

Leader

Peering through the retroscope...

As the tenth anniversary of 9/11 passes, the shock to the system it instilled, and the resulting uplift of counter terrorism efforts seems to wane. It may be time or the ubiquity of the imagery on power point slides that has reduced its ability to influence thinking – seen by the huge reductions in spending forced by an even bigger bogey man – the economy. Yet while it is easy to become blasé about the event and the global situation that it engendered, the impact cannot be under-estimated. Speaking as someone who was involved – albeit only just – with NBC/CBRN in 2001, it was an industry and threat that was on death's door. Often in the same powerpoint slides you will see the transition from 'State Based Actors using CWA to Terrorist Groups using TICs and BWA etc., yet those that were involved in it at the time know that this nice transition was, in reality, not there.

Despite the sarin attacks of 1995, and other assorted minor incidents, NBC was likely to be the victim of the defence budget doldrums that were the norm during the late 1990s. The late Jonathan Tucker, in his *Toxic Terror* – published in 2000, yet already name checking the potential use of WMD by Osama bin Laden – stated that, "Terrorism has traditionally relied on relatively unsophisticated weapons such as guns and bombs, which have been used in a small number of ways to inflict modest damage with limited social and political impact. At the same time, the historical record includes hundreds of cases in which individuals or groups motivated by criminal, economic, political or religious objectives have employed CBW agents. None of these incidents has involved mass casualties, either because the motivation or the capability to conduct such an attack was lacking. Accordingly, it is difficult to extrapolate the probability of such events in the future, or to predict their potential impact."

So what has changed in the ten years since Tucker's analysis? There have been hundreds of cases – by the FBI's count – of some form of Chemical, Biological or Radiological attempt, yet even the most notorious of these, the Amerithrax letters, lacked mass casualties – again perhaps due to what Tucker posited as a dearth of motivation. The one mass casualty incident, 911, used explosives, albeit in a non-conventional way, and as such falls outside the remit of this leader.

The parallels between now and ten years ago are stunning. We still have the threat from both 'lone wolves' – such as Anders Breivik, the right wing fundamentalist who fantasised about using anthrax, and from state sponsored terrorism – Al Qaeda has become franchised across the Middle East and Northern Africa.

CBRN still reads as 'No Body Cares,' at the recent Nato Allied Command for Transformation (ACT) Industry Day in London, there was a major emphasis on the deplorable trend of doing 'less with less.' Anders Fogh Rasmussen, (Nato Secretary General), like previous Secretary Generals before him, was complaining about capability gaps opening up due to a lack of funding. During the Question and Answer session I asked him about the potential capability gap opening up in CBRN, as many Nato allies slice away capability. "It is a Nato priority," he replied, "Something that we should further develop as well as working with the Middle East and Africa on preventing the proliferation of WMDs. The Libyan government has to ensure that proliferation does not take place. I don't foresee a Nato role in dealing with the post-conflict Libyan chemical stock."

As is often the case for Senior Leaders there is neither the understanding ('perhaps if I say something about Libya the question will go away...'), or care about CBRN – there is the lip service (It is a Nato Priority), but in terms of concrete actions over making sure that it does not become a major capability gap it is not there. This perhaps is where the differences between a decade ago and now becomes obvious – while we are still living in Tucker's conclusion, what we are seeing is a richer brew of events, a maturation of forces and, above all, an increase in interest from 'red force.' Despite the best prognostications of Senators Graham and Talent that we face an imminent nuclear or biological attack (only two years left of their five year 'deadline'), a WMD attack is still an unlikely occurrence, but radicalisation and fundamentalism, combined with the 'Arab Spring,' has grown to such an extent that the chances of a CBRN incident/attack is now greater than ever. Yet with cuts in the UK, Germany, US' (and many others) CBRN capability, we are seeing a scenario where our military forces are less likely to be able to deal with the CBRN threat than they were ten years ago. On the obverse side, however, our civilian forces are far better equipped, often to an order of magnitude greater than they were ten years ago. Yet, as our colleagues in the hazmat community will tell you, once the cuts in the civil side need to be made it is the niche capability that is the first to go – and there is a good chance that all we are seeing is that the military is further along the curve than the civil responders. We date the halt of the previous epoch's slide by the combination of both mass casualty terrorist attack and a lone wolf CBRN incident – let's hope that we don't date the start of the next cycle with another one.