
Defense Report

AUSA



Chemical Warfare—It's Time to Act

The time has come when this country can no longer ignore the specter of chemical warfare. Yes, it is an insidious threat, repugnant to civilized people, immoral in its application. Yes, it has been renounced, and treaties have been signed. But it's there, and our potential enemies have built enormous stockpiles of chemical agents, militarized them and equipped their armed forces with delivery systems that can reach across NATO and into the Middle East, and even to naval forces operating at sea.

And they have employed their chemicals—in Southeast Asia, in Afghanistan—calculating correctly that world reaction would be far outweighed by benefits gained, not only in military effects against their enemies, but also from the testing and experimentation so important to weapons research and development.

Meanwhile, the United States's continued adherence to its self-imposed, unilateral freeze in production of chemical munitions since 1969 has eroded our stockpile to the point where only a small portion is usable and effective today. The remainder—not deliverable, not repairable, ineffective or obsolete—represents primarily a safety and storage problem.

Congress has now agonized for several years over production of safer binary chemical munitions, refusing to provide funds for this step in modernization; refusing to acknowledge the terrible imbalance of a confrontation in which one side can employ chemicals in support of military operations while the other can only attempt to survive. That imbalance promises such a significant military advantage to the forces of the "haves," in this case the Soviet Union, that failure on their part to employ chemicals would be militarily foolish.

It is time for Congress to look rationally, rather than emotionally, at this problem. Even with protective gear, soldiers, sailors and airmen become so immobile and ineffective that they will be overwhelmed by other battlefield threats even if they avoid becoming chemical casualties. To continue to deny our soldiers the ability to retaliate in kind, an ability which has historically deterred an aggressor's first use of chemical weapons, is tragically shortsighted.