

Steve Johnson, Researcher at the UK Defence Academy of Science,
reviews the European Security Forum 2009

This conference, organised by Smiths Detection, acted as a launch event for their new office in Brussels. It was certainly well-timed, as 2009-2010 sees the launch of the EU CBRN Action plan, possible removal of restrictions on hand luggage across Europe and the hopeful ratification of the Lisbon treaty. The location was the charming Hotel Stanhope in Brussels, within walking distance of many of the major EU institutions. Not that you would have found many people in them, as the great and the good of Europe seemed to have been emptied out to host or speak at this conference: former Home Secretary John Reid, EU Counter Terrorism Co-ordinator Gilles de Kerchove and representatives from the EU military staff and European Defence Agency to name but a few.

The quality of presentations was high, certainly judging by the frequent nods and frantic note-taking going on in the audience. It is possible you might even have heard the stirring strains of Ode to Joy well up to a crescendo as we all wholeheartedly agreed that the EU was a good thing, co-operation was even better, and that getting industry deeply imbedded in the European decision making process

EU Harmony

was the pinnacle of excellence. This had overtones of Team CBRN in the UK that offers a strategic-level interface for the UK MOD with industry, which may be further enhanced by the sector change programme that will see key strategic partners awarded contracts to support capability areas (with some trepidation from SMEs that are concerned it will cement larger companies' grips on government contracts.

Those of us who had read the running order could see the oncoming car crash about to upset things, however: Geoffrey Van Orden MEP and member of the Security and Defence Committee. It would be hard to find a more vocal anti-EU speaker outside of the UK Independence Party (which has an automatic revulsion to EU-level initiatives and would seek to pull the UK back from the EU if they won power) but in fairness to him he prefaced his talk, which was supposed to be about solutions to detect

CBRN threats, with a warning that this was his own personal opinion. Sadly he then completely ignored his brief and departed on a rambling polemic against the EDA, the EU military staff and managed to crowbar the subject on to immigration. It was interesting to hear that ultimately even CBRN security issues could all be blamed on illegal immigrants, but disappointing that it was based on wild estimation, anecdote and ignoring the fact that most attacks are committed by legal immigrants or nationals. As this article goes to press, the Lisbon treaty has been ratified, which Geoffrey assured the room would never happen.

His talk was met with stunned silence and a gentle nervous giggle, not only because he had taken an axe to the spirit of the forum but also because he had insulted almost the entire panel with whom he sat. But in the spirit of great Hollywood films a hero stood up – Frank Kaemper from the EDA. Geoffrey's speech



What impact will the latest terrorist attack have on luggage and liquid regulations? ©DoD

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gave him an excellent springboard to address those who might be taking a rather ill-informed view of Europe. In particular, he addressed the fact that countries which can't afford to develop their own capabilities really rely on the EU structures. Further, all work was hand-in-glove with Nato (he cited upcoming Search and EOD courses jointly developed) and deconflicted to ensure no duplication. The UK's support for EU Security and defence issues, particularly the EDA, still seemed a little light. Industry has clearly seen the benefits, not merely just of market, so one wonders how much longer the MOD and Home Office will remain aloof.

This didn't detract from the overall success of the forum, but rather highlighted the weakness of some anti-Europe cases. The other panels fell into the following categories: Protecting EU citizens, Air Travel Security, Medical Surveillance, and CBRN Detection.

The CT Commissioner brought up some very interesting challenges for the EU. Chief among these was that the EU is not the right organisation to perform risk assessments, as it has no access to intelligence or intelligence apparatus of its own. He was very honest about the real and complex difficulties this presented the EU in developing security and defence strategies. How these might be solved was left slightly fuzziest.

The air travel security panel found itself slightly mired in discussing the history and possible end of security restrictions on liquids and hand luggage. As you might expect there was a fairly substantial area demonstrating the Smiths Detection range. Your intrepid reporter was the only one brave enough to stand in front of their new millimetric scanner, which was a harrowing experience both for him and anyone looking at the screen! The "Ego" was very impressive and was honestly not particularly intrusive, as the eye is drawn to the contents of pockets rather than body outline. Other than an intrusive hand search, it is hard to see how else to ensure someone isn't carrying non-metallic weapons or dangerous items. The potential lifting of restrictions in April 2010 is almost certainly going to be based around airports demonstrating the ability to identify unknown liquids and substance, or at least pick out dangerous ones.

There seemed to be an inconsistency between the CT Commissioner and the air security panel on the issue of restrictions because both its introduction and its eventual removal will be, we are told, after risk assessments. After some questioning it was revealed that the EU-wide ban had been based almost solely on the UK assessment of the threat – which shows excellent co-operation in sharing intelligence but raises the question of whether every EU country's intelligence assessment carry the same weight. Furthermore, is there a need for better intelligence apparatus on a pan-European scale which is just not being requested at the moment in order to get the Lisbon treaty passed.

Expect more from the Smiths Detection Brussels office. The audience feedback and the interest from EC officials in greater industrial co-operation is likely to see more events such as this both from Smiths and others interested in raising their European profile, reinforced by Tim Otter, Chairman of NBC UK, speaking at Shrivenham's CBRN Symposium, where he said that those who do not open an office in Brussels in the next two years will miss the EU boat.

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