

China | Countries | NTI

China is a party to the major international agreements regulating [biological weapons](#), having acceded to the [Geneva Protocol](#) in 1952 and the [Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention \(BTWC\)](#) in 1984. [1] China was a victim of large-scale biological warfare (BW) attacks during the Japanese occupation from 1937 to 1945, heavily influencing its later [nonproliferation](#) efforts. Beijing declared research on biodefense, and the country's growing biotechnology industry provides it with substantial [dual-use](#) capabilities. However, China has consistently maintained that it does not have an offensive BW program.

Past reports by the [U.S.](#) departments of State and Defense have alleged that China maintained a small-scale offensive biological weapons program even after joining the BTWC, and that Chinese entities have transferred controlled biological weapons-related items to nations of proliferation concern, such as [Iran](#). [2] However, the most recent U.S. assessment cites no evidence of any Chinese violation of BTWC obligations, although it notes China's potential dual-use activities. [3]

History

Victimhood and Denunciation of Biological Weapons

During the Japanese occupation of China, Japanese forces used BW against civilian and military targets; although it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of deaths from these attacks, it is estimated that more than 250,000 Chinese citizens may have died. [4] In addition to BW attacks on Chinese territory, the Japanese army's Unit 731, based in Harbin, China, experimented on Chinese civilians and Allied prisoners of war with various biological agents throughout the period of Japanese occupation. [5]

Since 1952, China has recognized itself as legally bound to the Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the use of biological and [chemical weapons](#). Although China had been the victim of BW attacks in World War II, Beijing was not involved in the BTWC negotiations—largely due to the Chinese leadership's general mistrust of the nonproliferation efforts of the two superpowers. When Beijing ultimately acceded to the Convention in 1984, China included the stipulation that the treaty was binding only in regard to its relations with other state parties, and would cease to be binding in regard to any enemy states whose armed forces or allies did not observe the convention's provisions. [6]

Foreign Suspicion and Disagreement Over Nonproliferation Commitments

Beijing has repeatedly stated in formal documents, official speeches, and defense white papers that China has never developed biological weapons and does not currently engage in biological activities with offensive military applications. For example, at the [1991 BTWC Review Conference](#), the Chinese delegation stated:

"of bacteriological weapons, China has always advocated the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of biological weapons and pursues a policy of not developing, producing or stockpiling this type of weapons."
[7]

However, the U.S. has remained skeptical. For example, the 2005 State Department compliance report noted that the U.S. government believed that "China maintains some elements of an offensive BW capability in violation of its BWC obligations. Despite China's BWC CBM declarations to the contrary, indications suggest that China maintained an offensive BW program prior to acceding to the Convention in 1984." [8] This report also lists two facilities with possible dual-use links to an offensive BW program: the Chinese Ministry of Defense's Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS) Institute of Microbiology and Epidemiology (IME) in Beijing, which Beijing says is a biodefense research facility, and the Lanzhou Institute of Biological Products (LIBP), identified as a vaccine producer.

China's [2000 National Defense White Paper](#) stated that, "in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the BWC, a necessary verification mechanism should be established." [9] However, when a draft verification protocol text was presented in 2001, China joined a group of other states, including Iran, [Cuba](#), and [Pakistan](#), in objecting to the protocol draft text as promoting a discriminatory [export control](#) regime. [10]

During the Sixth Review Conference of the BTWC in 2006, a number of disagreements were evident on issues related to Article X, which deals with the access to technology for peaceful uses. Countries with developing biotechnology industries, including China, cite Article X in supporting their right to engage in trade of potentially dual-use items. Ambassador Cheng Jingye, the head of the Chinese delegation at the Sixth Review Conference, stressed that, "promotion of international exchanges and cooperation in the peaceful uses of biotechnology remains one of the objectives of the Convention. It should go in parallel with bio-arms control and non-proliferation and prevention of bio-terrorism." [11]

Since the review conference, China has focused on domestic implementation of the BTWC. The 2009 report of the BTWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) confirms that China has set up a point of contact within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of Arms Control and that China has submitted the requisite declarations on confidence building measures for 2009. [12] In addition, China has emphasized its willingness to cooperate multilaterally:

"China has...made proposals on many issues such as national implementation measures, cooperation on implementation at regional level, biosafety and biosecurity, capacity building and international cooperation in the field of disease surveillance and international assistance and coordination in case of alleged use of biological and toxin weapons, etc." [13]

China's BW-Related Export Controls

Washington expressed concerns over possible Chinese biological weapons-related transfers to countries such as Iran as early as 1997. In that year, then U.S. Secretary of

State Madeleine Albright noted in written answers to questions from Senator Robert E. Bennett (R-Utah) that the State Department had "received reporting regarding transfers of dual-use items from Chinese entities to Iranian government entities which raise concern," and that the United States had "encouraged China to adopt comprehensive and rigorous export controls" to prevent assistance to Iran's biological weapons program. According to a U.S. intelligence official, China sold Iran dual-use equipment and vaccines with both civilian medical applications and biological weapons applications. [14]

Until the late 1990s, China condemned stringent export control regimes, vehemently opposing the [Australia Group \(AG\)](#). However since that period, China has increasingly accepted the need for export controls for nonproliferation purposes. In October 2002, China released the "[Regulations on Export Control of Dual-Use Biological Agents and Related Equipment and Technologies](#)" and the related control list. The export control list provided an extensive and well-defined list of pathogens and toxins covered by the new set of export control regulations, which fully mirror the Australia Group control lists. [15] With respect to the export of dual-use biological agents and technologies, exports are regulated by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), in coordination with other agencies such as the ministries of Agriculture and Health. [16]

Consultations between China and the AG are ongoing, with rounds of meetings occurring in March 2004, March 2005, June 2006, June 2008 and May 2011. [17] In July 2006, China updated its export control list of dual-use biological materials. Fourteen items were added to the list, including stocks of the SARS coronavirus, and the scope of restrictions was more clearly defined. [18]

Recent Developments and Current Status

The Chinese Foreign Ministry's position on the BTWC, updated in April 2011, maintains China's previous attitude supporting the "complete prohibition and thorough destruction of all kinds of weapons of mass destruction, including biological weapons." [19]

Beijing's [2010 National Defense White Paper](#) reaffirmed its support of "multilateral efforts to strengthen the effectiveness of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)" and its commitment to "the comprehensive and strict implementation of the Convention." [20] In addition, it emphasized measures taken domestically to implement and comply with the BTWC:

"China submits annual declarations of its confidence-building measures to the Implementation Support Unit of the Convention in a timely manner, attends Meetings of State Parties and Meetings of Experts and related seminars, strengthens bio-security and disease surveillance, and carries out international exchanges and cooperation." [21]

Other efforts include enacting and enforcing relevant legislation, delineating the roles of different departments in implementing BTWC obligations, and establishing a national system to monitor epidemic outbreaks. [22] In November 2010, China co-hosted a "Workshop on Strengthening International Efforts to Prevent the

Proliferation of Biological Weapons: The Role of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in Beijing." [23] Additionally China committed to work multilaterally with other State Parties to "explore the effective approach to enhance the implementation of the BWC" during the Seventh Review Conference. [24]

Meanwhile, recent U.S. assessments of China's BW intentions refrained from repeating previous assertions of an offensive BW program. The 2010 State Department compliance report emphasized that a large amount of uncertainty remained because China still had not disclosed any information about its previous activities. [25] The 2012 report states simply that,

"Available information indicates that China continued during the reporting period to develop its biotechnology infrastructure, pursue scientific cooperation with entities of several countries, and engage in biological activities with potential dual-use applications. China has adopted national export controls to address the challenges of biological weapons proliferation." [26]

The 2014 report states that,

"Available information indicates that China engaged during the reporting period in biological activities with potential dual-use applications. However, the information did not establish that China is engaged in activities prohibited by the BWC." [27]

China possesses the required technology and resources to mass-produce traditional BW agents as well as expertise in aerobiology. The country has also acknowledged research in defense against biological weapons; in 2007 China announced a 20-year plan to set up a research center to study natural and man-made epidemics as well as to produce vaccines and protective equipment. [28] In 2007, it was also announced that China would open its first BSL-4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, part of the Chinese Academy of Science. [29] China completed the facility in January 2015, but the National Health and Family Planning Commission must validate the facility before it becomes operational. Several Chinese scientists also conducted BSL-4 training in France, a key partner in the project. [30] While China's substantial dual-use infrastructure would in theory be integral to a large-scale BW program, it is also indicative of a modern research and development complex aimed at peaceful applications. Perhaps of greater concern is China's potential role in the export or transshipment of dual-use goods to countries of proliferation concern such as Iran and [North Korea](#), with whom it retains significant trade relationships. Although China has published thorough export control legislation, its enforcement efforts are understaffed and under-funded, creating a weak link in the system. Additionally, many top Chinese leadership lack sufficient political will to fully enforce domestic export controls, especially when the exporting party is a powerful, politically connected company. [31]

Sources:

[1] "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction," The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, www.opbw.org.

[2] U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control,

Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," August 2005, www.state.gov.

[3] U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," August 2012, www.state.gov.

[4] Geoffrey York, "Chinese Survivors of Germ Warfare are Still Suffering Six Decades Later; The Japanese Army's Unit 731 Killed an Estimated 250,000 People and Left Others Diseased for Life," *Globe and Mail*, 9 August 2005, p. A12, www.lexisnexis.com.

[5] Jonathan Watts, "Belatedly, Japan Admits Use of Germ Warfare," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28 August 2002, www.lexisnexis.com; Eric Croddy, *Chemical and Biological Warfare* (Springer-Verlag, New York: 2002), pp. 224-225.

[6] Eric Croddy, "China's Role in the Chemical and Biological Disarmament Regimes," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring 2002, p. 34.

[7] "Position of Principle of the Chinese Delegation on the Biological Weapons Convention and Its Third Review Conference," Working Paper submitted by China, BWC Third Review Conference, BWC/CONF.III/18, 20 September 1991, www.opbw.org.

[8] U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," August 2005, www.state.gov.

[9] Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2000," October 2000, www.china.org.cn.

[10] Seth Brugger, "Tóth Issues Draft BWC Protocol, Reactions in Geneva Mixed," *Arms Control Today*, May 2001.

[11] "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Cheng Jingye, Head of the Chinese Delegation at the 6th Review Conference of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (BWC)," 20 November 2006, www.opbw.org.

[12] 2009 Report of the Implementation Support Unit, Meeting of the States Parties to the [BWC], 10 November 2009, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org>.

[13] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention," 7 April 2011, www.mfa.gov.cn.

[14] Bill Gertz, "Albright Concedes 'Concern' over China-Iran Transfers," *Washington Times*, 24 January 1997, p. 6.

[15] Anupam Srivastava, "China's Export Controls: Can Beijing's Actions Match Its Words?" *Arms Control Today*, November 2005, www.armscontrol.org.

[16] Information Office, State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's Non-Proliferation Policy and Measures," December 2003, <http://english.gov.cn>; Information Office State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's Endeavors for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation," 1 September 2005, www.china.org.cn.

[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "大利亚集团" [The Australia Group], www.fmprc.gov.cn.

[18] "China Revises Export Control List for Dual-use Biological Agents," *Xinhua*, 28 July 2006, www.lexisnexis.com.

[19] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention," 7 April 2011, www.mfa.gov.cn.

[20] Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2010," Editor Wang Guanqun, March 2011,

www.xinhuanet.com.

[21] Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2010," Editor Wang Guanqun, March 2011, www.xinhuanet.com.

[22] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention," 7 April 2011, www.mfa.gov.cn.

[23] Liu Zhenmin, Assistant Foreign Minister, "Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the Workshop on Strengthening International Efforts to Prevent the Proliferation of Biological Weapons: The Role of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention," Beijing, 4 November 2010, www.unog.ch.

[24] Wang Lei, "Statement of the Chinese Delegation Mr. Wang Lei on CWC and BWC at the 66th Session of the UNGA First Committee," distributed by the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 17 October 2011, www.china-un.org.

[25] U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," July 2010, www.state.gov.

[26] U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," August 2012, www.state.gov.

[27] U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," July 2014, www.state.gov.

[28] "China to Establish Anti-Bioterrorism System," *Xinhua*, 26 June 2007, www.xinhuanet.com.

[29] "Wuhan Institute of Virology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS)," Wuhan Branch, Chinese Academy of Sciences, April 2007, <http://english.whb.cas.cn>.

[30] Chenhui Qiu, "中国建成亚洲首个P4实验室可降伏埃博拉," *Sohu News*, 31 January 2015, news.sohu.com.

[31] Stephanie Lieggi, "From Proliferator to Model Citizen? China's Recent Enforcement of Nonproliferation-Related Trade Controls and Its Potential Positive Impact in the Region," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Summer 2010), www.au.af.mil.