

Leader

As has become traditional, the December Leader tends to be a year in review. It gets repetitive, admittedly on an annual basis, to say that there has not been a CBRN year like it... but here we are again saying just that for 2017! All developments have been towards an increase in the use of CBR substances, and while there is more of the 'same old' there is some new as well.

The new elements are to do with changes on the global scale, rather than down in the CBRN weeds. The new US president has certainly decided to do things differently, especially where North Korea (DPRK) is concerned. Despite bold assertions that the North's nuclear ambitions were "not going to happen", 2017 was the year that DPRK went thermonuclear. President Trump inherited a Korean policy that had failed and, despite plenty of bluster, has been unable to improve on it in 12 months. 'Little Rocket Man' might look good on paper (albeit the electronic variety), but the goading does not seem to have had any obvious positive effect. For a period of a few weeks we seemed closer to the use of nuclear weapons than at any time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Syria decided to test the president early in his regime with another attack involving sarin, and found a more combative POTUS (perhaps fortified by delicious chocolate cake) who was happy to scatter cruise missiles liberally around Syrian airbases. In terms of tactical effect the attack had little impact, but on the political stage it does seem to have outlined to Assad that there is a new incumbent in the White House. There has been no use of organophosphate since, but the same was true post-Ghouta, and we will have to see what 2018 brings.

While the conflict in Syria would seem to be coming to some form of resolution, it's fairly unlikely that anyone other than mid to low level sacrificial lambs will be offered up for previous chemical weapon agent attacks. After a closed security council meeting, Russia's ambassador to the UN stated that the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) had "discredited itself completely" and that Russia would work to find a new mechanism capable of correctly identifying the individuals behind various attacks.

Considering that the JIM was mainly involved in pointing the finger at the Assad regime for the most egregious attacks, the correct individuals are probably not members of the ruling regime. The drive for action post-Ghouta has well and truly evaporated and it is unlikely that anything will replace it. Syria is now shaping up as a worrying case study for the OPCW crowning achievement now has more the air of a pyrrhic victory.

Despite the formation of a National Opioid Taskforce

in the US, there doesn't seem to be anything that can stop the fentanyl (and other opioid) epidemic. This is not just a north American problem, albeit that they currently have the worst of it. But with fentanyl appearing in the UK and Europe (since 2017 those two have had to change their relationship status to 'it's complicated') this is going to be something that will plague first responders. Unlike previous trends in narcotics this one is important due to the toxicity of the agent, and the fact that it can be bought in bulk, pure form from pharma companies in Asia and delivered to your door. The democratisation of narcotics manufacture might be good for junkies, but it is going to be very bad for first responders who will have to handle these substances.

While CRISPR hasn't delivered the bio-apocalypse yet (or any time soon), if the concerns of Professor Zilinskas are anything to go by we may well be forced to re-examine Russia's interest in BWA. The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention has long been criticised for not having its fingers in any bio-dyke holes, but if his claims have any accuracy to them, it will be hard to see what is the point of that organisation. Whether it is on the geo-political scale, or the CBRN scale there would seem to be a need for greater scrutiny of Russian plans than there has been for 30 years, and, since measures require counter-measures, any Nato plans to counter them. This is not a swift proposition as the education and hiring (or hiring and education) of a generation of analysts cannot be done in a few short years.

So, as 2017 has certainly been a landmark year, what of 2018? Considering Trump's unilateralism on things like the Paris Climate Accord and the matter of Jerusalem, it would seem likely that there will be a similar lurch over the Iran nuclear deal framework. At the time of writing there are riots in north east Iran and no doubt the Rouhani regime will want to look especially strong in their wake, so a misjudged Little Rocket Man type of tweet could be the spark that sets off a major conflagration.

It would also be naïve to assume that North Korea will stay quiet in 2018, and with the personalities of Kim and Trump it's anyone's guess who would start that ball rolling. Conflict seems very likely; let's just hope it is no more than a war of words. As for the Levant, there is still the belief that some of the chemical weapons have been spirited away for future use, and it will also be difficult to judge which side will use them and against whom. The easiest of all predictions for 2018 is that when I sit down to write this column in 12 months' time, we will have lived through another poster year for CBRN!