



Arizona Model United Nations 65

United Nations Conference on International Organizations

Short Research Guide

Introduction

The United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO), commonly known as the San Francisco Conference, was held from April 25 to June 26, 1945. Representatives of 50 nations met to create the institutional framework for a new international organization intended to maintain international peace and security following World War II. The conference worked primarily from the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals, the agreements reached at Yalta concerning Security Council voting, and amendments proposed by participating governments.

The conference was divided into four commissions, including Commission II on the General Assembly, Commission III on the Security Council, and Commission IV on Judicial Organization. These commissions and their technical committees debated the powers, composition, procedures, and relationships among the proposed organs of the new organization. The conference ultimately adopted the UN Charter and the Statute of the International Court of Justice on June 25, with the Charter signed on June 26.

For this committee, delegates should approach the topics as representatives at the 1945 conference, rather than assuming the final Charter provisions are already settled. The central question is how much authority states should delegate to the new international organization while preserving national sovereignty and ensuring that the organization can actually maintain international peace. The negotiations over the General Assembly, Security Council, and International Court of Justice were particularly important because they established the basic balance between broad representation, great-power influence, and international law.

Topic I: General Assembly powers and representation (Chapter IV of the UN Charter)

The General Assembly was envisioned as the principal representative body of the new international organization, with membership for all participating states. One major question at UNCIO was how much authority the Assembly should possess relative to the Security Council. The Dumbarton Oaks Proposals provided a foundation for the Assembly's structure and functions, but governments at San Francisco proposed amendments concerning its powers and procedures.

The final Charter established the General Assembly as consisting of all UN members and gave it broad authority to discuss matters within the scope of the Charter and to make recommendations. At the same time, Article 12 placed a limitation on the Assembly when the Security Council was actively exercising its functions concerning a particular dispute or situation. The Assembly also received important responsibilities involving elections, admission of members, the budget, and coordination of the organization's work.

At UNCIO, delegates therefore needed to consider the proper balance between equal representation of states and effective decision-making. A central issue was whether the General Assembly should primarily serve as a deliberative and representative body or possess stronger powers over international affairs.

Questions to consider:

1. What powers should the General Assembly possess, and how should those powers be limited in relation to the Security Council?
2. How should states be represented and how should voting in the General Assembly work?
3. What issues should require a simple majority, a larger majority, or another form of agreement among members?

Topic II: Structure and power of the security council (Chapter V of the UN Charter)

The Security Council was designed to be the organization's principal body for maintaining international peace and security. Unlike the General Assembly, the Security Council was intended to be capable of taking decisions requiring immediate action. The structure of the Council was one of the most contentious issues at UNCIO because the major Allied powers—the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union, China, and France—expected to have a particularly important role in maintaining the postwar international order.

The Dumbarton Oaks Proposals had established the basic concept of a Security Council, but the voting procedure remained unresolved until the Yalta Conference in February 1945. Yalta produced the agreement that became the basis for the Security Council's voting system at San Francisco.

The resulting system gave the five major powers permanent seats and a special voting position on substantive decisions. This raised a fundamental question for the conference: should the organization prioritize the participation of all states equally, or should the states possessing the greatest military and political power receive special responsibilities and protections? Delegates also had to consider the Council's authority to address threats to peace and the circumstances under which it could take enforcement action.

Questions to consider:

1. How should the Security Council be structured, including the number and selection of permanent and non-permanent members?
2. Should any states possess special voting privileges or a veto over Security Council decisions? If so, how should those privileges be defined?
3. What authority should the Security Council possess to respond to threats to international peace and security?

Topic III: International law and the role of the court (Chapter XIV of the UN Charter)

The proposed United Nations system also required a judicial institution capable of resolving legal disputes between states and providing authoritative interpretations of international law. At UNCIO, Commission IV and its technical committees dealt specifically with judicial organization and the creation of the International Court of Justice. The conference ultimately adopted the Statute of the International Court of Justice as an integral part of the UN Charter.

Chapter XIV of the Charter establishes the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as the UN's principal judicial organ. The Court's role includes deciding legal disputes submitted by states in accordance with its Statute and providing advisory opinions on legal questions when properly requested. The Charter provides that the General Assembly and Security Council may request advisory opinions, while other UN organs and specialized agencies may do so when authorized by the General Assembly.

An important issue for delegates is the relationship between state sovereignty and compulsory international law. The Court could provide a mechanism for peaceful resolution of disputes, but states had to determine how willing they were to accept its jurisdiction. Delegates should also consider how Court decisions would be enforced. The final Charter provided that states party to a case undertake to comply with the Court's judgment, while the Security Council could become involved if a state failed to perform its obligations under a judgment.

Questions to consider:

1. How should the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction over disputes between states be determined?
2. Should states be required to accept the Court's jurisdiction, or should they retain the ability to choose whether to submit disputes to the Court?
3. What role should the Court play in interpreting international law, and how should its decisions and advisory opinions relate to the authority of other UN organs?