

While the opportunity exists, world must ban chemical weapons

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Chemical weapons – nerve, mustard, and other deadly agents – are sometimes called the poor man’s nuclear bomb. More easily obtainable, hidden, and transportable than nuclear weapons, they are one of the most serious post-Cold War threats to US and world security.

The latest military budget, for example, expands federal, state, and local response training for biological and chemical disasters.

A terrorist, to cite one worst case, could detonate a small VX nerve agent shell in a football stadium, turning it in minutes into a massive morgue for thousands of dead spectators.

We have already witnessed the horrific use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq border wars, in the Tokyo terrorist subway attack, and in a number of regional conflicts. Fortunately, after years of negotiation, the world agreed to ban all such weapons with the signing of the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993.

And yet, in an ironic move to undermine longstanding and bipartisan efforts at nonproliferation, the House Armed Services Committee this month is seeking to halt a program aimed at destroying two million Russian chemical munitions.

Russia has 40,000 tons of chemical agents stockpiled at seven large sites, some not far from European borders, others on the steppes of Siberia. The remaining American arsenal of 24,000 tons is spread out at nine sites – Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, and Maryland in the East; Colorado, Oregon, and Utah in the West; and Johnston Atoll in the Pacific.

These stockpiles hold a wide variety of weaponry including bombs, spray tanks, missile warheads, rockets, artillery shells, land mines, and storage tanks. Unlike the Russian arsenal, most US weapons are obsolete and remain secure in thick concrete bunkers.

Russian weapons present a different picture. While the weapons themselves are in many cases more modern and without internal explosives, their physical security leaves much to be desired. Stored in above-ground warehouses, the weapons remain vulnerable to theft, diversion, and proliferation.

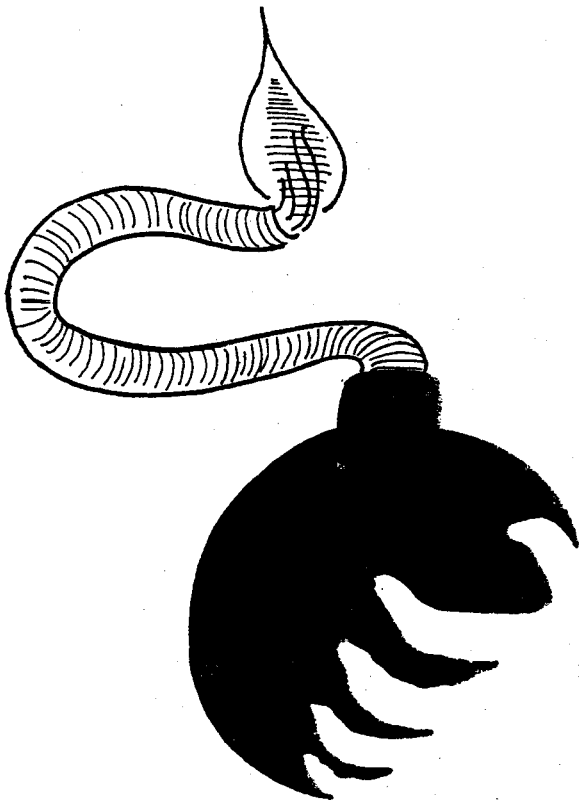
One site in the Kurgan region, east of the Urals, is located close to the Kazakh border, just north of one of the most unstable regions of the world. With Russian military unpaid for months at a time and with many weapons small enough to slip into a backpack, the risk of internal diversion is high.

Three complementary and timely initiatives are needed to preserve the gains already made in nonproliferation and to help guarantee successful implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

First, the United States and other Western nations, including convention signatories, must continue to support Russian demilitarization efforts financially and technically. The American cooperative threat reduction program, established eight years ago by Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, is the long pole in the weapons destruction tent. Funded at \$400 million to 500 million annually as

part of the military budget, the program is the key to helping Russia destroy its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Included has been planning and development of a destruction facility to destroy more than 5,400 tons of nerve agent at Kurgan.

Last year, however, Congress zeroed out the program’s request for Kurgan, arguing that both Russians and allies were insufficiently pulling their weight. In a dangerous Catch-22, most European na-



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tions have in turn frozen their own funding. This month the House Armed Services Committee once again rejected a request of \$35 million for fiscal year 2001 and reiterated that the program should be closed out.

The Senate, on the other hand, has acted more positively, conditioning funding in the coming year on expanded Russian and European support.

Weapons destruction is not cheap – the Kurgan site may run to \$1.5 billion (of which some 50 to 60 percent would be US-funded) for full planning, construction, operations, and decommissioning. But it is clearly in the interest of American and world security to see these arsenals abolished before we face them in regional hot spots or terrorist attacks.

The House should accede to the Senate in conference this month on the program's language in the upcoming defense budget. And in accord with the Senate conditions, both Russia and Western allies must increase

their own funding support, abysmally low to date.

Second, Russia and the United States must engage the political process more at both elite and local levels in order to have any hope of abolition. Both the US Congress and the Russian Duma must be more engaged.

Chemical weapons destruction, a major part of cleaning up our still burdensome Cold War legacy, needs political champions in order to preclude sudden

and arbitrary funding cuts. And at the grass-roots level, both countries have lately begun important consensus-building and facilitation. The phrase, think globally, act locally, applies here.

And third, flexibility is required in development and deployment of weapons destruction technologies so that community concerns are met and political obstacles are overcome. In programs of this size – \$15 billion and growing in the United States, likely \$10 billion in Russia – bureaucratic momentum tends often to obscure reasonable options. Because no silver bullet exists for any weapons destruction, a shared toolbox of safe, environmentally sound, and complementary technology options is needed.

The United States has successfully destroyed some 6,000 tons – 20 percent – of its chemical weapons arsenal. Russia has yet to destroy a single weapon. Without serious progress in the above three areas – continued Western aid for Russian abolition, political support for full Chemical Weapons Convention implementation, and further technology development – we may fail badly in this historic mission to abolish a whole class of mass destruction weapons.

Worse still, we may witness the collapse of the convention, negative consequences for other arms control regimes, and a dangerous rise in proliferation. We must make chemical weapons taboo worldwide while the opportunity exists.

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