Background:

Indigenous peoples are distinct social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands and natural resources where they live, occupy or from which they have been displaced.

It is impossible to make broad generalisations about indigenous people given their diversity. There are 476 million Indigenous people globally, who belong to more than 5,000 different groups and speak more than 4,000 languages. The vast majority of these indigenous people live in Asia.

Indigenous people are often discriminated against in law and can be stripped of their rights. For this reason, indigenous people are disproportionately poor, making up 15% of those in extreme poverty. They are also more likely to, according to Amnesty International, experience “higher rates of landlessness, malnutrition and internal displacement”.

There are added pressures upon indigenous women - they have “higher rates of maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases and are more likely to suffer violence”, according to Amnesty International. The general lack of access to adequate healthcare that indigenous people experience is one such symptom of this, but discrimination and racism is another.

The preservation of identity is also an important point of discussion. Official recognition of indigenous people and their various languages in constitutions and common law is a step that can be taken by nations to allow for better preservation of identity and culture. Against the backdrop of globalisation, however, a more organic approach might be necessary to encourage cultural awareness within the community itself, through initiatives spearheaded by NGOs or funded by countries.

There is a right to self-determination that is a legally binding principle present in several articles of international law. If indigenous people are denied their rights to autonomy or even a state, can they be found in contravention of international law? Should indigenous people be afforded greater representation and power in a state’s internal affairs? One such proposal of this was “The Voice” in Australia, which aimed to provide Australian Aboriginals with an advisory body which would advise on proposed legislation. The proposal was defeated by a 60% to 40% vote at referendum.

Given that indigenous people have such strong ties to the land which they occupy, it might be worth considering an agreement over the transfer/ownership of land, whereby indigenous people have greater access to and control over their native land, preserving tribal sovereignty and national sovereignty. For example, Native Americans have reservations, which effectively act as “domestic dependent nations” of the United States, allowing for representation of Native Americans whilst maintaining the sovereignty of the US.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Indigenous people also play a significant role in their stewardship of forests. According to the World Bank, “Indigenous Peoples conserve80% of the world's biodiversity”, and “forestlands under collective [...] stewardship hold at least one quarter of all tropical and subtropical forest above-ground carbon”. Given their “vital ancestral knowledge and expertise on how to adapt, mitigate, and reduce climate and disaster risks”, they may play an important part in a net-zero future - something to further take into account.

Key questions:

How best can a state tackle discrimination and racism against indigenous people?

How best can a state work to improve healthcare access for aboriginal people - more specifically, for women?

Is there a need for self-determination for indigenous people? If so, how can it be implemented, and is it feasible for every state?

Can we put indigenous matters up for referendum?

How can sovereignty function given the existence of a “dependent nation” for indigenous people?

How much control can these indigenous people have over their own land?

How can we ensure that indigenous identities are preserved and protected in the eyes of the law?