Background Guide

DISEC

Duke

Letter from the Chair

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC) at DUMUNC! I'm thrilled to have you join us for discussions on two of the most consequential security challenges facing our world.

Our topics couldn't be more relevant. Nuclear weapons remain humanity's most destructive invention, yet the treaties designed to contain them are fraying. Meanwhile, terrorism continues to devastate communities from the Sahel to Southeast Asia, and the countries hit hardest often lack the resources to fight back effectively.

These aren't problems that any one country can solve alone. That's why DISEC exists: to bring all nations to the table and forge collective solutions. I encourage you to think boldly. The best resolutions won't just repeat what's been tried before; they'll propose new approaches that balance security with sovereignty, urgency with feasibility.

Come prepared to debate, negotiate, and collaborate. I can't wait to see what you accomplish.

Best regards,

Asa

Chair, DISEC

History of the Committee

The Disarmament and International Security Committee (also known as the First Committee or DISEC) is the United Nations General Assembly's primary forum for tackling global security threats. Established in 1945 alongside the UN itself, DISEC was born from a simple but powerful idea: lasting peace requires more than ending wars; it requires addressing the weapons and conditions that make war possible.

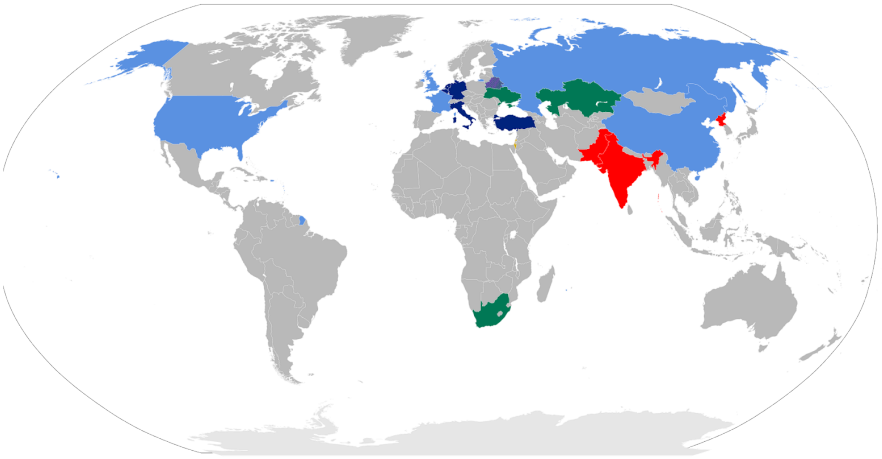
The committee's founding coincided with the dawn of the nuclear age. The very first resolution ever adopted by the General Assembly, in January 1946, addressed "the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy." Since then, DISEC has served as the world's most important venue for debating disarmament, arms control, and international security cooperation.[1]

All 193 UN member states have a seat in DISEC, making it one of the most inclusive bodies in international politics. Unlike the Security Council, where five permanent members hold veto power, DISEC operates on the principle of sovereign equality—every nation gets one vote. While the committee's resolutions aren't legally binding, they carry enormous weight, shaping international norms and laying the groundwork for major treaties.[2]

Topic A: Nuclear Arms Control and the Future of Nonproliferation Treaties

Statement of the Problem

The global nuclear order is under unprecedented strain. After decades of painstaking progress on arms control, the treaties that kept the world safe during the Cold War are crumbling. New START, the last remaining agreement limiting U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, is set to expire in February 2026, and Russia suspended its participation in 2023. If nothing replaces it, there will be no legal limits on superpower arsenals for the first time since 1972.[3]



The numbers are sobering. Nine countries possess roughly 12,100 nuclear warheads, with Russia and the United States holding about 88% of the total. More alarming than the raw count is that nearly all nuclear-armed states are modernizing their arsenals, developing faster missiles, more accurate warheads, and new delivery systems that challenge existing defenses.[4]

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the cornerstone of the global nuclear order since 1968, rests on a "grand bargain": non-nuclear states agreed not to acquire these weapons, while nuclear states promised to eventually disarm. But many countries feel this bargain has broken down. Nuclear powers continue modernizing

instead of disarming, while demanding that everyone else stay nuclear-free. The last two NPT Review Conferences failed to produce outcome documents, a sign of deep divisions within the treaty community.[5]

Meanwhile, new proliferation risks are emerging. North Korea has dramatically expanded its nuclear program, conducting multiple tests and developing missiles capable of reaching any continent. Iran's nuclear activities remain a source of international concern, with the IAEA reporting that Iran possesses highly enriched uranium, material no other non-nuclear-weapon state has produced. These developments put pressure on neighboring countries to reconsider their own nuclear options.[6]

The challenge is clear: how can the international community revitalize arms control, strengthen nonproliferation, and move toward a world with fewer nuclear dangers?

History of the Problem

Nuclear weapons burst onto the world stage in August 1945, when the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The devastation was unlike anything humanity had seen: over 200,000 people killed, entire cities reduced to ash. The bombings ended World War II but opened a terrifying new chapter in human history.[7]

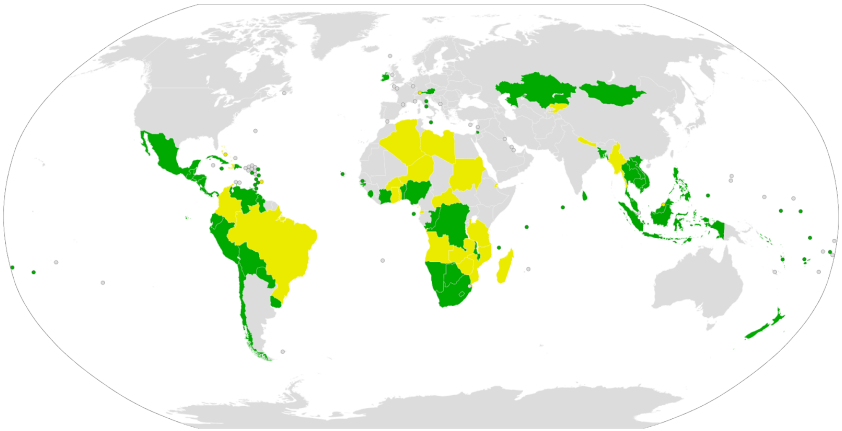
What followed was an arms race of staggering proportions. The Soviet Union tested its first bomb in 1949. The United Kingdom, France, and China followed. By the 1960s, experts predicted that 25 or more countries would eventually go nuclear. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the U.S. and Soviet Union came within hours of nuclear war, concentrated minds on the need for limits.[8]

The result was the NPT, opened for signature in 1968. It created three categories of states: the five "nuclear-weapon states" (the U.S., Russia, UK, France, and China) who were allowed to keep their arsenals; non-nuclear states who agreed never to acquire

them; and all parties who committed to pursue disarmament. The treaty also guaranteed all countries access to peaceful nuclear technology. By most measures, the NPT succeeded: today there are nine nuclear states instead of the 25+ predicted.[9]

The end of the Cold War brought genuine progress. The U.S. and Russia signed a series of treaties (START I, START II, SORT, and New START) that reduced their arsenals by over 80% from Cold War peaks. Former Soviet states like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus gave up the nuclear weapons on their soil. It seemed the world was moving toward fewer nuclear dangers.[10]

But that progress has stalled. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which banned an entire class of missiles, collapsed in 2019. Russia suspended New START in 2023, halting the inspections and data exchanges that built trust between the superpowers. North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 and has since built an arsenal estimated at 50 or more warheads. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which constrained Tehran's program, fell apart after the U.S. withdrew in 2018.[11]



Today, instead of disarmament, we're seeing a new arms race. All nine nuclear states are investing heavily in modernization. Hypersonic missiles, which can evade existing defenses, are entering service. Some countries are developing tactical nuclear weapons designed for battlefield use, lowering the threshold for nuclear conflict. The Doomsday Clock, maintained by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, now stands at 89 seconds to midnight—the closest it's ever been.[12]

Past Actions

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT): The NPT remains the foundation of the global nonproliferation regime. With 191 states parties, it's nearly universal. The treaty established the IAEA safeguards system, which monitors civilian nuclear programs to ensure they're not diverted to weapons. Regular Review Conferences assess implementation, though recent conferences have failed to reach consensus.[13]

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT): Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1996, the CTBT bans all nuclear explosions. It has created a powerful global norm: no country except North Korea has tested a nuclear weapon this century. The treaty's International Monitoring System can detect nuclear explosions anywhere on Earth. However, the CTBT hasn't formally entered into force because eight key states, including the U.S. and China, haven't ratified it.[14]

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW): Frustrated by slow progress on disarmament, 122 countries adopted the TPNW in 2017, banning nuclear weapons outright based on their catastrophic humanitarian consequences. The treaty entered into force in 2021 and now has 74 states parties. However, no nuclear-armed state or NATO member has joined. The March 2025 meeting of states parties called for continued work toward universalization, and the first Review Conference is scheduled for late 2026.[15]

Bilateral Arms Control: U.S.-Russia treaties have achieved the deepest cuts. New START, extended to 2026, limits each country to 1,550 deployed strategic warheads. In 2025, Russian President Putin proposed continuing to observe these limits for one year after expiration if the U.S. does the same, a potential off-ramp that could preserve some stability while new negotiations proceed.[16]

IAEA Safeguards: The International Atomic Energy Agency verifies that countries' civilian nuclear programs aren't being diverted to weapons. The Additional Protocol, adopted in

1997, gives inspectors enhanced access for short-notice inspections. As of 2024, the IAEA applied safeguards in 190 states.[17]

Possible Solutions

Preserving New START Limits: With New START expiring in February 2026, preventing an uncontrolled nuclear buildup is urgent. Delegates could call on the U.S. and Russia to continue honoring treaty limits even after expiration, buying time for new negotiations. Looking further ahead, any successor agreement should bring in China, whose arsenal is growing fast.

Fixing the NPT Review Process: Two failed Review Conferences have shaken confidence in the NPT. Solutions might include clearer disarmament benchmarks, regular expert working groups between conferences, or new ways to hold nuclear states accountable without requiring unanimous consensus.

Reinforcing the Testing Ban: The CTBT hasn't formally entered into force, but it's created a powerful norm: only North Korea has tested this century. Delegates could strengthen this norm through General Assembly action or by boosting resources for the CTBTO's global monitoring network.

Topic B: Counterterrorism Operations and Capacity-Building in Developing Countries

Statement of the Problem

Terrorism remains one of the gravest threats to international peace and security, but its burden falls unequally on the world's shoulders. While wealthy nations can deploy sophisticated intelligence agencies, specialized military units, and advanced surveillance systems, many developing countries lack these capabilities. They face the same terrorist threats (sometimes worse) with a fraction of the resources.

The numbers tell a stark story. According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel region of Africa accounted for 51% of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in 2024, up from 48% the previous year. Five of the ten countries most affected by terrorism are in the Sahel. Deaths from terrorism in this region have increased nearly tenfold since 2019. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger bear the brunt of attacks from groups affiliated with Islamic State and al-Qaeda.[18]

This isn't just an African problem. Terrorism affects developing countries across the globe—from the Philippines to Colombia to Afghanistan. These nations face a cruel paradox: they're expected to defeat sophisticated terrorist networks while struggling to fund basic services like schools and hospitals. When they fail, the consequences don't stay contained. Ungoverned spaces become havens for training and planning attacks that can strike anywhere.[19]

Fighting terrorism isn't just about military operations. It requires police training, intelligence sharing, border security, programs to counter radicalization, and tackling the grievances terrorists exploit. Building these capabilities takes time, expertise, and sustained investment, resources many affected countries simply don't have.[20]

The question for delegates: how can we help developing countries build effective counterterrorism capabilities while respecting their sovereignty and protecting human rights?

History of the Problem

Terrorism has ancient roots, but the modern international counterterrorism framework emerged in response to specific crises. Airplane hijackings in the 1960s and 70s prompted early conventions on aviation security. The 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, spurred conventions on explosives marking. But these efforts were piecemeal, addressing specific tactics rather than the broader phenomenon.[21]

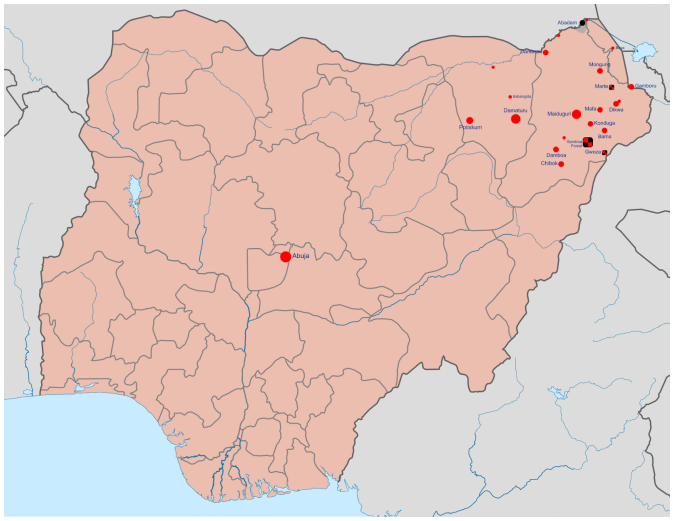
September 11, 2001, transformed everything. The attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania demonstrated that non-state actors could inflict casualties on a scale previously associated only with state militaries. The world's response was swift and far-reaching.

Just weeks after 9/11, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1373, which required all member states to criminalize terrorism, freeze terrorist assets, and deny safe haven to terrorists. It created the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) to monitor implementation. This was followed by Resolution 1540 (2004) on preventing terrorist access to weapons of mass destruction and Resolution 1624 (2005) on prohibiting incitement to terrorism.[22]

In 2006, the General Assembly adopted the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the first time all member states agreed on a common approach. The strategy rests on four pillars: addressing conditions conducive to terrorism, preventing and combating terrorism, building state capacity, and ensuring respect for human rights. It's reviewed every two years.[23]

The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) was established in 2017 to coordinate the UN system's counterterrorism efforts. Its UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) provides capacity-building assistance to member states. Since its founding, UNOCT has received over $370 million in voluntary contributions and expanded to approximately 200 staff members.[24]

Despite these efforts, terrorism has evolved and spread. The territorial defeat of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2019 didn't end the threat; it dispersed fighters to affiliates across Africa and Asia. Al-Qaeda's Sahel affiliate, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), has expanded dramatically. New threats have emerged from far-right extremism and online radicalization. The terrorism problem has grown more diffuse and harder to address.[25]



Past Actions

UN Security Council Resolution 1373: Adopted unanimously on September 28, 2001, this resolution requires all states to criminalize terrorist financing, freeze terrorist assets, deny safe haven, and share intelligence on terrorist movements. The Counter-Terrorism Committee monitors implementation through country assessments and visits. Since 2005, the CTC Executive Directorate has visited 117 member states.[26]

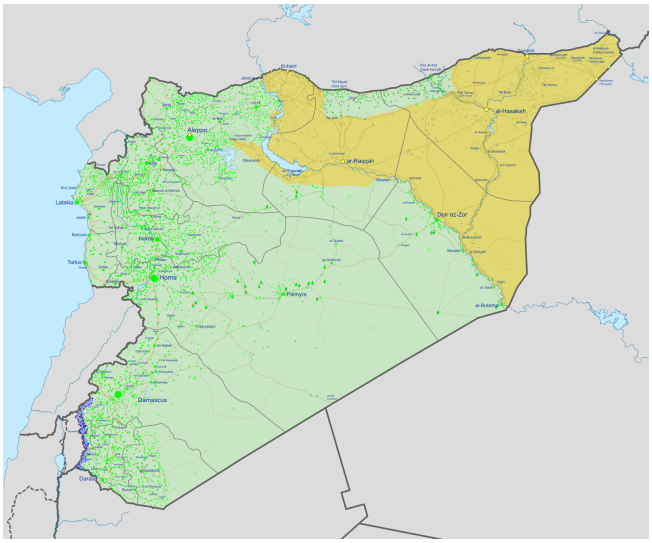
UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: This framework, adopted by consensus in 2006 and reviewed biennially, provides the most comprehensive approach to terrorism. Its four pillars address root causes, prevention, capacity-building, and human rights. The eighth review in 2024 requested UNOCT to support member states in addressing challenges from new technologies.[27]

UNOCT Capacity-Building Programs: The UN Counter-Terrorism Centre delivers technical assistance on issues ranging from border security to countering terrorist financing. In 2024, it launched the "goFintel" software to help financial intelligence units combat terrorist financing. Regional programs focus on areas of greatest need, including a dedicated initiative for the Sahel on countering improvised explosive devices and small arms trafficking.[28]

South-South Cooperation: Recognizing that developing countries can learn from each other's experiences, UNOCT promotes South-South cooperation in counterterrorism. Countries that have successfully addressed specific challenges share knowledge and training with others facing similar threats. This approach ensures capacity-building is contextually appropriate rather than one-size-fits-all.[29]

Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF): While not a UN body, the GCTF brings together 30 countries to develop civilian counterterrorism tools and share best practices. Its working groups focus on issues like criminal justice, countering violent extremism, and regional challenges. The GCTF Sahel Capacity-Building Working Group addresses the region's specific needs.[30]

Possible Solutions



Regional Counterterrorism Centers: Most affected countries can't afford sophisticated counterterrorism infrastructure on their own. But pooling resources across a region might work. A shared center could handle intelligence analysis, joint training, and coordination, spreading costs while building expertise. The African Union's African Centre for

the Study and Research on Terrorism offers a model, though it needs more resources to be effective.

Linking Security and Development: Military operations alone rarely defeat terrorism. People join extremist groups for many reasons: poverty, lack of opportunity, grievances against corrupt governments. Solutions that pair security assistance with development programs could address root causes: building schools while training police, creating jobs while disrupting terrorist financing.

Technology Transfer with Safeguards: Wealthy nations have surveillance tools, forensic labs, and communications systems that developing countries can only dream of. Structured technology transfer (with proper training and human rights safeguards) could help level the playing field. This might include shared access to satellite imagery, cybersecurity assistance, or biometric systems to track known terrorists.

Potential Blocs

Understanding the major groupings in DISEC will help delegates find natural allies and anticipate debates.

Nuclear-Armed States (P5 and Others): The United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, and France hold official nuclear status under the NPT. India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea also possess weapons. These states generally resist binding disarmament timelines and support incremental risk-reduction measures. On counterterrorism, most provide assistance to developing countries but prioritize their own security partnerships.

NATO and Allied States: Members of NATO and other U.S. allies (like Japan, South Korea, and Australia) live under "nuclear umbrellas," meaning they rely on American nuclear weapons for their security. This makes them reluctant to support measures that

delegitimize nuclear deterrence, even while officially supporting disarmament. On counterterrorism, they're major donors and often deploy forces to assist partners.

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): This grouping of 120 developing countries has historically advocated for rapid nuclear disarmament by weapon states. Many NAM members are parties to the TPNW. They often argue that nuclear states' modernization programs violate their NPT obligations. On counterterrorism, they emphasize sovereignty and caution against counterterrorism being used as a pretext for great-power intervention.

African Union States: African countries face severe terrorism threats, particularly in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Lake Chad Basin. They seek substantial international support for capacity-building while emphasizing African ownership of African security problems. They'll advocate for resources and attention to flow to where terrorism is deadliest.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS): While not facing major terrorism threats, SIDS are deeply concerned about nuclear weapons, particularly the legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific. They've been strong supporters of the TPNW and nuclear-weapon-free zones.

States Affected by Terrorism: Countries currently battling significant terrorist threats (like Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Philippines) have urgent needs for capacity-building support. They may prioritize practical assistance over ideological debates about sovereignty or human rights conditions.

Glossary

Arms Control — Agreements between countries to limit the development, production, stockpiling, or deployment of weapons.

Capacity-Building — Helping countries develop the skills, resources, and institutions needed to address challenges like terrorism.

Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement — A legal arrangement between a country and the IAEA allowing inspectors to verify that nuclear materials are used only for peaceful purposes.

Counterterrorism — Efforts to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorist attacks, including military, law enforcement, and preventive measures.

CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty) — A treaty banning all nuclear explosions. Adopted in 1996 but not yet formally in force.

Disarmament — The reduction or elimination of weapons, particularly weapons of mass destruction.

IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) — The UN-affiliated organization that promotes peaceful uses of nuclear energy and verifies that nuclear programs aren't diverted to weapons.

New START — The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the U.S. and Russia, limiting each to 1,550 deployed strategic warheads. Expires February 2026.

Non-Proliferation — Efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to countries that don't currently have them.

NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) — The 1968 treaty that forms the foundation of the global nuclear order, with 191 states parties.

Nuclear Umbrella — Security guarantees from a nuclear-armed state to its allies, promising to use nuclear weapons in their defense if necessary.

Radicalization — The process by which individuals adopt extremist ideologies that may lead to terrorism.

Resolution 1373 — The landmark UN Security Council resolution adopted after 9/11 requiring all states to take action against terrorism.

Sahel — The semi-arid region of Africa south of the Sahara Desert, stretching from Senegal to Sudan. Currently the global epicenter of terrorism.

TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) — A 2017 treaty banning nuclear weapons outright. Has 74 states parties but no nuclear-armed states.

UNOCT (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism) — The UN office coordinating counterterrorism efforts across the UN system, established in 2017.

Footnotes

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