

Study Guide

Week 6

Addressing the
proliferation of chemical
weapons

1) Introduction

The proliferation of chemical weapons presents a significant challenge to global peace and security. Chemical weapons, which are devastatingly effective in causing mass casualties and environmental destruction, are prohibited under international law, specifically by the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Despite these prohibitions, the potential for the proliferation of chemical weapons remains. This risk arises from the possibility of state-sponsored programs, non-state actors such as terrorist groups, or even lone individuals acquiring and using these weapons. Given their potential to be produced through repurposing industrial chemicals, it is crucial to maintain rigorous international safeguards.

In response to this issue, the United Nations Security Council must prioritise the prevention of chemical weapons proliferation. This includes strengthening verification mechanisms, enhancing cooperation between states to secure chemical materials, and imposing strict sanctions on violators of the CWC. Failure to address this could lead to catastrophic humanitarian consequences, destabilising regions and undermining international norms. Therefore, a united and robust response from the Security Council is vital to safeguarding global security and upholding the integrity of international disarmament agreements.

2) Background information

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which entered into force in 1997, was a landmark in disarmament efforts, aiming to eliminate the production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons globally. The CWC established the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to oversee the destruction of chemical weapon stockpiles and ensure compliance through inspections and verification. The Convention's success is evident in destroying vast stockpiles, particularly by nations such as Russia and the United States, both of which have made substantial progress in their disarmament commitments. However, some states, including Syria and North Korea, have been accused of continuing to possess and use chemical weapons.

The 21st century has witnessed several instances of chemical weapons use despite the CWC. In Syria, chemical attacks were reported during the country's civil war, leading to

widespread condemnation. In more recent years, reports have emerged alleging the use of chemical weapons in Ukraine during the ongoing conflict with Russia. While these claims are under investigation, the risk posed by chemical weapons remains a critical global concern.

Despite the progress in disarmament, some nations continue to maintain chemical weapon stockpiles. As of recent reports, a few countries, including the United States and Russia, hold significant stockpiles that are in the final stages of destruction. North Korea and Syria are believed to have active chemical weapons programs, posing a risk to regional and global security. The need for ongoing vigilance and international cooperation remains crucial to ensure these weapons are never used again in conflict.

3) Key issues

3.1) Compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

Ensuring full compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is a crucial challenge in the global effort to eliminate chemical weapons. While the CWC has led to the destruction of over 99% of declared chemical stockpiles, issues remain, particularly with nations accused of non-compliance.

The OPCW's verification and monitoring efforts are central to maintaining transparency, but ensuring access to all potential chemical facilities, including undeclared ones, remains a hurdle. Countries like Syria have been accused of using chemical weapons despite being party to the CWC, while North Korea, which has not joined the Convention, is suspected of maintaining an active chemical weapons program. Addressing these violations requires a robust international response, including the use of sanctions, independent investigations, and possibly legal action through bodies like the International Criminal Court.

Strengthening the legal mechanisms within the CWC to ensure violators face meaningful consequences is vital to maintaining the convention's credibility. Furthermore, achieving universal adherence to the CWC is essential, as key countries like Egypt, Israel, and North Korea remain outside its framework. Diplomatic efforts should focus on bringing these nations into compliance, ensuring that no loopholes remain in the global effort to eliminate chemical weapons permanently.

3.2) Addressing the Threat of Chemical Weapons Use by Non-State Actors

The risk of chemical weapons falling into the hands of non-state actors, such as terrorist organisations, remains a critical concern for global security. Unlike state actors, non-state entities often operate outside international norms and agreements, making the control and prevention of chemical weapon use by these groups particularly challenging. Terrorist organisations, criminal groups, and even lone actors have demonstrated their willingness to exploit security gaps to acquire and use chemical weapons, as seen in attacks by groups like ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

One of the most pressing issues is the accessibility of dual-use chemicals. Many toxic chemicals used in industries such as agriculture and manufacturing can be repurposed to create chemical weapons. For example, hydrogen cyanide, chlorine, and phosphorus compounds are widely used for legitimate purposes but have also been weaponised. The international community must discuss how to strengthen the control of these dual-use chemicals through tighter regulations, export controls, and tracking mechanisms. Ensuring that industries comply with these safeguards is essential, as even a tiny amount of chemical precursors can be used to create deadly weapons in small, unsophisticated facilities.

Another challenge is securing vulnerable chemical facilities, particularly in regions affected by conflict or poor governance. In countries with weakened state control, chemical plants, laboratories, and stockpiles can be vulnerable to theft or attack by terrorist groups. Nations must discuss strategies to enhance the physical security of these facilities, particularly in high-risk areas, and provide technical assistance to countries with limited resources to prevent the diversion of chemical materials.

International cooperation is essential for addressing this issue. Governments must share intelligence on potential threats, collaborate on joint security measures, and engage in coordinated law enforcement efforts to track and intercept chemical materials before reaching non-state actors. The OPCW and the United Nations play critical roles in providing platforms for cooperation, training, and capacity-building. Moreover, nations should work together to develop rapid response mechanisms to contain and mitigate the impact of any chemical weapon use by non-state actors.

Overall, preventing non-state actors from acquiring and using chemical weapons requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves tightening control over dual-use chemicals, improving the security of chemical facilities, and enhancing international cooperation to track and prevent the illicit movement of chemical materials. Without concerted global efforts, the use of chemical weapons by non-state actors could result in devastating attacks that have far-reaching humanitarian and security consequences.

3.3) Chemical Weapon Use in Contemporary Conflicts

Recent reports of chemical weapon use in conflict zones like Syria and Ukraine highlight the ongoing risk of chemical warfare. Nations must address how to respond effectively to these violations, ensuring that the use of chemical weapons is met with swift international condemnation, sanctions, and potential legal action. The Security Council's role in taking decisive measures is crucial for deterrence.

3.4) Destruction of Remaining Stockpiles and Ensuring Global Disarmament

While significant progress has been made, some nations still hold chemical weapon stockpiles that are yet to be fully destroyed. The focus here should be on supporting the final destruction of remaining stockpiles in compliance with the CWC and addressing any delays in the process. Additionally, the discussion should cover how to bring nations that

are not party to the CWC, such as Egypt and Israel, into the global disarmament framework.

Sources

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/chemical-weapons-remain-threat-world_en

<https://www.opcw.org/about-us/history>

https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/CWC/CWC_en.pdf

<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-10/press-releases/russia-and-iran-join-cwc-membership-total-reaches-104#:~:text=President>

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/csis-brief-rigid-structures-evolving-threat-preventing-proliferation-and-use-chemical>

<https://www.stimson.org/2023/proliferation-prevention-efforts-remain-critical-despite-elimination-of-worlds-declared-cw-stockpiles/>

<https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/99-01/labanca.pdf>