

Confidence in the Biological Weapons Convention: What is it? How can it be secured?

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The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) has defined biological weapons as categorically illegitimate. As such, this represents a major achievement of the international community. And yet, in recent years, many States Parties to the BWC have expressed unease about its accomplishments and future direction.

A key topic of concern is confidence in the Convention itself, and the role of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in securing confidence. As part of the political obligations on governments, those party to the treaty are meant to complete CBM declarations each year. The stated intention of these declarations is to establish confidence in the commitment of parties to the Convention. As Filippa Lentzos overviewed in the Spring/Summer issue of *Disarmament Times*, in recent times, much of the consideration of confidence has been couched in terms of CBMs – and yet some states argue that they may even offer a distraction from finding more substantial means to build and secure confidence in the treaty. In this article we consider the limits of CBMs and ask what more is needed to establish and maintain confidence among States Parties.

Discussions about CBMs within the BWC since 2007 have been preoccupied with significant -- but largely technical -- issues of how to improve the quality and the number of States Parties submissions. It is our contention that promoting confidence requires something other than further discussion and further refinement. Indeed, expending more energy on CBMs might ultimately prove counter-productive. Instead of more of the same, alternative types of discussion needed to be nurtured.

CONFIDENCE IN THE PAST

This conclusion follows from research conducted by the authors that took as its topic the way in which States Parties have dealt with declarations about past of-

fensive programmes. ‘Form F’ of the CBMs asks states to declare past offensive and defensive research and development programs. While this is likely to be a sensitive issue for some states, forthright declarations about past programmes are part of states’ commitment to the treaty. Yet neither the declaration form itself, nor its contents, have been the subject of any significant attention in recent years by those party to the BWC.

We were interested in why this was the case, particularly since what is known publicly would suggest that several states with past major offensive programmes have failed to declare them, or have only declared limited aspects. We found it difficult to reconcile the CBMs stated goals of transparency and building confidence with the limited attention given to the Form F declarations in BWC meetings. We wanted to understand how this was tied to confidence in the BWC and belief in the value of CBMs.

While several country cases could be used, we examined these issues in relation to the lack of a declaration of South Africa’s past biological weapons programme. Under the code name Project Coast, between 1981 and 1995 a chemical and biological warfare programme was established and maintained in South Africa. This case was chosen because of the authors’ familiarity with it, and because significant detail about the programme is already in the public domain. In addition, the ideological and temporal distance between the apartheid state and the current South African state, as well as the positive contribution to the BWC made by South Africa for many years since the end of apartheid, meant this case was relatively open for examination.

Despite this, not only has South Africa not declared an offensive biological research and development programme under the Biological Weapons Convention, but little to no mention has been made of this non-recognition within the proceedings of the Convention by other states, in the same way that little mention has been made about the absence of, or incompleteness, of other states’ CBM declarations.

INQUIRY INTO THE PRESENT

In order to understand why this was the case and what it suggested about the origins of confidence, in 2013 and 2014 we conducted 16 interviews with key individuals from South Africa as well as leading international contributors to recent CBM discussions. From these we hoped to

hear what interviewees would (and would not) say about the history of the South African programme today, as well as what they thought what should (and should not) be said about it.

Our initial round of interviews suggested two important points. One, our respondents offered substantially divergent assessments about fundamental issues, such as whether South Africa had an 'offensive' bioweapons programme at all, as well as whether the lack of an declaration should be of concern.

Two, defensive reasoning was also prevalent. Interviewees conveyed that in the course of their work they avoided making statements that were threatening or could cause political embarrassment to others. Upon reflection, we also noticed that we as researchers were engaging in such defensive behaviour ourselves. Within the interviews we avoided issues we thought would be too personally or professionally threatening, so as to maintain rapport. Neither we nor the interviewees mentioned, much less explored, the fact that this was taking place.

In light of such experiences we decided to take the prevalence of defensive reasoning as our focus. In doing so we drew on the work of scholar Chris Argyris. Based on numerous ambitious and well-regarded efforts to foster organisational change, Argyris concluded that many forms of interaction foster self-reinforcing defensive routines that inhibit robust inquiry. Attempts to stay in control of situations and avoid oneself or others being threatened means there is often little testing of the basis for views and evaluations. Defensive reasoning leads to the use of covert attributions of motives, scapegoating, the treatment of one's own views as obvious and valid, and the use of unsupported evaluations. The common end result is the reproduction of (potentially invalid) assessments and inferences that decrease possibilities for changing thinking and behaviour, a kind of frozen state.

One technique proposed by Argyris for exploring and altering learning patterns involves the production of 'Action Maps.' These seek to reveal the inter-related variables that individuals identify as relevant to their learning; notably those self-maintaining and self-reinforcing patterns that limit learning. The maps themselves also act as hypotheses to be debated and refined over time, and in this way Action Maps can provide the basis for building agreement about what is really taking place (and not), why, and what needs to be done to alter such circumstances.

Change can be accomplished if Action Maps are used patiently and persistently in cycles of dialogue, reflection and intervention--their use can foster alternative behaviours and relationships within organizations and other groups..

Figure 1 provides the Action Map we produced through the interviews and subsequent feedback pertaining to why South Africa's failure to declare an offensive programme has been 'bypassed' or made irrelevant within the BWC.

The box on the extreme left sets out the general governing conditions that influence and inform interactions between states. These conditions define possibilities for action, and constraints on action, by officials across the topics covered in the BWC. The map then lists the factors specific to the case of South Africa that our interviewees thought contributed to the lack of recognition or relevance of the past programme. The map then identifies more general factors that led to some CBM-related concerns becoming non-issues. We then mapped the consequences interviewees identified on group dynamics, which then have consequences for problem solving and decision making within the BWC.

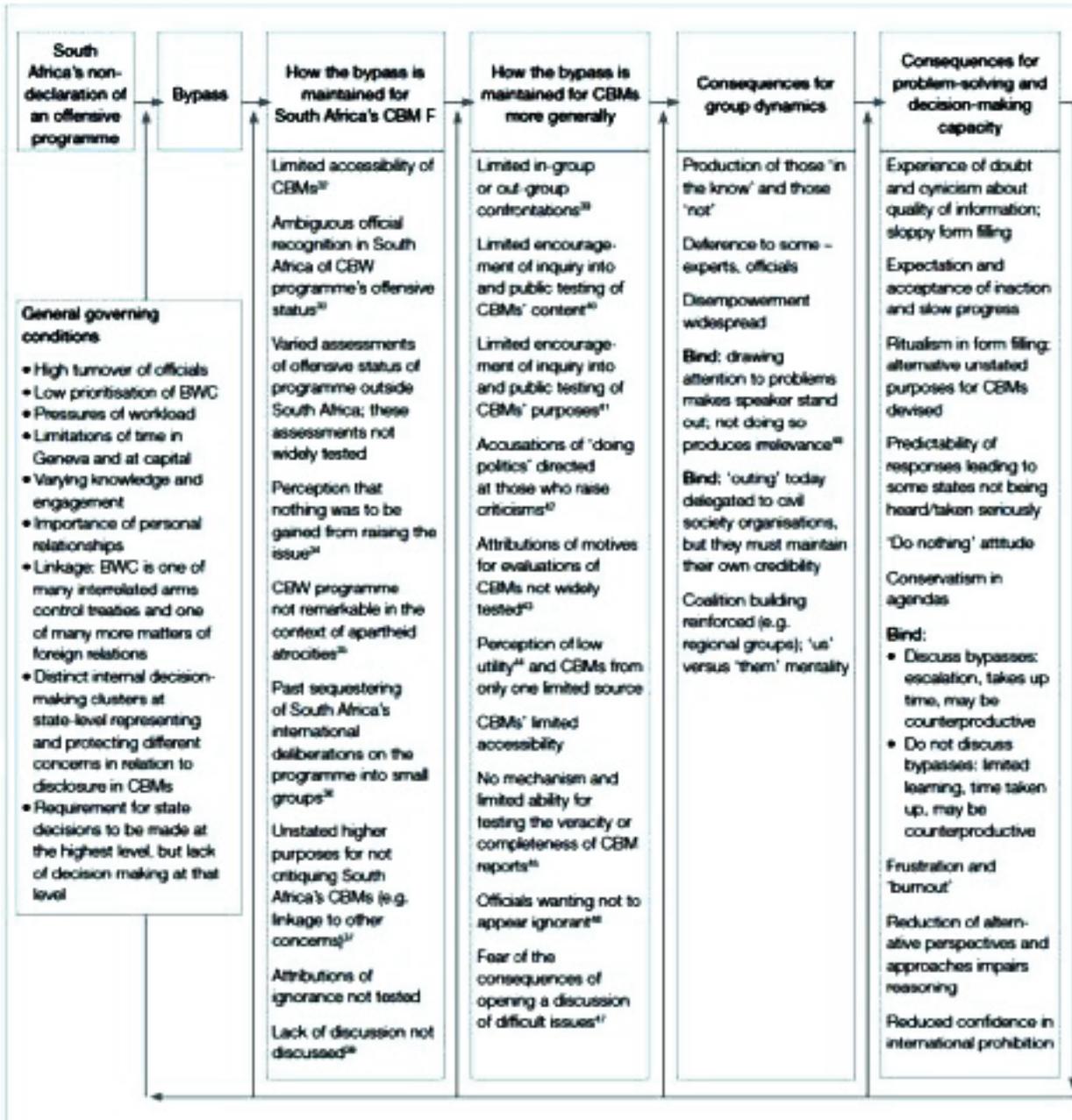
For instance, anyone seeking to raise fundamental concerns about the contents of CBMs wrestle with a basic bind: if they raise points of concerns with what is (or is not) being discussed, then this is likely to be seen as politically motivated posturing. Drawing attention to awkward matters could also be seen as counterproductive to achieving positive reforms. Yet if points of concern with what is (or is not) being discussed are not raised, then it is also not possible to achieve positive reform. Within these difficult situations, frustration and withdrawal are likely. Without the airing of varied perspectives, alternative options, and conflicting viewpoints, collective reasoning is impaired. All these factors taken together reduce confidence in the international prohibition.

As indicated by the flow of arrows, each set of issues shapes the others. For instance, the inability to identify that there is a problem that ought to be addressed, at least in the eyes of some, makes it more difficult to build a process in which CBMs are discussed and, where necessary, queried. This in turn hinders the ability to identify problems collectively, as there is no other multinational forum in which to raise it.

As set out in this map, the ways in which the South

African past programme and declaration became non-issues reflect a much wider set of countervailing pressures and competing imperatives within the BWC that have negative consequences for international relations and weapon prohibitions--including how little time and opportunity there is for collective discussion.

FIGURE 1 ACTION MAP



MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

A key prediction follows: in the absence of attention to what does and does not become the focus of attention in the BWC today – and to the underlying and unstated assumptions that determine what is and what is not discussed, attempts to enhance confidence through greater participation in CBMs are likely to be of limited potential. Indeed, without addressing why some matters become ‘non-issues,’ greater participation in CBMs might well result in more matters being sealed off from consideration because of defensive reasoning. Rather than simply re-doubling efforts then, it is necessary to question what action should be undertaken.

Since the production of this map, we have sought to use the formation and discussion of this map as basis for encouraging reflection among government officials, members of civil society, and others about the role of CBMs in confidence building, and to use it as a basis for exploring what else, other than CBMs, might enhance confidence in the treaty. We invite readers to respond to us about the value and validity of the map.

What the map shows is that the potential of CBMs to serve the purpose of building confidence is constrained by overarching conditions within the BWC. These are expressed in an ironic tension. Under the defensive reasoning and action in the BWC, it is the lack of transparency that is often taken by those interviewed as a requirement for maintaining confidence. As such there is no direct relationship perceived between a lack of information sharing and a lack of confidence. And yet, in longer term, the incentives and disincentives associated with defensive reasoning were also regarded as having significant negative consequences that could, or have, undermined confidence in the international prohibition of biological weapons.

Although the challenges of moving beyond entrenched and self-reinforcing defensive routines are considerable, developments in arms control and disarmament more broadly suggest grounds for optimism. In recent years a number of attempts have been made to devise fora that provide opportunities for non-traditional forms of interaction between officials and civil society. The Oslo Process that led to the signing of the Convention on Cluster Munitions in 2008, and the ongoing efforts to address the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons outside the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, illustrate the ability of groupings of interested parties to

devise novel forums for action. In their substantive focus, location, governing rules, participation, and duration, such fora have provided a basis for taking forward demanding matters. The hope is that similar novel and productive means of moving forward can be found for the BWC.

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