



EMERGING CHALLENGES August 2019

Does the response to bioterrorism need a Manhattan project?

The need to develop a response to the bioterrorism threat emerged after episodes in the 1990s like the Aum Shinrikyo (Aum Supreme Truth, later changed into Aleph) or the diffusion of letters containing anthrax spores around the United States. Apart from a fleeting public sense of insecurity, specialists re-considered the issue of how countries were prepared to this sort of attack.

The 11th of July, in New York, during the meeting on biodefense, organized by the Blue Ribbon Study Panel [Kim Riley, Experts support a future Manhattan Project for Biodefense to thwart new threats in *Homeland Preparedness News* Friday, July 12, 2019

<https://homelandprepnews.com/countermeasures/34774-experts-support-a-future-manhattan-project-for-biodefense-to-thwart-new-threats/>], speakers discussed about the need to strive, even more, to

constitute an increasingly effective response plan and proposed a huge national, public-private research, such the governmental atomic Manhattan Project, for developing strategies and counter-measures.

Biological agents such as anthrax, plague, brucellosis, smallpox, viral encephalitis, and viral haemorrhagic fevers are, unlike classic military attacks, invisible and silent, and, therefore extremely difficult to identify; they are relatively easy and inexpensive to produce for a serious laboratory, they cause death or disabling disease, and they can be aerosolized and distributed over large geographic areas. If released under ideal environmental circumstances, these agents can infect hundreds of thousands of persons and cause many casualties.

Nevertheless, US administration on the one hand warned through the National Security Strategy released in December 2017 about increasing biological threats and on the other was trying to shut down National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center (NBACC) at Fort Detrick, Maryland. Congress restored but not increased funding for this unique centre in the USA for a mere \$44,3 million.

There is evidently a disconnect between a public discourse on a mounting threat (zero mentions of bioterrorism in the 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US intelligence community, exception

made for the diffusion of biotechnologies), few repeatedly mentioned past incidents (often omitting cases of US militias experimenting with ricin) and concrete funding for these emergencies.

The jury is out, but probably the most sensible answer to this high impact-low probability risk is to focus on funding robust public health systems that are able to handle pandemics and epidemics (as they break often around the world) in order to have solid medical emergency response foundation, strengthen counter-biowarfare research to tackle specific problems and fund a more discriminating intelligence collection and analysis on the matter.

Manuele Scardaccio – *Intern at the NATO Defense College Foundation, CBRN Analyst.*