

Chain of command

The Commanders and Commandants conference is an annual closed event, open only to commanders of CBRN regiments, commandants of CBRN schools and those lucky enough to be invited – in which group the Editor found himself. Previous events have been held in Southofen in 2005, Panama City (Florida) in 2007, Vyskov (Czech Republic) in 2008 and most recently in Sofia, Bulgaria. Reviews of these conferences have become annual events (see *CBRNe World* Winter 2007 and Winter 2008) and should allow for some kind of mapping of strategic trends passed down from military leadership – which is, loosely, the *raison d'être*.

Last year's review set a challenge to the event in general, and the Bulgarians in particular: "There will have to be some solid work done on the theme of the conference and the spread of the delegates to ensure that this event is kept relevant." (*CBRNe World*, Winter 2008, p30).

That challenge was not met, though, to be fair, many of the problems did not originate with the Bulgarians. The Bulgarians were excellent and gracious hosts, the event ran smoothly, the social programme was first rate and they put on an interesting exercise – all good. What they had to struggle with was a global economic recession the like of which has not been seen since the 1930s, which has left slashed travel budgets for the delegates and an event that is losing relevance; neither were problems they can control and both were inherited.

The key factor is one of drift; the Commanders and Commandants conference has nothing to anchor it in place. It is an international conference
not

On target for obsolescence. The Commanders and Commandants conference is struggling to find itself relevant
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tied to any multi-national organisation. This frees it from any membership restrictions, but means it lacks a framework. It also has a changing audience; there is no central committee, so in the five years the event has run there is, to my knowledge, only one Commandant still in place – Col Ohrstrand from Norway. Equally, since it has no geographic “home” and moves around to the hosting nation, it lacks any form of continuity; something is lost as the baton is passed on from year to year. The shoots of this were already apparent last year, but they were hidden by the immense capability of the Czech Army. The level of investment is not the same in Bulgaria, however, and the problems had grown to such an extent that it is unlikely any force could have masked them.

What of the event itself? There were 21 presentations over three days, 17 of which were Bulgarian. There were approximately 40 delegates, of which 16 were internationals. Here is the trend writ large: in the Czech Republic there were approximately 60 delegates, 37 of which were internationals. In 2007 there were approximately 50 delegates, of

which 33 were internationals. The trend is going the wrong way: a growing number of nationals and a smaller percentage of internationals. There is doubtlessly a need for an international senior leaders conference at which they can share lessons with their peers – but currently this event is failing that need.

It was impossible not to notice this failure this time, and there are now steps in place to try and reverse the trend. The lack of continuity and grip has been identified, and the Netherlands and Norway are going to produce a Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Conference. At time of writing there is a first draft – a combination of the closing remarks from the conference and some of the original plans behind the event which have been collated by Colonel (ret) Kuhl, the ex-CO of Sonthofen to try and synthesise a common aim and objective. This Terms of Reference will be passed to the participants of the fourth Conference in January, and then this will be disseminated to the previous attendees of the Conference for comments so the report can be finalised in June 2010. As you might expect with this process going on, and the depth of malaise inherent in the event, there is no taker for the event in 2010. Instead, the US has offered to host the event again, this time in 2011, and the TOR will be presented to the conference attendees for acceptance.

So why is this relevant to our 30,000-odd readers? If you are in the military, this has the potential to be the CBRN Bildenberg group – an unofficial meeting of senior leaders that try to shape the future and will have a say in many of the decisions your force will make, especially on multi-national operations. If that concerns you then you need to ensure you are involved in the process; too much of the audience is there because of close links with the host nation. This works if you are the US and have a vast force (also known as Dale Chapman) that can reach out and get the right people there, but if you have more modest assets then you are going to struggle. There has to be a push, as well as a pull, so nations that have an interest – and currently the Conference reaches out to all nations –

need to start that process now, before the TOR solidifies and starts making restrictions. That remains especially true of civilian CBRN school commandants and civilian force commanders; there is a chance you can contribute, but you will have to make the first move and influence the policy.

What was learned from the event?

The evidence of that is mainly in the articles and interviews with Colonel Penelov, Ms Simeonova and Dr Kostadinov in this edition. As an overview, however, Bulgaria is an interesting example of a small nation trying to keep up with the changes in CBRN. Bulgaria is neither a rich country nor a country that has identified CBRN as a priority – as Slovenia has, for example – and it has a large amount of legacy equipment. Issues such as clandestine labs and forensics are outside the primary target, which is to bring the level of equipment up to Nato standards. Professionalism in the forces seems high and they are certainly keen to prove themselves, which is a good foundation on which to build the force. Equally, the military medical units seem first-rate and well equipped. The current aim is to get involved in more rotations of the NRF – which is exactly why the NRF is such a great concept, as it is through these rotations that the whole Bulgarian CBRN capability will rise.

I, and I am sure the whole delegation, will be keen to pass on our thanks to the Bulgarian MoD for a well-run event – something that clearly required a great deal of effort to run as smoothly as it did. They were unlucky to inherit an event that needs so much work done to it, and the recession did not help matters, and with hindsight far more effort was needed to match the figures of last year – but you are always wise after the event. Hopefully the event can be salvaged – I think it can be – but it will require effort, good will and a great deal more support from the people that it is supposed to benefit – the commanders and commandants. Those interested in having a say can always mail me – gwyn.winfield@cbrownworld.com, and I will pass your comments on to the relevant individuals.



A great chance to learn about Bulgaria
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