

## EXPERT OPINION – AVIS D'EXPERT



### STRENGTHENING THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION IN SUPPORT OF GLOBAL PEACE AND SECURITY

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## INTRODUCTION

On 26 March 2025, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Over the course of the last five decades, the BWC has established itself as one of the key pillars in multilateral disarmament. The BWC builds on the foundations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which prohibited only the use of biological and chemical weapons in warfare. The Convention goes beyond that by comprehensively banning an entire category of weapons of mass destruction. It effectively prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, acquisition, retention and use of biological weapons against humans, animals and plants.

Following its negotiation at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s in Geneva, Switzerland, the Convention was opened for signature on 10 April 1972 in London, Moscow and Washington D.C. It entered into force on 26 March 1975.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF ADVANCES IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY ON THE CONVENTION

As of 8 June 2025, 189 States have become party to the Convention. While its near universal adherence and the non-use of biological weapons by States must be considered great successes, constant vigilance is required to ensure that this established norm remains strong. Tremendous advances in the life sciences have brought many benefits to humankind, including the curing of diseases and the reduction of hunger and of poverty. At the same time and taking into consideration the dual use nature of life sciences and comparably easier access to relevant technology, equipment and materials nowadays, these scientific and technological breakthroughs have also lowered the threshold for the development of biological weapons. This is especially true for non-state actors. However, it should also be noted that the development of a sophisticated biological weapons programme still requires considerable expertise and major resources. Only international cooperation and multifaceted disarmament measures can ensure that advances are used peacefully and responsibly.

In an increasingly volatile international security landscape, where established disarmament norms face immense strain and potential risks continue to evolve, we must remain mindful that the threat of biological weapons has not been confined to history. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly demonstrated the devastating harm that the spread of infectious diseases can cause globally and the disruption that could be caused if biological agents were to be used deliberately as a weapon. This has only underscored the necessity of enhanced international efforts to further reinforce the Convention.

## EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THE CONVENTION

In 2022, despite the challenging and increasingly volatile international security landscape, BWC States Parties were able to establish a new Working Group to ‘identify, examine and develop specific and effective measures, including possible legally binding measures, and to make recommendations to strengthen and institutionalise the Convention in all its aspects’. The Working Group addresses various topics, including, *inter alia*, the issue of verification and compliance, as the Convention currently lacks a multilateral verification regime.

Intensive efforts to strengthen the BWC by creating a verification regime date back to the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1993, a group of experts assessed 21 potential verification measures from a scientific and technical point of view in four meetings (VEREX). The group concluded that some of these measures could contribute to strengthening the effectiveness as well as improving the implementation of the Convention. It was also stated that not a single measure, but a combination of them could contribute to improved verifiability. However, the subsequent negotiations on a legally binding Additional Protocol between 1995 and 2001 were ultimately unsuccessful and represented a major setback in the efforts to strengthen the Convention.

More than 30 years have passed since VEREX and enormous advances in the field of science and technology have enabled completely new verification methods, but at the same time also have presented some challenges. Various proposals are currently being discussed within the framework of the above-mentioned Working Group. From today’s perspective, the discussions on a potential verification regime for the BWC have made good progress. Although proposals differ between States Parties, there is a shared understanding that verification can strengthen the Convention. The discussions are currently still at an early stage and States Parties are exchanging national positions on the strategic goal and purpose of a verification regime for the BWC as well as its basic principles. The Working Group is requested to complete its work as soon as possible, preferably before the end of 2025.

## ENHANCING NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION

In the meantime, it remains vital to adopt and enforce comprehensive biosafety and biosecurity measures at the national level. In early 2025, the Republic of Moldova, which acceded to the BWC on 28 January 2005, designated the National Agency for Public Health as the country’s BWC National Contact Point (NCP). The NCP is responsible for coordinating respective efforts at the national level. In this regard, close collaboration between a range of stakeholders, including the scientific and technical community, policy makers and civil society is crucial.

The Republic of Moldova regularly participates in BWC meetings in Geneva and has also taken up active roles and functions during previous Review Conferences. Of note, at the Ninth BWC Review Conference in 2022 Ambassador Tatiana Molcean chaired the Committee of the Whole. Likewise, at the Eighth BWC Review Conference in 2016, Ambassador Tudor Ulianovschi chaired the Credentials Committee.

The Republic of Moldova also frequently submits the annual Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) reports. Since its accession in 2005, Moldova has submitted 14 national reports that inform about relevant national bio-capacities

and activities. The country thus contributes to the overarching aim of CBMs in the framework of the BWC, namely to “prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts and suspicions, and in order to improve international co-operation in the field of peaceful bacteriological (biological) activities”.

## CONCLUSION

The Biological Weapons Convention entered into force five decades ago in 1975. Back then, it was not possible to foresee whether the BWC would be able to meet the expectations placed on it. Although States Parties have been aware of the obvious weaknesses of the Convention – the lack of an international verification regime and an independent international organisation to facilitate the BWC’s implementation – the Convention must nevertheless be considered as a success story. No State today publicly admits to possessing biological weapons nor are they an integral part in national military doctrines. Biological weapons have become ‘outlawed weapons’ and 189 states have joined the Convention. None of this could be expected or judged as a “given” in 1975.

It is hoped that the efforts in the framework of the Working Group will succeed and lead to a strengthened Convention. A Convention, that is fit for purpose and can continue to serve in the future as a strong norm and bulwark against weaponizing biology and making them unthinkable.