

How to Uphold the WMD Taboo, an Interview with Michelle Bentley



Dr Michelle Bentley is Reader in International Relations and Director of the Centre for International Security at Royal Holloway, University of London. She has written two sole-authored books: *Weapons of Mass Destruction and US Foreign Policy: The Strategic Use of a Concept* (Routledge, 2014) and *Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo: Exploiting the Forbidden* (Manchester University Press, 2016). She is currently finishing up a new book on the biological weapons taboo.

What is the current research agenda of the Centre for International Security in the field of non-proliferation and disarmament?

The Centre for International Security is a varied group of security scholars analysing a wide range of topics related to non-proliferation and disarmament – including norms, military learning, and gender. We are committed to high-quality research which not only informs academic scholarship but can also have real-world impact. Members are actively engaged in international policy debates, advise public bodies, and work with NGOs. They have also testified and consulted at Westminster, the House of Lords, European Parliament, European Commission, the United Nations, the G7 and the G20, and are frequent speakers in national and international media.

In what ways will you and your Centre contribute to the Consortium activities and objectives?

After Brexit, UK academic collaboration with Europe has become extremely difficult. The decision to leave the EU has left British scholars finding it very hard to maintain, and develop new, research networks with Europe. As the Centre for International Security is based at a UK university (Royal Holloway, University of London), we want to help promote activities within the Consortium that not only focus on the important issues of disarmament and non-proliferation – but which also specifically facilitate UK-Europe collaboration. We want to contribute by keeping that dialogue going and helping to continue the research that has been put at threat by the leave vote.

Weapons of mass destruction (biological, chemical and nuclear) are one of the main research activities of your centre. How are you currently approaching these topics? What is the main research agenda you are pursuing?

The Centre's primary research focus relates to the taboos on weapons of mass destruction. The concept of the taboo says that these weapons are so abhorrent, so immoral, and so beyond the limits of our toleration that actors will refuse to use and even possess them. Our research explores this claim to ask why nuclear, biological, chemical, and radiological weapons are seen as repulsive and how this feeling plays into political responses to them? How strong are these norms and to what extent can they shape security policies? In particular, we consider whether focusing on taboos as a form of policy can drive more effective disarmament and non-proliferation strategies. Would arms control be improved by actively promoting taboos as a key means of prevention?

On the basis of the above research agenda, what do you consider should be the main focus of European non-proliferation policy in the coming years?

The war in Ukraine has sadly shown that more unconventional forms of weaponry are still a major problem – including for Europe specifically. Russian President, Vladimir Putin has, or is alleged to have, used numerous weapons that are considered to be especially illegitimate, such as thermobaric weapons, cluster bombs, and white phosphorus. There are further concerns that Putin has seriously considered the use of biological and nuclear arms. These examples demonstrate that modern warfare is still heavily characterised by the employment of highly abhorrent and indiscriminate arms – and controlling them needs to be a priority. Without those controls, the destructive potential of conflict will escalate.

Building momentum towards a global ASAT test ban

On 18 April, 2022, the US announced a commitment not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) tests and called on other nations to do the same. On 9 May, 2022, Canada followed suit and joined the US in this commitment. These announcements coincided with the first session of the UN Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviour between 9-13 May, 2022.

Concern regarding destructive ASAT tests was expressed repeatedly during the session and was highlighted by many as a space security threat with an achievable regulatory solution. Interest in banning such tests was also evident in the process that led to the establishment of the OEWG. Indeed, states highlighted destructive ASAT tests in their submissions to the Secretary-General under UN General Assembly Resolution 75/36 in 2021. Many states that did not expressly mention these tests nonetheless raised the issue of space debris, which is directly linked to ASAT testing. This reflects growing recognition that such tests present more disadvantages than benefits due to the indiscriminate and destabilizing impact of space debris.

The most recent destructive DA-ASAT test was conducted by Russia in November 2021, which spurred widespread condemnation from both states and non-state actors. The US announcement came five months after Russia's test and, as indicated in the statement, was prompted by Russia's test. However, tests have been increasing globally in recent years. India conducted a similar test in 2019. The calls for a global ban have been a reaction to this increasing number of tests.

The EU condemned Russia's test in November 2021. In its statement, the EU urged states to refrain from conducting such tests in light of their impact on stability and confidence and the risks posed by space debris. Similarly, in its submission under Resolution 75/36, the EU emphasized that these tests were among the "most visible" threats to space systems. Even prior to Resolution 75/36, the EU attempted to include destructive ASAT tests in multilateral discussions. The ill-fated 2008 draft International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities proposed by the EU included a provision on intentional destruction of space objects.

Prohibiting these tests through a global ban therefore is in line with the EU's position and priorities for the space sector, being in the interest of each individual Member State and the EU as a whole. However, any attempts to move forward on a global ban must take into account that some states claim the right to develop technologies and require assurances on the intent, scope and process for a global ban. Clarifying these open questions will be essential to achieving progress on a global ASAT test ban.

Nivedita Raju

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)



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Latest Publications

The War in Ukraine and the European Space Sector, European Space Policy Institute (ESPI), 05/2022

Launching the Competence Network CBWNet: Achievements of the Chemical Weapons Convention and Future Challenges, CBWNet Working Paper, 1, 05/2022

Italy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty: A Hesitant Opening?, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Commentary, 06/2022

Revisiting 'Minimal Nuclear Deterrence': Laying the Ground for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament, Dr. Tytti Erästö, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 06/2022

Network Calls

Doctoral Researcher in the Field of European Security and Defense Politics

The Institute Frankfurt (PRIF / HSFK) is seeking a part-time doctoral researcher, for three years starting on September 1, 2022. All the application documents and the outline of the doctoral project must be submitted no later than **July 29, 2022**. More information: [here](#).

Lecturer in War Studies

The Department of War Studies of the King's College London (KCL) seeks to recruit a Lecturer in War Studies. The successful applicant will undertake high-quality research and support our MA program in War Studies and provide other, related MA and BA teaching. The closing date for the application is **July 19, 2022**. More information: [here](#).

EU NEWS

EU Declaration on Reducing Threats in Outer Space

On the 11th of May the EU issued a [document](#) declaring full support for the [UNGA Resolution 76/231](#) entitled "*Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours*" considering it "as a step in a pragmatic and cooperative process aimed at maintaining outer space as a peaceful, safe, stable and sustainable environment".

The EU stressed the importance of conducting space activities in accordance with international law, including the UN Charter. At the same time, it advocated an approach based on behaviours, supported by relevant monitoring activities, as the most pragmatic way forward to improve space security. It called all States to subscribe the Hague Code of Conduct against ballistic missile proliferation (HCoC).

In the EU's view, the process launched with UNGA Resolution 75/36 may create "the momentum for more ambitious steps", including new legally binding instruments. These, according to the Union, should be effective, verifiable and cover all relevant threats.

NETWORK NEWS

Launch of new research network CBWNet for the reinforcement of norms against chemical and biological weapons

CBWNet is a new project carried out jointly by the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), the Chair for Public Law and International Law at the University of Gießen, the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and the Carl Friedrich Weizsäcker-Centre for Science and Peace Research (ZNF) at the University of Hamburg. The project aims to identify options to comprehensively strengthen the norms against chemical and biological weapons (CBW). Project partners will develop options and proposals to uphold or strengthen these norms and to enhance their resilience.

More information: [here](#)

Call for the 2022 EUNPDC Next Generation Workshop

On 14 November 2022, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), on behalf of the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, will organize the annual EU Non-proliferation and Disarmament Next Generation Workshop. Young students and professionals in the field, selected through a competitive process, will discuss pressing issues of the Arms Control, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament field and present fresh ideas and views on how to address the field's main challenges. Presentations will be followed by comments from other participants, including EU officials.

More information: [here](#).