

Retaliation in Kind

—a CW necessity

by LTC Richard Read

The capability of the Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces to use chemical weapons during a conflict in Europe presents the US and its NATO allies with a formidable threat. Soviet forces have undergone extensive modernization and growth over the past years, and their chemical warfare (CW) capabilities have expanded significantly as a result of that effort.

Capitalizing on a unilateral US de-emphasis beginning in 1969, the Soviet Union has developed chemical agents, delivery systems, tactical doctrine, and organizations to conduct offensive chemical operations on a massive scale. Taken together with strong evidence of recent use of both chemical agents and toxins by the Soviet Union or their surrogates in Afghanistan, Laos and Cambodia, we have clear indications of Soviet intentions.

Operationally, Soviet doctrine calls for a non-nuclear offensive strategy that relies on operational-level surprise, as well as rapid and timely completion of assigned missions during each stage of an operation. Accordingly, the Soviets, aware their forces may encounter unforeseen resistance, expect to plan for some type of "quality edge" that enables their commanders to maintain their time schedules. At the same time, the Soviets consider it to their advantage to keep a European conflict non-nuclear and to minimize, as much as possible, destruction of the European indus-

trial base. Chemical weapons, therefore, might well provide the desired "quality edge."

The US and its NATO allies rely heavily on the policy of deterrence through strength. Although deterrence theory has evolved from the nuclear weapons environment, one cannot simply draw a direct parallel to chemical weapons. Nuclear deterrence is based on the fact that the destruction caused by these weapons is so complete and so devastating that the use of them by either side becomes virtually irrational.

On the other hand, chemical weapons, unlike nuclear weapons, can be defended against. Therefore, the foundation of chemical deterrence is built on two separate pillars: defense and retaliation. A strong, viable CW defensive capability is essential. Yet, by itself, defense is not an adequate deterrent. In fact, the nature of CW is such that the requirements of CW defense may actually enhance the attractiveness to a planner of employing chemical weapons.

The masks, protective overgarments, and detailed decontamination procedures required impose a tremendous burden on the defending force, both operationally and logistically. In addition, once chemical weapons have been used in a theater, doctrine dictates that any incoming strikes or smoke from unknown sources be treated as potential CW attacks and responded to accordingly. Thus, simply by threat alone, the defender can be forced into a disadvantageous

posture. As a result, meaningful CW deterrence must also be based on the second equally significant pillar, effective retaliation.

The policy options available to the US and its allies are basically three. First, the NATO response to enemy use of CW could be limited to other than chemical means. This policy provides the least cost option, as the requirement to maintain a chemical weapons stockpile would be eliminated. In fact, the overall impact of this policy on current US and NATO force structures and budgets might be relatively minor. However, it would put a premium on CW defense and, in all likelihood, require some increased expenditures for the development and procurement of detection/protection devices.

Yet by keeping any Allied response to the initiation of CW by Soviet forces somewhat specific, we significantly complicate the task of the Soviet planner. It seems natural to assume that under this policy our response ranges from a purely conventional response up to, and including, tactical nuclear weapons. The policy has its drawbacks. It would be politically sensitive as it would effectively decouple US strategic nuclear weapons from our response—a fact unacceptable to many NATO allies.

It also tends to place the CW defense burden only on Allied forces, who face the probability of fighting encumbered by protective clothing and equipment. Accordingly, this policy might even enhance the likelihood of CW use against such targets as air bases and POMCUS sites due to the likelihood of delays in operations resulting from necessary protective measures.

Finally, the Soviets could actually use the leverage of potential escalation to global nuclear war to negate any use of tactical nuclear weapons by NATO in response to a CW attack.

The second policy option for the NATO allies would be to directly link Soviet use of CW to the potential use of the entire US nuclear arsenal. In effect, this policy declares CW as a major escalatory step in NATO eyes and relies on nuclear weapons as the major CW deterrent. While appearing to provide the Allies with a spectrum of responses, this policy tends to force one toward the upper end of the scale, namely strategic nuclear weapons.

Although this coupling may appeal to many NATO allies, it would be difficult for the US to sell at home. The American people would demand that some significant "chemical threshold" be crossed before the continental US be put at risk of a Soviet nuclear counter-strike. Simple tactical use of chemical weapons by the Soviets is not enough for the American people to be willing to risk the loss of Chicago.

Additionally, this policy requires improved detection and identification capabilities for chemical attacks as well as rapid effective command and control for nuclear weapons if the policy is to be viable. Furthermore, this policy still places the CW defensive burden only on the alliance since the Soviets are concerned only with protection from their own use of CW.

The third possible policy option calls for retaliation in kind to a CW attack. Simply stated, the current US policy of no first use of CW would stand; however, if used against NATO forces, we reserve the right to retaliate with our own chemical weapons. The main advantage to this policy is that it permits a meaningful response to a CW attack without the risk of an a priori escalation to nuclear weapons.

Secondly, this policy places a comparable, significant CW defense burden on the attacking forces.

This, in turn, tends to slow operations, and thus negate any tactical advantage originally perceived for Soviet CW use. This, of course, is the basic purpose of deterrence. Retaliation in kind does not automatically preclude any other responses, but truly does, in fact, make the spectrum of responses complete.

It is essential to note, of course, that the success and effectiveness of any such policy depends heavily on the Allies possessing a viable CW retaliatory capability. Since the current US chemical stockpile is not suitable as a credible deterrent, adoption of this policy would necessitate increased costs. Until recently, no positive steps had been taken regarding the US stockpile since 1969. Outdated munitions, inadequate delivery systems, and improper agent selection all combine to compound the problem. Inappropriate or leaking munitions, changes in tactical doctrine, and the inherent difficulties in storing and handling the current stockpile result in less than 30 percent being judged to be of even limited military usefulness.

However, within the last year, the US has begun production of binary chemical munitions that can solve many of the current problems. Binary munitions provide an effective way to modernize chemical stocks and reestablish a strong, viable deterrent. Once the binary stockpile is fully developed, complete demilitarization of the old and dangerous stockpile can be accomplished.

Of the three policy options presented for dealing with the CW threat, the option of retaliation in kind, while not the one of least cost, would be the most effective. Other options impose either unacceptable limitations on our conventional forces due to necessary CW protective measures, thus increasing their risk of defeat, or introduce

the danger of unwanted escalation beyond the nuclear threshold. Neither of those possibilities is acceptable or appealing. Budget constraints notwithstanding, we must set priorities that offer the best chance of success.

By strengthening the second pillar of CW deterrence and developing a viable ability to retaliate in kind to enemy use of CW, we bolster our strong beginning in CW defense and perhaps actually can preclude any use of chemical weapons. Then, from a position of strength, we can push forward with negotiations that can lessen the likelihood of the world ever again having to witness scenes such as those that flashed across our television screens from the Iran-Iraq War. To do any less would be abrogating our responsibilities, first, to provide our forces with the means to defend our country and, second, to do our part to make the world a better place for us all. ☐

LTC Richard D. Read's present duty position is Chief, Chemical and NBC Defense Division, ODCSOPS, HQ DA.

His previous assignments include duty as a chemical officer in the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Carson, Colorado; the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), and 196th Infantry Brigade in the Republic of Vietnam; the 4th Allied Tactical Air Force in Germany; and as division chemical officer for the 7th Infantry Division (Light) at Fort Ord, California. Other assignments include duty as an ORSA analyst at the Concepts Analysis Agency in Washington, DC, and as an assignments officer at Chemical Branch. LTC Read recently completed command of the 84th Chemical Battalion at Fort McClellan, Alabama. LTC Read has a BS degree in chemical engineering from the University of Colorado, where he received an ROTC commission in the Chemical Corps. He has an MS degree in operations research from the Naval Postgraduate School.

His military education includes the Artillery Officer Basic Course, Chemical Officer Advanced Course, and the Command and General Staff College. He is a recent graduate of the Army War College.