

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & SECURITY

- The transfer of or assistance with acquiring the agents, toxins, weapons, equipment, and delivery vehicles described above. All State parties have to destroy all such bioweapons upon becoming a member of BTWC.
- The convention further requires states-parties to destroy or divert to peaceful purposes the "agents, toxins, weapons, equipment, and means of delivery" described above within nine months of the convention's entry into force.
- The treaty regime mandates that states-parties consult with one another and cooperate, bilaterally or multilaterally, to solve compliance concerns. It also allows states-parties to lodge a complaint with the UN Security Council if they believe other member states are violating the convention. The Security Council can investigate complaints, but this power has never been invoked.
- The treaty stands for indefinite period of time.

CHALLENGES TO THE BTWC REGIME

1. Universality Gap:

- The BTWC has currently been signed by 183 countries. However, some countries such as Israel, Egypt and some others have not ratified the treaty. Thus, nothing prevents them from developing biological weapons. Steps must be taken to bring them on board.
- The BTWC mainly prevents states from developing biological weapons. However, most biological technologies are dual use with increase ease can also be available to non-state actors and terrorist organisations. The BTWC is silent on how to tackle this threat.

2. Implementation Gap: Verification of compliance of the treaty by BTWC states requires implementation at the national level. There is no elaborate international monitoring and inspection regime which is present in most-arms control treaties.

3. Response Gap: The BTWC is silent on how should state parties react in case of a biological attack. In response to a perceived violation, member states can lodge a complaint with the UNSC. However, the power veto means that no action may be taken.

4. Institutional Gap: The meetings of the BTWC are infrequent. There is no permanent agency to ensure implementation of BTWC. Since 2007, a small

Implementation Support Unit has been formed. But its mandate and funding are limited.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING BTWC

1. In the absence of a standing international body to oversee implementation of the BWC, the option of placing biological weapons under the jurisdiction of the existing Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) should be explored.
2. The idea of equipping the BTWC with a verification or investigation mechanism should be revisited.
3. Countries not party to BTWC should be encouraged to become parties to BTWC.
4. Next BTWC review conference in 2021 provides an opportunity for strengthening the BTWC loopholes.

India's preparedness -

- India is under prepared compared to the more developed countries in this area given poor disease surveillance, insufficient coordination among various government departments dealing with biosecurity issues.
- Multiple institutions are dealing with biosafety and biosecurity threats but there is no coordination among them.

Example - implementation of biosafety guidelines is the responsibility of the Science and Technology Ministry and the Environment Ministry. However, labs dealing with biological research are set up under the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, which are under the Ministries of Health and Agriculture, respectively.

- This highlights two issues pertaining directly to biosecurity.
 1. One, the multiplicity of bodies and ministers makes coordination difficult, especially in the absence of an empowered coordinating body.
 2. Two, given the rising risk of diseases of zoonotic origin, the traditional ministry-wise separation might not be useful.
- Another important question is whether India, with its porous borders and ill-trained border control institutions, is prepared for defending against pathogens or dangerous biological organisms or agents arriving from abroad. COVID-19 should serve as a wake-up call.