

**Forum: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL)**

**Issue: Promoting self-determination and political autonomy in non-self-governing territories**

**Student Officer: Tanmay Garg**

**Position: Deputy President**

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**Introduction:**

The right to self-determination is one of the most important aspects of international law and a principle that has been deeply ingrained in the United Nations. It helps ensure that all people have the right to choose their own political status. Despite it being such a fundamental right, however, even decades after major decolonization, 17 territories are recognized by the United Nations as Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs) across the globe. NSGTs are territories that are officially recognized by the United Nations as areas that do not have full political independence or the right to self-govern.

This issue still remains sensitive today, because even if the local population of an NSGT seeks autonomy or independence, administering nations may have intentions to maintain control, since they will benefit by doing so. This is the reason why populations in these NSGTs often face issues, such as a lack of representation and limited access to international decision-making.

This report will examine how the principle of 'self-determination' has evolved, key parties in this evolution, the issues it has faced, and past attempts to solve these issues. Along with this, the report will also discuss potential solutions that represent a fair path towards self-determination.

**Key Terminology:**

**Self Determination**- The right to choose one's own political status without outside resistance, through autonomy, independence, and integration. It allows for free association and various levels of autonomy.

**Non-Self-Governing Territory (NSGT)**- A territory that has not achieved self-governance (still controlled by another nation) and is listed as a territory needing decolonization by the United Nations.

**Administering Power**- A country that controls an NSGT. An example is the U.K. controlling the Falkland Islands.

**Autonomy**- A type of self-rule, where a territory remains part of a bigger nation, while being able to manage its internal affairs independently.

**Decolonization**- A procedure where a territory gains independence or self-government from colonial or foreign powers.

## **Background:**

The issue of self-governance and NSGTs began during colonization that took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time, European powers controlled much of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. The United Nations, which was established by the International Community after World War II, urged for decolonization in order to provide independence and self-government rights to colonies.

In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) accepted Resolution 1514, also known as the 'Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples'. This

resolution stated that “all peoples have the right to self-determination”. This resolution was then followed by Resolution 1541, which provided details as to how a territory can be classified as an NSGT. It specified that a territory would only be self-governed if it were fully independent, associated freely with another country, or integrated with another existing country.

Ever since the United Nations was formed, 80 colonies have gained their independence. In 1945 (the year of establishment of the UN), around 750 million people were present in these NSGTs.



However, that number has now shrunk down to 2 million. Despite these improvements, the UN still currently recognizes 17 territories worldwide as NSGTs. These areas include Western Sahara (divided between the Sahwari people and Morocco), New Caledonia (controlled by France), Guam (controlled by the US), and more. These areas have still not accomplished self-government and face various issues, such as political, economic, and social challenges.

These matters also tend to get really complicated. An example is the situation in Western Sahara. There, a referendum on independence has been delayed by decades, due to various reasons, like disagreements between Morocco and the Polisario Front (a political and military movement formed to oppose the Spanish colonial rule, which later also opposed Morocco) regarding who should be allowed to take part in the voting. Morocco claims full authority over

the area, while the populations of the Western Sahara demand full independence. Despite the UN's suggestions calling for a peaceful solution, the disputes remain.

Most of the time, these situations are complicated even further by the fact that administering powers have deep interests in territories that they have colonized. These interests may be for access to natural resources, military bases, and more. This divides the local populations of these NSGTs on whether they want full independence and autonomy, or whether they want to fully integrate with their administering country.

The relevance of the issue of self-determination in NSGTs remains highly relevant in today's life, especially because of the effects it has on human rights and international law. It is really important for people to be able to have access to the fundamental right of self-governance because it allows them to choose their own political status without outsiders affecting their choices.

## **Major Parties Involved:**

### **The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA):**

The UNGA is a United Nations committee that has played a really important role in the decolonization process. It can pass resolutions that help with self-determination efforts. The UNGA resolutions are not legally binding, which means that nations can decide to not follow them. However, these resolutions do help set global standards because they carry a lot of moral and political weight, making some countries follow them.

### **The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24):**

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The UN Special Committee on Decolonization (known as the C-24) was established in 1961. This committee was set up in order to keep track of and assist the implementation of the UNGA Resolution 1541. It constantly assesses all the NSGTs and makes recommendations as to how they can progress towards self-determination. The C-24 also provides platforms for the NSGT representatives to speak at the UN conferences and raise concerns.

### **The United Kingdom (UK):**

The UK is in charge of multiple NSGTs, including Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands (Malvinas), and Bermuda. The UK claims that it supports its territories 'achieving self-determination. However, the UK's control of such areas has caused international tensions. For example, the UK and Argentina have been having a long dispute over the Falkland Islands. This is because, on one hand, Argentina claims that the islands belong to it, due to historical and geographical context. On the other hand, the UK claims the islands belong to it because of the continuous settlement, effective administration, and self-determination the islands have achieved under its governance.

### **Timeline of Events:**

| Date              | Event                                                                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| October 24, 1945  | Establishment of the United Nations. Self-determination is one of the UN's core principles.   |
| December 14, 1960 | Resolution 1514 is adopted by the UN General Assembly, which supports the end of colonialism. |
| December 15, 1960 | Resolution 1541 is adopted, which specifies what self determination means.                    |

|                   |                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| November 14, 1975 | Spain withdraws from Western Sahara. Morocco comes in, which leads to a conflict with the Polisario Front.                                            |
| 1988-1991         | The UN identifies 17 territories as NSGTs.                                                                                                            |
| May 2013          | The UN re-writes French Polynesia into the list of NSGTs, despite oppositions from the French.                                                        |
| 2018              | The first referendum is held for New Caledonia. However, 56.7% vote for it to remain with France.                                                     |
| 2020              | The United States supports Morocco's claim that it controls Western Sahara, which is a controversial move globally.                                   |
| 2021              | The Third New Caledonia referendum is held. The independence is rejected once again, however, this time with a much lower voter population            |
| 2024-2025         | The UN Special Committee on Decolonization continues to review NSGTs. Tensions remain in many of these territories, especially in the Western Sahara. |

### **Previous Attempts/Solutions:**

Over the past 75 years, the United Nations has made many efforts to encourage decolonization of NSGTs. Many former colonies have successfully gained independence; however, this procedure has been slow and inconsistent for those that haven't achieved independence.

#### **1. UN Resolutions and Declarations:**

The earliest and most significant steps were:

- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples Resolution*, 1514, A/RES/1514(XV), [accessed 2 July 2025]:
  - Declared that “all peoples have the right to self-determination” whilst also supporting the end of colonialism.
- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), *Principles which should guide Members in determining whether or not an obligation exists to transmit the information called for under Article 73 e of the Charter*, 1541, A/RES/1541/(XV), [accessed 2 July 2025]:
  - Mentioned that in order to achieve a ‘full measure of self-government’, a nation should be (1) independent, (2) freely associated with another state, or (3) integrated into another state.

These resolutions created a global standard and an equal framework for decolonization, which has been used as a guide for decolonization worldwide. However, these resolutions are not legally binding, meaning that some nations do not accept them, resulting in some territories still remaining under the control of administering powers, even now. When these resolutions first came out, they did cause some stirring and decolonization; however, over time, due to political issues and a lack of enforcement, this issue could not be fully solved.

## **2. Referendums on Independence:**

Some NSGTs have held referendums under UN supervision:

- New Caledonia (France): New Caledonia, a territory colonized by France, has had three referendums, one in 2018, 2020, and 2021 each. These referendums have been held to decide whether this territory would remain part of France or it will

become independent. The result of all three of these referendums has resulted in more voters voting for New Caledonia staying with France. However, the political pressure and the number of voters in each of these referendums have differed. This was especially the case in 2021, when pro-independence groups had boycotted taking part in the referendum, due to the effects on their campaign caused by Covid-19. This resulted in a voter turnout for the referendums to be just 44%. All of these referendums were conducted peacefully and followed a democratic procedure, meaning that these referendums did find success. However, the most recent referendum (in 2021) was not as successful, due to the lack of authenticity and participation.

### **3. Peacekeeping and Mediation:**

The UN has also created peacekeeping and negotiation missions:

- The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO): The United Nations' goal since 1991 has been to be able to hold a successful referendum in Western Sahara. However, even after more than 3 decades, it has not occurred. This is mainly because of the political disagreements between Morocco and the Palestinian Front. These disagreements consist of arguments over which people amongst the population should be eligible to take part in the referendum. It is also important to note that the MINURSO is a peaceful mission, which is not allowed to use force, whose primary goal is to support ceasefire agreements and decolonization. The MINURSO also does not have the authority to be able to enforce a timeline. This lack of authority and force is one of the reasons why the organization has not been able to successfully hold the referendum. However, despite not being able to host the referendum, the MINURSO has successfully been able to maintain a ceasefire in this area.

#### **4. Inclusion in UN Committees and Forums:**

- NSGT representatives are often given the opportunity to speak at the UN Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24) and the General Assembly. This provides them with a platform to inform others and raise concerns internationally. While the concept is good, there are some inconveniences, such as that direct actions are often not taken unless there are political follow-through missions regarding the issues raised by the representatives.

#### **5. Reinscription of Territories:**

- In some cases, territories that had been removed from the NSGT list were later added to it again due to political activism. An example is French Polynesia, which had been removed from the lists of NSGTs in 1947, without local consultation. However, on 17th of May, 2013, the UN General Assembly reassessed the state of French Polynesia and voted to reinstate the territory onto the list of NSGTs. This allowed French Polynesia to reemerge in decolonization discussions and gain rights to NSGT discussions.

These efforts show how dedicated the UN has been to the cause of self-determination, especially since it is constantly reassessing and monitoring NSGTs. However, the limitations it faces also suggest how its influence fades when other member states do not cooperate.

### **Potential Solutions:**

**1. UN-Monitored Referendums:**

- Encourage the UN to organize and monitor referendums in all NSGTs to ensure freedom of speech, international observers, and fair media coverage. Also, provide agencies that continue to follow up in order to make sure that the issues raised by the representatives are consulted upon.
- This will allow people to express their will openly and effectively, without any fear or political pressure.

**2. Enhanced Autonomy Agreements:**

- For territories that don't want to be separated from the governing nation, enhanced autonomy models can be promoted, which allow the territory to gain full control over local affairs while remaining politically connected with the administering country.
- This will allow the territories to experience a level of self-determination while still being part of another administering nation, and may be a situation where both the NSGT and the administering nation are content.

**3. Economic Capacity Building:**

- Provide various supports to the NSGTs, such as education, infrastructure, and local industry in NSGTs, so that they can eventually govern themselves properly, if they desire independence.

**4. Stronger Role for Regional Organizations:**

- Groups like the African Union, Pacific Islands Forum, and CARICOM can be involved for promoting self-determination. This is because these organizations have a good understanding of the history, culture, and geopolitical status of their respective regions. This makes these organizations some of the best to cooperate with when addressing such issues.

**5. Mediation and Conflict Resolution Services:**

- In regions with heavy conflicts, like Western Sahara, promote neutral UN mediation teams to help form agreements between parties (eg. Morocco and Polisario Front).
- This will allow for peaceful and neutral solutions to be formed, where neither party feels as if they have been disadvantaged. This helps ensure the safety of the people living in these areas.

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