



Next Steps for Myanmar and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention by Jaime Yassif and David Santoro

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Myanmar crossed a milestone in December 2014 when it ratified the [Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention](#) (BTWC), which bans the development, production and stockpiling of biological weapons and means of delivery. While its government had signed the Convention in 1972, Myanmar remained until last December the only BTWC holdout state in Southeast Asia. Now Yangon must implement the Convention's requirements – the only way to ensure that its membership is meaningful. This will pose some challenges, but there are numerous mechanisms that Yangon can and should utilize to get assistance. Meanwhile, states in the region should capitalize on BTWC universalization in Southeast Asia by increasing their collaborative efforts to further reduce biological threats and thereby advance shared interests.

As has become clear in our [discussions with Myanmar officials](#), Yangon understands that burnishing its nonproliferation credentials is critical to reintegration into the international community and becoming a “good international citizen.” Implementing the BTWC provides it with an opportunity to do just that. Furthermore, Myanmar stands to benefit on multiple fronts from its decision to ratify the BTWC. Implementing the Convention will reduce biological threats to its people and its neighbors. For example, strengthened laboratory biosafety and biosecurity measures – which are necessary to fulfill the Convention's Article IV obligations – will reduce the risk of accidental or deliberate release of dangerous infectious diseases in Myanmar and its surroundings.

Another advantage of BTWC implementation is that it will help Myanmar meet other important nonproliferation obligations, including several provisions of [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540](#) (UNSCR 1540). BTWC Articles III and IV are reinforced by UNSCR 1540 requirements to: refrain from providing support to non-state actors; adopt and enforce laws which prohibit non-state actors from engaging in proliferation activities; and establish domestic controls that prevent non-state actors from diverting materials from legitimate activities for weapons purposes.

Additionally, fulfilling BTWC provisions can contribute to Myanmar's economic development – a first-order priority for Yangon. As a BTWC state in good standing, Myanmar will open the door to greater assistance with its national

biotechnology capacity, which has been an engine of economic growth across the region. Through assistance facilitated by Article X of the Convention, Myanmar has an opportunity to develop national- and facility-level frameworks for safe and secure bioscience research and development and position itself to take advantage of the economic opportunities that come with this rapidly advancing industry. Taking advantage of such opportunities would enable Yangon to gain competitiveness and join a growing number of Asian states that are investing in biotechnology industry as part of their economic-growth strategies.

Finally, by instituting national biosafety and biosecurity measures that can help prevent non-state actors from acquiring biological materials for illicit purposes, and by linking export control, law enforcement, and public health activities to help thwart efforts to traffic these materials, Myanmar will become more capable of fighting other forms of illicit trafficking. Illicit drug trafficking is a significant challenge for Myanmar, which must contend with networks that operate within its territory and across its borders, and that have the potential to be exploited for other purposes – including smuggling dangerous biological agents. Maintaining control over shipments that come in and out of its territory is essential for Yangon as it builds [deep-sea ports](#) and aspires to become a transit and transshipment point in Southeast Asia.

If Myanmar is to reap all these potential benefits of BTWC accession, it must meet its obligations under the Convention. They include developing national legislation and regulations governing the use of biological agents and toxins, as well as controls on import and export of such materials. These obligations also include developing and instituting biosafety and biosecurity standards at biological research facilities. Additionally, BTWC States Parties are expected to promote a culture of responsibility among the scientific research community through education and outreach, emphasizing the importance of assessing potential safety and security risks when planning research projects. Another important aspect of BTWC implementation is the [annual submission of Confidence-Building Measures](#) (CBM), which provide the transparency necessary to build trust among the parties to the Convention. CBM submission is paramount given the dual-use nature of biological research, i.e., its potential applicability both to peaceful and non-peaceful purposes. Through CBMs and other means of increased transparency, BTWC States Parties can continually reassure one another that they have no intent to apply dual-use biological technologies and materials to offensive military purposes.

The challenge is that, while Yangon shows a strong willingness to make progress on nonproliferation, it lacks the capacity to do so. We have heard this message loud and clear in our [interactions with Myanmar officials](#). Fortunately, there

are multiple mechanisms to assist states like Myanmar in meeting their BTWC obligations – both within the Convention framework and through other initiatives. BTWC Article X, which protects States Parties’ rights to assistance and cooperation on projects with peaceful purposes, can facilitate support in developing national legislation and regulations, building biosafety and biosecurity capacity, and a broad range of other activities. To benefit from these resources, Myanmar can utilize the [Assistance and Cooperation Database](#), which is administered by the BTWC [Implementation Support Unit](#) and provides a platform for matchmaking among States Parties that are offering and requesting assistance.

Another important mechanism for relevant assistance is the [Global Health Security Agenda](#) (GHTSA), which aims to “accelerate progress toward a world safe and secure from infectious disease threats.” Launched in February 2014, the GHTSA has brought together high-level leaders and technical experts from dozens of countries, and they have made commitments to implement its vision through 11 “Action Packages” that collectively articulate a comprehensive plan for building health security capacity worldwide. Two of these Action Packages have particular relevance to the BTWC: Biosafety and Biosecurity, and Linking Public Health with Law and Multisectoral Rapid Response. If Myanmar were to sign up for these two BTWC-related Action Packages, states participating in the GHTSA could help assess national needs and support Yangon’s efforts to meet them. Now that Myanmar has ratified the BTWC and is preparing for implementation, it should utilize these mechanisms for international assistance.

Finally, and significantly, Myanmar’s decision to ratify the BTWC – and the resulting universalization of the BTWC in Southeast Asia – presents an opportune moment for countries in the region to help Myanmar fulfill its obligations, improve integration of regional biosecurity and biosafety initiatives, and enhance cooperation on emergency preparedness and response to manage biological accidents or incidents. BTWC implementation, after all, is not a silver bullet; reducing bio-threats requires sustained and persistent collective action. Southeast Asian states can and should use Myanmar’s decision as a stepping stone to strengthen regional cooperation to reduce biological threats and work collectively to reach the highest international biosecurity and biosafety standards. This will enhance their security and international status, and pay dividends as they seek to further integrate themselves into the global economy.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.