Disarmament and International Security

Topic Area A: Regional Security and Civil War
Topic Area B: Chemical and Biological Weapons

History of the First Committee

The General Assembly is the main United Nations body for deliberation and negotiations and the only structure where all 193 member states enjoy representation. It was first established by the United Nations Charter on 10 January 1946. It convenes annually under the principle of one country, one vote. Unlike the Security Council, the GA does not afford the right of veto to any member state.

The United Nations created six main committees for the General Assembly, each with a separate scope and mandate. The First Committee was originally called the Political and Security Committee, but its name was adjusted to the Disarmament and International Security Committee to reflect the number of political topics of peace and security in had increasingly fielded in recent years.

Since its beginnings, the First Committee has debated some of the most pressing issues about global peace and security during the General Assembly, which meets from September to November every year at the United Nations General Secretariat. Deliberations are led the President of the General Assembly who is selected on a rotation basis from each of the five UN global regions. Unlike the Security Council, GA resolutions are not legally binding and are articulated in recommendations and suggestions. Despite its non-binding nature, the First Committee passes highly influential resolutions, for example, in the area of nuclear non-proliferation and the use of chemical and biological weapons.

TOPIC A: Regional Security and Civil War

Civil wars have presented regional and global political with many different challenges. In recent years, civil wars have persisted in many areas throughout the world, from Iraq to Afghanistan, Central and North Africa and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, one current civil conflict overshadows all others significance: the ongoing conflict in Syria. As such, we will focus on it at length here.
The Civil War in Syria

Despite the rise of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, Syria was a fairly stable nation. Leading up to December 2010, international media had praised the history and culture of Syria, as well as the new direction of government. However, over the course of the Arab Spring, the country rapidly shifted from comparative stability to repressive military state increasingly involved in a civil war.

The first forms of combat broke out in the spring of 2011. During the first week of March, at a school in the small southwestern city of Deraa, school children wrote the Arab Spring-inspired “down with the regime” as graffiti on the wall of their school. Aware of the rise of dissent in other Arab states, Syrian intelligence had already been in a heightened state of awareness due to the events in Tunisia and Egypt. This led to the the arrest of the schoolchildren. A few days later, a few hundred protestors, gathering in front of a mosque, called for the release of the children, but also chanted demands for reform of the corrupt government. Like in other Arab states, the manifestations rapidly grew to several thousand. Acting against this, Syrian security and police forces
opened live rounds into the crowd, causing four casualties. The actions of the police precipitated a yet greater protest on 16 March with nearly 20,000 protestors. Protestors began to chant anti-government slogans and damaging government offices of the mukhabarat (the Syria security apparatus), office of the ruling pro-Assad Baath party and the police. The protests continued and grew in size, reaching a pinnacle on 23 March when police and security forces entered the Omari mosque in Deraa, taking the lives of fifteen and wounding hundreds. The government limited or closed down necessary social services, such as water, electricity, and mobile phone networks. In an attempt to prevent the further spread of Deraa to other Syrian cities, government forces surrounded the city with a cordon sanitaire, preventing people from either entering or leaving the city.

The Deraa protests, some anti-government, others anti-secular, were just the beginning of protests that erupted in late March 2011. Manifestations emerged in more and more towns and cities, such as Homs and Latakia, as well as some suburbs of Damascus. Like in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, social media networks, such as Facebook and Youtube, helped to disseminate information about the protests at an uncontrollable speed throughout the country. This led to yet more demonstrations. While the protests may have initially attempted to address disappointments with local-level governance, the protests increasingly adopted a language that embraced deep-seated systemic problems in Syria. However, unlike other Arab Spring states, criticism did not translate into calls for the removal of the Assad government. Common goals from the disparate protests supported the proper execution of already promised reforms.

The Syria intelligence gathering and security apparatus, the Mukhabarat, much like other Arab republics, is effectively a social and economic structure of Syria
society, omnipresent throughout the country. It uses fear and intimidation as tools to prevent forms of public anti-regime criticism and politically- or religiously-inspired unrest. Some estimate that there are up to 70,000 full time security officers employed by the mukhabarat in addition to hundreds of thousands of low-level informants.

When one considers the five decades of the Assad family’s rule over Syria, it was indeed a significant event when President Bashar al-Assad announced a set of sweeping reforms on 24 March 2011. As a conciliatory reaction to the brewing national crisis, the Assad regime promised to create committee to look into and try anyone who had committed unlawful acts. Syria soldiers, who had fired upon protestors, would not be spared the investigation.

Along with this legal measure, the government undertook a series of concessionary tactics: wages for government employees would be increased by 20-30%; cuts in income tax were to be introduced; and additional payments into state pensions would be made. Other reforms included a relaxation of state-run media and the possibility for the establishment of independent political parties. There were even promises to lift the state of emergency, which that was introduced in 1963. On 30 March, President Bashar al-Assad finally spoke to the nation. His speech failed to garner much popular support, as he focused more on blaming the political unrest on foreign subversives, rather than on real political reforms.

After a series of internal reforms in the government, President Assad again made a speech on 16 April, in which he announced the removal of the long state of emergency. Although the speech discussed pressing social issues, such as rising unemployment, anti-corruption and political reforms, it failed to focus on what most Syrians wanted to hear: political reforms that would end violence and dismantle the security state. A few weeks later, the long-held emergency law was removed, the state of emergency was declared over and dodgy security courts had been dismantled. Despite these concessions, Syrian protestors felt that these changes were cosmetic at best and that the security posture of the government had remained largely unchanged.

One year after the first protests at Deraa and despite the governments efforts to reform itself, the situation was spiraling out of control. In March 2012, the Free Syrian Army (hereafter, FSA), which had engaged the regular Syrian army in urban combat in the city of Homs, pulled back its forces. The FSA was increasingly concerned for a major offensive by government forces. The United Nations brokered a cease-fire on 11 April and appeared to take hold nationwide,
however, the peace deal quickly fell apart by mid-June, when the UN suspended its mission in Syria due to violence. The situation took on even more complications. On 21 June, NATO was forced to consider an increased involvement in the region after Syrian air defense units shot down a Turkish military jet on a sortie near its border. Throughout 2012 and into 2013, the Syrian Civil War has yet to reach any major resolution, with the fear of increasing numbers of foreign jihadi fighters. Millions of refugees have poured into neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, potentially destabilizing brittle political capacities there. Thousands of refugees have even arrived in Bulgaria, the poorest member of the European Union, quickly challenging its limited capacity to provide aid and shelter for forced migrants. Moreover, a wider, regional spreading of the conflict cannot be ruled out, as the pro-Assad Hizbollah in Lebanon, anti-Assad, pro-islamist forces in Iraq, other Arab states and even Western Europe, continue to stream into the theater of conflict.

The Syrian conflict serves as a unique historical illustration of the regional implications of complex civil wars. The repercussions of civil wars are rarely limited to those states embroiled in the conflict. Typically, civil wars generate a myriad set of negative effects that reach regionally: refugee flows, political instability in already precarious states and the threat that the conflict will escalate to include different regional actors, not all seeking a democratic outcome in Syria. The international community must therefore develop mechanisms for managing and containing the destabilizing regional effects of civil conflicts.

Proposed Solutions

In the face of spiraling regional security concerns like the case of Syria, the question of some form of intervention to alleviate the humanitarian situation must be considered from all perspectives. In prior humanitarian interventions undertaken in Somalia and Liberia, efforts fell well short of creating a durable peace: forces intervening to enforce a ceasefire had no meaningful ceasefire to protect and the peacekeeping forces became active combatants in the conflict. Still, some peacekeeping operations can, of course, yield some results, such as in East Timor, Bosnia and Kosovo. Peacekeeping operations can and often have enhanced internal stability. Nevertheless, in certain complex situations, like the one in Syria, peacekeeping in such a large country would have little impact and almost always must be pursued on a careful case-by-case basis by the international community.
Humanitarian considerations are among the most complicated in the international relations of conflict and civil war. Humanitarian aid and humanitarian response are key components of this issue: how does the international community provide needed supplies, medicine and aid to deal with massive refugee outflows and prevent shortages in the conflict theatre. Additionally, the assistance in securing refugee camps is a key component of states hosting forced migrant populations.

Bloc Positions

Bloc positions on individual civil wars, specifically those that may warrant a humanitarian intervention, tend to divide along coalition lines interested in the outcome of the conflict or the proposed use of force for humanitarian purposes. Recall that any use of force should be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council. Bloc positions should inform each nation’s viewpoint on the other options available in addressing regional security aspects of civil war.

One prevalent divide is concerned with those that will receive aid in the pursuit of regional security and those that will give the aid. The developed-developing nation divide will be a key point of difference in positions. Nations from North Africa and the Middle East are likely to be net-benefactors from the aid, while developed industrial states will be tasked to provide that aid. The ability of each nation to offer aid will be a factor in their advocacy for solutions to this problem.

An additional dividing line that will likely emerge is that between states with traditional reticence about militarized humanitarian interventions and those members states that support the robust use of force. This brings up the classic international relations question of the sanctity of sovereignty and the non-intervention in the affairs of sovereign states. For both sides, nations are acutely aware of the complexities of the use of force. On the one hand, some states believe that even a limited strike in the name of humanitarianism will yield little benefits and likely further complicate matters on the ground, embolden the ruling regime and cause even more refugee outflows. Others believe that a robust intervention can force warring parties to the negotiation table, coerce leaders to step down and lead to the alleviation of suffering of the population.
Relevant Partners

Several regional and global actors can serve as relevant partners in civil conflicts like in Syria. One important group of partner organizations are humanitarian-based NGOs that deal specifically with refugee scenarios. These organizations may include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders, and Refugees International.

Within the United Nations system, there are several organizations that offer assistance in these situations. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) are three organizations that deal specifically with these issues. Within the United Nations Development Program, the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Resolution (BCPR) assists with the development side of conflicts. Other regional organizations like League of Arab States, the African Union and the European Union are also likely be strong partners.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer

What specific responsibilities do United Nations members have to nations affected by a regional civil war?

Which set of conditions should prompt the United Nations to deploy peacekeeping forces to prevent any cross-border spillover?

How can the United Nations help externally and internally displaced persons while also reducing mass refugee migrations?

Which set of priorities should the international community set for the maintenance of regional security in the event of a civil war?
TOPIC AREA B: Biological and Chemical Weapons

Generally defined, biological warfare is the military use of microorganisms, toxins derived from living organisms or bioregulators to deliberately targeted to achieve casualties or illness of humans, plants or animals. Biological weapons are composed of living organic agents, which, when delivered in a theatre of conflict, can result in the unique implications of their use and impact on security. Pathogens — disease-causing bacteria and viruses — require another organism to replicate and maximize the effect of the corresponding disease, and, when transmitted to humans, can create the outbreak of an epidemic.

While a historical part of warfare, the usage of biological weapons has actually been limited to only a small number of recorded attacks. Armies have long engaged in biological warfare through a variety of forms, including poisoning water supplies, harnessing the toxicity of plants or dead animals and passing infected bodies to enemies.

There are numerous historical instances of the use of these crude biological weapons. Records of Greek and Roman warfare have numerous references to the use of toxic plants and dead animals for contamination of water supplies. In 1346, the Mongols reportedly catapulted corpses infected with bacterium that causes plague into the besieged city of Kaffa in the Crimea. During Pontiac’s Rebellion in 1763, Lord Jeffrey Amherst advocated giving smallpox-infected blankets to hostile Native American tribes. Due to a smallpox outbreak at Fort Pitt, infection of blankets with smallpox was possible, and many correspondences to and from Amherst indicate the genocidal intent of distributing the blankets to the Native Americans. Reports from the American Revolution suggest that British forces tried to infect the Continental Army with smallpox by sending infected individuals behind enemy lines. However, due to the prevalence of these diseases and the lack of official records, it is difficult to discern the success or failure of these efforts.

During World War I, Germany become the first country to use bio-chemical weapons, such as mustard and various nerve gasses. In response to the first widespread usage of chemical weapons in conventional warfare, these new forms of weaponry were declared as banned forms of combat under the 1925 Geneva Protocol. However, the Geneva Protocol failed to limit or prohibit the development of chemical and biological weapons. Most countries that undersigned the 1925 Protocol reserved the right to retaliate with these weapons if attacked first.
Because of any further prohibitive measures, the major WWII actors had offensive and defensive biological weapon programs, when the conflict broke out in Europe and Asia in 1939. In 1931, Japan had already begun with an aggressive biological weapons expansion. The Japanese program produced a large volume of chemical agents, however production methods failed to develop effective delivery systems for the biological weapons. In WWII, Japan first used biological weapons against Soviet forces, but later conducted larger biological weapons attacks on Chinese civilians and military, employing such agents as anthrax, cholera, typhoid and plague. The operations caused widespread epidemics, but the techniques were unreliable, causing Japanese casualties, and failed to provide a significant advantage. The Japanese World War II attacks were the only confirmed large-scale use of biological weapons in the 20th century, a reflection of Japan’s biological weapons division, the largest of its kind.

**Biological Weapons Convention (1972)**

In 1972, as a result of the Cold War’s reliance on nuclear weapons, the international community agreed to the creation of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the first international agreement to prohibit an entire class of weaponized conflict. It resulted from an international consensus against the use of biological weapons, which served to ban the further development, acquisition, and possession of biological weapons. Unlike other nonproliferation treaties, the Biological Weapons Convention did not contain mechanisms for verifying weapons development through, for example, an international oversight body. The BWC of 1972 was nevertheless a remarkable step taken, yet it left many issues to be addressed, and only a comprehensive response to these problems will yield a complete solution to the terror of biological weapons.

The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) was the first international treaty to ban an entire class of weapons. It was the result of international consensus against biological weapons, and banned development, production, acquisition, and possession of biological weapons. However, unlike other nonproliferation treaties, the Biological Weapons Convention did not contain any method of verification or any international organization to implement it. The Biological Weapons Convention was a remarkable step taken by a world divided by the Cold War, yet it left many issues to be addressed, and only a comprehensive response to these problems will yield a complete solution to the terror of biological weapons.
Chemical Weapons Convention (1992)

Over the next decades, the international community grappled with the complexities of chemical weapons disarmament without resolving key divisive issues at the Conference on Disarmament in 1992. The horrible effects chemical weapons, used by Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War (1981-88) shocked the world, causing the 1972 Convention to lose some of its credibility, as Iraq was never held accountable or was subject to political sanctions as result. Consequently, the US-led coalition emerged triumphant in the first Gulf War in 1991 without using chemical weapons against civilian targets, claiming that chemical weapons did not possess any utility in the conflict theater. Based on these recent events, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) entered into force on 29 April 1997 with 65 states ratifying.

The Chemical Weapons Convention comprises twenty-four articles that create a foundation for the eventual prohibition and elimination of chemical weapons. The first six articles provide for the elimination of chemical weapons by states party to the convention. Article I outlines the general obligations of each state party to the convention. For example, Article III declares that each signatory to the convention must submit to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the globally recognized body oversees the regulation of biological and chemical weapons. Article IV outlines a set of mechanisms for state parties to undertake with regards to stockpiles of chemical weapons. Article V defines actions of each signatory regarding the maintenance of chemical weapons facilities. Finally, Article VI defines the activities not prohibited under the convention.

Current Situation

Currently, the Chemical Weapons Convention comprises 189 signatory member states with only seven UN member state that are not party to the CWC. Similarly, the Biological Weapons Convention has 170 signatories with 17 non-signatory states. Only those states that have agreed to the convention are subject to its provisions. Therefore, the international community must consider
what types of binding or concrete actions can be taken effectively by the UN or other organizations to eliminate biological and chemical weapons, even without states agreeing to international treaties.

The continuing debate surrounding the possible use of chemical weapons in the current conflict in Syria is of tremendous significance but one that challenges the international community, as well. As recent as September 2013, there have been reports of chemical weapons attacks by the Assad, which is under investigation by OPCW officials. Moreover, many rumors exist of various rebel groups and terrorist organization active in Syria having also used chemical weapons captured from government stockpiles. A solution to the ongoing issue was brought before the United Nations by Russia, which sought to internationalize the observation and collection of chemical weapons in Syria, which has now agreed to take steps to eliminate its chemical weapons stockpile. At time of writing, chemical weapons have begun to be collected under the observation of the OPCW.

Proposed Solutions

The issue of bio-chemical weapons requires careful consideration, as adopted by the UN General Assembly. A GA resolution should contain both convention-oriented recommendations and general guidelines, such that the adoption of the General Assembly’s recommendations includes both new protocol negotiations and actions that can be immediately put into force.

New conventions may take several forms. First, members states may recommend new verification and oversight methods. In accordance, a Biological Weapons Convention organization, such as the OPCW, would be in order, as none was ever generated after the adoption of the Biological Weapons Convention and as any such verification could be run through this organization. This enforcement mechanism and oversight body would be critical, as the OPCW has successfully addressed the enforcement of biological weapons destruction and management.

The international community can also create new enforcement frameworks, which should seek to adjust the currently existing noncompliance of signatories to the convention. The purpose of any new enforcement mechanisms should be to guarantee that convention parties must comply to the full spirit of the convention. There is also the critical question of those states that have not ratified the BWC. GA delegates may seek coercive mechanisms to convince those states to sign on to the convention.
Bloc Positions

The different positions on the topic of bio-chemical weapons cannot be bifurcated in two delineated camps. While most states clearly condemn the use of banned chemical weapons, their opinions on issues surrounding the debate tend to be varied and many. Like many questions emerging in international relations, issues of national sovereignty overshadow the discussion of making agreements legally binding. The issue of the peaceful use of biological agents for research purposes also poses serious questions, with some states insisting on their sovereignty to pursue scientific and economic reasons. Other states claim that provisions based on scientific purpose can be easily used as a shield for the secret production of military-grade weaponry.

Positions in international negotiations often fall along minimalist or reformist lines. States should not be expected to categorize themselves neatly into one of these two camps. Moreover, since a member state’s position is primarily focused national issues, blocs on this issue should not be anticipated to fall on regional or socioeconomic lines, as nations tend to pursue their policy positions on ideological grounds. On the issues of reforms to each convention, delegates should understand their national position on the reform-minimal spectrum and should anticipate the policies their nation would support and nations with which they would align in pursuit of these solutions.

Relevant Partners

The United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons are the two primary agents that are currently involved on an international level. Many other organizations, including regional organizations and non-governmental organizations, are involved in policymaking, but the actual implementation and monitoring on a global scale are occurring through UN and OPCW action. Another body of interest in combating biological and chemical weapons is the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security (NGOCDPS). The NGOCDPS was created in 1973, and it provides services to hundreds of groups concerned with the disarmament and peace activities of the United Nations. The committee plays a role in informing NGOs of negotiations, positions, and opportunities, and it helps NGOs convey their policy recommendations and experience to the responsible bodies.
Questions a resolution must answer

1. What additional measures are necessary to ensure a full treatment of the issue of biological and chemical weapons?

2. Are binding verification mechanisms a priority to the effectiveness of each Convention (1972 and 1992)? Can the conventions succeed with such mechanisms?

3. Does the success of each convention require the membership of every member state?

4. How should the international community determine and deal with non-compliance?