
Defense Report

AUSA



A Safe Way to be Ready for Chemical Warfare—A Decision is all that is Needed

There is an abundance of treaties and protocols denouncing chemical warfare in just about all its forms; flame warfare, defoliants, deadly gasses and even relatively safe riot-control agents. The United States and the Soviet Union are signatories to those understandings and yet during the troubled years of his administration President Nixon saw fit to make an additional pledge against the "first use" of chemical warfare.

He did this for a variety of reasons. Not the least of them was the observation that the Soviet Union is not expected to abide by the treaties if the use of chemical warfare could make a difference in the achievement of its political/military goals. Chemical warfare is accepted by the Soviets as a normal part of their offensive arsenal and their strategic and tactical doctrine calls for its use. Hard evidence also shows they are very well prepared to use it, both in terms of having ready weapons and training their troops to exploit them.

The United States has not been standing idly by. We have detection and protection equipment for our troops that is probably far better than that available to their Soviet counterparts. But our philosophy is strongly against the use of deadly chemicals and this aversion is reflected in less-than-enthusiastic training in that mode of warfare. Nevertheless, our determination to retaliate against any first use is represented by a substantial stockpile of chemical weapons and it is that stockpile that may be the weakest link in our readiness to respond to an enemy chemical attack. It is old, it is deteriorating and it is stored in some very dangerous places—like the city of Denver, Colorado—where an accident could threaten thousands of lives.

The Army has had a potential solution to the stockpile problem for several years in the form of binary chemical munitions. As the name implies they are composed of two elements but each of those elements is safe until it is mixed with the second in the last few seconds before striking its target. The Army, which produces chemical weapons for all the services, proposes to gradually replace the present dangerous stockpile with binary shells and bombs, detoxifying the old material as it goes. Unfortunately, even though the binary principle has been proved sound, there has been little enthusiasm among political leaders to embark on a new chemical weapons project. Requests for binary production funds have been repeatedly rejected.

But now there is evidence that the Carter Administration may be willing to take the first step toward binary production. They should be encouraged to do so. It is a well-advised move toward a level of preparedness that might deter the use of weapons that are in many ways more frightening than nuclear warfare. It is also a common-sense step in the direction of a safe stockpile.