FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Food Weaponization Makes a Deadly Comeback

How to Combat the Revival of an Ancient Tactic

BY ZACH HELDER, MIKE ESPY, DAN GLICKMAN, MIKE JOHANNS, AND DEVRY BOUGHNER VORWERK

March 22, 2024

ZACH HELDER is a graduate student at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs and served as Senior Adviser for Food and Agriculture Policy at the U.S. House of Representatives.

MIKE ESPY is former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Mississippi's Second District. He is the 2024 Advanced Leadership Initiative Fellow at Harvard University.

DAN GLICKMAN is former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Kansas's Fourth District. He is a Senior Fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

MIKE JOHANNS is former U.S. Senator from Nebraska and former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

DEVRY BOUGHNER VORWERK is CEO of DevryBV Sustainable Strategies. She was Global Head of Corporate Affairs at Cargill and served as Lead Economist for the Chair of the U.S. International Trade Commission.

This article was developed by a working group that also included Ertharin Cousin, Joseph Glauber, Phil Karsting, G. John Ikenberry, Emily Holland, and Miguel Centeno.

Food is a weapon of war. Like nuclear weapons, the weaponization of food can bring about mass civilian deaths and unthinkable horrors, provoking rightful moral outrage at the prospect of its use. But unlike nuclear weapons, food weaponization is routinely used in warfare. And in our globalized world, this tool has become more dangerous than ever.

Conflict has long been a central driver of global hunger. This enduring pattern is on tragic display today in places such as the Gaza Strip, Haiti, and Sudan, where millions of civilians are now on the brink of famine. The link between conflict and hunger stems in part from the weaponization of food itself, a method of warfare that exploits the coercive potential of disrupting (or threatening to disrupt) critical food supplies through the looting and destruction of farms, the manipulation of food supplies to exert domestic political control, and the use of sieges and blockades calibrated to starve the civilians trapped inside. More recent examples of the weaponization of food include the Syrian civil war, during which the regime of Bashar al-Assad waged what it called a "Starvation Until Submission Campaign," prohibiting the entry of food in residential areas thought to harbor rebel forces. On both sides of the civil war in Yemen, combatants have targeted agricultural production for destruction, disrupted local food markets, and obstructed or diverted humanitarian aid.

But since invading Ukraine in 2022, Russia has taken the tool to a new level. The Kremlin is not only targeting Ukraine's agricultural capacity but also threatening the broader global food supply. In an interdependent global economy, food weaponization in one region could affect the food security of all. Moscow has exploited this interdependence, deliberately disrupting the food supply to further the Kremlin's military objectives. Over the course of the war, Moscow has imposed export restrictions, blockaded the Black Sea, and bombed granaries—crushing Ukraine's agricultural exports, gaining leverage over neutral importer countries, and testing Western resolve in the process.

At the outset of the invasion, global food prices rocketed to an all-time high. Food price inflation and volatility continue to buffet low-income countries today. The war's shock to agricultural production and trade is a key driver of a global food crisis that has nearly tripled global acute hunger since 2020, leaving as many as 333 million people at risk of starvation.

This shock to the global food system represents an opportunity to rally the world to ban one of humanity's most shameful and enduring weapons of war. To that end, Washington should campaign for an international treaty prohibiting food weaponization. The negotiation and ratification of treaties is notoriously challenging, but it is that very challenge that gives treaties their outsize political and moral weight. A treaty process would engage the whole of society, from ordinary citizens to world leaders, to reckon with the danger of food weaponization and, if successful, produce a legally binding commitment to abandon the practice.

"FOOD IS A WEAPON"

In 1974, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz made a bold and now infamous pronouncement to *Time* magazine: "Food is a weapon. It is now one of the principal tools in our negotiating kit." In the context of the Cold War, Butz viewed American agricultural abundance as an instrument of coercion that Washington could wield in the Third World: food aid and trade in exchange for political concessions. The same *Time* article observed, "This may be a brutal policy, . . . but Washington may feel no obligation to help countries that consistently and strongly opposed it." Butz drew on an intuition as old as the agricultural revolution, that food bestows control to those who possess it and renders vulnerable those who do not. To exploit that vulnerability—by, say, laying siege to and starving an enemy's civilian population—is to weaponize food.

Food is indeed a weapon, and Butz was hardly the first public official to state it so plainly. Throughout the Russian Civil War, from 1917 to 1922, Bolshevik leaders were obsessed with the acquisition and distribution of grain. Famines across eastern Europe—at first an unintended consequence of civil war and societal collapse—offered the Bolsheviks such leverage over domestic opposition that they even contemplated rejecting food aid from the American Relief Administration, explicitly telling the Americans that "food is a weapon." During World War II, the relative strength of U.S. food production was critical to the Allied war effort, so much so that the U.S. Office of War Information promoted food rationing with a striking slogan: "Food is a weapon. Don't waste it!"

Before World War II, the effects of food weaponization were local in scope, as food security was largely a function of domestic or regional food supplies. But as regional food systems became woven into an interdependent global system, Butz envisioned something even grander: American dominance of the global food trade as a tool of economic and political warfare. He failed to foresee that global interdependence made the targeting of individual states infeasible.

The United States first tested Butz's proposition in 1980, imposing a grain embargo on the Soviet Union. The plan failed: Moscow swiftly found alternative suppliers, and the Carter administration incurred fierce domestic political blowback. But the American experiment with what some then called "the food weapon" offered a grim lesson: food trade restrictions could have dangerous and unpredictable consequences. It became evident that a liberal democracy leading an international order had no use for such an imprecise weapon, which was as likely to harm one's allies and domestic constituencies as it was to harm one's intended target.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin is not so constrained. He believes that a more chaotic world improves his relative power, protects his regime, and advances his military objectives. The Kremlin's actions have demonstrated that a single state can inflate the price of food, imposing grave harms on hungry people around the world.

FAILURE TO GOVERN

The West has few tools to deter rogue states from weaponizing food on a global scale. International humanitarian law, much of which was crafted in the early twentieth century, could not have envisioned today's interconnected food system. Existing agricultural trade agreements do not prevent the use of export restrictions as coercive tools. Maritime law is permissive of blockades as long as humanitarian aid is unrestricted. Even the Geneva Conventions' prohibition on civilian starvation as a method of war includes exceptions and ambiguities, such as when starvation is unintentional or incidental to military objectives.

Of course, intent is difficult to establish in the heat of conflict. It is also largely irrelevant to the civilians who suffer the consequences. A tactic that incidentally or unexpectedly brings starvation on an enemy's civilian population and thereby confers some military advantage is often indistinguishable from the most brazenly deliberate uses of food as a weapon. The complexity of the food system and warfare itself make parsing intent ever harder. If Kyiv were to destroy Russia's wheat and fertilizer exports to damage the Russian economy, many would surely argue that such behavior was acceptable, even if many civilians outside the zone of conflict were harmed in the process. Existing international agreements intend to protect civilians in the line of fire, not guard against systemic threats to civilians around the world. In an interdependent food system, the disruption of critical food supplies is food weaponization, regardless of intent.

If the weaponization of food were judged by its outcome rather than by the perceived motivations of the perpetrators, states that agree to prohibit the practice would be much more constrained in how they wage war. If intent is inscrutable, as it is with modern food weaponization, then it is plausibly deniable. To meaningfully restrain the use of food as a weapon, strong norms against the practice must be paired with new rules and explicit obligations.

THE CASE FOR A TREATY

The international community's long-standing moral objection to starvation as a method of warfare needs a new mechanism of enforcement and accountability: a treaty banning the use of food as a weapon. Ideally, the treaty would have four conventions, or agreements. The first would define and prohibit the use of food as a weapon in conflict. The second would cover the use of export restrictions as a tool of economic coercion. The third would strengthen the international community's commitment to prevent food crises. And the fourth would commit member states to fund research and development that would help countries diversify their food supply chains, mitigating their vulnerability to the weaponization of food.

To better protect civilians in conflict, the treaty would need to make clear that there is no legitimate military purpose for attacks on food or its means of production. The treaty would specify that land and facilities that are used primarily for agricultural production or storage must be treated as demilitarized zones. It would hold combatants explicitly responsible for the civilian food supply in territory they control, requiring parties to provide sufficient in-kind or financial contributions to the World Food Program, the UN agency tasked with providing food aid worldwide, as a cost of waging war. Military interference in trade, economic sanctions, and trade policy are all forms of global food weaponization, and the treaty should address each of these tools.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative—an agreement among Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey to temporarily lift the Russian blockade of Ukraine and resume grain exports through the international waters of the Black Sea—provides an instructive model for preventing military interference in the food trade. In July 2022, the initiative established a joint coordination center between the parties and the UN to administer the safe passage of food shipments in and out of the Black Sea; the center directly supervised shipments to make certain that the initiative was not abused for military operations. A treaty banning food weaponization could institutionalize such a framework. In the event of a war, the parties would be required to set up joint coordination centers with the involvement of the UN—sites that would monitor the flow of food supplies to conflict zones and ensure that food shipments were not diverted, monetized by combatants, or exploited to smuggle military supplies.

Economic sanctions can also function as a form of food weaponization, intentionally or not. Western countries imposing sanctions against Russia took pains to safeguard the food supply, yet food markets were nonetheless affected because of a phenomenon called "overcompliance," or the tendency of private firms to play it excessively safe under uncertain sanctions rules. A treaty banning food weaponization would automatically carve out food and critical agricultural inputs from sanctions but also provide universal implementation guidelines to solve the overcompliance problem.

Finally, export restrictions on critical food and fertilizer exporters pose a serious and ongoing risk to global food security. Export restrictions tend to be contagious, triggering panic buying and domestic food hoarding in a process resembling a bank run. Consequently, a large and hostile agricultural power can, as the Kremlin did, choke its export supply, stoking inflation and price volatility, before reentering global markets to sell food and inputs at extortionate prices or exerting political pressure on food-importing countries desperate for affordable supplies. For that reason, the treaty on food weaponization should prohibit countries that produce significant quantities of food and fertilizer from imposing export restrictions on those goods.

Parties to the treaty should also mitigate the developing world's heightened vulnerability to food weaponization. Underlying food crises, such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate disasters, make some countries particularly vulnerable to food weaponization. For this reason, the parties to a treaty would need to commit to preventing and responding to food crises. One way to do so would be to obligate the parties to make additional financial commitments to multilateral institutions such as the World Food Program, as well as to a new research fund aimed at strengthening the developing world's food supply.

A global treaty banning food weaponization may appear highly aspirational, as most treaties do before they are realized. But every country has an interest in banning food weaponization. For the United States, food weaponization around the world poses a security risk as well as an economic threat, with the potential to harm American farmers and consumers. China, a major food importer, also has an interest in restraining the use of food as a weapon and could prove a valuable partner in promoting a treaty. Developing countries have been harmed the most by the weaponization of food and have good reason to back a treaty that would constrain larger powers. If key powers, such as Russia, decline to participate, signatories could agree to impose collective penalties on nonsignatories that violate the treaty's tenets, universalizing aspects of the treaty even in the absence of universal ratification.

Global food interdependence has amplified the risks of food weaponization beyond war's immediate theaters. These new risks create new responsibilities. Unimpeded, the weaponization of food may

precipitate a more hungry and violent world. While the memory of war is fresh, world leaders must take the food weapon off the table.