

Leader

Welcome 2009. All change?

In the three months since the Winter edition of the magazine came out, what has changed? Well, everything and nothing. In the operational world of CBRN and EOD life, all remains pretty much as normal; the challenges remain fairly static, the threat remains constant but background, contracts get signed and life motors on at its own pace. At the grand strategic level, however, everything is in turmoil. During the writing of the last edition, Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States, nominated Hillary Clinton as his Secretary of State, and kept Robert Gates in as his Secretary for Defense. So what is the new agenda? Well part of that is combating WMD – as Hillary Clinton pointedly commented in her nomination address – “The gravest threat that America faces is the danger that weapons of mass destruction will fall into the hands of terrorists. To ensure our future security, we must curb the spread and use of these weapons – whether nuclear, biological, chemical, or cyber – while we take the lead in working with others to reduce current nuclear stockpiles and prevent the development and use of dangerous new weaponry.”

The other part is the nuclear issue, both within the US and abroad. Within the US, the debate is over the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW), and whether (much like the UK's Trident replacement) it is needed when there are other more pressing requirements for money and attention. Secretary Gates is, understandably, a keen advocate for the RRW, while President Obama has made good on his campaign promise to ensure the new administration “will stop the development of new nuclear weapons,” and added to this his desire to work with Russia to ensure missiles are taken off hair trigger alert, reduce stockpiles and expand the ban on intermediate range missiles. Obama's desire to have a world without nuclear weapons seems to involve leading by example, and it will be interesting to see whether this is followed through by the administration (in the teeth of the DoD) and what impact this has on foreign policy – when do you realise you are leading but no-one is following?

Secretary Clinton has already fired a broadside at North Korea, warning of an abandonment of the aid programme if they don't stop their nuclear activity, and there has been a constant degree of pressure on Iran. Within weeks of the election result, the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism issued their report on the likelihood of nuclear and biological terrorism (for more information on this see the interview with Senator Graham on p.10). Unsurprisingly, the new administration was faced with a dire warning that the world faced a nuclear or biological attack of huge proportions in the next five years – or, conveniently, the approximate length of the next administration. At the same time there is going to be a closing down of the Iraq front, an increase in troops in Afghanistan and the potential for the conflict to spread into NW Pakistan (NWFP and FATA).

Above all this, however, was the reality of the worst worldwide recession – everyone studiously avoiding the word depression – for 70 years. As unemployment begins to

seriously bite and repossessions deprive people of their savings and property, there will start a new period of local instability. A sense of grievance against a government and society that sanctioned disastrous banking policies will, inevitably, lead into public protest and demonstrations. Some of those disaffected will, equally inevitably, be recruited by radical groups – and the litmus test of any organisation is when they can get the middle classes on board to provide the intellectual drive and direction. The majority of this will be stone throwing, placard waving and local protests, but a tiny percentage of these people will start to wonder about “weapons of mass destruction”, and an even smaller percentage might have the knowledge and gumption to go about building a CBR device. Meanwhile, while law enforcement agencies find themselves taxed more than ever with maintaining public order, government incomes plunge as fewer people are employed and paying taxes and instead draw benefits, and less money is therefore made available for fringe activity, among which CBRNE is sure to be classed.

We are a long way from that scenario at the moment, and nothing is guaranteed – economic bailout packages can quite quickly kickstart a process of regeneration. Are we facing then CBRN armageddon as capability drops and desire rises? No – certainly not the weapon of mass destruction threat that Bob Graham's Committee is concerned about. What will happen is that nuisance devices such as white powder letters will soar, complacency will set in, and then, in 12 months, something real will happen. Nothing major; it may well be that the media never gets to hear about it – a nuisance chemical (phosgene) or biological (tularemia) which has a low-grade release and which hospitalises a couple of people for a while. Behind this, however, is a growing of knowledge and an increase in understanding and competence, until finally a significant event happens resulting in a handful of deaths, and the world learns to live with another form of terrorism. The situation is far from hopeless, however; the growth of these groups is also their weakness, as rapid growth will bring those less ideologically indoctrinated into the inner circle, providing intelligence services, together with the chance for infiltration and actionable tip-offs – the links to the old lives and society will not be too far from the surface.

Sure enough though, foreign policy will be the unifying impact on local angst – already the Israeli attacks in Gaza over January are being hailed as “gifts” by both hard-line and moderate clerics. The US, with its strong links to Israel, will have the power to inflame or douse the growing conflagration, and it will take all the skill of the new administration to stop this slide. US nuclear policy will have a tangential effect on this, but far less than other elements of foreign policy. Front line CBRN forces, both at home and on operations, are going to be entering a period of sustained “chatter” on the networks, and hopefully there will not be too much of a drawdown of capability to allow them to deal with the incidents when they happen.