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The International Bioweapons Regime Must be Strengthened, Not Exploited in Geopolitical Competition

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SYNOPSIS

Emerging biotechnologies make this a critical time for updating and strengthening the international bioweapons regime. However, international cooperation on biosecurity is becoming increasingly difficult. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, biological weapons have become a trope in the war of narratives between Moscow and Washington. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's new biotechnology strategy explicitly singles out Russia as a bad actor. International cooperation, not blocs, is required to confront the emerging problems of biosecurity, from genetic modification to enhanced pathogens of pandemic potential.

COMMENTARY

The Working Group on the Strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) met for the fourth time in Geneva in August 2024. Its [aims](#) were to “examine how technology has changed and what the bioweapons threats of today and tomorrow look like” and “develop a realistic approach to verification and compliance”.

In addition to Britain submitting examples of scientific and technological advances relevant to the BWC, the meeting's tangible outcomes were Russia's proposal to create mobile biomedical units and France and India's proposal to establish a database to help match assistance offers and requests between countries. Such proposals, however, require concrete steps if they are to be translated into actionable mechanisms for strengthening international responses to biological threats.

Might any concrete steps be taken in the near future? Probably not. While emerging biotechnologies make this a critical time to update and strengthen the BWC, it is also

a very difficult period for international cooperation. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, biological weapons have become a trope in the war of narratives between Moscow and Washington. Mutual accusations of biological warfare have intensified this year to the point where they endanger global security.

War of Words

The war of words began two weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine. The Russian foreign ministry [claimed](#) that the US Department of Defense was financing military-biological laboratories in Ukraine. Russia's Defense Ministry [described](#) the laboratories as aiming "to establish a mechanism for the stealthy spread of deadly pathogens" by migratory [birds](#), bats, reptiles, and mosquitos. US Department of State [described](#) the allegations as "absurd", not least because it would be impossible to keep birds from flying over Russia's borders and endangering Ukraine and other countries in the region.

In April 2022, President Vladimir Putin [described](#) a "network of Western bioweapons labs" as one of the threats that forced him to act in Ukraine. Then came the repeated raising of [concerns](#) at the United Nations Security Council. In June 2022, Russia submitted diplomatic notes to the United States and Ukraine detailing concerns about their compliance with the BWC. It claimed to have called for a "bilateral consultative process" with the United States and Ukraine concerning their implementation of Articles I and IV of the BWC. Moscow then requested a formal consultative meeting under Article V of the BWC. The meeting took place in September 2022 in Geneva, with over 80 states attending. However, the gathering was not open to the public, and its details were not publicly available.

In April 2024, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) released what it [described](#) as "the first international strategy" governing "the responsible development and use of biotechnologies and human enhancement technologies". The publicly released Summary [describes](#) biotechnologies as offering unprecedented defensive and offensive capabilities and expresses "grave concerns" about Russia "considering further use of chemical or biological weapons in the future".

In response to the Summary, the Russian government-owned media channel Sputnik International [accused](#) NATO of seeking justifications to continue its "scary" biotechnological R&D. It said NATO was using Ukrainian servicemen and civilians as "literal human guinea pigs for a series of experiments, including deliberate infection with deadly viruses to gauge response".

The US Department of State, in turn, [accused](#) Russia of using the choking agent chloropicrin to "achieve tactical gains on the battlefield" and added some 80 individuals and entities to the nearly three hundred already sanctioned.

Global Bio-insecurity

The weaponisation of biotechnology in the US-Russia war of narratives endangers global security for at least four reasons. First, misuse of the BWC mechanisms of consultation and review further degrades the foundations of the international bioweapons regime. This makes future cooperation on preventing (or tackling) the

next pandemic or the proliferation of the next generation of biological weapons even more difficult, if not impossible.

Second is the [“cry wolf effect”](#). False alarms based on speculations without solid evidence tend to generate fatigue and diminished concern for substantial verified cases. There is also the alarming possibility that Russia or third parties, such as China, could use false allegations to justify their own potential misuse of biotechnology.

Finally, the growing tension increases the likelihood of an [arms race](#) in biotechnology, as policymakers may feel compelled to develop and deploy new biological capabilities in response to perceived threats, thereby increasing the risk of a biological conflict or catastrophe.

Multilateralism, Not Blocs

As biotechnology advances and diffuses globally, we cannot dismiss the potential for misuse. NATO’s outward demonstrations of ethical commitments on bioweapons single Russia out as a bad actor and add to the international divisions along the lines of “us” versus “them.” This not only escalates tensions but also adopts the Russian style of manipulating perceptions and engaging in “lawfare” concerning the BWC.

Any multilateral regime concerning BWC verification must be a [process](#) “collectively agreed upon by all BWC States Parties to ensure international legitimacy and acceptability to all”. NATO’s leadership in establishing [Responsible Use principles](#) could be valuable. However, framing adversaries as the reason behind the Strategy empowers Russia to exploit this narrative, deepens international isolation, and advances an agenda contrary to global interests. While NATO’s Strategy pioneers an ethical approach to biotechnology, it risks backfiring and provoking a defensive response that could jeopardise the viability of the BWC.

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