
United Nations Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL) Background Guide

2026-2027

**Cleveland Council on
WORLD AFFAIRS**



Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL) Background Guide

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Written July 2026

The United Nations Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL) is the fourth committee of the General Assembly of the United Nations.¹ Its purpose is to cover a broad range of decolonization-related issues, with current topics including the effects of atomic radiation, a comprehensive review of peacekeeping operations, as well as a review of special political missions. The commission hears petitions from remaining non-self-governing territories to aid in their processes of decolonization. This commission also works on projects such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Israeli Practices and settlement activities affecting the rights of the Palestinian people and other occupied territories, and international cooperation in outer space.²

SPECPOL was established in 1993 by merging the Decolonization and Special Politization committees.³ All 193 member states of the UN General Assembly are members of SPECPOL because it is a specialized committee of the General Assembly. The committee is headquartered at UN Headquarters in New York. SPECPOL serves to address decolonization and specialized political topics through forums and discussions and by delivering recommendations to the General Assembly.⁴ SPECPOL does not possess its own budget; instead its financial allocations are managed through the wider General Assembly and overall UN budget.⁵

SPECPOL has handled and aided in the management of decolonization processes for regions like Western Sahara and the Trust Territories (a UN trusteeship for over 2,000 islands in

¹ United Nations. (n.d.). General Assembly of The United Nations [Review of General Assembly of The United Nations]. Wwww.Un.Org. Retrieved July 15, 2026, from <https://www.un.org/en/ga/fourth/>

² Ibid.

³ Model Diplomat, "Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Specpol)," Model Diplomat, 2026, <https://modeldiplomat.com/learn/glossary/specpol>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rebecca Leppert, "How the United Nations Is Funded, and Who Pays the Most," *Pew Research Center*, July 31, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/31/how-the-united-nations-is-funded-and-who-pays-the-most/>.

the Pacific).⁶ The committee facilitated these decolonization processes by supporting self-determination in these nations and overseeing the creation of trusteeship agreements, which are the terms under which a trustee or guardian nation has administration over a trust territory.⁷ They support through public acknowledgement of these islands as independent, which solidifies these newly formed nations on the international stage as sovereign.

It is the focus of this committee to understand how previous actions and attitudes of both colonial powers and the wider international community today impact former colonies, as well as recognizing the lasting or permanent effects of colonialism. This committee should provide recommendations to facilitate the goals of decolonization through a variety of methods that enfranchise former colonies and promote independence of culture and politics. The recommendations and policies that SPECPOL pursues should focus on the success of formerly colonized nations and communities through the building of their independent cultures and acknowledging the history of colonialism in these topics.

Topic I: Reparations and the Repatriation of Cultural Properties

Statement of the Issue:

SPECPOL convenes to discuss the topic of Reparations and Repatriation of Cultural Properties. Reparations are defined as “the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury.”⁸ Repatriation is defined as “the process by which important cultural items and human remains are returned to lineal descendants or descendant communities.”⁹ In the context of cultural properties, this can be the return of stolen items from colonizers, payment for these items, or public acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of private collections, museums, or governments who have had possession of stolen cultural items. Cultural properties can be works of art, parts of historic buildings, structures, or installations or

⁶ Model Diplomat, “Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Specpol),” Model Diplomat, 2026, <https://modeldiplomat.com/learn/glossary/specpol>.

⁷ UN Yearbook, “Functions and Organization of the United Nations 103,” accessed July 27, 2026, https://cdn.un.org/unyearbook/yun/pdf/1950/1950_115.pdf.

⁸ Merriam-Webster, *Definition of REPARATION*, Merriam-Webster.Com, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reparation>.

⁹ Field Museum, *What Is Repatriation?* | Repatriation | the Field Museum, Repatriation.Fieldmuseum.Org, 2026, <https://repatriation.fieldmuseum.org/narrative/6525>.

items such as books or jewels. While the monetary value of cultural properties can be as little as one USD, or as great as millions, it is the cultural significance which makes these items valuable, and the simple fact that so many stolen cultural properties around the globe have not been given back, let alone publicly acknowledged or financially compensated for makes the mission of SPECPOL to see these cultural properties returned to their communities of origin incredibly important.

It is important to this committee to facilitate the return of stolen cultural properties to its culture of origin. However, this is not always the arrangement that is made, and SPECPOL could pursue facilitating lending agreements so that the community to which the property actually belongs receives reparations for theft of the property while still allowing museums and other countries to showcase the cultural item. While not fulfilling the goal of returning stolen cultural properties, potential lending agreements with both private collections and museums with nations and communities to whom these objects belong to, facilitates a different kind of reparation and repatriation that allows these objects to be financially compensated for, while also allowing these objects to be viewed and appreciated in other parts of the world.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention to “Fight Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property” committed the 149 member state parties at the time to combatting the illicit trafficking of cultural property by raising awareness of the topic both nationally and internationally.¹⁰ The Convention also calls for strengthening cooperation with the international art industry, in line with the 2022 MONDIACULT Declaration, which calls for stricter ethical guidelines for art acquisitions, to prevent buyers and museums from purchasing objects that lack proper documentation and proof of legality.¹¹ This convention also seeks to promote new kinds of restitution that benefits not only the governments of nations that have had cultural property stolen, but also the specific communities the goods may have originated from.¹² Additionally, artists and curators from both

¹⁰ UNESCO, *Fight Illicit Trafficking (Convention 1970)*, Unesco.Org, 2021, <https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

the country currently holding the stolen property and the country of origin are encouraged to work together to protect and maintain the integrity of the cultural property as it journeys home.¹³

To deliver justice for the theft or extraction of cultural properties aids in SPECPOL's mission to continue the process of decolonization and ensure that nations no longer benefit from the exploitative practices that accompanied colonialism and imperialism. This committee should identify regions, nations, and specific communities that have been negatively impacted by the loss of stolen cultural properties. This goal should be pursued by placing continued public pressure on museums and nations who refuse to give back stolen property, and by recommending to parent bodies in the UN, like the General Assembly, that funds and support be given to organizations and nations that are pursuing repatriation and reparations for stolen cultural properties.

History:

Many of the cultural properties which SPECPOL seeks to see returned are items taken by former colonial governments, or wealthy individuals or museums of former colonial powers. Two strong examples of countries facing the issue of stolen cultural property are Nigeria and Mali. Both nations are former colonies of England and France respectively. While the UN has made significant strides in supporting and facilitating the return of cultural properties, through methods like public media attention and UNESCO's Virtual Collection of Stolen Cultural Objects, collections of stolen goods from former colonies still exist, despite demands for their return.¹⁴ In 2012, Nigeria's government demanded the return of a collection of stolen art and cultural artifacts be returned by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (MFAB).¹⁵ Despite clear evidence that the items were taken from the Benin Kingdom during a massacre in 1897 perpetrated by the British, and then sold and moved to the MFAB, the museum has refused to repatriate any of the items.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elizabeth A Klesmith, *Nigeria and Mali: The Case for Repatriation and Protection of Cultural Heritage in Post-Colonial Africa*, NDLScholarship, 2014, <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjicl/vol4/iss1/1/>. 47.

¹⁵ Ibid. 47

¹⁶ Ibid. 48

This is a strong example of a case of desired repatriation and reparations for cultural objects, as the Nigerian government can identify what was taken, when it was stolen, and where it resides today, and yet they continue to await repatriation. Additionally, the Nigerian government is in a functional and stable place to facilitate the return of their stolen goods and reintegrate them back into the cultural world of Nigeria. Mali on the other hand faces a more difficult situation when it comes to the repatriation of their stolen property. Experts have estimated that many Malian cultural sites have not only been plundered for cultural goods, but that these items have been sold and illegally exported from the country.¹⁷ The illegal trade for Malian cultural goods is negatively impacted by forged approval-of-sale certificates that dealers, primarily in Europe, manufacture to look as if the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has approved of these cultural artifacts being sold to buyers.¹⁸ However, because the UN has to condemn these falsified documents, it further complicates and delays the process of tracing where stolen goods are being traded.

Not only does global illegal trade hinder the attempts of SPECPOL and the Malian government to bring these cultural properties home, but the mission of repatriation is also hindered by the political and military conflicts in Mali. Since 2012, the northern regions of Mali have faced conflict stemming from an ongoing war between Islamic militant groups, the Malian government, and offshoot groups that support a side in the conflict.¹⁹ This conflict has since spread, but its political disruption has complicated the processes of repatriation and reparations for stolen cultural goods, as the Malian government is focused on the conflict rather than pursuing the return of their stolen cultural goods.²⁰ As the Malian government's attention has strayed from this topic, the conflict continues to serve as the perfect cover-up for the continuation of the illegal theft and sale of Malian cultural properties.

¹⁷Allan Ngari, "Crime Without Punishment: The Illegal Trade in Mali's Cultural Artefacts | ENACT Africa," *ISS Africa*, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/enactafrica/enact-observer/crime-without-punishment-the-illegal-trade-in-malis-cultural-artefacts>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Elizabeth A Klesmith, *Nigeria and Mali: The Case for Repatriation and Protection of Cultural Heritage in Post-Colonial Africa*, NDLScholarship, 2014, <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjicl/vol4/iss1/1/>. 47.

²⁰ Ibid. 48

Despite the thriving market for stolen cultural properties globally, the efforts of SPECPOL and individual nations to rectify these crimes through reparations and repatriations have made a difference. In November of 2022, the US Department of State in conjunction with the U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) helped to repatriate a trove of stolen Malian artifacts of great cultural and monetary value from Houston, Texas.²¹ The goods were returned to the Republic of Mali, and represent one example of what SPECPOL seeks to achieve, and the duty of this committee to continue support and demand for all stolen cultural property.

Another nation that has faced the issue of stolen cultural properties is Greece. A collection of Greek cultural artifacts, now known as the Elgin Marbles, were taken to England by the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Lord Elgin (Thomas Bruce) who served as Ambassador from 1799-1803.²² These objects were directly removed from the Parthenon and other cultural sites in Athens, and shipped to London where they eventually became part of a collection at the British Museum known as the “Parthenon Sculptures.”²³ The items have been highly contested since their removal, with calls from both activists as well as the Greek population and government for their repatriation.²⁴ In spite of immense global pressure, the Elgin Marbles have yet to be returned to their home, or financially compensated for.

Despite the large number of cultural properties that have yet to be returned, there have been steps made to hold nations accountable for this theft and bring awareness to the topic. Previous UN initiatives on this topic include the UNESCO Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects, a digital platform dedicated to displaying plundered, looted, and illicitly trafficked cultural artifacts.²⁵ This site compiles pictures, information about current whereabouts, and the history of stolen objects, as well as a “Return and Restitution room” which displays artifacts that have been repatriated.²⁶ The goals of this committee should align with the mission set forth on

²¹ U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “Archived: HSI, US State Department Return Stolen Artifacts to Mali,” *Ice.Gov*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/hsi-us-state-department-return-stolen-artifacts-mali>.

²² EBSCO, *Elgin Marbles* | EBSCO, EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | *Www.Ebsco.Com*, 2024, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/anthropology/elgin-marbles>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ UNESCO, *Unesco Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects*, *Unesco.Org*, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/culture-and-digital-technologies/virtual-museum>.

²⁶ Ibid.

the UNESCO site, to bring these stolen cultural goods home, but to not forget the journeys endured by the communities which these objects were taken from. SPECPOL is dedicated to the pursuit of repatriation and reparations. The sole step of returning these stolen items to their homeland does not fulfill the decolonization mission that this committee is entrusted with, only with full compensation, in the form of public acknowledgement, apology, and financial compensation can these objects truly be repatriated.

Analysis:

It is the primary duty of this committee to demand and facilitate not just the return of stolen cultural goods, but that financial reparations are given if so desired by the nation or community in which the items were stolen from, or aid in the assistance of the creation of a letting agreement in which the item is not returned to its homeland, and instead kept in a foreign museum or collection but still financially compensated for. This committee should pursue public acknowledgment of the illegal and immoral nature of the possession of the stolen goods and apologies. While some of these facets may seem arbitrary in the face of the safe return of the stolen property to its homeland, the emphasis on public acknowledgment/apology and monetary reparations is integral to the process of decolonization that SPECPOL is dedicated to. For this committee, simply returning the items without admittance of wrongdoing by colonial powers or individuals who benefitted from colonial practices of cultural extraction and theft undermines the damage faced by the communities who were stolen from.

Although there have been records of private collections, governments, and museums repatriating stolen or missing cultural properties in the past few decades, some of the world's most prominent museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and the Louvre Museum still display stolen goods. The British Museum is reportedly the world's largest repository of stolen art, but the public scrutiny the museum has faced over its possession of stolen art and artifacts, particularly the infamous Elgin Marbles has not been enough for the British government nor the museum itself to repatriate the stolen goods.²⁷ Not only has the

²⁷ Dalya Alberge, *British Museum Is World's Largest Receiver of Stolen Goods, Says QC*, *The Guardian*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/04/british-museum-is-worlds-largest-receiver-of-stolen-goods-says-qc>.

museum refused to give the stolen goods back, but it has been accused of telling “half-truths” that present the theft of the Elgin Marbles from Greece as necessary or as a “rescue” of the cultural property.²⁸ It is mentalities such as this that this committee must be dedicated to combatting, as the false narratives spun surrounding the theft of cultural properties damages the communities that have been robbed even further, while still denying them both repatriation and reparations.

Another obstacle in the path of repatriation and reparations is the legal classification of cultural and heritage artifacts and sites. In many nations, including Mali, there is little to no legal classification of what counts as a cultural heritage site or object.²⁹ For example, this issue is not aided by the weak judicial system in Mali, which coupled with the current growing conflict between the government and Islamic militias makes it difficult for the nation to try these crimes and gain back their stolen property. This is because Mali’s judicial system is siloed, which means that various sectors of law enforcement like organized crime and international crime do not speak or collaborate with one another, making it incredibly hard for their judicial system to confront the illegal exportation and sale of Malian cultural properties globally.³⁰ Combatting these issues in Mali and other nations who face the same struggle of repatriation and reparations for their stolen cultural property is of the utmost importance to SPECPOL.

With so many stolen cultural artifacts remaining out of their homelands, the mission of repatriation and reparations grows increasingly important. The longer these objects remain out of the communities which created them, the more their importance, history, and cultural value decline, as without their return, a part of history is lost to the communities where these objects originate from. Furthermore, the physical act of returning these objects, while meeting repatriation criteria, does not erase the damage suffered by these communities for the absence of a part of their culture and history. Reparations can come in many forms, and SPECPOL acknowledges that no amount of monetary compensation nor public acknowledgement of the colonial history or apology can negate the impact of cultural theft. With that in mind, the steps

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Allan Ngari, “Crime Without Punishment: The Illegal Trade in Mali’s Cultural Artefacts | ENACT Africa,” *ISS Africa*, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/enactafrica/enact-observer/crime-without-punishment-the-illegal-trade-in-malis-cultural-artefacts>.

³⁰ Ibid.

this committee should pursue not only the return of cultural properties, but also agreements that work in congruency with the 1970 and 2022 UNESCO policies to facilitate the safe return of these objects, and foster relationships between museums around the world as partners in the future.

Conclusion:

The issues of repatriation and reparations for stolen cultural properties must be handled by SPECPOL with the upmost consideration for the wellbeing of the objects and communities in which they belong to. True repatriation is more than the physical return of the object; it is accounting for the object's loss in three key ways: physically, financially, and publicly. The ideal route to true reparations requires honoring the history of these objects, where they came from and the fact that they were taken.

SPECPOL should pursue recommendations that fulfill all the aspects needed for repatriation and reparations; recommendations to the UN should consider the history of the object, its community, and the impacts of colonialism on the process of theft. To achieve repatriation and reparations, institutions in possession of such artifacts, like the British Museum and MFAB, must acknowledge the inherent wrongness of their actions in withholding these cultural objects. They should acknowledge the reprehensible nature of how these nations and museums came to possess the artifacts as well as commit to the retrospective effort toward the processes of repatriation and reparation. The public acknowledgement of museums apologizing for the illegal processes in which they came to possess these goods is crucial to fulfilling the processes of reparation. In addition, monetary compensation for these cultural goods should also be present in every process of reparations. To simply return the stolen cultural good and apologize fixes the problem in the present, but it does not account for the losses suffered by these communities in the past.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are the ideas of repatriation and reparation truly met without all of the key aspects (physical return of property, public admittance of wrongdoing, and financial compensation)?

2. How can the committee support the institution of national and international legislation to combat both the sale of stolen cultural property as well as push for its repatriation without violating international sovereignty?
3. How can SPECPOL decide on a monetary value for reparations without bias?
 - a. How can the committee provide art specialists and appraisers that will assess the value of both the objects themselves, but also lost revenue from display in the community of origin?
 - b. Can a price be put on emotional and cultural damages to these communities of origin?

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U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Archived: HSI, US State Department Return Stolen Artifacts to Mali.” *Ice.Gov*, November 22, 2021.

<https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/hsi-us-state-department-return-stolen-artifacts-mali>.

Topic II: Sovereignty of Island Nations

Statement of the Issue:

This committee convenes to discuss the topic of the sovereignty of island nations. The independence of island nations is incredibly relevant to international politics today with both the widespread acknowledgment of the impact of colonialism on former colonies, as well as the damage and risk to island nations from increasing climate change issues and natural disasters. There exist around 60 island territories still under colonial control globally, such as Guam, French Polynesia, and the U.S Virgin Islands. However, as some of these island territories are not inhabited, it is unlikely that all of them will seek sovereignty and independence. Decolonization is defined as the “process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country.”³¹ Independence is the freedom of the people to express through language, cultural, etc. and sovereignty is the ability of a nation to govern itself. The difference between these concepts is the legal separation of governments that sovereignty represents, whereas independence represents the separation of cultural and economy.

States across the globe have claimed sovereignty from former empires through difficult and violent paths. Key examples of decolonized nations are India and their sovereignty from Great Britain, Brazil from Portugal, the Democratic Republic of Congo from Belgium, and Haiti from France. While these nations all gained independent sovereignty, many of the paths that were taken to achieve independence came at the cost of civil order and the lives of civilians. Furthermore, many of these successful independence campaigns have been nations attached to larger continents, often with more resources and potential for support from allies in their fight for sovereignty than island nations that were isolated and dominated by many of these former colonial powers. Today, many former colonies have claimed independence and gained sovereignty from their erstwhile empires, but islands like Madagascar, Puerto Rico, the Falkland Islands, and Taiwan possess both complex histories shaped by colonialism and imperialism, as well as difficult paths towards sovereignty due to economic, security or environmental factors that have kept them from their independence and sovereignty.

³¹ Britannica, *Decolonization*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/decolonization>.

However, the victory of claiming independence and sovereignty is not the end of colonialism's impacts on these islands. Their status as former colonies has impacted their ability to be recognized on the international stage as independent entities, as well as contributed to long lasting environmental damage. This environmental damage has included, though isn't limited to, mass deforestation and reliance on an industrial or agricultural system set up by a colonial power that negatively impacts the island and its inhabitants, but may also be a main form of capital and thus the island may be dependent on it in order to survive, despite these systems slowly killing their environments.

It is the role of this committee to address the historical context in which these islands were colonized by, or purchased into, former empires that they remain a part of today. This committee's responsibility is also to understand how the native and local populations feel about the topics of sovereignty and independence and how these would affect the culture, environment, and inhabitants of these islands. SPECPOL should recommend ways to amend the negative impacts of colonialism on these islands while addressing how SPECPOL, and the UN, could aid in the transition from colonialism to independence and sovereignty. The committee should focus on whether these potential island nations would benefit most from sovereignty, or solely independence, or both. This includes discussing the reliance of these island territories on colonial economies, or military support to maintain governments, as well as the ways in which colonial power has repressed culture, identity, language and religion of these islands.

History:

The history of colonialism has deeply affected the culture and political climates of islands across the world today. In the Caribbean, colonial conquest of the islands began with Spanish establishment of colonies across modern day Jamaica, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Cuba, as well as many other smaller islands in the Caribbean.³² By a quarter of the way through the 17th century, other colonial powers such as England and France had begun attacking Spanish holds as well as establishing their own colonies across the island region.³³ Not

³² Colin Clarke and Bridget Brereton, *West Indies - Colonialism*, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Indies-island-group-Atlantic-Ocean/Colonialism>.

³³ Ibid.

only did this disrupt the lives of the native populations living across these islands, it also forced them into a state of changing “ownership” due to the combative environment created by these colonial powers.

These islands became primarily dominated by French and English imperialism and were utilized for sugar production, in which mostly enslaved African people were forced to work in harsh conditions.³⁴ The islands in the Caribbean were entirely stripped of any sovereignty for hundreds of years following colonial conquest. Apart from the Haitian Revolution in 1791, many of these former colonies did not gain independent sovereignty until at least the 1960s.³⁵ The lack of sovereignty caused harm to the rights and culture of native populations, and economic reliance on colonial powers, stifling the potential for an immediate strong economy following the acquiescence of sovereignty for these island nations.

Colonialism is also tied to the history of sovereignty in the Pacific Islands and was intrinsically tied to religious missions and attempts to convert native populations living across islands in the region.³⁶ Catholic missionaries expelled in 1836 from Tahiti and Hawaii led to the French church and government utilizing the expulsion as a pretense for French invasion of the Pacific Islands.³⁷ First, French forces took Tahtuata and southeast Marquesas and then forced the Tahitians for a French Protectorate in 1843.³⁸ In a short few years, these islands went from independent and sovereign regions with their own languages, cultures, and religions, to colonies that stripped local identity in favor of the imperial culture. Additionally, these islands were often used as penal colonies or had their natural resources stripped using forced, enslaved, or underpaid labor from both abducted and enslaved African individuals as well as locals and prisoners who had been expelled to the penal colonies.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Matthew McIntosh, “Caribbean History | Timeline & Facts | Study.Com,” *Study.Com*, 2025, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/caribbean-history-timeline-facts.html>.

³⁶ Francis West and Sophie Foster, “Pacific Islands - Colonial Rule,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pacific-Islands/Colonial-rule>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Tahiti endured not only political and cultural suppression from the French, but has faced long-standing environmental impacts that stem from colonial power. The islands of French Polynesia have faced many negative environmental changes, but Tahiti in particular has been greatly affected environmentally by colonial practices like coconut plantations, which while bringing great profit to the Tahitian economy and export, are damaging to the land and slowly add to the erosion of the island.⁴⁰ Coconut plantations anchor the island in place, where it is meant to float around the oceans, which disrupts the natural existence of the island, and others like it in French Polynesia.⁴¹ Coconut trees exude an oil which repels seabirds, which are incredibly vital to the survival of the ecosystem of the island, and the growth and spread of coconut plantations across Tahiti has depleted the population of seabirds contributing to the environment of Tahiti.⁴² Without these birds' feces to contribute to the soil, other species of animals and plants have suffered, dying out in regions of the island or seeing massive shrinking in population, which in turn eventually affects the food sources and habitats of humans, limiting tourism with the death and depletion of these environmental sites. This process will eventually kill the island. Rising global temperatures will likely lead to the sinking of entire archipelagos of French Polynesia by 2100, which will further affect the amount of available land for both tourism and coconut cultivation, which keeps the destructive cycle spinning.⁴³

Another Pacific Island affected by colonial behavior is Taiwan. Taiwan existed as an amalgamation of independent tribes that researchers say existed somewhere from 8,000 to 15,000 years before the arrival of the Dutch, who colonized the island first.⁴⁴ Colonization of the island by the Dutch, Japanese, French, and Chinese over the past 400 years has repressed and erased the native Taiwanese culture.⁴⁵ Taiwan has been utilized as a strategic shipping location by these former imperial powers, making it a piece on the board of imperialism instead of its

⁴⁰ Ryan Green, "Colonial-Era Coconut Farms Pose Risks To The Survival Of Pacific Atolls," *Honolulu Civil Beat*, June 17, 2026, <https://www.civilbeat.org/2026/06/colonial-era-coconut-farms-pose-risks-to-the-survival-of-pacific-atolls/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sabrina Wong, "Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan," *BYU Asian Studies Journal* *BYU Asian Studies Journal* 7 (2022): 1–2022, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=asj>.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.6

own independent entity.⁴⁶ This was furthered by the creation of plantations and the abuse of native Taiwanese.

Following the Chinese Civil War in 1945, Taiwan became a haven for the fleeing KMT (Kuomintang, which was the losing side in the Chinese Civil War) and a standoff between Taiwan and mainland China began to take form.⁴⁷ Newcomer KMT members claimed the island of Taiwan as “Chinese” and continued to repress native Taiwanese identity and culture as an entity. This was done through events like the “White Massacre” in which the KMT slaughtered thousands of Taiwanese residents whom they deemed a threat or opposition to their rule.⁴⁸ Not only was the population of Taiwan affected, but their environment was desecrated in favor of building the economy and capital to support the goals of the KMT. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, a cultural movement placed emphasis and appreciation on the farmers and agricultural sector of Taiwan, and this was in direct response to the aggressive industrialization of the KMT, which was destroying agricultural lands and the environment of Taiwan overall.⁴⁹

The longstanding oppression and lack of sovereignty that Taiwan has endured makes their path towards both independence and sovereignty a difficult one, as they must establish themselves economically, as well as unearth their native culture and decide how aspects of imperial cultures should fit into their future, if at all. Due to the actions of both former colonial powers and the colonial nature of KMT rule over the island, the international status and name of Taiwan remain a contested subject to this day. Not only has this repressed the potential flourishing of the culture and economy of Taiwan, but it has limited their ability to conduct diplomatic relations and complicates both Taiwan’s and China’s representation within the United Nations.

Another nation that has faced the issues of independence and sovereignty is Haiti. Despite its first attempt at revolution in 1791, and then formal independence in 1804, the subsequent taxation of Haiti by its former colonial power of France limited the capability of the

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.7

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.7

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.6

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.6

nation to stand on its own economically.⁵⁰ It faced many challenges during the early years of its independence, including the difficulty to acquire international recognition as an independent nation from neighboring countries like the United States, who feared acknowledgement of the successful slave rebellion in Haiti would condemn their own slave-based economies.⁵¹

Despite Haiti's earlier revolution that gained them sovereignty and independence, the island nation has faced many issues related to colonial impacts on their environment and the transformations in the environment due to climate change. Haiti's forests have been rapidly disappearing since colonial powers took over the island. Haiti was once primarily covered in forests, but now, forestation covers barely 1/3 of the overall land of the island.⁵² In a worrying statistic, over 1/3 of the overall forestation has been lost since 2002, meaning that the rate of deforestation has sped up exponentially.⁵³ Without the trees, the soil has become less moist, which harms remaining plant life and makes the soil more vulnerable to movement and landslides as well as massive amounts of erosion.⁵⁴ Much of modern deforestation stems from wood and charcoal industries however, this too is tied to colonialism. The lack of trade that made Haiti reliant on natural resource exports following its gaining of sovereignty and independence as retribution from other colonial powers for breaking away from France.⁵⁵ The forestation issues have compounded into drought related issues, with less water coming through the soil into groundwater aquifers, which is detrimental not only to the human and animal populations, but the success of agricultural production on the island.⁵⁶ Had France not retained colonial power over Haiti and caused it to become reliant on the draining of natural resources in order to survive, the environment of the island would be far more sustainable.

Like Haiti, Malta had a long tradition of culture and history before it was occupied by British control. Over its history, it has been invaded by the Phoenicians, the Romans, and the

⁵⁰ Irwin Halfond, "Haitian Independence | EBSCO," *EBSCO Information Services, Inc.* | *Www.Ebsco.Com*, 2023, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/haitian-independence>.

⁵¹ The University of Kansas, "HAITI: A Brief History of a Complex Nation," *Haitianstudies.Ku.Edu*, 2024, <https://haitianstudies.ku.edu/haiti-brief-history-complex-nation>.

⁵² Lily Hess, *Haiti Deforestation: Was Colonialism to Blame?*, #ThinkLandscape, May 5, 2025, <https://thinklandscape.globallandscapesforum.org/72963/haiti-deforestation-history/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Normans among others.⁵⁷ Due to its strategic location in the Mediterranean, Malta has been occupied and used as a trading port and military outpost much like Taiwan.⁵⁸ Under British rule from 1814-1964, the Maltese independence movement was successful and broke away from their imperial rulers in 1964, and formally established the Republic of Malta in 1974.⁵⁹ The lack of political rights and independence felt by the Maltese during their occupation was a key driver in their independence movement and its ultimate success.

Although these islands spread across the globe, they all share similarities in the ways in which they have been politically, economically, and culturally exploited and repressed by colonialism and its key perpetrators. It should be of the upmost importance to SPECPOL to recognize the ways in which the gaining of both sovereignty and independence are impacted by colonialism, and how that alters the potential for a stable and prosperous independent island nation and the roles and responsibilities of former colonial and imperial powers in addressing the modern issues faced by these countries.

Analysis:

SPECPOL's commitment to facilitating and supporting smooth transitions from colony to sovereign state is the committee's main priority. The committee needs to identify colonial impacts on already established island nations and understand potential desire from current island colonies or territories that might be on the path towards sovereignty. To do this, the committee must assess the effects on modern day and past colonialism, the impact of climate change on the potential autonomy of islands and the economic and socio-political implications of sovereignty and independence. For the purpose of this conference, this background guide will assess four main examples of island sovereignty and independence: Madagascar, Taiwan, the Falkland Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Madagascar has a long history of colonization by the French beginning in 1896, which eradicated previously existing independent states in Madagascar like the Menabe and the

⁵⁷ Michael Aliprandini, *Malta | Geography and Cartography | Research Starters | EBSCO Research*, Ebsco, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/geography-and-cartography/malta>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Kingdom of Boina.⁶⁰ This era started with an official shift to Protestantism by a Malagasy leader named Rainilaiarivony, who repressed the native Malagasy religion and began the process of forced Europeanization with the admittance of European settlers and the setup of European ministries as well.⁶¹ The repression of the native religion and culture allowed for French ideals and policies to dominate Madagascar both politically and socially. Thus, when Madagascar gained its independence in 1960, its economy and culture had been shaped massively by French influence. This can be seen by the large percentage of the modern population (27%) that practice Protestantism.⁶² Three-quarters of all trade coming out of the island nation was with its former empire, France, and much of the first few decades of independence were marred by civil war and political strife, further fueled by an economy still reliant on colonial powers for trade.⁶³ So, despite the success as breaking away from imperial French rule, the economy of Madagascar's success was still intrinsically tied to trade with France, which left Madagascar disadvantaged in many trade deals. The committee must consider how the breakaway from former empires has negatively impacted island nations who have claimed their independence and sovereignty, as well as understand the impacts it could have on the island territories that have potential to seek separation from colonial powers.⁶⁴

Additionally, the impacts of deforestation faced by Madagascar due to colonial extraction of its forests has disrupted the country's unique subtropical climate, meaning that both other plant and animal species have suffered, most notably the island's dense tropical rainforest ecosystems. This eventually causes negative impact on the food supply, and habitation of the human populations of Madagascar. With the loss of 70% of its primary forests between the years of 1895 and 1925, the climate makeup of Madagascar was massively shifted by colonial deforestation policies.⁶⁵ Today, this impacts a variety of species and has been detrimental to the growth of Madagascar's economy due to the loss of various species and arable lands for both

⁶⁰ Maureen Ann Covell et al., *Madagascar* | *Britannica*, *Www.Britannica.Com*, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Madagascar>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ United Nations, *UN Chief Urges Renewed Push to Complete Decolonization as 17 Territories Remain*, *UN News*, February 16, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1166971>.

⁶⁵ World Rainforest Movement, *Madagascar: Colonialism as the Historical Root Cause of Deforestation* | *World Rainforest Movement*, *Www.Wrm.Org.Uy*, January 2, 2003, <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/madagascar-colonialism-as-the-historical-root-cause-of-deforestation>.

wildlife habitation and human habitation. A 2022 analysis by Tearfund, an international NGO, of African nations' culpability in the global climate crisis versus the financial toll on their economies in response to it found that Madagascar would have to spend at least 15% of its GDP, reallocating funds from other industries, to effectively adapt to increasing environmental consequences⁶⁶.

Like Madagascar, Taiwanese history is greatly altered by the presence of multiple colonizing forces, from the British to the Chinese. Taiwan's identity and national independence is a multi-layered topic because of its establishment as a haven for groups opposing the government of the People's Republic of China. However, because Taiwan's government is made up of those loyal to the KMT party, who stand in stark opposition to the current government of the People's Republic of China, the independence of Taiwan is less about a sovereign nation and more another country's exiled political party establishing a territory. Thus, the idea of island sovereignty in the case of Taiwan is complicated by the fact that its current status is legally ambiguous, with some nations formally recognizing it as independent and sovereign, while other nations like China, recognize it as a territory of the People's Republic of China. A path towards sovereignty and independence for Taiwan must not only be a separation from China but also recognize what the native Taiwanese population desires for their politics, economy, and culture, not just the KMT party as a force against the Chinese political sphere.

Unlike Taiwan and Madagascar, the Falkland Islands off the coast of South America lack the designation of being independent but still face a similar multi-layered independence and sovereignty crisis. With colonialization attempts by both Argentina and England, the Falkland Islands have grappled with the difficulty of colonial repression and have been unable to gain the sovereignty and freedom found by other island nations.⁶⁷ A key difficulty of this is, despite nations recognizing the negative colonial nature British rule has on a small cropping of islands across the planet, many of the conversations surrounding freedom from Great Britain include not

⁶⁶ Sandra Laville, "Climate Adaptation Bill for African Countries to Dwarf Health Spending," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/13/climate-adaptation-bill-african-countries-dwarf-health-spending>.

⁶⁷ Swoop Antarctica, *Swoop Antarctica*, *Swoop-Antarctica.Com*, 2025, <https://www.swoop-antarctica.com/cruises/falkland-islands/history>.

the future of Falkland Islands independence, but whether its sovereignty would transfer to another nation, like Argentina.

The brief war fought in 1982 between Argentina and England over the Falkland Islands displays the belief in an Argentinian claim to the islands.⁶⁸ In the recent 2026 FIFA World Cup, members of the Argentine national football team chose to hold up a banner reading “Las Malvinas son Argentinas,” meaning the Malvinas (the Argentine name for the Falkland Islands) are Argentinean and should be governed as such.⁶⁹ This message spread not only on social media and news outlets across the globe, but also across public spaces in Argentina. The phrase appeared on tote bags, clothes, in bars, and on signs across the streets of the South America nation.⁷⁰ The rapidity with which the population of Argentina embraced the messaging affirms the sentiment that despite the British still possessing internationally recognized rule over the archipelago, there is a sentiment in Argentinian communities that the Falkland Islands belong to them.

The Falkland Islands are a special case for island sovereignty because the current international discussion surrounding their independence from England as a colonial territory has less to do with their own sovereignty and rather which other nation should gain control over the islands. The committee should analyze the Falkland Islands as an example for future sovereignty cases, which could be less about independence and more about a change in ownership for some of these island nations. It should be the priority of the committee to understand what path for independence and sovereignty is both most beneficial for the economy of the islands, as well as meet the desire of the islands’ occupants.⁷¹

Finally, Puerto Rico is arguably one of the most complicated cases for island sovereignty. Although originally colonized by the Spanish, it was acquired as a territory of the United States during the Spanish-American War in 1898, changing its status to territory, rather than a formal

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Isabel Debre | Associated Press, “‘The Malvinas Are Argentine’: A World Cup Banner Makes the Falkland Islands a Cultural Obsession,” *WLRN*, July 31, 2026, <https://www.wlrn.org/americas/2026-07-31/the-malvinas-are-argentine-a-world-cup-banner-makes-the-falkland-islands-a-cultural-obsession>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

colony of the U.S. As a territory of the United States, Puerto Rico's independence and sovereignty are nonetheless non-existent. It exists in a limbo state, possessing neither full statehood within the U.S., nor status as its own separate country. Puerto Rican citizens lack the full voting rights of other U.S. citizens if they reside on the island; they cannot vote in any general election, including for the U.S. presidency if they live full time in Puerto Rico.⁷² Not only does this strip Puerto Ricans of the ability to full participate in American politics and society, it perpetrates divisive dynamics seen between other former colonies and colonial powers, by creating a distance between "full" American citizens and Puerto Ricans, despite them also being legally American. If Puerto Rico were to gain both independence and sovereignty, the island nation and its inhabitants would have to reconcile its economic dependence on both trade with mainland U.S. states and other allies in the region, as well as the loss of federal funding from the United States.⁷³ There are divided sentiments regarding the best path forward for Puerto Rico's global status. Arguments range from becoming a fully integrated U.S. state, seeking absolute separation from the U.S. for full independence and sovereignty, and becoming an enhanced commonwealth or free association, maintaining the existing relationship with U.S. while being granted rights such as full citizenship and the ability to make its own foreign policy decisions.⁷⁴

Puerto Rico has also faced detrimental environmental impacts that stem directly from the impacts of colonialism and U.S. on their island. This has occurred through "green crimes", which are violations of environmental law such as waste pollution in water, supplies, air pollution, and radioactive testing.⁷⁵ Between 2012 and 2017, over 2,000 environmental crimes were committed in Puerto Rico by the U.S.⁷⁶ Not only does this violate the environment, but this disrespect of Puerto Rican resources and inhabitants reflects a mentality in which United States' territories function as an extension of the U.S.'s global hegemony, rather than distinct nations with their own cultures and peoples.

⁷²PBS News, *Residents of Puerto Rico Can't Vote for President, but Their Anger at Trump Is Still Shaping the Race*, PBS News, October 28, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/residents-of-puerto-rico-cant-vote-for-president-but-their-anger-at-trump-is-still-shaping-the-race>.

⁷³ Chomphosy, "An Independent Puerto Rico Imagined - PUERTO RICO REPORT."

⁷⁴ Roy, Diana, and Amelia Cheatham. 2025. "Puerto Rico: A U.S. Territory in Crisis." *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/puerto-rico-us-territory-crisis#chapter-what-are-the-arguments-for-changing-puerto-ricos-status>.

⁷⁵ Kieren Rudge, *The Colonial Legacy of Environmental Injustice in U.S. Territories*, *Yale Environment Review*, November 10, 2022, <https://environment-review.yale.edu/colonial-legacy-environmental-injustice-us-territories>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Another aspect to consider when debating Puerto Rico's viability for independence and sovereignty is acknowledged by journalist Gregorio Igartúa, which is that there would likely be need for a grace period following legal and governmental separation of Puerto Rico from the U.S.⁷⁷ This grace period would theoretically require Puerto Rican residents to decide whether they wanted to be Puerto Rican citizens or U.S. citizens. This would simultaneously allow for population adjustment and for a legal transition that would grant time for issues to be worked out diplomatically, rather than rushing the process and possibly creating conflict between the island nation and the U.S. Despite the variance in opinion on which path toward sovereignty and independence Puerto Rico should take, many can agree that the nature of the U.S.'s authority over the island needs to change.

This changes what the idea of independence and sovereignty for the greater good of Puerto Rico and its people would and should look like. There are multiple potential paths for this island nation to progress, and thus the committee should consider which path is the most beneficial to the island and its people for the future. Gaining the status of a full state of the U.S. would allow for Puerto Rican citizens to be treated as full-fledged American citizens, granting them full voting rights and representation within the American governmental system. This would not grant Puerto Rico independence but would give them political representation, which could aid in the prevention of environmental damage which they face. Another option for Puerto Rico would be to gain sovereignty but not independence; this would mean that Puerto Rico would declare an independent government from the U.S. but would try to maintain at least some economic support from the U.S. for the first few years of their sovereignty and eventually move towards financial independence. This would take into account that the island nation would likely not economically survive on its own if declaring full sovereignty and independence from the U.S. at once.

It is the role of the committee to determine and support the path most beneficial to sovereignty and independence of not just Puerto Rico, but all island territories, so that the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

populations and cultures of these island nations can be set up for long term success as independent countries or semi-autonomous states.

Conclusion:

SPECPOL must assess and understand the potential futures of island territories, and how the impacts of colonialism could affect their path towards becoming independent and sovereign nations. The committee must also consider the long-term effects on the population that separation from former colonial powers brings, whether it be economic or political stability. This does not in any way support the practices of colonialism but rather seeks to understand what resources and circumstances are necessary for these potential sovereign island nations to stand on their own. The complicated nature of colonialism that led to the current cultural and political climates of these island nations has made it difficult for SPECPOL to recommend a singular path for the islands to take towards their independence and sovereignty. This committee should aspire to provide the most effective and sustainable paths for island sovereignty that both preserve the wellbeing of the island inhabitants while establishing independence and sovereignty for the nation.

SPECPOL should provide recommendations for the facilitation of island independence and sovereignty in capacities that both promote the abilities of these island nations to stand as independent and sovereign but also must recognize the realistic capabilities of these islands to stand alone. The committee should focus on political, cultural, and environmental issues within these nations caused by colonialization and facilitate independence and/or sovereignty based on the best potential outcome for long lasting growth in culture and economy, that will also not worsen the environmental issues begun by practices of colonialism.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can individual states or the UN provide support to island nations impacted by climate change without violating or mitigating their national sovereignty?
2. How can the committee address supporting island nations impacted by colonialism when members of the committee are former colonial powers? How should the committee facilitate a sovereignty claim for islands that are internationally recognized as part of

another nation? How does previous independence and sovereignty of the island affect how SPECPOL supports their claims for sovereignty and independence?

3. Is there a potential situation in which the best path forward for an island could be either independence or sovereignty, but not both?

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