



## Disarmament politics in the age of emerging (bio)technologies: what next?

*Dagmar Rychnovska*

Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague

### Background

The international community recently commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Having entered into force on March 26, 1975, the BWC expanded previous attempts to delegitimize the use of inflicting disease as a means of warfare in international law, especially the 1925 Geneva Protocol; and has been the first multilateral treaty prohibiting the production, stockpiling, and use of an entire category of weapons. However, the use of biological weapons in contemporary wars does not seem like a major concern for the international community. In fact, many experts have seriously questioned the strategic relevance of biological weapons, as dangerous disease-causing organisms or toxins are difficult to weaponize and the potential harm caused by them is comparably lower and far less predictable than in the case of other weapons – in particular, bioweapons are very sensitive to external factors (such as weather) and their effect may be to some extent mitigated by modern medical countermeasures. The motivation of states to obtain biological weapons thus seems rather low.

What became much more worrying are new forms of political violence conducted by non-state actors and the un-

predictable techno-scientific risks associated with modern life sciences. In this context, what role does biological disarmament have in international politics at the beginning of the 21st century and how can the BWC help us tackle the challenges posed by novel biotechnologies? This paper argues that while the BWC provides a good starting point for discussing these challenges, linking biological disarmament to a broader scope of societal risks posed by biotechnologies is neither viable, nor useful in a long term.

### Analysis

The past two decades have brought about rapid advances in life sciences which offer new benefits to our societies but also pose many social, ethical, political, and security challenges. Unintended, yet potentially dangerous side effects of biotechnologies and the threat of deliberate misuse of biology by malign non-state actors are of particular concern. The BWC meetings have sought to address these issues, yet so far with mixed results.

In fact, the BWC is a typical product of Cold War politics, aimed at easing the East-West tensions during the period of *détente*. In 1990s, active state parties and security experts aimed at strengthening the BWC and negotiating a

legally binding verification protocol to the treaty. However, these efforts failed in 2001 after decade-long talks. This development led to searching for new ways how to approach biological disarmament and stabilize the biological weapons regime as a set of shared expectations, norms and mechanisms for their enforcement.

The functioning of the BWC was invigorated, yet also significantly shaped by bringing the issues of bioterrorism and dual-use research in life sciences to the agenda after 9/11. From inter-state disarmament politics, the BWC re-oriented its focus on less politicized issues of “securing dangerous pathogens” from illegitimate use of any kind and started to pay more attention to the review of potentially dangerous scientific and technological advancements. To better address these complex challenges, the BWC meetings also started to host more intensively a broader variety of actors, ranging from science experts, civil society associations, and commercial companies to international organizations such as WHO, OECD, or Interpol, and the role of expert politics and informal cooperation gained in importance.

This development has given rise to new debates as well as policy initiatives within the regime that are aimed at overseeing the development of potentially dangerous biotechnologies. Instead of promoting inter-state compliance mechanism, typical for other non-proliferation regimes, these efforts link the security concerns related to biotechnologies with broader questions of scientific ethics and focus on shaping the culture of scientific responsibility, especially in developing countries. Concrete projects are organized voluntarily on an *ad hoc* basis by a broad variety of actors including interested states, European Union, international organizations such as WHO as well as scientific associations and are of bilateral as well as multilateral character. In general, these initiatives are quite unique in the sense that they bring together the elements of biological disarmament, development assistance, and science diplomacy.

However, expanding the agenda and practices of biological disarmament to the realms of science politics is not welcome by everyone. Some states see this trend as interfering in their internal affairs and something unrelated to

the original purpose of the BWC regime. Besides, with the broadening of the BWC agenda and “informalization” of policies related to biological disarmament, finding a common ground among state parties regarding further development and potential strengthening of the BWC regime becomes more and more difficult. The increasing number of actors involved in the BWC does not imply greater representativeness of diverse voices and approaches to dealing with the challenges of biotechnologies.

From a broader perspective, contextualizing the debate on the risks of biotechnologies in the politics of disarmament is problematic, since it may promote rather narrow understanding of the complex problems and restrict the scope of potential solutions. In order to gain attention and legitimacy among the many state parties, the dilemmas related to the development of biotechnologies and the openness of potentially sensitive research are being linked to the logic of security, but this also comes at a price. Political interests and animosities among states naturally affect these deliberations. Besides, the fact that there is very little coordination among the diverse *ad hoc* initiatives promoting scientific responsibility may support the interpretation that hidden agendas and national interests play greater role in these policies than the proclaimed goals.

The unpredictable development of novel biotechnologies and the potential for misuse of this research for malign purposes are serious issues that deserve proper deliberation at the international level and potentially new forms of regulation. The political relevance of the BWC meetings and the community of experts at the BWC are important assets that can help trigger more robust international deliberations on the risks and benefits of biotechnologies and the rules for their use. Nonetheless, the BWC in its current form and with its current problems does not seem like an appropriate platform for dealing with these issues in a long term.

The aim of any new international forum should not be to depoliticize the debate and leave it only to experts without democratic accountability. It should rather allow for a variety of actors with diverse types of expertise to come together and share their concerns, best practices and ideas

on how to approach these issues collectively. Two aspects are of particular importance: first, giving more voice to actors – be they states or e.g. scientific experts – who challenge the dominant understanding of the problem and the suggested approaches to it; and second, freeing the deliberations from accenting only security aspects and focusing only on security-driven solutions.

## Bottom Line

- The way we think and act on emerging biotechnologies should not be restricted by the language of security and institutions of disarmament;
- Security and ethical dilemmas related to novel biotechnologies should be recognized when possible, and state parties to the BWC should more explicitly formulate possible scenarios of the “misuse” of science and technology when dealing with these issues;
- The deliberation on emerging biotechnologies within the BWC should be as inclusive as possible, involving state parties, scientific and security experts, civil society and other relevant stakeholders representing diverse voices and regions of the world;
- In the long-term, these stakeholders should seek to establish a different international platform where they would discuss and regulate research and innovation in life sciences.