Research report

Forum: First General assembly

Issue: Developing protocols about the use of biological weapons in warfare

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# **Introduction**

# Since their first use, biological weapons have had a mixed perception at best. The use of biological weapons raises serious ethical, humanitarian, and security considerations because they are bioagents that are intended to hurt or kill people, animals, or plants. If not properly addressed, the lack of clear international standards and controls on the use of these weapons could have disastrous effects. Mass deaths, irreparable environmental harm, and weakening of international security are only a few examples. These hazards are made worse by the lack of protocols and regulations, which could cause unintentional escalation and raise the possibility that they will be used.

This research report aims to provide an understanding of the issue at hand, including its historical context, consequences it has had and will have and prior/possible solutions. It is meant as a rough guide used alongside independent research so delegates may be prepared for the conference and be able to write resolutions as necessary.

# **Definitions of key terms**

### **Biological Weapons**

Biological weapons can be defined as microorganisms like virus, bacteria or fungi or toxic substances produced by living organisms that are produced and released deliberately to cause disease and death in humans, animals and plants.  
  
**Mass Destruction**  
A weapon of mass destruction is any weapon, including biological weapons, with the potential to significantly harm many people, cities or structures.  
  
**Dual-Use Research**  
Dual-Use Research is research for both military and civilian purposes, even when unintended. Although the research may be intended to provide a clear benefit, it can be misapplied for military purposes as well.  
  
**Non-State Actors**  
An individual or organization that has significant political influence but is not officially allied to any particular country or state.

**General overview**

The use of biological weapons dates back as far as human conflict itself. Demonstrating humanity's dark ingenuity, ancient civilizations used strategies like contaminating enemy water supplies with contaminated corpses. However, the development and potential lethality of biological weapons have undergone a significant evolution in the modern era, whilst the protocols surrounding biological weapons have only just started development.  
  
The Geneva Protocol of 1925, which forbade the use of chemical and biological weapons in combat, was one of the first international attempts to address this issue. Despite this ban, World War II's atrocities showed that adherence to such agreements was not always assured. After the second world war, most major nations continued their biological weapons research. Although an argument was to be made that it could be used to ‘cure’ biological weapon outbreaks, views around the topics were strongly against and many state leaders publicly denounced other nations when it was proven they had classified biological weapon research divisions.  
  
Aside from the potential for mass destruction, biological weapons also present moral and ethical issues. The use of such weapons has the potential to cause significant environmental contamination, numerous large-scale civilian casualties, and long-lasting health effects, whilst the portability of biological weapons and the inability to quickly respond to them makes them a desirable option for non-state actors looking to cause harm. Furthermore, if one side in an armed conflict makes use of biological weapons, the opposing side may retaliate and start their own use, which could lead to back-and-forth use of biological weapons only resulting in the future destruction of each side.  
  
The situation regarding biological weapons is still unstable as of 2023. Although several countries have unconditionally renounced their use and production, there has not yet been a comprehensive international policy to stop their use and spread. The main international treaty to outlaw these weapons is the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), which was established in 1972 and represents the main effort to control use and more importantly research into biological weapons. However, it has had difficulty being verified, enforced, and is thought to be outdated in recent times. Despite the BWC's objectives, claims and rumors of non-compliance have developed over time. The urgent need for a more robust international response is highlighted by recent allegations of Russian violations and worries about the potential resurgence of biological weapons research.  
  
Due to advancements in biotechnology, it is now easier than ever to manipulate pathogens and disseminate them, raising the risk of unintentional release or misuse of biological agents. In addition to state actors, non-state actors like terrorist groups have also shown an interest in acquiring and using biological weapons, underscoring the importance of finding a global solution to this problem.

# **Major parties involved**

#### *UNODA* The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) oversees and manages global disarmament initiatives. Its role encompasses a range of issues related to disarmament, including the crucial problem of biological weapons. The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) has the steadfast backing of UNODA, which emphasizes the value of its guiding principles and goals in advancing global peace and security. All representatives of member states are strongly urged by UNODA to support the BWC's guiding principles and to act forcefully in their respective nations. It instructs delegates to press state officials to follow the convention's directives and stop all production, research, stockpiling, and applications of biological weapons, and is considered one of the most important parties when it comes to disarmament of biological weapons.

#### *WHO* The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized UN organization that promotes health and wellbeing on a global scale. The WHO is primarily responsible for preventing disease outbreaks and promoting public health, but it also has a critical role to play in addressing the possible effects of the use of biological weapons. The WHO is an essential collaborator in observing and responding to outbreaks brought on by biological weapons due to its knowledge in epidemiology and disease control. The WHO is involved in monitoring, planning, and international collaboration to lessen the effects of biological weapons on public health. When developing strategies to address the problem of biological weapons in warfare, delegates should take the perspectives and experience of the WHO into consideration.

*ICRC*The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a nonprofit group with goals of assisting war victims and fostering adherence to international humanitarian law. The ICRC is a supporter of safeguarding both civilians and combatants from the devastating effects of biological weapons. The ICRC is a crucial partner in discussions about biological weapons due to its knowledge of humanitarian issues and its work protecting the rights and wellbeing of people affected by armed conflict. When creating policies to deal with the use of biological weapons in warfare, delegates should consider the opinions and suggestions of the ICRC.

# **Timeline of Key Events**

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| 1925 | Geneva Conventions and their protocols are considered the first step in the prohibition of research, use and acquiring of biological weapons. 38 states originally signed the protocol. |
| 1949 | By 1949, the Geneva Protocols had been signed by a total of 196 nations, and now included the protection of civilians in warfare and required all states, even on opposing sides, to aid civilians if they were targeted by a biological weapons attack. |
| 1972 | The Biological Weapons Convention is signed, serving as an updated version of the Geneva Conventions and Protocols. It was updated to fit the more modern definition of biological weapons and warfare. |
| 1984 | Allegations of biological weapons use in the Iran-Iraq war raises concerns about the validity of the BWC treaty and raises questions about further updates of any signed treaty. |
| 2001 | Anthrax attacks in the United States underscored the threat of biological weapons, especially in the hands of non-state actors. Questions about their acquisition of Anthrax were raised, as it was meant to have been banned and destroyed by the BWC in 1972 |
| 2018-present | In 2018, the USA accused Russia of violating the BWC and has caused ongoing debates in both the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the General Assemblies about updating any biological weapon treaties. |

# **Previous attempts to solve the issue**

Several initiatives, treaties, and conventions have been established in an effort to address the problem of biological weapons in conflict with the goal of preventing their use and fostering disarmament. These initiatives, which show how seriously the world community takes the threat posed by biological weapons, have limitations and difficulties. Here are a few noteworthy prior attempts:

Geneva Conventions  
One of the earliest international agreements attempting to forbid the use of chemical and biological weapons in warfare was the Geneva Protocol of 1925, also known as the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous, or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare. While it did set the stage for upcoming disarmament initiatives, it did not successfully stop the use of biological weapons and lacked methods of enforcement.  
  
Biological Weapons Convention  
Biological weapons were significantly addressed by the Biological Weapons Convention (BTWC), which entered into force in 1975. The BTWC forbids the creation, manufacture, acquisition, transfer, and use of biological weapons and toxins for armed conflict. The member states pledged to destroy any facilities and stockpiles of biological weapons they currently possess. The BTWC has, however, run into issues with enforcement and verification. It has been challenging to guarantee complete compliance because there isn't a reliable verification mechanism. Additionally, the convention has not been able to stop all states from conducting dual-use research, which may have both civilian and military applications and has been used as an ‘excuse’ to still research biological weapons.  
  
Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) Review  
The 2011 BWC Review Conference had as its goals enhancing the implementation of the BWC and addressing new issues. Although improvements in confidence-building measures and the promotion of collaboration in the scientific and technological fields were made, the conference did not produce a consensus on important issues like verification and compliance. The 2011 conference brought attention to the need for stronger mechanisms to deal with compliance issues.   
  
UNSC Reviews  
The issue of biological weapons has occasionally been brought up in UNSC meetings. Due to varying viewpoints among the permanent members of the UNSC, these discussions have not always led to specific actions or resolutions. However, the UNSC continues to be a venue where states can voice their worries about alleged transgressions and threats involving biological weapons.

# **Possible solutions**

While the responsibility to propose comprehensive solutions ultimately rests with the delegates, this section provides an overview of potential avenues and principles that can guide discussions and policy formulation regarding the use of biological weapons in warfare.

One of the primary steps in addressing the issue is to reinforce the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Delegates can consider enhancing verification mechanisms to ensure compliance with the BWC's provisions. This may involve the development of more robust inspection and monitoring procedures, encouraging states that have not yet ratified the BWC to do so, thereby expanding the treaty's coverage as well as holding regular review conferences to assess the treaty's effectiveness and address emerging challenges. Furthermore, providing technical and financial assistance to states lacking the resources to meet BWC obligations, particularly in the areas of biosecurity and biosafety, will be crucial for its development.

Transparency is vital in preventing the misuse of biological materials and technologies. Delegates can explore ways to encourage states to declare their bioweapons-related activities, research, and facilities. They could establish an international database for the exchange of information on dual-use research, which can help identify potential concerns, or promote open access to research findings related to biosecurity and biosafety to foster international collaboration and awareness.

Delegates may consider the establishment of an international monitoring body tasked with overseeing compliance with biological weapons conventions. Such a body could conduct regular inspections of facilities suspected of engaging in biological weapons research or production produce annual reports on the state of biological disarmament efforts and compliance and coordinate international responses to suspected biological weapons incidents and outbreaks.

Enhancing global awareness and understanding of the dangers posed by biological weapons is crucial. Delegates can explore initiatives such as launching educational campaigns to inform the public, scientists, and policymakers about the risks associated with biological weapons or encourage scientists and researchers to adhere to codes of conduct that prioritize ethical and responsible use of biotechnology.

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