

ERIC MARGOLIS



Toxic tactics

The uproar in Europe over tactical nuclear weapons has masked what NATO planners consider to be an even more dangerous threat.

The large numbers of nuclear weapons held by NATO and the East bloc have created a certain balance of terror and unwillingness to use them, except in *extremis*.

But no such restraining balance exists in the field of chemical weapons. Here, the Soviet Union possesses a superiority so pronounced that many NATO planners are convinced that any war in Europe will begin with massive chemical strikes rather than the nuclear war that everyone now fears.

Russian military doctrine considers the use of chemical weapons as part of normal combat operations. Accordingly, Russian forces now include 80,000 specialized chemical-warfare troops and 30,000 decontamination vehicles. The Soviets have amassed the staggering sum of 100,000 tons of chemical agents, most of which is positioned against NATO forces.

Among the many agents available — some so new that they are little understood by Western scientists — the most common are nerve and blistering gasses. One tiny drop of nerve agent on exposed skin leads to rapid paralysis of the central nervous system and death. Blistering agents burn the skin, lungs and mucous membranes. These fearsome weapons come in short-lasting or persistent forms, the latter can cling to the ground for days or weeks.

Toxic agents can be delivered by bombs, artillery and rocket fire, helicopters, mines or by aircraft spray dispensers. They can also be delivered — and this worries NATO enormously — by a new generation of highly accurate Soviet SS-21 and SS-23 tactical missiles.

Massive attack

In the event of war, NATO expects the Soviets to unleash a massive chemical attack on our forward positions and against key rear installations. Air bases, nuclear storage sites, supply depots, ports and headquarters would all be primary targets for persistent agents.

Most NATO troops are now equipped with protective clothing but wearing these rubberized suits and masks immediately degrades the combat effectiveness of troops by 50%. After 24 hours, effectiveness declines by 80%. Worse yet, if an attack comes during the hot summer months, more than half our troops could be expected to succumb to various degrees of heat stroke because their impermeable outfits allow no escape of moisture or heat.

The only effective counter to chemical weapons is the threat of using them against the attacking forces who would then suffer similar discomfort and reduced fighting ability. But here is the problem: Among the NATO allies, only the U.S. has any offensive chemical weapons — and only about 10,000 tons, 10% of Russia's vast arsenal.

Worse yet, while Russia's chemical weapons are all of recent manufacture, only 10% of America's chemical weapons are ready for use; the remainder, averaging from 14-30 years old, are unserviceable or are not loaded in any munitions capable of delivery. NATO is thus outnumbered by 100 to one in deliverable chemical munitions.

This awesome asymmetry must naturally tempt the Russians to devastate NATO defences by a surprise chemical attack. The West's puny chemical arsenal would hardly phase fast-advancing Russian troops, whose tanks and armored vehicles, unlike NATO's, are sealed against gas attack. The Red Army's enormous decontamination force could easily handle NATO's limited chemical riposte.

In spite of this very real and growing threat, NATO members have taken almost no action to develop offensive chemical weapons. This paralysis is the result of very effective Soviet political warfare enhanced by Western liberal media which has portrayed efforts to increase our arsenal as acts of the utmost barbarism.

Inevitable storm

Our political leaders, having barely survived the outcry over emplacing U.S. tactical missiles in Europe — where the Soviets already have a four-to-one superiority — simply cannot face the inevitable storm that would greet the deployment of new chemical weapons. Russian propaganda has skilfully exploited this issue.

Recent efforts by the U.S. Army to deploy a new generation of binary chemical weapons, ones that are harmless until fired, have been blocked by liberals in Congress in spite of clear evidence of their pressing need. An unquestioned military requirement has become another political football.

Meanwhile, the Russians are hard at work developing yet more chemical and toxic agents. In Laos and Afghanistan, they have successfully tested a range of mycotoxins, "yellow rain;" something called "Blue-X" that seems to freeze the body; and another unknown agent that causes almost instant decomposition of body tissue. Since we know extremely little about these new agents, Western scientists are uncertain if protective clothing or drugs will counter them.

If our present protective gear does not work against these mystery toxins, we are presented with the hideous scenario of tens of thousands of our troops quickly dying while the remainder flee in uncontrollable panic. And then there is the question of the inevitable massive civilian casualties that would occur no matter what type of agents were used.

Unless the Western allies somehow find the political courage to respond to this very real and frightful threat, the prospect of a widespread chemical war in Europe draws closer every day. (Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)