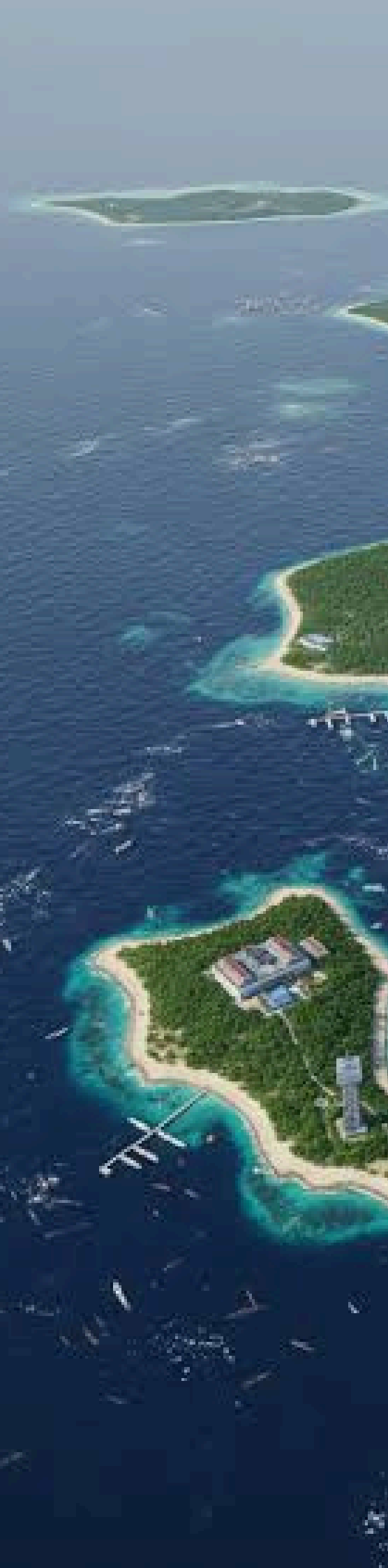




Ensuring equitable maritime boundaries and managing resource protection and sustainability

STUDY GUIDE



An aerial photograph of a tropical island, likely in the Maldives, showing a small airport with a runway and taxiway, several buildings, and a lush green landscape surrounded by turquoise water and coral reefs. The image is positioned on the left side of the page, serving as a background for the index.

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LETTER FROM YOUR CHAIR

Dear Delegates,

It is a privilege to welcome you to the International Court of Justice. As your chair, I hope this conference becomes more than just debate and what is written on paper. I hope it becomes an experience from which we can all take something with us.

MUN has a unique way of teaching us things we never expected to learn. We enter a committee thinking about speeches, arguments, resolutions, and awards, but somewhere along the way, we learn how to stand behind our ideas, speak when we are nervous, listen when we disagree, and understand perspectives completely different from our own. There will be moments when you know exactly what to say and others when you will not. There will be disagreements, unexpected questions, and mistakes. Embrace them. Some of the most valuable lessons in MUN come from the moments that do not go according to plan.

Most importantly, get to know the people around you, challenge their ideas, and allow them to challenge yours. Years from now, you may not remember every argument you made, but you will remember the people you met, the moments that pushed you, and the times you surprised yourself. If you leave this conference knowing a little more about the world, about others, and perhaps even about yourself, then we will have achieved something far greater than anything we could put on paper.

Best regards, your chair

Julian Araya

LETTER FROM YOUR CHAIR

Dear Delegates,

It is a true honor to welcome each and everyone of you. My name is Ella Peters, I am a senior, and I am proud to serve you as your chair for this year's SPMUN. I am so excited to share this experience with such a capable group of delegates. MUN is a demanding but extremely rewarding experience. I know at first glance it may be intimidating, but you gain so much from it, including critical thinking, public speaking, conflict resolution, and leadership skills, along with the chance to learn different perspectives on real problems.

This is your moment to explore your full potential and demonstrate your abilities not only to your chairs and fellow delegates, but also to yourselves. Don't be afraid to speak up and share your opinions through the debate. Express your opinions with confidence, and remember, debate is not just about winning, it is about understanding different perspectives, defending your position with evidence, and working toward solutions, even when facing disagreement.

Debate can become intense at times, in those moments I encourage you to stay calm, and be patient. You don't need to be perfect to make a difference. All that matters is that you try your best and stay open to learning from each other.

Lastly, I want to thank each and everyone of you for the time and effort you've put into preparing for this conference. Your effort and participation are what make committees like this one meaningful. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any concerns or doubts throughout this process, we are here to support and assist you so you can do your best in your role as delegates.

Best Regards, your chair
Ella Peters

COMMITTEE INTRODUCTION

The International Court of Justice, whose full official name is the Cour internationale de Justice in French, is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. Established in 1945 by the UN Charter and seated at the Peace Palace in The Hague, Netherlands, the Court began functioning in 1946 as the successor to the Permanent Court of International Justice, which had operated under the League of Nations. Since then, the ICJ has served as the world's foremost forum for resolving legal disputes between sovereign states.

The Court operates under the ICJ Statute, which is annexed to the UN Charter, and fulfills two central functions. First, it settles contentious cases, meaning legal disputes submitted voluntarily by states, since only states, not individuals or organizations, may appear before the Court, and its jurisdiction depends on the consent of the parties involved. Secondly, it issues advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by authorized UN organs and specialized agencies, such as the General Assembly or Security Council.

The Court is composed of fifteen judges elected for nine-year terms by the General Assembly and Security Council, chosen to represent the world's principal legal systems. Decisions are reached by majority vote, and while rulings in contentious cases are binding on the parties, the Court itself has no direct enforcement power, leaving enforcement to the Security Council under Article 94 of the UN Charter. Proceedings follow strict rules of written and oral pleadings, evidence submission, and legal reasoning grounded in treaties, customary international law, general principles of law, and judicial precedent. In this simulation, delegates will act as judges, applying these same standards of legal analysis rather than debating from a purely political standpoint.

COMMITTEE INTRODUCTION

Why is the ICJ handling this issue?

Maritime boundary disputes and questions of resource protection are fundamentally legal in nature, rooted in the interpretation of treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, alongside customary international law and prior case law. The ICJ has a long history of adjudicating precisely these kinds of disputes, having decided landmark cases such as the North Sea Continental Shelf Cases, the Maritime Delimitation in the Black Sea between Romania and Ukraine, and the Territorial and Maritime Dispute between Nicaragua and Colombia. Through these cases, the Court has developed established legal principles, including the equidistance and relevant circumstances method, that make it uniquely equipped to handle equitable maritime boundary delimitation.

Importance of the topic

Maritime boundaries determine sovereign rights over vast economic resources, including fisheries, oil, gas, and seabed minerals, as well as strategic and security interests. As competition over these resources intensifies amid overlapping claims, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelf extensions, unresolved disputes risk escalating into broader geopolitical tensions between states. At the same time, the sustainable management of maritime resources is essential to addressing overfishing, environmental degradation, and the effects of climate change on coastlines and ocean ecosystems. The ICJ's role in this simulation is therefore to balance these competing state interests through impartial and legally grounded rulings, reinforcing the broader principle that international law, rather than power politics, should govern how nations share and protect the world's oceans.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

The oceans hold resources vital to every state's economy (oil, fisheries, and seabed minerals) and since 1982, UNCLOS has set rules for dividing these waters into territorial seas, EEZs, and continental shelves. However, UNCLOS provides no reliable enforcement: overlapping claims still spark confrontation worldwide, and states have at times rejected ICJ rulings against them outright. Climate change adds further urgency, as rising seas raise unresolved questions over whether boundaries must shift, threatening the sovereignty of low-lying states.



These disputes carry real stakes: boundaries decide who may fish or extract resources, meaning economic survival for smaller states and strategic advantage for larger ones. Left unresolved, they risk armed conflict and the erosion of a rules-based order all states depend on.

Because these are disputes between sovereign equals, no single state can resolve them alone. Only the UN, through UNCLOS and its judicial bodies, holds the legitimacy to arbitrate fairly and as new frontiers like the Arctic and deep seabed open fresh competition, this committee must decide whether to strengthen peaceful settlement or let power decide instead of law.



KEY TERMS

UNCLOS – The 1982 UN treaty governing maritime zones and ocean law.

Maritime Boundary – The legal line dividing one state's waters from another's.

Baseline – The coastal line from which maritime zones are measured.

Territorial Sea – Waters up to 12 nautical miles from the coast; full state sovereignty.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – Waters up to 200 nm where a state controls resource rights, but not full sovereignty.

Continental Shelf – The underwater extension of a state's landmass, granting seabed resource rights.

Seabed Minerals – Mineral deposits on the ocean floor, often targeted for mining in international waters.

Common Heritage of Mankind – Principle that deep-seabed resources belong to all humanity, not one state.



KEY TERMS

Equidistance – A method of drawing boundaries at equal distance from each state's coast.

Innocent Passage – The right of foreign ships to pass through a state's territorial sea peacefully.

Archipelagic Waters – Waters enclosed by an archipelagic state's outer islands, treated as sovereign.

IUU Fishing – Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing that threatens marine resources.

Joint Development Zone (JDZ) – A shared area where states jointly exploit resources instead of settling a boundary.

ICJ / ITLOS – The main courts that resolve maritime and law-of-the-sea disputes.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Origins of the dispute

Modern maritime boundary disputes began to intensify in the mid-twentieth century, when technological advances made it possible to extract oil, gas, and minerals from the seabed. This encouraged coastal states to expand their claims over nearby waters. In response the UNCLOS established territorial seas, exclusive economic zones extending 200 nautical miles, and continental shelf rights. However, issues such as historic rights, overlapping claims, and the classification of islands and rocks remained open to interpretation, contributing to many disputes today.

Main catalysts and causes

Several factors transformed maritime boundaries into a source of international tension. The discovery of valuable oil and gas reserves, especially in the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, gave states strong economic reasons to defend or expand their claims. Decolonization also left many newly independent states with unclear maritime boundaries inherited from colonial rule. In addition, strategic waterways and concerns over freedom of navigation attracted global powers, turning some local disputes into broader geopolitical conflicts.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The South and East China Sea

The South China Sea is a major maritime dispute, where China's nine-dash line claims overlap with the exclusive economic zones of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Tensions increased in the 2010s as China built artificial islands and military installations on disputed reefs. In 2016, an UNCLOS tribunal ruled that China's historic claims had no legal basis, a decision China rejected. The United States is involved due to its interest in freedom of navigation and global trade. In the East China Sea, China and Japan dispute sovereignty and resource rights over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

The Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean

Greece and Türkiye have long disputed maritime boundaries in the Aegean Sea, with tensions increasing after offshore hydrocarbons were discovered in the 1970s. The dispute extends into the Eastern Mediterranean, where the division of Cyprus since 1974 has complicated maritime claims. Natural gas discoveries in the 2000s and 2010s increased tensions further, as Türkiye does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus's maritime claims and has established competing agreements. These disputes show how historical divisions and natural resources can create regional tensions.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Other Affected Regions

Other disputes show the global scope of this issue. Somalia and Kenya contested their Indian Ocean boundary before the ICJ over unclear agreements and valuable fishing and hydrocarbon resources. Australia and Indonesia negotiated their Timor Sea boundary for decades before reaching an agreement in 2018. In the Arctic, melting ice has opened access to resources and shipping routes, creating overlapping claims among Arctic states. Argentina and the United Kingdom also continue to dispute the Falkland Islands and surrounding waters.

Why this issue persists

Maritime disputes usually result from a combination of unclear legal agreements, valuable natural resources, strategic interests, and unresolved historical or colonial conflicts. Smaller coastal states often depend heavily on fisheries and hydrocarbons but may face larger states with greater influence. Combined with the lack of a single mechanism to enforce maritime decisions, these challenges make institutions such as the International Court of Justice important for resolving disputes.



CURRENT SITUATION

Maritime disputes and ocean governance challenges remain active across multiple fronts in 2026, ranging from unresolved boundary tensions to a landmark new conservation treaty. Some regions show hopeful signs of cooperation, while others reveal how easily competition over resources can outpace the legal frameworks meant to manage them. The sections below outline the most pressing developments shaping this topic today.

Deep-Sea Mining

The International Seabed Authority failed again in March 2026 to finalize its long-delayed "Mining Code," leaving commercial seabed exploitation formally unregulated. In the meantime, the United States (not a party to UNCLOS) is licensing mining unilaterally through NOAA, having approved and since expanded an exploration/mining application from a U.S. mining subsidiary. In response, Nauru and Tonga files proceedings against ISA itself before ITLOS's seabed disputes chamber in May 2026, the first case of its kind. It tested whether multilateral "common heritage" governance can survive unilateral pressure.

Arctic Frontiers

Melting sea ice is opening new shipping routes and previously inaccessible oil, gas, and mineral reserves, intensifying competition among Arctic coastal states. Russia currently holds the world's largest Arctic continental shelf claim, over 2 million km², arguing the Lomonosov Ridge extends from its own landmass, a claim that directly overlaps with submissions from Canada and Denmark (via Greenland). Unlike most other maritime disputes, however, Arctic states have generally pursued resolution through the UN's scientific Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf rather than open confrontation.

CURRENT SITUATION

The Eastern Mediterranean

Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus remain locked in one of the world's most complex EEZ disputes, centered on how much maritime entitlement small islands can generate against a larger mainland coast. Türkiye, which is not a UNCLOS party, rejects Greek and Cypriot EEZ claims and formally protested a Greek-Egyptian maritime delimitation agreement at the UN in 2026 as "illegal". Cyprus, meanwhile, continues offshore gas partnerships with Egypt and Israel that Turkey disputes on behalf of Northern Cyprus, keeping the dispute both legally unresolved and economically active.

Ocean Governance

The UN's High Seas Treaty (the BBNJ Agreement) entered into force on January 17, 2026, after reaching the required 60 state ratifications the previous September. Hailed by the UN Secretary-General as a "historic achievement for multilateralism", it is the first legally binding framework to protect marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction and supports the global goal of protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030. Key implementation details, including environmental impact assessment rules, are still being finalized ahead of the treaty's first Conference of Parties later in 2026.

The Overfishing Crisis

Beyond boundary and mining disputes, unsustainable fishing remains a severe ongoing threat to marine resources. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing accounts for roughly one in every five fish caught worldwide, costing the global economy an estimated \$23.5–36.4 billion annually. The FAO's 2025 review found that over a third of global fish stocks are now overexploited, and the international target to eliminate IUU fishing by 2020 was not achieved, leaving enforcement gaps that disproportionately affect developing coastal states.

SOLUTIONS

Past Attempts:

UNCLOS (1982) built the main legal framework for the topic, including EEZs, continental shelves, and courts such as the ICJ and ITLOS. It has worked well in some cases, such as Bangladesh's peacefully settled boundary disputes and Guyana's ongoing case against Venezuela. However, it often fails when a losing state simply refuses to follow the ruling, as China did after losing its 2016 South China Sea case and Kenya did after losing to Somalia in 2021.

Efforts to stop overfishing, such as the FAO's Port State Measures Agreement and the WTO's fisheries subsidies deal, have also struggled, since illegal fishing still makes up about one in five fish caught worldwide. The new High Seas Treaty (2026), however, was agreed on much faster, suggesting that treaties focused on shared environmental protection are easier to agree on than ones involving contested territory or resources.

Possible Solutions:

Delegates might consider strengthening compliance mechanisms for ICJ and ITLOS rulings, such as follow-up review periods or benefits for cooperation. Joint Development Zones could offer a model for sharing disputed resources without settling sovereignty outright. Expanding funding and technology for monitoring (for example, satellite tracking) could help smaller states enforce their EEZs against IUU fishing and unauthorized incursions. Finally, using the High Seas Treaty's fast ratification as a model, delegates could explore framing contested issues (like seabed mining) around shared environmental stewardship rather than competing ownership claims.

BLOC POSITIONS

China: The central actor in the world's most active maritime dispute, the South China Sea. China rejects the binding 2016 UNCLOS arbitral ruling that invalidated its "nine-dash line" claim, and continues coast guard operations against the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. It clashed with the Philippines multiple times at Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal in July 2026 alone, and is resisting a legally binding ASEAN Code of Conduct.

Philippines: Won a landmark 2016 ruling invalidating China's claims in the South China Sea, yet China has ignored it ever since. Manila continues to assert its EEZ rights around areas like Reed Bank despite ongoing clashes with Chinese vessels, and as 2026 ASEAN Chair is pushing for a binding Code of Conduct. Its case is central to the debate over whether international law can be enforced against a non-compliant great power.

Japan: Locked in a long-running dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea — uninhabited islets believed to sit atop oil and gas reserves. Tokyo administers the islands and has repeatedly protested Chinese coast guard incursions, including a confrontation as recent as July 2026; the dispute is a textbook case of sovereignty determining resource and EEZ rights.

United States: Not a party to UNCLOS, yet the dominant naval power backing "freedom of navigation" against China's claims. It is also unilaterally licensing deep-sea mining through domestic law rather than the International Seabed Authority: in March 2026, NOAA approved an exploration/mining application from a U.S. subsidiary of The Metals Company, a move widely criticized as undermining the "common heritage of mankind" principle.

BLOC POSITIONS

Türkiye: Central to the Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean EEZ dispute and not a party to UNCLOS. Turkey argues that islands (Greek islands, Cyprus) should not generate full 200-nautical-mile EEZs, and in 2026 formally protested Greek-Egyptian maritime agreements at the UNas "illegal," citing its own 2019 memorandum with Libya instead

Greece: Turkey's principal counterpart, claiming broad EEZ and continental shelf rights extending from its Aegean and Ionian islands, backed by agreements with Italy and Egypt. Athens has offered to negotiate delimitation specifically but refuses to discuss island sovereignty, which it considers non-negotiable.

Venezuela: Party to a live ICJ case over the Essequibo region and its offshore oil deposits. Venezuela claims roughly two-thirds of Guyana's territory and adjacent waters, has passed domestic legislation purporting to annex the area, and its Acting President has stated the country may not comply with an adverse ICJ ruling.

QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION PAPER MUST ANSWER

The following questions should guide the committee's Resolution Papers. The proposed solutions should address the main challenges presented by the topic and provide realistic and actionable measures for the international community.

- How should overlapping maritime claims be fairly divided?
- Who should control resources in disputed waters?
- How should countries ensure that resource extraction is sustainable?
- How can illegal fishing be reduced and better monitored?
- How can international rulings on maritime disputes actually be enforced?
- Should environmental impact assessments be mandatory before extraction begins?
- What should happen to states that ignore international rulings?
- How often should maritime and environmental agreements be reviewed?

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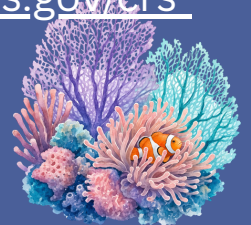
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