

Russia & Chemical Weapons Destruction

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Summary

The chemical weapons destruction milestone achieved by Russia raises the hope of the international community that it will also play an important role in restraining Syria and also undertake leadership role in the CWC.

In a historic announcement on 27th September 2017, the Russian Federation declared the complete destruction of its huge Cold War-era chemical weapons stockpiles.¹ The Russian announcement has been greeted with widespread acclamation from the OPCW and several member states as it marks the 'major milestone' in the history of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).² Among the various challenges facing the CWC regime, the timely destruction of large stockpiles possessed by Russia and the United States has been a long-standing one. While most of the CWC member states have carried out the destruction of their arsenals within the timeframes stipulated by the regime, the U.S. and Russia have repeatedly failed to meet both original as well as revised timelines for destroying their arsenals. Of the two major powers, however, the case of Russian Federation has attracted much concern as projections in the past had predicted only slower progress on Russia's chemical weapons destruction.³ Belying such predictions, the Russian Federation has achieved the destruction well before the U.S. and shrewdly used the occasion to project its non-proliferation and disarmament credentials.⁴

While the Russian achievement is certainly laudable and noteworthy in every respect, it equally calls for underlining the role of significant financial and technical assistance rendered by the U.S. and other western countries without which Moscow wouldn't have achieved this milestone. Throughout the cold war years, the Soviet Union maintained the largest stockpiles of chemical weapons including wide-ranging chemical agents and munitions. It also built one of the largest chemical weapons complexes comprising of 4 research labs, 8 storage depots, and 2 test facilities.⁵ Destroying such

large-scale arsenals and production facilities entailed enormous costs which the fledgling Federation emerged after the Soviet disintegration was clearly incapable of committing.

The beginning of Western assistance to Russia's chemical disarmament process started immediately after the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership announced a halt on the production of chemical weapons in 1989. The announcement was in line with the policies of Glasnost and Perestroika that Gorbachev pursued to initiate reforms within the Union. Subsequent to the announcement, the USSR signed a Wyoming Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the U.S. which called for bilateral verification experiments and information sharing to firm up verification procedures that were being negotiated under the CWC.⁶ More importantly, however, the two countries signed an important Bilateral Destruction Agreement (BDA) within a year of signing the Wyoming MoU that provided for undertaking measures to destroy their respective stockpiles to 5000 tons by the year 2002.⁷

After the entry into force of the CWC in 1997, the reductions agreed under the BDA came to be replaced by the new targets and timelines prescribed under the CWC. The BDA, nonetheless, proved to be a major breakthrough for concluding negotiations on the CWC as it helped in resolving any outstanding differences between the two superpowers over verification issues relating to the convention. The newly emerged Russian Federation was clearly incapable carrying out its obligations either under the BDA or the CWC and stated the need for long-term financial assistance. The need for assistance to Russian Authorities after the Soviet disintegration was so dire that I presented serious difficulties to even retain

the technical staff manning Russian weapons facilities let alone allocating any budget for their dismantlement. Sensing the potential dangers of proliferation or seizures from these Soviet-era facilities, the U.S. in 1991 resolved to assist Russia through an assistance scheme widely known as the 'Cooperative Threat Reduction' (CTR) Programme.⁸ Through CTR, funded majorly by the U.S. and partly by its allies such as Canada and Sweden, the U.S. ensured that Russia not only destroys its large chemical weapons stockpiles but is also able to safeguard these facilities and retain the technical staff.

As part of the programme, the U.S. officials including technical experts visited one of the Russian chemical weapons facilities in 1994 and thereafter concluded a joint study on the possible technological solutions to first safeguard and then destroy the large Russian stockpiles. These efforts significantly helped Russia to safeguard its production and storage facilities that had become the centers of serious potential proliferation risk. Upon the entry into force of the CWC on December 05, 1997, Russia declared to OPCW that it possessed about 40,000 metric tons of chemical agents.

The CWC requires all states-parties to destroy: within three years of entry into force of the convention, 1 percent of their Category 1 or the highest 'risk' category weapons; within five years of entry into force, 20 percent of the Category 1 weapons; within seven years of entry into force, 45 percent of the Category 1 weapons; and finally within 10 years of entry into force, all Category 1 chemical weapons.⁹ Russia, however, missed the initial deadline due to what Jonathan Tucker, a noted analysts on WMDs had described as, "three years of inaction on chemical weapons destruction because of the August 1998 financial crisis that led to the devaluation of the ruble and bureaucratic

infighting among the three government bodies responsible for the program”.¹⁰

The lack of political commitment in the initial years was mainly the reason for Russia's inability to meet the deadlines. However, the furtherance of the Western assistance and especially Germany's technical aid in building Russia's first chemical weapon destruction plant which opened in December 2002 at Gorny site in the Saratov Oblast finally set in motion the long-delayed destruction process. In the following years, the Russian authorities showed strong commitment to destroy their stockpiles, and to accelerate the process of destruction, Russian authorities built as many as six additional plants at sites such as Kambarka in 2005, Maradikovskiy in 2006, Leonidovka in 2008, and Shchuch'ye in 2009, Pochep in 2011 and last one in Kizner in 2012.¹¹

It is widely known that the construction of the aforementioned facilities was made possible only through financial assistance rendered through G-8 security initiative called “Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction”.¹² The G8 summit held in Kananaskis, Canada in 2002 granted Russia, a long-term financial assistance to carry out the destruction of its arsenal. Through CTR programme alone, the U.S. had pledged more than one billion dollars to Russia since its inception in the mid-1990s. The programme ensured that Russia has latest available technologies to destroy its stockpiles. Apart from the U.S., Germany, Britain, Canada, Sweden all provided a significant amount of financial and technological assistance both to ensure that Kremlin meets its obligations under the CWC and that the threats of proliferation from these facilities are mitigated significantly.

The Western assistance to Russia's destruction programme began to decline only

towards the end of last decade when Russian economy began witnessing strong growth trends. With Russia able to shoulder the cost of destruction on its own, the long-running assistance programmes rendered through CTR were brought to closure. Nevertheless, the pivotal role that it played in Russia's chemical weapons destruction process is clearly without a doubt. While Russia's commitment too has been significant in destroying chemical weapons that enabled the OPCW to register a record 96 percent destruction of global stockpiles, the occasion calls for retaining the spirit of international cooperation and collaboration in mitigating the threats of WMD use.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria only presents a grim reminder that use of these weapons is yet to fully consign to the history. Given that the norm against their use is more than a century old; its defence represents a collective responsibility. In this context, Russia's diplomatic shielding of the Assad regime accused of using chemical weapons is clearly indefensible. Though Russia is free to aid the Syrian regime in very many legitimate means and pursue its own geo-strategic interest in the region, defending the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime grossly undermines the cause that Russia is trying to uphold after destroying its own stockpiles. The chemical weapons destruction milestone achieved by Moscow therefore only raises the hope that Kremlin will take appropriate measures to restrain the Syrian regime and show leadership in steering the CWC regime as it poised to enter the post-destruction phase, alas, in the larger interest of regional and global security.

Endnotes:

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3. Weise, Rachel A., "Russia, U.S. Lag on Chemical Arms Deadline", Arms Control Association, July 2, 2009, URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_07-08/chemical_weapons.
4. Putin Hails Russia's Destruction Of Chemical Weapons, Chides U.S., RFE/RL, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chemical-weapons-destruction-united-states-stockpile/28760622.html>.
5. Russia: Chemical Weapons, Nuclear Threat Initiative, June 2015 URL: <http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/russia/chemical/>.
6. The CWC negotiations started in 1984. The period of early 1980's saw the emergence of so-called second Cold War, which made the progress on CWC increasingly difficult. Throughout these years, the U.S. accused USSR of using chemical weapons in countries like Afghanistan and Laos. The American allegations were never proven conclusively, unlike the known uses of chemical agents by U.S. during the Vietnam War. The USSR was also accused by U.S. for maintaining war-fighting doctrines involving use of chemical weapons. The allegations caused a major dispute between the two giants and hindered the progress of CWC negotiations. See, Wyoming Memorandum of Understanding (Wyoming MOU) Bilateral Verification Experiment and Data Exchange, Federation of American Scientists, URL: <https://fas.org/nuke/control/wyoming/index.html>.
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10. Jonathan B. Tucker, "Russia's New Plan For Chemical Weapons Destruction", Arms Control Today, July 1, 2001, URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001_07-08/tuckerjul_aug01.
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12. Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction, June 20, 2017, URL: <http://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/global-partnership-against-spread-weapons-and-materials-mass-destruction-10-plus-10-over-10-program/>.