Historical Conference of the Committee on Disarmament

LASMUN

Drafting the Biological Weapons Convention in the Committee on the Conference of Disarmament(1971-1972)



Important to know:

- In its earliest form, the committee was led by a joint United States–Soviet chairmanship. This arrangement was later replaced by a rotating presidency, with leadership passing alphabetically among all member states every four working weeks. However, because this committee will be one meeting we will not rotate chairs to maintain continuity and ensure the smooth functioning of debates.
- During the negotiations of the Biological Weapons Convention between 1969 and 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union shared co-chairmanship of the committee. However, during this committee, the United States and the Soviet Union will participate as delegates to allow different perspectives during debates in the committee. Furthermore,
- While electronic devices are permitted within this committee, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in any form is prohibited, and all work and speeches must be independently researched and composed by the delegate.
- Furthermore, as this is a historical committee, all delegates are bound by the date of April 10, 1972. Every piece of factual information, historical evidence, statistical data, and policy argument presented during debate must strictly be before this date. Any facts, events, or arguments referencing dates after April 10, 1972, will not be considered or accepted.
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Key Vocabulary:

- Biological weapons (BWs): a weapon that uses living matter such as bacteria to cause damage or death to people, animals, or crops

- Biosecurity: Security and accountability measures (personnel vetting, physical locks, inventory tracking) designed to prevent the theft, diversion, or intentional misuse of pathogens.

- Dual-Use Research of Concern (DURC): Legitimate scientific research for medical or agricultural advancement that can be easily repurposed to create or weaponise a biological agent

- Biosafety: Laboratory practices, containment infrastructure, and safety equipment designed to prevent the *accidental* release or exposure to pathogens

Background information

- Biological weapons (BWs) deliver toxins and microorganisms, such as viruses and bacteria, to deliberately inflict disease among people, animals, and in agriculture. These weapons are created to affect small villages, destroy crops, or even kill large numbers of people.
- The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) was heavily debated and negotiated starting from 1969 to 1972; then, on April 10th, 1972, it was adopted by the UN General Assembly and opened for signatures.

- The convention's purpose was to get rid of the world's biological and toxin weapons at all times, especially during times of war. The convention prohibits the use of any kind of development, production, acquisition, transfer, stockpiling and use of biological and toxin weapons. The Convention has reached almost universal membership with 189 States Parties and four Signatory States (as of November 2021).

- Before 1972, BWs were conducted primarily to target livestock rather than human populations. The First World War saw one of the first attempts to use anthrax during warfare, which was intended to affect livestock, but in the end it was ineffective.
- These trials led to the creation of the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which went into force on February 8, 1928. The protocol did not directly prohibit the production and development of biological weaponry, only the use of it, which led to continuous production of BWs.
- When WWII happened, neither the US nor Japan ratified the treaty, along with other countries. These countries still secretly developed BWs, and major powers such as the United Kingdom and Japan had spent a lot of money and effort on these BW labs, but did not actually put these developed BWs widely into use on the battlefield.
- This may have been due to the remaining respect for the 1925 treaty or associated imperfections of bioweapons technology.
- Even with these, Japan had many notorious instances of the use of BWs; one of the most famous ones was the Japanese Military Unit 731 at Ping Fan, Manchuria, which experimented extensively with bioweapons, killing thousands of prisoners of war with anthrax, cholera, plague, dysentery and other infectious agents. Japan also released plague on the Chinese civilian population of Chekiang Province on several occasions by dropping from aeroplanes laboratory-grown fleas fed on infected rats.
- Also, there was this highly controversial theory that the Soviets used BWs, more specifically tularemia, against German tank crews during the 1942 Battle of Stalingrad; however, it backfired and affected both armies, and the disease spread to more than 100,000 people.
- Disarmament talks after WWII originally addressed biological and chemical weapons together. However, these discussions remained inconclusive for many years up until 1968.

Challenges for the Committee:

What should be defined as Biological Weapons?

- During the negotiation of the BWC between 1971-1972, one of the main questions was: what counts as a biological weapon? This was a key factor in writing the convention, because many biological agents and toxins have legitimate peaceful uses in medicine, agriculture, and scientific research, not just uses for battlefields.
- People had to consider many different perspectives at once, like delivery systems, infected vectors, toxins produced synthetically, and the difference between exploitation of BWs and useful research. The main challenge was to create a definition broad enough to prevent biological weapons, while narrow enough to allow vaccines, medical research, agriculture, and public-health work to continue.

How should laboratories be monitored to make sure no BWs are created in secret? (Dual-Use Research of Concern)

- There were many disagreements on how observance of laboratories should be applied to make sure no BWs are created or produced in laboratories. Many countries supported international investigations, declarations and inspections of laboratories to build trust and prevent any secret production of BWs. However, many argued against it because they feared it would violate sovereignty, expose military secrets, or harm commercial and scientific interests.

Should the Convention also include Chemical and not just Biological weapons?

- Chemical and biological weapons have very similar effects on populations, including mass killings; however, at the same time, they are far apart in many different ways, mostly in how they use these weapons and how they work. Many states wanted a joint framework for both weapons, such as the USSR, and they argued this would propose a stronger framework as it would prohibit the use, creation, and production of both chemical and biological weapons.
- However, many states also argued against it, such as the United Kingdom, because a shared treaty would not be appropriate as the two weapons are so different. Biological weapons use agents that can spread and multiply, while chemical weapons have a fixed quantity. Also, biological weapons have a harder time to be detected as their use in medicine.
- The United Kingdom was the first one to support a separate treaty on July 10th 1969, when the UK submitted a draft resolution prohibiting the use of biological methods of warfare.
- However, in 1971, after the USSR's strong disagreement, they proposed a draft resolution covering only BWs, which greatly helped in moving forward the negotiations.

When should states destroy existing Stockpiles?

- Also, many disagreements came from the deconstruction of existing stockpiles, as many questions started coming up. When should states destroy their biological weapons? Should states be required to destroy all of their BWs? Instead of destruction, should states rather just turn those materials to peaceful use? How should states prove they destroyed all of their BWs?
- These were obvious questions that needed to be answered. States argued that stockpiles should be destroyed immediately to prevent the use of BWs in the future, while other states argued that these take time and that rushing to destroy these BWs could create serious biosafety problems towards populations.

Stakeholders:

United States: They are one of the major powers; they were also one of the main negotiators of the BWC. The US wanted to prevent the use of BWs while protecting its own security interests. The United States was one of the co-chairs in CDD during the negotiations.

Soviet Union (USSR): They were also a major power in the world. They were a co-negotiator for the BWC. Originally, they wanted a joint version of the treaty that also included chemical weapons

prohibitions, but in 1971 they changed perspective and started supporting the idea of a separate treaty for chemical and biological weapons, as they were concerned about military security and verification. The Soviet Union was also one of the co-chairs in CDD during the negotiations.

United Kingdom: They were a very early supporter of the biological weapons treaty. From the start, they wanted a separate treaty for biological and chemical weapons. The UK was one of the first ones to submit a draft resolution for BWC and pushed for a separate treaty.

China: Historically aligned with developing countries as they believed strict guidelines from major powers would affect the development of still developing countries and prevent them from developing and create gaps in biotechnology.

Developing countries: Some developing countries (India, Iran, Pakistan and others) argued against the BWC because they worried it would affect their access to peaceful biotechnology and vaccines. The countries also worried their development might depend on strict regulations from the BWC.

Useful websites for Delegates:

- https://www.americanscientist.org/article/the-growing-threat-of-biological-weapons History on BWs
- https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1200679/ Information about early use of Biological warfare
- https://www.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/biological-weapons/biological-weapons-convention The official website for the BWC.
- https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/biological-weapons General term explanations
- https://www.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/biological-weapons/national-implementation-biological-weapons-convention National laws, regulations, and implementation measures.

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