

The Chemical Strategy

—negotiation and modernization

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Serious questions arise over the strategy of the United States in pursuing a chemical weapons ban while at the same time requesting congressional support for modernization of the chemical stockpile.

This dual based strategy for eliminating the chemical threat is a realistic and complementary approach. It takes into consideration the current inadequacies of our chemical retaliatory capability and the difficulties involved in achieving a chemical weapons ban.

President Reagan summarized this approach during his 4 April 1984 press

conference when he announced the United States would present a draft chemical weapons ban treaty in Geneva. He stated,

"The United States must maintain a limited retaliatory capability until we achieve an effective ban. We must be able to deter a chemical attack against us or our allies. And without a modern and credible deterrent, the prospects for achieving a comprehensive ban would be nil."

In assessing the chemical warfare threat confronting the United States, two things become obvious—the chemical threat is growing and the US ability to deter or respond to a chemical attack has eroded. Consider

first the chemical threat. The Soviet Union has an overwhelming chemical warfare capability—an extensive arsenal of chemical weapons, delivery systems which can range deep targets, protective equipment equal in quality to ours and in greater quantity, and an extensive force structure which exceeds any reasonable defensive requirements. The President's assessment presented in his press conference stated,

"The Soviet Union's extensive arsenal of chemical weapons threatens the US Forces. They have a massive arsenal and are ahead of us in many areas having to do with chemical warfare."

Until December 1987 the United

States had, on the other hand, maintained an 18-year self-imposed chemical weapons production moratorium which placed the United States "at risk" to the Soviets. Additionally, the spread of chemical weapons to third world countries has placed the United States in a tenuous threat position.

Chemical warfare is no longer reserved for the superpowers. Chemical warfare may be more likely to be initiated by a smaller nation in an effort to exploit a perceived weakness. We now know that there are some 17 countries that are capable of offensive chemical warfare. There are several other nations with the capability to produce chemical weapons or that are actively seeking that capability.

In contrast, the United States no longer has a credible chemical retaliatory capability. Our present stockpile has become obsolete for use on today's modern battlefield and does not meet the requirements of our field commanders. The average age of the munitions in the stockpile is some 28 years. Moreover, it is potentially hazardous to maintain.

The nation has made a commitment to ridding itself of this old stockpile and replacing it with one that is safer, more effective, and, at the same time, smaller. Toward this end, the United States has structured a well-defined, phased approach to replace our current stockpile with new and improved binary weapons systems.

The new systems, the 155mm binary artillery projectile, the Binary Chemical Warhead, MLRS, and the Navy/Air Force BIGEYE bomb will be filled with non-lethal components which mix in flight to produce the toxic chemical agents. These munitions provide the advantage of improved safety in storage and handling as well as an optimum solution to our battlefield retaliatory shortfalls.

The President has strongly supported the "binary modernization program as essential to national

security," "certified this need to Congress," and requested funds to continue this modernization effort. He emphasized that "failure to move forward with our chemical modernization program would significantly reduce our negotiating leverage."

Last year the Congress gave this urgent program support by approving funds for 155mm binary projectile production, and continued development of the Binary Chemical Warhead for the MLRS. The President certified the production of the 155mm binary projectile and the Army initiated production in December 1987.

The deterrent value of a credible chemical retaliatory capability cannot be underestimated. President Reagan cited as an example World War II. He stated,

"All the nations had them (chemical weapons) and no one used them, even in the most desperate moments when defeat was staring at them because they knew that the others had them and would use them in return."

The deterrent value may be even more valid today. Considering the lethality of current agents and the sophisticated delivery systems available to employ such weapons, a one-sided use of chemical weapons could be decisive, even against well-protected defenders.

The Soviets can attack, contaminate, and severely degrade operations at US or Allied airfields, ports, supply and maintenance centers, command and control facilities, and other vital support functions. Today, the United States cannot impose a similar burden on Soviet forces. This asymmetry is dangerous.

The ultimate goal of the US Government is to eliminate the possibility of chemical warfare by achieving a complete and verifiable ban of such weapons. Since 1980, when the goal was formally established, the United States has aggressively pursued every opportunity to achieve

some progress toward negotiating a treaty and tabled a draft chemical weapons (CW) convention in 1984. No other nation has done this. Progress was slow.

As binary modernization comes closer, the USSR gives the appearance of becoming more flexible. In March 1987, the Soviets admitted, for the first time, to possessing chemical weapons. Also, they proclaimed an end to their CW production, announced they possess less than 50,000 tons of poisonous substances, and publicly stated that a CW convention can be signed this year—a fact that is simply not true.

While the Soviets may agree "in principle," they seldom provide detailed proposals to implement critical treaty issues such as verification. There is an enormous amount of technical, fiscal, and administrative detail to be worked out. Additionally, we must still be able to leverage the other CW-capable nations to participate in a world-wide ban. Accordingly, we must continue to aggressively pursue our program to reestablish a credible chemical deterrent retaliatory capability through modernization. President Reagan has stated,

"If we're going to have a chemical warfare ban or treaty banning them, we've got to have something to bargain with. They must know that the alternative to banning them is to then face the fact that we're going to build a deterrent."

The chemical strategy is clear: Sustain a strong deterrent safeguard while vigorously seeking to conclude an arms control agreement. To enhance the prospects for successful negotiation, the United States must continue to pursue, as a high priority, the current program for modernizing the US chemical stockpile. Until the threat posed by chemical weapons is effectively eliminated by treaty, the United States must achieve and then maintain a modern and credible deterrent.