9 ‘Will It Be So Again?’

The ‘problem of chemical and biological weapons’, as it is termed by SIPRI, is a compound of historical events, political and military perceptions, technical issues and public concerns. In the past century chemical and biological warfare have been rehearsed, waged, and renounced. Now, 70 years after the end of the First World War, we are struggling to regain the position that obtained at the end of the nineteenth century – the absence of chemical and biological weapons from the world’s arsenals. As the Red Queen in Alice Through the Looking Glass remarked, ‘Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’

The key issues currently arising with regard to CBW could be summarised as follows:
- Should chemical weapons be banned?
- Should the ban on biological weapons be strengthened?
- What are the implications of the modernisation of the US chemical stockpile?
- What are the implications of chemical proliferation and how should it be controlled?

The history of CBW provides no easy answers. The subject remains confused, the evidence contradictory. Decisions involving arms control are rarely easy, but they still have to be taken, making the best sense possible out of the contradictions which can arise between public demands, moral concerns, economic and political imperatives and the requirements of national security.

SHOULD CHEMICAL WEAPONS BE BANNED?

It has already been argued that the provisions of the chemical weapons Convention being negotiated by the CD are probably, in broad terms, the best that it is practicable to achieve. The worth of the Convention can be judged against two broad sets of criteria – military and ethical. Thus, one might argue for a ban on chemical weapons on the grounds that it would improve security, or that the possession and use of chemical weapons was immoral. Arguments against a ban would rest on the military utility of chemical weapons or on the grounds that chemical warfare was not intrinsically immoral.
Military utility

There can be no doubt that chemical weapons are an effective means of causing casualties, often on a large scale. Hitherto their use has not proved decisive in any conflict, although it has generally been judged sufficiently useful to be continued, once started. Perhaps their most significant effects are psychological – chemical weapons are greatly feared; the constant need for protection against them in war has a severe impact on morale. Their use – or even the threat of it – would also greatly complicate the commander’s task. He would have to allow for the degradation of his troops’ performance, for the need to decontaminate or avoid contaminated terrain and equipment. He would have to concentrate a proportion of finite intelligence resources on determining the likelihood and possible scale of chemical attack.

On the other hand, chemical weapons may not prove entirely straightforward to use, especially in the forward combat area. Despite his advocacy of gas during and immediately after the First World War, Foulkes expressed doubts about its utility in modern warfare, arguing that the deployment of smaller, self-contained units of ground forces who would be more mobile and more dispersed than in the two world wars made it ‘hard to see how chemical agents can be used effectively against such dispersed targets’.¹ Christopher Donnelly describes the Warsaw Pact view that the battlefield of the future would be ‘extremely confused, there will be no stable front line, and forces will mingle in great depth, engaging primarily in battles of encounter, that is, when both sides engage whilst on the move’.² In these circumstances, the identification of suitable targets, other than at fairly close range, will not be easy. Once targets are identified and located, chemical attack with anything other than highly volatile non-persistent agents would put at risk one’s own forces. It is difficult to deliver these agents in sufficiently high concentrations to achieve a substantial casualty level. The rapidity with which they disperse means that, unless very high concentrations are achieved immediately on target, their effectiveness is substantially diminished.

It is argued that new agents and delivery systems would greatly increase the effectiveness of chemical attacks, so that the Soviet use of chemicals in a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact would not detract from mobility and could lead to breakthroughs at significant points in Western defences.³ This thesis remains unproven – but also dangerously unprovable. Fears of the opposition’s ability to discover new agents and to defeat one’s own defences has been a constant