

STARTING A CHEMICAL REACTION

Timothy Compston reflects on how recent incidents involving chemical weapons have been a catalyst for renewed action by the West.

With the spectre of a type of Novichok nerve agent apparently having been deployed in Britain to target the former Russian military intelligence officer and double agent Sergei Skripal – and then a few weeks later alleged chemical attacks, involving chlorine gas, in the town of Douma, Syria, being attributed to the Assad regime – many voices in the West are once again stressing the need to take firm action to maintain what they refer to as a “rules-based international order”.

The clear message from the Western powers led by the US, Britain and France, is that the use of chemical weapons represents a red line that should never be crossed and, even without a consensus in the UN Security Council, subsequent actions – from the expulsion of Russian diplomats, in the wake of events in Salisbury, to the sight of cruise missiles being launched at night from ships in the Mediterranean plus British Tornado jets taking off from RAF Akrotiri to fire Storm Shadow missiles towards sites in Syria – are a physical manifestation of their resolve to confront this menace.

KICK STARTING THE COLD WAR

In terms of the Salisbury incident, it was certainly shocking to see something like this materialise on the streets of Britain, decades on from the end of the Cold War. To recap, on Sunday, 4 March, Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia – who was visiting from Russia – were found collapsed on a park bench in Salisbury after visiting a pub and enjoying a meal in a local restaurant. Subsequently, they were both admitted to hospital, as was a police officer who came to their aid. Thankfully Yulia Skripal has now been discharged from hospital while Sergei Skripal is still recovering from his ordeal.

So how did the Skripals become ill in the first place? At the time of writing, eight weeks on, the latest thinking is that a very small quantity of military-grade Novichok nerve agent – or what is identified in Russia by the code A-234 – was delivered in a liquid form. In practice, nerve agents are organophosphate-based poisons that may be absorbed through the skin and stop the enzyme acetylcholinesterase, the 'off switch' for nerves, from working.

As to who was behind the attack, from the start British

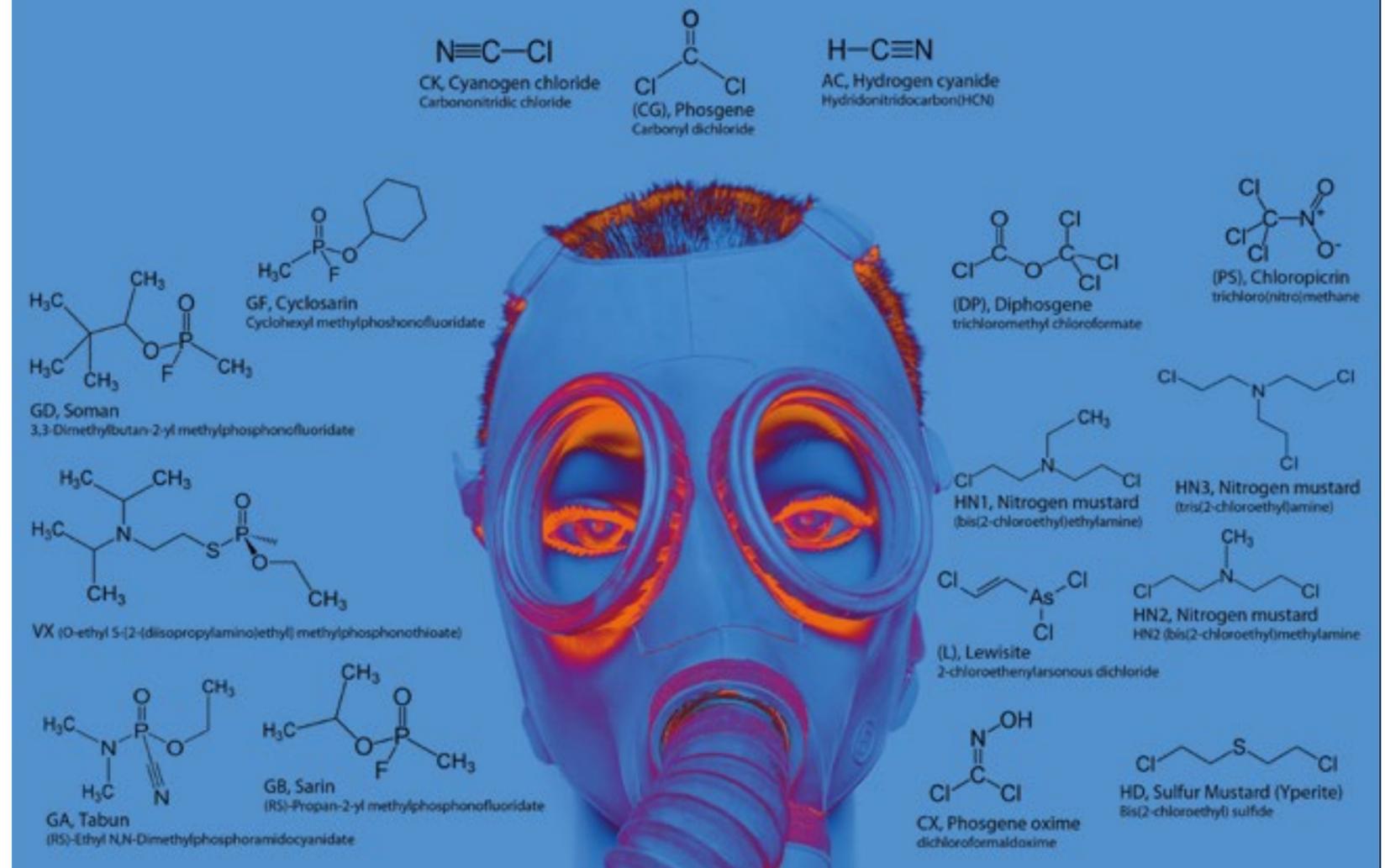
suspicions have centred on Russia given the background of Sergei Skripal and the mode of attack, with inspectors from Porton Down – the defence research facility – confirming that the nerve agent involved belonged to the Novichok family, that was first developed in the old Soviet Union. In addition to Porton Down's efforts, an independent team from the OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) – the implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) – which is based in The Hague, Netherlands, also visited Salisbury at the request of the UK Government to provide technical assistance. Although the team's remit is not to attribute blame, the results of the analysis by the OPCW-designated laboratories of environmental and biomedical samples collected in Salisbury are said to confirm the findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity of the toxic chemical that was used.

To date, the primary response to the Skripal's poisoning has been to expel diplomats. For its part the British

20 EXPLANATIONS HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED BY THE RUSSIAN MEDIA FOR THE SKRIPAL POISONING

Government sent 23 home with 29 other countries following suit, resulting in an additional 145 Russian officials having to pack their bags, including 60 diplomats based in the US. Beyond this, 10 individuals were asked to leave the Russian mission to NATO.

On the question of why Sergei Skripal was targeted, given that he was part of an agreed spy swap, Philip Ingram – a former British Army intelligence officer – does not pull his punches. For Ingram there are a number of factors which point to Russia's culpability here: "The reason they will have chosen Sergei Skripal is twofold. One, he is an ex-intelligence officer who turned traitor so that gets a tick in the box from [President] Putin, the second reason is that he lived in Salisbury near Porton Down." For Ingram the closeness of Porton Down allowed the Russians to start a disinformation campaign along the lines of: "It [the nerve agent] escaped from Porton Down, so the Brits must have done it themselves."



The closeness of Porton Down allowed the Russians to start a campaign of disinformation

This, he suggests, could also be played out as a 'Western conspiracy' against Russia.

In addition, Ingram places the assassination attempt on Sergei Skripal into the wider Russian political landscape: "If we look at the timing of it, it was exactly 14 days before the Russian Presidential election and Putin – who is quite an arrogant character – wanted to show that he could get a stronger return [than last time] and to send a very clear message to dissenters, amongst some of the oligarchs and his political opponents, that 'you know I can get you anywhere, don't mess around with me.'" For Ingram the Novichok agent was even chosen deliberately because Putin wanted it to be traced back to Russia but, at the same time, he set out to create a path of 'plausible deniability'.

FOUR KEY CONCLUSIONS

In his briefing to the international diplomatic community on 13 April, after the publication of the OPCW report on the Salisbury attack, the UK's ambassador to Russia – Dr Laurie Bristow – reiterated the British Government's thinking on the matter, pointing out that the Russian state was: "Highly likely to have carried out the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the UK". This assessment, he continued, was based on four key conclusions: firstly, the positive identification by experts at Porton Down of the specific chemical used as a type of Novichok nerve agent; the knowledge that Russia has

produced this agent within the last 10 years and remains capable of doing so; Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations – including in the UK – and finally, the UK's assessment, based among other things on the statements of Russia's leadership, that Russia views defectors as suitable targets for assassination.

Naturally, Russia disputes the narrative being given in the West regarding its culpability for Salisbury and, at the outset, even offered to conduct a joint investigation, an overture that was rejected by the UK side. Unfortunately, whatever the ultimate truth of the matter, the credibility of Russia's rebuttals and denials have been weakened, in the view of many commentators, by the more outlandish theories being put forward by the country's officials and media. The extent of the information – or 'disinformation' – war being waged regarding Salisbury was underlined by the EU vs Disinfo website, a European Union initiative, which reckons that 20 different explanations have been published by the Russian media on the rationale for the Skripal poisoning, none of which, it notes, involve the Kremlin. UK foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, has been forthright in his criticism of the approach taken by Russia accusing Moscow of seeking to "conceal the needle of truth in a haystack of lies".

For his part, the Czech Republic's foreign minister was quick to pour cold water on the claim, after comments by Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson

Maria Zakharova, that it was one of four countries most likely to have manufactured the nerve agent found in Salisbury: "We must protest at the claims of the origins of Novichok, which are wholly unsubstantiated. This is a classic way of manipulating information in the public space, releasing a highly speculative claim with no proof whatsoever."

DEJA VU FOR SYRIA

Moving on to the situation in Syria, which is certainly a minefield of competing geopolitical interests, what played out in the town of Douma regarding claims of chemical attacks on the 7 April, and the subsequent response from the West, in many ways closely mirrors the situation a year earlier. The previous April, after orders from President Trump, 59 Tomahawk missiles were launched at Shayrat airfield in Homs province in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Government. This time around, nearly twice the number of missiles – 105 – were fired at a wider range of targets with both Britain and France involved in the action. Even so it was still a limited operation with great care taken by the allies to only attack installations thought to be linked to Syria's chemical weapons infrastructure and, crucially, to avoid locations where Russian military personnel were present.

On the surface, the timing of the reported chemical incidents at two separate locations in Douma, if they were indeed initiated by Syrian forces, would appear to run contrary to the interests of the regime of President Assad given that it was in the final phase of recapturing the town East, of Damascus as the last rebel-held enclave in the wider Eastern Ghouta area. The Russians had of course, been warning in the weeks running up to the incidents about the rebels planning a so-called 'false flag' operation as a pretext for an intervention. However,

such arguments do not hold weight with former British Army intelligence officer Philip Ingram who is convinced of the regime's culpability: "This was almost certainly chlorine bombs, not a nerve agent. Chlorine is heavier than air, so it will settle down into basements before it evaporates. This is what Assad has done before when a negotiated settlement has broken down. He uses it [chlorine] not to kill lots of people but to break the spirit of the people. The message is that 'if you don't surrender I will drop more of this horrible stuff on you!'"

Perhaps to strengthen their case it could be argued that it might have been better for the Western powers to wait for the nine-strong OPCW FFM (Fact Finding Mission) now on the ground in Syria to report back before taking military action. The counter to those urging caution was that there was already a wide range

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of information available to Western intelligence agencies and Governments to help guide the decision to act, a case in point being a declassified French national assessment, which said that "several lethal chemical attacks took place" and that there was "a high degree of confidence that they were carried out by the Syrian regime", citing evidence such as the fact that "two new cases of toxic agents employment were spontaneously reported by civil society and local and international media". In addition, the thinking was that any delay in striking the Syrian regime would simply allow defences to be ramped-up and chemical-related materials moved or hidden ●

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Guided-missile destroyer USS Porter conducts strike operations in the Mediterranean



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