

# UK prime minister delivers ultimatum to Russia, heightening war danger

By Laura Tiernan  
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British Prime Minister Theresa May told the House of Commons that Russia was “highly likely” to be responsible for deploying “a military grade nerve agent” against double agent Sergei Skripal, which she declared “an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom.”

May’s speech followed a meeting of the National Security Council to discuss Britain’s response to the poisoning of Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, just over a week ago.

“It is now clear that Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by Russia. This is part of a group of nerve agents known as Novichok,” May claimed.

Her speech follows a wave of anti-Russia hysteria unleashed by the media, political and military establishment, including the mobilisation of 180 military personnel in the cathedral city of Salisbury.

May did not provide a shred of evidence to support her claims that Russia had developed the chemical agent used in Salisbury. She simply asserted that because Russia can produce such a chemical, and because of “Russia’s record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations; and our assessment that Russia views some defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations...the government has concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the act against Sergei and Yulia Skripal.”

May said, “there are therefore only two plausible explanations for what happened in Salisbury on the 4 March. Either this was a direct act by the Russian State against our country. Or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.”

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had “summoned the Russian Ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and asked him to explain which of these two

possibilities it is...”

The government has imposed a 24-hour ultimatum, ending midnight today, for the Russian Federation to “provide full and complete disclosure of the Novichok programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.”

The May government’s reckless actions are dragging the UK to the brink of war with Russia.

She framed her stance as a response to “a well-established pattern of Russian State aggression” throughout Europe and in the Middle East. “Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the Second World War that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe,” she declared. She accused Russia of “foment[ing] conflict in the Donbas, of “repeatedly violat[ing] the national airspace of several European countries” and of “a sustained campaign of cyber espionage and disruption” including “meddling in elections and hacking the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag, among many others.”

“During his recent State of the Union address,” May continued, “President Putin showed video graphics of missile launches, flight trajectories and explosions, including the modelling of attacks on the United States with a series of warheads impacting in Florida.”

She told the House that on Wednesday her government would “consider in detail the response from the Russian State. Should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian State against the United Kingdom. And I will come back to this House and set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.”

Just hours before May’s speech, Rear Admiral Alex Burton, former commander of the UK’s Maritime Forces, who also commanded NATO’s “high readiness” naval forces, said Britain was threatened with losing its status as a “credible military power.” Citing the threat from

Russia, he called for a major boost in military spending to at least 2.5 percent of GDP—an extra £7.7 billion a year.

The dangers posed are underscored by statements from Russia's embassy in London, which accused the British government of playing “a very dangerous game,” which “bears the risk of more serious long-term consequences for our relations.”

May's remarks will have been drafted in the closest collaboration with powerful sections of the military and political establishment in the United States, centred on the Democratic Party, who have been pushing for a confrontation with Russia against a degree of resistance from the Trump administration.

In response, last week US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats told a Senate armed services committee hearing he had not seen evidence of Russia trying to meddle in the 2018 midterm elections, but that it is “highly likely” Moscow will try to do so. He expected the US Treasury to announce sanctions on Russia as soon as this week. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin made a similar announcement, insisting that Trump is “fully supportive” of the actions.

Yesterday, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was asked repeatedly about the Salisbury incident at a press conference in Washington DC. She refused to say whether the US agreed with May's attribution of Russian responsibility and did not mention Russia by name. Clearly dissatisfied, the journalist questioned whether the US was pointing the finger at the Putin government, with Sanders replying, “I think they're still working through even some of the details of that, and we're going to continue to work with the UK.”

That same day, the European Union said it had extended sanctions against Russia, imposed following Russia's annexation of Crimea, for another six months.

Responding to May, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn said the whole house condemned the “deeply alarming attack” in Salisbury and that a full account was needed from Russian authorities.

He urged May to introduce tougher sanctions on Russian oligarchs hiding their money in the UK, noting that there has been over £800,000 worth of donations to the Conservative party “from Russian oligarchs and their associates.”

Whereas he issued no challenge to May's warmongering accusations, Corbyn cautioned the government, “We need to continue seeking a robust dialogue with Russia on all the issues dividing our

countries, both domestic and international—rather than simply cutting off contact and simply letting tensions and divisions get worse, and potentially more dangerous.”

His diplomatic caveat met with cries of “shame!” and “disgrace!” from the Tories and was too much for the warmongers in his own party.

A procession of Labour MPs, including Yvette Cooper, Chris Leslie and John Woodcock, joined with the Tories to demand a “united response”, echoing Tory Iain Duncan Smith who had condemned “appeasers” while denouncing Corbyn for “playing party politics.”

Ex-Labour shadow chancellor Chris Leslie insisted it is “just not appropriate” to take “party political differences” when “our country is potentially under attack.”

His colleague Mike Gapes insisted that “all MPs must stand together,” as he branded the Salisbury poisoning “an act of terrorism.”

Former Labour chief secretary to the treasury Liam Byrne said, “The Prime Minister should know that if by Wednesday she concludes we are indeed embattled, she'll find both unity and resolve across this House in facing down a common threat.”

Former shadow transport minister John Woodcock, who has previously stated he could not support Corbyn as prime minister, suggested that the Labour leader in Number 10 would threaten the UK's national security.

“The level of resilience voiced by the Prime Minister in the chamber today has been many years in coming but it is hugely welcome,” he said. “Indeed, it would put our national security at significant risk if we were led by anyone who did not understand the gravity of the threat which Russia poses to this nation.”

Stephen Doughty, Labour MP for Cardiff South and Penarth, stated, “Can I urge the prime minister to speak with the secretary of state for culture, media and sport to look at reviewing Russia Today's [RT's] broadcasting licence. And to speak to the House authorities about blocking their broadcasts in this building itself.”

Former Labour minister Chris Bryant, MP for the Rhondda, demanded: “Can we just stop Russia Today just broadcasting its propaganda in this country?”

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