefore become increasingly dependent upon objects orbiting hundreds or thousands of kilometers above Earth. That dependence has created a security problem.

If satellites are essential to a country's economy and national security, another country may see those satellites as valuable targets during a conflict. States may then develop capabilities to protect their own systems or threaten those belonging to rivals. Rivals, fearing that they will fall behind, may respond by developing capabilities of their own.

This is the basic problem behind a potential arms race in outer space.

The international community must determine where peaceful military use of space ends and dangerous weaponization begins—and whether it is even possible to draw that line.

The Outer Space Treaty

The foundation of international space law is the 1967 Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, usually called the Outer Space Treaty.

A common misconception is that the treaty makes all military activity in space illegal. It does not.

Article IV prohibits states from placing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit, installing them on celestial bodies, or stationing them elsewhere in outer space. It imposes additional restrictions on the Moon and other celestial bodies. They must be used exclusively for peaceful purposes, and military bases, fortifications, weapons testing, and military maneuvers there are prohibited.

But the treaty does not create a general prohibition on conventional weapons in Earth orbit, nor does it prohibit all military satellites.

This distinction has become increasingly important as technology has advanced far beyond what existed when the treaty was negotiated.

Militarization vs. Weaponization

Delegates should understand two terms that are often confused.

Militarization of space generally refers to using space systems for military purposes. This has occurred for decades. Militaries use satellites for communications, navigation, reconnaissance, missile warning, and other functions.

Weaponization of space generally refers to placing or using systems capable of damaging or destroying targets in, from, or through space.

The distinction is not always clear.

A satellite designed for peaceful servicing or inspection might also be capable of approaching another country's satellite. A missile-defense technology may potentially have applications against satellites. A cyber capability could interfere with a satellite without physically striking it.

This dual-use problem is one of the greatest obstacles to creating new space-arms-control rules.

Anti-Satellite Capabilities

A central concern is the development of anti-satellite, or ASAT, capabilities.

ASAT capabilities are intended to disrupt, disable, or destroy satellites. They can potentially take several forms, including physical attacks and non-physical interference.

For the committee, the important issue is less the engineering of these systems than the political problem they create.

A state may claim that a capability is defensive. Another state may view the same capability as preparation for an attack.

This creates a security dilemma: actions one country considers necessary for its own security can make its rivals feel less secure, encouraging them to respond with new capabilities of their own.

Destructive ASAT Testing and Space Debris

One particular concern is destructive testing against objects in orbit.

Destroying a satellite can create large amounts of orbital debris. Because objects in orbit travel at extremely high speeds, even small debris can threaten spacecraft.

The debris problem also makes space warfare different from many conflicts on Earth. The consequences of destroying one country's satellite may not remain limited to the two countries involved. Debris can endanger satellites operated by other governments, companies, or scientific organizations.

In 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 77/41, calling upon states to commit not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile tests. The resolution passed with 155 votes in favor, nine against, and nine abstentions.

The resolution did not ban every possible ASAT capability. Instead, it focused specifically on one particularly debris-producing type of test.

This demonstrates one possible approach for delegates: rather than attempting to define and prohibit every possible “space weapon,” states could prohibit specific behaviors considered especially dangerous.

What Is a Space Weapon?

This apparently simple question is one of the hardest problems facing the committee.

Imagine a satellite capable of approaching another satellite. It could potentially inspect or repair a damaged spacecraft. But similar technology might also be viewed as threatening.

Likewise, a system based on Earth could affect an object in orbit without ever entering space itself.

Should a weapon therefore be defined by:

- where it is located?
- what it was designed to do?
- what technology it contains?
- what target it can affect?
- or how a state actually uses it?

Each definition creates loopholes.

A treaty banning only weapons placed in orbit, for example, might leave Earth-based anti-satellite systems outside its scope. A treaty banning all technology capable of damaging a satellite could unintentionally restrict systems with legitimate civilian or defensive uses.

This is why verification is central to the debate.

PAROS

For decades, the United Nations has discussed the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, commonly known as PAROS.

The basic goal is to prevent space from becoming an arena for an escalating arms competition. There is broad international support for preventing an arms race, but countries disagree sharply about how to achieve it.

Some governments favor negotiating new legally binding treaties restricting weapons in space. Others argue that defining and verifying prohibited weapons would be extremely difficult and instead support rules focused on responsible state behavior, transparency, and confidence-building.

This disagreement—ban particular weapons or regulate dangerous behavior—is likely to be one of the central divisions in committee.

The PPWT Proposal

In 2008, China and Russia submitted a draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects, known as the PPWT, to the Conference on Disarmament. A revised draft followed in 2014.

The proposal sought to create legally binding restrictions on placing weapons in outer space and threatening or using force against space objects.

However, the proposal has been controversial.

One major issue is verification. Analysis submitted to the Conference on Disarmament noted that the 2014 draft did not contain an integrated, legally binding verification system. China and Russia themselves had previously acknowledged technical difficulties associated with effectively verifying compliance.

Another issue is scope. A treaty focused on the placement of weapons in outer space raises questions about weapons based on Earth that could threaten satellites.

The PPWT therefore illustrates the broader challenge confronting delegates: writing an ambitious prohibition may be easier than designing a system capable of determining whether every country is actually following it.

Rules Based on Behavior

An alternative approach focuses less on identifying particular weapons and more on identifying dangerous actions.

Beginning in 2022, a UN Open-Ended Working Group examined ways of reducing space threats through norms, rules, and principles of responsible behaviors.

Examples of behavior-focused policies might include greater transparency about space activities, communication between governments, information exchange, advance notifications, measures to reduce misunderstandings, and restrictions on particularly dangerous testing.

Supporters argue that governments can more easily observe what another state does than determine the secret technical capabilities or intended purpose of every satellite.

Critics may argue that voluntary norms are weaker than binding treaties and may fail to stop states determined to develop military capabilities.

Verification

Any new agreement must confront one question:

How do you know whether another country is following it?

Space objects can often be tracked, but determining their purpose can be much more difficult.

A satellite may have civilian and military applications. States may be unwilling to reveal classified information about their spacecraft. Inspections could themselves create security concerns. Technologies may also change faster than treaties can be negotiated.

Delegates considering a new treaty should therefore think about mechanisms such as transparency measures, registration, notifications, international monitoring, information sharing, and procedures for investigating suspected violations.

A rule that cannot realistically be verified may have little effect.

The Risk of Escalation

Satellites present another unusual problem: an attack may be difficult to interpret.

If a satellite suddenly stops functioning, its government must determine whether the cause was mechanical failure, an accident, interference, a cyberattack, or deliberate hostile action.

During an international crisis, uncertainty could be dangerous.

Military forces also rely on satellites for communications, navigation, reconnaissance, and early warning. An attack against a satellite might therefore be interpreted as preparation for a larger military attack.

This makes miscalculation one of the major risks of competition in space.

Preventing conflict may therefore require communication and transparency in addition to restrictions on weapons.

Major Approaches Available to the Committee

Delegates do not need to choose between simply “weapons everywhere” and “ban everything.”

Several policy approaches are possible.

A comprehensive treaty could attempt to prohibit certain categories of weapons in outer space.

A testing ban could prohibit particularly destructive forms of ASAT testing.

Behavioral rules could define actions states agree not to take around other countries' spacecraft.

Transparency and confidence-building measures could require greater communication, notifications, and information sharing.

Debris protections could restrict actions likely to create long-lived orbital debris.

Verification mechanisms could establish procedures for monitoring compliance with future agreements.

A resolution may combine several of these approaches.

The Central Problem

The committee ultimately faces a difficult balance.

States have legitimate national-security interests and already depend heavily on military satellites. A rule that effectively prevents states from defending themselves is unlikely to gain universal support.

At the same time, an unrestricted competition in counterspace capabilities could make every country's satellites less secure.

The question is therefore not simply whether countries should be permitted to use space for national security.

It is:

What rules can prevent competition in space from becoming conflict in space?

Questions a Resolution Should Address

1. What should legally qualify as a “weapon in outer space”?
 2. Should conventional weapons in orbit be prohibited?
 3. Should destructive ASAT testing be prohibited?
 4. How should agreements address systems located on Earth that can affect satellites?
 5. How can the international community regulate technologies that have both peaceful and military uses?
 6. Should future rules be legally binding or voluntary?
 7. How could compliance with a space-arms agreement be verified?
 8. What transparency measures could reduce the risk of accidental escalation?
 9. Should actions that create dangerous orbital debris be prohibited regardless of their military purpose?
 10. How can states preserve their right to national security while preventing an arms race?
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Selected Sources and Further Reading

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