

Front Bench: Britain has made its move against Russia, now it awaits the reaction

Theresa May set out Britain's response to the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter yesterday after the deadline for Russia to respond came and went. The reaction to the Prime Minister's announcements was mixed, with a strong statement by America at the United Nations in support of Mrs May but far cooler words from France. Jeremy Corbyn found himself in hot water again after refusing to condemn Russia in the Commons, while his spokesman went further and claimed the UK's intelligence had been "problematic" in the past.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson will make a major speech in Bristol this morning where he will reveal plans to offer an anthrax vaccination to troops.

Planned restraint

Some felt the Prime Minister could have gone further yesterday when she announced 23 Russian diplomats will be forced to leave the country but stopped short of widespread financial sanctions.

There was, however, solid logic to this. May and her advisers are likely to have had three issues in mind when putting together the response. First, the need for due process. The UK can't be seen to arbitrarily confiscate assets and private property. Second, Downing Street will have wanted to hold some options back in case further measures are needed. Third, there is a desire to build international backing - hence the PM's clear effort in the Commons yesterday to frame the issue around the unprecedented, highly illegal use of a nerve agent on British soil.

Building a coalition

There was plenty of progress on building mutual support but at least one significant setback.

Last night Britain put its case to the UN Security Council (on which Russia sits and has a veto). The US ambassador Nikki Hayley came out strongly in the UK's

favour and, in a line perfectly aligned with the UK's diplomatic strategy, warned that without "immediate concrete measures" ... "[nerve agents] could be used here in New York or in cities of any country that sits on this council." There were contrarian voices, however.

The Times splashes on the equivocation of French President Emmanuel Macron's spokesman, who accused May of "fantasy politics" and said France would wait until "the elements are proven" before making any decisions. That echoed the line Jeremy Corbyn took in the Commons yesterday which has proved less than popular.

The French stance may shift, with the PM set to speak to Macron directly today.

Enter Williamson

Meanwhile, Gavin Williamson will deliver a key speech later. It was not originally planned as a response to Russia and the bigger picture is the ongoing review into defence spending, which has seen a steady stream of senior officers and politicians calling for more money for the UK's defence.

However, the Defence Secretary will use the Skripal poisoning to make clear the threat Russia poses to Britain. While calling for more funding for defence, he will announce nearly £50m for a new chemical weapons defence centre (planned well before the events in Salisbury), and that thousands of frontline troops will be vaccinated against anthrax.

What does Moscow think?

So far Russia has, unsurprisingly, cast doubt on Britain's accusations, telling the security council that the Kremlin had done no research or development "under the name Novichok" and suggesting the whole thing is a British conspiracy to "tarnish" the country.

A similar sentiment was expressed to The Telegraph by a "trusted representative" of Vladimir Putin. Evgeny Primakov Jr. said that he was "absolutely certain" the attack was performed by the UK or US to discredit Russia's presidential election on Sunday.

That attempt at misinformation will likely form just one part of a wider fightback against UK measures. There are already fears of an escalation in tit-for-tat

expulsions now that Britain has ordered 23 Russian diplomats, believed to be undeclared agents, to leave the UK. In 2017, when the US increased sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by ordering the expulsion of 755 US diplomats.

The Prime Minister may well need those measures she held back on.

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