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U.S. CHEMICAL WEAPONS ARE NEEDED TO DETER MOSCOW'S POISON ARSENAL

(Updating Backgrounder No. 272, "Deterring Chemical War: The Reagan Formula," June 15, 1983.)

The U.S. chemical weapons program faces a showdown vote in Congress. Last year, Congress gave a conditional go-ahead and partial funding for the so-called binary weapons system, which is safer to transport and store than previous kinds of chemical weapons. The \$21.7 million needed for production of the 155mm binary shell, however, was blocked until October 1, 1986, pending Pentagon compliance with three congressional conditions. This means that before Congress votes on the Fiscal Year 1987 \$201 million binary weapons request, it will have to decide whether to free the FY86 funds for the 155mm shell.

The Reagan Administration from the start has sought to modernize the aging U.S. chemical stockpile of unitary munitions, those filled with an already lethal compound. A binary munition, by contrast, contains two harmless chemicals which only become lethal when combined upon firing. The U.S. ceased producing chemical munitions in 1969 in the hope that the Soviet Union would also. As such, the chemical ordnance in the U.S. stockpile is designed for artillery and aircraft no longer in service. To make this weapons/munitions mismatch even worse, vast quantities of ordnance are leaking and unsafe to handle. The chemical agents currently available, moreover, do not give U.S. forces the flexibility required to retaliate against attacks from Soviet chemical weapons. And Moscow's refusal to accept rigorous verification procedures dims hopes for an effective global chemical weapons ban. So seriously has the U.S. arsenal deteriorated that only about 10 percent of U.S. unitary chemical weapons are useable; this comprises a mere 25 percent of U.S. chemical deterrent requirements. By 1990, even these weapons will probably be useless because of agent and electrical component deterioration.

Not only are binary weapons safer to store and transport, they also can be deployed aboard ships and be airlifted without elaborate security precautions. This allows for enormous flexibility in deploying them. And because binary weapons are easily disposed of after their shelf-life has expired, they are environmentally safe.

Moscow's vast chemical weapons stockpile is ten times larger than the shrinking U.S. arsenal. It contains short-lived and persistent nerve gas, blister agents, and exotic compounds against which the West still has to develop defenses. Some of these were field tested against Freedom Fighters in Afghanistan, Laos, and Cambodia. Chemical weapons are fully integrated with Soviet conventional and nuclear ordnance and can be delivered with virtually any weapons system--artillery, multiple rocket launchers, tactical missiles, and aircraft.

The triple congressional conditions on the FY86 Defense Appropriations bill require: 1) the Pentagon to submit a report on "Bigeye" bomb testing; 2) NATO to adopt formally U.S. chemical weapons modernization as a Force Goal; and 3) NATO to approve production of the 155mm artillery round.

One obstacle to congressional approval appears to be the troubled "Bigeye" binary bomb designed to strike distant enemy targets with the longlasting chemical agent VX. A GAO study has concluded that the bomb has serious problems, which the Pentagon denies. But these problems are unrelated to other aspects of the binary program.

The other sticking point is whether NATO actually has adopted U.S. chemical weapons modernization as a Force Goal, and approved production of the 155mm artillery shell. Approval of a Force Goal requires only that NATO's Defense Planning Committee accept the U.S. program. This it did on May 16. Critics contend that NATO approval requires a vote of the North Atlantic Assembly. But this body deals only with political issues. Vocal opposition to the U.S. program by the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark does not change the fact that U.S. chemical weapons modernization now is a NATO Force Goal.

To be sure, no NATO ally has agreed to accept peacetime deployment of binary chemical weapons on its soil, though West Germany has volunteered to receive them in a crisis. But West European reluctance to accept chemical weapons does not reduce America's urgent need for a modern chemical arsenal to deter Soviet use of poison weapons. The binary chemical arms can be shipped to Europe more quickly than unitary munitions. Production of binaries, moreover, may prod Moscow to negotiate a verifiable regional or global chemical ban. This would create a vastly safer world than one in which the Kremlin wields the sole chemical weapons club.

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