

## Incoming Turbulence for the Biological Weapons Convention

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### Summary

The current liberal international order is in a state of flux. Some factors contributing to the crisis are the rise of China, an intense backlash against globalisation and institutionalism, and the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is an integral part of this rules-based order, it will also face strong headwinds. This article highlights the three significant challenges that the Convention and the wider pro-disarmament civil society will face. These are, weakening institutions, re-emergence of border politics, and increased risk of proliferation of bioweapons.

### Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has reignited the debate around the risks of nuclear proliferation.<sup>1</sup> Though some disagree, the dominant discourse is that the war will incentivise new states to seek nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> Since nuclear weapons are considered a superior class of weapons, a public debate over these, tends to side-line the issues and the risks associated with other weapons.<sup>3</sup> A testimony to this, is how biosafety concerns have gone into a lull since the start of the war. It is despite these concerns having assumed new importance since the pandemic, especially those related to storage, handling, and transportation of bioagents. However, as the disruptions in the liberal international order grow, the biological weapons regime will face further challenges.

### Weakening of global governance institutions

The global governance institutions are the first casualty in times of sustained crisis in the international order. Institutions are a set of rules that specify how States should cooperate and compete with each other.<sup>4</sup> They prescribe acceptable forms of State behaviour and proscribe unacceptable behaviour. States negotiate these rules, which are “standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, institutions are a mechanism for “decentralised cooperation of individual sovereign [S]tates, without any effective mechanism of command”.<sup>6</sup> Any crisis negatively affects their functions of agenda setting, coordinating the ensuing debates, and rulemaking and enforcement.

The shift from unipolarity to bipolarity will exacerbate the challenges for the BWC. The smooth functioning of a rule-based order requires clarity on global distribution of power.<sup>7</sup> A willing unipolar hegemon is best suited to ensure a sustainable international order.<sup>8</sup> With the rise of China as a peer competitor of the US, developing possible strategies and evolving a consensus on strengthening the BWC regime will become difficult and conflict-ridden. As seen in the past, China's lack of transparency on the origins of COVID-19 and the US's lack of willingness to enforce order within the World Health Organization (WHO) resulted in an inadequate and incoherent global response to the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

As the backlash against globalisation and the global pandemic are key constituents of the current crisis, the WTO and the WHO have increasingly found it difficult to perform their respective roles. Similarly, the progress on developing an institutional architecture like the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to monitor and ensure compliance with the BWC will also face new roadblocks.

### **Re-emergence of border politics**

Another phenomenon that positively reinforces institutional weakening is the acute rise in border politics since the pandemic. The idea of an interdependent and interconnected world having shared responsibility, has taken a hit. Border politics and pandemics have been linked very closely for centuries. Border restrictions on immigrants and travellers from outside have been the dominant way States have responded to global health crises. These externalisation policies are driven not by scientific rationale and consensus. Instead, they are influenced by popular opinion, stereotypes, and pre-existing orientations towards State control. Such a response to the

pandemic reflects growing anxieties about border security in the modern international system.<sup>10</sup>

Here, one cannot ignore the rise of populism across the globe. As an ideology, populism seeks to bifurcate society into two homogenous but antagonistic camps: a virtuous and homogeneous 'people' and a set of 'elites'. These elites are characterised as 'dangerous' and "depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice".<sup>11</sup> Largely, fears relating to border security have become current in domestic politics as against designing and implementing effective national policies on biosafety.

Populist leaders see and project the liberal international order as unfair and unjust.<sup>12</sup> They label international institutions as elite chambers established to benefit a few. Whether from the public or leaders' point of view, these sentiments pose barriers to cooperation. Populists aggressively resist nudges towards cooperation by international institutions and civil society. They are reluctant to delegate national sovereignty and suspect that it would result in a loss of popular support from the electorate.<sup>13</sup> Hence, States will continue to strongly resist any such demands by international institutions for implementing global biosafety norms.

### **Increased risk of bioweapons proliferation**

Thirdly, the risk of bioweapons proliferation emanates both from non-state and state actors.<sup>14</sup> Since the pandemic, extremist and terrorist groups have recognised the immense potential of bio-agents as weapons for mass disruptions.<sup>15</sup> Security agencies have traced the activities of radicalised individuals and groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State

pursuing bioweapons.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the inter-State system, the Russia-Ukraine war has brought attention back to traditional anxieties and insecurities. The doubts about national survival can make States look at bioweapons as insurance against existential threats. States having disputes with a stronger adversary or fearing regime change through foreign intervention will look at pathogens and biotechnologies as an asymmetric means to balance against such threats.

Various factors make bioweapons a cost-effective instrument of terror, intimidation, and asymmetric warfare. First, they offer plausible deniability to the user. In contrast to nuclear or chemical weapons, locating them and tracing their supply chain is tough. Second, because of the dual-use nature of biotechnologies, pathogens are cheap and easy to access and can be manipulated for destructive purposes with moderate efforts. Third, bioweapons are easy to deliver and have high potency.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

It is not clear if COVID-19 was a potential bioweapon accidentally let loose. However, the pandemic has brought the risks associated with bioagents and biotechnologies out in the open. The dangers posed by these as potential weapons are too great to be ignored or dealt with half-heartedly. States cannot depend just on the normative consensus of bioweapons being immoral and unacceptable, to reduce the risks. Given the multitude challenges, assuming so will put the world population at risk. It is to be seen whether the dangers of not having an effective global biosafety regime can bring the States together on the issue. However, the current crisis of the liberal international order hints at an uncertain future.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>2</sup> Guy B. Roberts, "Will the NPT Survive Russia's Invasion of Ukraine?", *The National Interest*, 28 June 2022 at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/will-npt-survive-russia%E2%80%99s-invasion-ukraine-203246> (Accessed on 01 August 2022);

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