

CBRNe

Spring 2008

WORLD

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Common (funded) people?

Nato fits into the grand tradition of alliances; if there isn't a common enemy, the next best thing is to fight your allies. It is no surprise, considering the operational strain some Nato nations such as the US, UK, Canada and the Netherlands are under, that there is friction towards nations that are either not seen to be doing enough, or, alternatively, are restricted by their government in their usage. Canada is looking to pull out of Afghanistan by 2009, and reacting to earlier noises to this effect the US sent 'strong' letters to various countries requesting that they send more troops to the south of Afghanistan. More than one nation suggested that one way to do this would be to send the Nato Response Force (NRF) – an idea not greeted with enthusiasm. This, among other things, has brought the NRF into sharp relief; what is the NRF there to do?

Nato has a habit of setting up commands that do nothing and are then dissolved – Allied Command Europe's Mobile Force (AMF) being a prime example of this – and NRF is in danger of becoming another. The abiding rule is "use it or lose it" and the NRF is not being used. It is also becoming unpopular with the soldiers who sign up to the idea of NRF and then find they don't go on operations and get no operational experience. Faced with an unpopular force that is not used, the question would seem to be "How long can it last?"

Yet within the NRF is the Multi National CBRN Battalion (MN CBRN Bttn), which *is* used and is, in theory, liked. As opposed to the rest of the NRF, the MN CBRN Bttn has been used at Nato summits and major sporting events and seems likely to be used on a frequent basis for similar activities. The Battalion always had a slightly difficult relationship with the NRF; a Battalion to support the NRF was always oversized, when the "right" sort of level would have been a platoon. The current vogue is to call it a taskforce, rather than a battalion, and this would seem to be more accurate. The original concept behind the Battalion was that it could be used separately to the NRF, which it has been, but it needed a home and a force structure to live in – and that became the NRF. If the NRF goes, what happens to the MN CBRN Bttn? Should that go too?

The Battalion's record has been hit and miss – some rotations have been excellent, some have been "must try harder", but as a generalisation they have got better each time. It has also been something to which many of the 'New Nato' members (can we still call them that?) have been able to make a real contribution, as opposed to just paying lip service. With that in mind it would be a shame for it to disappear, but what are the options?

The most obvious is that in the same way that AMF beget NRF, no doubt NRF will also beget another force, and MN CBRN Bttn can just go there. There will need to be a bit of adjustment, but that will soon be passed. The Battalion is undergoing changes anyway; there are two more six-month rotations and then the UK will take lead nation for a 12-month period, so change happens and something as

successful as the MN CBRN Bttn won't be jettisoned anyway.

Well, it need not be jettisoned, but is the current model the best way to do it? At the North Atlantic Council (NAC) WMD seminar in November of last year, the Allied Command for Transformation (ACT) representative to Nato HQ raised the subject of common funding for the MN CBRN Battalion. Common funding is one of those things that tend to make people draw breath – all are agreed it is a good idea, as long as they don't have to pay any more. Common funding in Nato currently funds AWACs as well as other collective requirements such as air defence, C2 and alliance-wide communication – so why not CBRN?

Nato policy on common funding is that "The starting point for the process of seeking and obtaining approval for common funding of a given project is the identification and recognition of the required capability and a determination that the responsibility for providing this capability cannot reasonably be made the financial responsibility of a single country and that it will serve the interests of all contributing countries." (Chapter Nine of the Nato Handbook). While I accept personal bias, it would seem that CBRN would fit this description, and that the MN CBRN Bttn would be the perfect way of going about providing it. It could be made part of the command structure, with common funding providing infrastructure and kit with a three year rotation. Whether that rotation would be a single nation providing the bulk of the force – 50 per cent+ – with support from other nations, or whether it would be a more traditional percentage, would be up for debate.

Certainly sustainment would be a problem, as few nations can put that sort of capability into the field for that duration – the Czechs, Germans and maybe the Brits at a push. Yet that raises the question of what the US and Canada do with the NRF and MN CBRN Bttn? The US' great goal for the NRF was to use it as a catalyst for transformation, a transmission mechanism for improvement in European capability (which some European nations misunderstood), yet with the exception of a few members of a Bio Coy the US contribution to MN CBRN Bttn has been muted – and Canada is equally culpable. The Battalion gains a great deal of command and troop experience from doing their operations, and while the lessons learned are shared, the US and Canada have not made much of a contribution to MN CBRN Bttn (though Canada is the only nation to lack the benefit of Nato infrastructure on its soil). There needs to be an outreach to these countries to find out whether they would want to take further operational part in a MN CBRN Bttn, and if not whether they might like to contribute funds?

Funds will be at the heart of any debate on common funding, and closely allied to that will be the reality of the threat and behind that the necessary capability. There is a solid, positive case for most of these, yet whether Nato has the guts (and pocket) to embrace CBRN is very far from certain.

The editor welcomes any debate on this (and other) topics and can be reached on gwyn.winfield@cbnrworld.com