

Biological Weapons Convention

Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), formally **Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction**, international treaty that bans the use of biological weapons in war and prohibits all development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, or transfer of such weapons. The convention was signed in London, Moscow, and Washington, D.C., on April 10, 1972, and thereafter was opened for signing by other states. The convention went into force on March 26, 1975, following the submission of 22 national instruments of ratification (such as passage by a national assembly). By 2013, 170 states and Taiwan had signed and ratified the BWC, and 10 states had signed but not ratified it. Sixteen member states of the United Nations had neither signed nor ratified the treaty by that time.

The BWC prohibits countries that have signed the treaty from developing, producing, stockpiling, acquiring, or retaining biological agents or toxins of types and in quantities that have no justification for protective, defensive, or other peaceful purposes. The treaty also bans any equipment or means of delivery that is designed to use biological agents or toxins for hostile purposes or armed conflict. It requires signatories to destroy biological weapons, agents, and production facilities within nine months of the treaty's entry into force.

Unfortunately, the BWC does not yet contain provisions for verification of members' compliance, and there has been evidence of significant cheating by some parties since the treaty went into effect. For example, the Soviet Union engaged in a massive clandestine biological weapons program in direct violation of the BWC from the day it signed the treaty in 1972. The illegal program was revealed by scientists formerly involved in the program and finally confirmed by Russia's first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin, who ordered the termination of all Russian offensive biological weapons programs in 1992.

The lack of a necessarily intrusive inspection and reporting system has left the states who are parties to the treaty with no strong assurance that they can monitor and verify other members' compliance with the terms of the BWC. Biological weapons programs can be easily concealed and need not require large numbers of personnel or large-scale physical plants. For instance, a clandestine weapons program can be hidden inside a perfectly legal vaccine-production facility or pharmaceutical plant. Weapons laboratories disguised in this way would give off few unique "signatures," or telltale signs that illicit activity is taking

place. Indeed, if “national technical means” (that is, spy satellites and other such systems) are the only methods used to verify BWC compliance and if more-traditional “human intelligence” (i.e., spies and defectors) is insufficient, a massive biological weapons program might take place in a country that has signed the BWC without any physical evidence coming to light. This lack of a verification procedure has led some critics of the BWC to argue that the best deterrent to being attacked with biological weapons is not a treaty at all but rather the recognized ability to retaliate in equal or greater measure.

Proponents of the BWC argue that the treaty provides an international norm for the world community, making it understood by all that biological weapons are illegitimate tools of statecraft or warfare. Therefore, if violations are detected, the international community can be more easily mobilized to pressure the offending regime into giving up the weapons lest it face military, economic, and diplomatic sanctions. The BWC, it is also argued, makes proliferation harder, slower, and more expensive for cheaters. Finally, it is argued that the presence of an international treaty on biological weapons may put pressure on even nonsignatory states to comply with the treaty or at least to restrict their biological weapons programs by creating an international norm against them.

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