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Guest Columnist

Skeptics should realize that treaties can work. Just look at chemical weapons

It is a proud moment for the U.S. and the world that for the first time an entire class of weapons of mass destruction has been very nearly destroyed.



A Syrian doctor in the town of Khan Sheikhoun treats a child after a chemical weapons attack in 2017. Then-president Donald Trump ordered a missile strike against a Syrian airbase in retaliation. (No credit provided.)

Over decades in my international law classes at Eckerd College, students consistently expressed cynicism about the usefulness and efficacy of law to curb conflict and protect civilians in times of war. This distrust and skepticism is, of course, totally understandable. The post-World War II period is filled with abundant examples of nations ignoring their legal obligations under the U.N. charter and human rights law.

Russia's war of aggression against the Ukrainian people is only the latest bloody illustration of brute force overriding law and morality in the global arena. International law has clearly failed to protect millions of people from grotesque levels of violence and suffering throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

Yet, while rightfully condemning these failures, it is also critical to applaud those cases when international law is able to mitigate the fury of war and protect innocent civilian lives. One such success occurred this summer when the world's nations followed through on their legal commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to eliminate all chemical weapons in their national arsenals.

The convention entered into force in 1997 and was the first multilateral disarmament agreement to provide for the elimination of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction within a fixed time frame and under a universal verification mechanism. The 193 nations that ratified or acceded to the treaty represent 98% of the world's population.

The treaty established the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to verify adherence to the agreement. This intrusive monitoring organization got off to a fast start. In its first 22 months of operation, it had conducted 500 inspections, totaling 28,000 inspection days, at nearly 260 sites in 29 different nations. By 2007, the organization could verify that only five states-parties remained with declared chemical weapons. By 2019, 96% of the world's stockpile of chemical weapons had been destroyed, including the arsenals in Britain (2007), India (2009) and Russia (2017).

The United States actively participated in this effort and this year finished disassembling and destroying the last of its vast stockpile of chemical weapons. It's taken a long time, but the U.S. followed through on its legal obligations under the treaty. The last chemical munitions of America's declared stockpile were permanently terminated. In June, more than 780,000 projectiles and mortars filled with mustard gas were demolished in Colorado. And on July 7, at the Blue Grass Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant in Kentucky, the military completed the job by annihilating and dismantling more than 100,000 rounds of mustard and nerve agents. With the U.S. completing its destruction of its chemical arsenal, 100% of the declared chemical weapons stockpiles by the world's nations have been extinguished.

The American stockpile was hideous and shocking, including cluster bombs and land mines filled with nerve agents. Despite this class of weapons being deemed inhumane after World War I, the U.S. and others continued to produce them in astounding amounts. The U.S. accumulated artillery shells capable of submerging entire forests with a scorching mustard fog, and tanks full of poison to be loaded on jets to spray on targets below. In addition, deadlier versions of the chlorine and mustard agents made infamous in World War I were massively produced, as were new nerve agents, like VX and Sarin, that proved exceptionally lethal in tiny quantities.

The United Nations estimates that more than 100,000 people died in World War I from chemical weapons, including chlorine, phosgene and mustard gas. Since World War I, the U.N. reports that chemical weapons have been responsible for at least 1 million casualties, primarily civilians, across the globe.

The U.S. was the treaty's last participating country to finish its chemical weapons elimination. It took more than a decade to destroy the last 10% of these weapons. Neutralizing these toxins and dangerous chemicals proved challenging with Congress rightly mandating the use of a more environmentally friendly alternative to incineration.

A caveat is in order. All chemical weapons have not been destroyed. A few nations never signed the treaty. Russia is believed by some experts to have retained undeclared stocks. Furthermore, rogue states and terrorist groups are outside the

control of the treaty. This meant, for example, that forces linked to President Bashar al-Assad of Syria used chemical weapons numerous times between 2013 and 2019. And, as was widely reported, the Islamic State used chemical weapons over 50 times in Iraq and Syria between 2014-2016. Yet, these actors are outliers who can be isolated and defeated.

It is a proud moment for the U.S. and the world that for the first time an entire class of weapons of mass destruction has been very nearly destroyed. The success of this treaty is a testament to the ability of international law to establish monitoring and verification methods to halt the proliferation of weapons that ultimately target civilians and do little to enhance military strategies for victory; 98% of the world's people joined this effort to reverse and halt the spread of these insidious weapons. The treaty provides compelling evidence that the international laws of war, with robust global monitoring and verification, can be effective.



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