

Leader

Georgia on my mind

A witches brew of CBRN stories are emanating from the South Ossetia/Georgia or, as it is currently developing, South Ossetia/Russia vs US/Nato, conflict. Clearly some journalists (the UK's *The Times* for example) who had been doing some research – or alternatively had been briefed – came to the conclusion that the conflict in the area could provide terrorists with the perfect opportunity for stealing radiological sources to create a 'dirty bomb.'

Jumping on to the fact that Georgia has witnessed "the only confirmed case of missing, weapons-grade fissile material", and that it boasted a number of entrepreneurs trying to sell everything from caesium to low-enriched uranium, the media were bound to play this element of the conflict up to the hilt. Personally, I cannot see it being in Russia's interest to encourage any form of radiological racketeering. The next-door Chechen rebels – themselves aspiring radiological terrorists – have created enough international tension in the region and once isotopes enter the 'market' there is no knowing where they will appear next – Moscow as much as Manchester. While there might be a froth of lawlessness around Georgia at the moment, there are enough states in the region with similar unconventional weapon sources whose stability and security are far worse. The US has done a massive job following 911 in cleaning up the ex-Soviet states, international intelligence agencies are infiltrating the criminal bazaars, confusing what is a "legit" deal (in the broadest sense of the word), coupled with attacks on known terrorist "scientists" (again in the broadest sense of the word), such as Abu Khabab al-Masri, has culminated in a very different climate from when these stories first appeared in 2004. Does war-torn Georgia pose more of a CBRN threat than before? Probably, but not enough to keep anyone awake at night.

Of far more concern is the impact that the attack on Georgia has had on other neighbouring states to Russia. Poland was quick to stop quibbling and sign the deal that will see 10 interceptor missiles placed on missile bases near the Baltic. The US has always insisted that these interceptors are aimed at no-one, and are designed to be used defensively against threats such as Iran – but it is hard to see how bases near the Baltic are a defence against attacks emanating from the Caspian. Moscow has, legitimately, not been impressed, yet as the Russians seek to find their feet on the world stage their language has become belligerent. Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn told journalists at a Moscow press conference that Poland was making itself a target for Russian missiles and that the US-Polish agreement could not go unpunished. The Polish President, Lech Kaczynski, in a remarkable piece of understatement suggested that "no-one who has good intentions towards us... should be afraid of it."

Russia's statements of aiming missiles at Polish targets is hardly unexpected, and would no doubt result in a large amount of fallout landing on Russia as well as Western Europe. But if it has got to the "buckets of instant sunshine" stage, then a little bit of fallout is hardly going to matter. It will be interesting to see the impact that this has on other



Will the new cold war lead to the demise of CBRNE? ©DoD

states that are lukewarm to missile defence, such as the Czech Republic, and it will be interesting to see how it strengthens ties to Nato in such countries as Latvia and Estonia.

Again the press has made a great deal out of the fact that the interceptors are of dubious quality, and whether they will be able to hit their targets. As Moscow is only too aware, this is beside the point. Once the interceptors are there they can be upgraded – and the technology is improving every year. It is the political decision that gets them into the bases in the first place that is the challenge. More interesting than this is the statement that the US is going to be obliged to defend Poland at greater speed than Nato can: "Poland wants to be in alliances where assistance comes in the very first hours of any possible conflict" – David Tusk, the Polish prime minister. Setting aside what this does to the future of the alliance (we're not interested in the rest of you, just America), the logistic problem of doing it (where are the troops coming from and how are they going to get there that fast? Will the closure of US bases in Germany be followed by the opening of bases in Poland?), what impact does this have on CBRN?

Unfortunately the answer is nothing good. First up is the Russian suspension, in answer to Nato's own suspension, of various agreements: of interest to CBRN is the suspension of information exchanges on nuclear safety, civil emergency planning and counter terrorism planning. Yet the greatest change will be that the major defence priorities of Central and Eastern European nation will change from terrorist/homeland security operations into the ability to fight alongside the Americans – high capacity data radios, blue force tracker etc. – rather than Nato. Despite the fact that the invasion of Georgia is likely to be a bit of a storm in a tea cup – a chance for a swift operation when the world was watching the Olympics – it will set defence priorities back ten years: back to the Russian bear, rather than the terrorist mole. Admittedly it takes only one unconventional attack to reverse this trend, but this might be the high water mark of CBRNE as a priority – at least in Central and Eastern Europe.

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