

Statement to Parliament: PM Commons statement on National Security and Russia: 26 March 2018

Mr Speaker, I beg to move the motion on the order paper standing in my name.

Three weeks ago, the Russian Federation was responsible for an attempted murder here in our country.

This was not only a crime against Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

It was an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom, putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk.

It was an assault on our fundamental values and the rules based international system that upholds them.

And it was part of a pattern of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour, but which – with the first offensive use of a nerve agent on European soil since the foundation of NATO – also represents a new and dangerous phase in Russia's hostile activity within our continent and beyond.

So this debate is taking place, Mr Speaker, because there is no greater responsibility for this House – for this government and for me as Prime Minister – than recognising threats to our national security and acting to meet them.

So let me set out for the House what we now know about the recklessness of this act and its exposure of innocent people to potential harm, the evidence that Russia was indeed responsible, the wider pattern of Russia's illegal and destabilising actions within our continent and beyond, the extensive actions this government has already been taking, and our determination to work with our international partners to confront the evolving nature of this threat, to defend the rules based international system and to keep our people safe.

Mr Speaker, let me start by updating the House on the situation in Salisbury.

Sergei and Yulia Skripal remain critically ill in hospital.

Sadly, late last week doctors indicated that their condition is unlikely to change in the near future and they may never recover fully.

This shows the utterly barbaric nature of this act – and the dangers that hundreds of innocent citizens in Salisbury could have faced.

An investigation continues into all the locations where the Skripals had been present on Sunday 4th March.

As a result, we now have a fuller picture of the recklessness of this act

against our country.

While Public Health England have made clear that the risk to public health is low – and this remains the case – we assess that more than 130 people in Salisbury could have been potentially exposed to this nerve agent.

More than 50 people were assessed in hospital, with Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey taken seriously ill.

I know everyone in the House will welcome the news that he has been discharged and continue to hold him and his family in our thoughts as he makes his recovery.

Mr Speaker, we are quite clear that Russia was responsible for this act.

As I set out for the House in my statements earlier this month, our world-leading experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down positively identified the chemical used for this act as a Novichok – a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by the Soviet Union.

We know that Russia has a record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations – and that it views some former intelligence officers as legitimate targets for these assassinations.

And we have information indicating that within the last decade, Russia has investigated ways of delivering nerve agents probably for assassination – and as part of this programme has produced and stockpiled small quantities of Novichoks.

Clearly that is in contravention of the Chemical Weapons Convention and so it is right that we have been working closely with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons whose team arrived in the UK last week and collected samples.

This is a normal part of us discharging our obligations under the Convention, although we are clear as to what the evidence is.

As a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, upholding these non-proliferation regimes with our partners is central to our international security, while Russia has recklessly undermined and violated them.

In conclusion, as I have set out, no other country has a combination of the capability, the intent and the motive to carry out such an act.

There is no other plausible explanation.

And that is not just the view of the UK government.

It was the unanimous view of every single leader at last week's European Council.

And the view of our Allies in NATO and around the world.

Mr Speaker, I know there are some who question whether there could be alternative explanations.

So let me be absolutely clear.

We have been led by evidence not by speculation.

And when faced with the evidence we gave the Russian government the opportunity to provide an explanation.

But they did not do so.

They provided no explanation as to why Russia has an undeclared chemical weapons programme in contravention of international law.

No explanation that could suggest they had lost control of their nerve agent.

And no explanation as to how this agent came to be used in the United Kingdom.

Instead they have treated the use of a military grade nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance.

Incredibly, they have deployed at least twenty-one different arguments about it.

They have suggested that they never produced Novichoks; or that they produced them but then destroyed them.

They have tried to claim that their agents are not covered by the Chemical Weapons Convention.

They have pointed the finger at other countries – including Slovakia, Sweden and the Czech Republic – and even tried to claim that the United Kingdom was responsible for a chemical attack on our own citizens.

For a nation state like Russia to resort again to peddling such preposterous and contradictory theories is unworthy of their people and their great history.

It is merely an effort to distract from the truth of Russia's violation of international law.

And this unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, is a clear violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and a breach of the UN Charter.

This act against our country is the latest in a pattern of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour attacking the international rules based system across our continent and beyond.

Russia's illegal actions in Crimea were the first time since the Second World War that one sovereign nation has forcibly annexed territory from another in Europe.

Since then Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbass, repeatedly violated the national airspace of several European countries, and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber espionage and disruption.

It has meddled in elections and hacked the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag among many others.

It is seeking to weaponise information, deploying its state-run media organisations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.

During his recent State of the Union address, 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.

And of course Russia used radiological substances in its despicable assault here in London on Mr Litvinenko.

Russia is also failing to honour its responsibilities in the international community as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

In particular, Russia has covered up for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria – especially in its attempts to impede the OPCW's Joint Investigative Mechanism. This has allowed the Syrian Regime to continue to perpetrate atrocities against the Syrian people.

For the last month, in contravention of UNSCR 2401, Russian airpower and military coordination has enabled the Regime offensive in Eastern Ghouta, causing more appalling suffering and impeding the heroic efforts of the humanitarian relief agencies.

Indeed, over the course of many years of civil war, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have died and many times that number have been displaced. Yet Russia has repeatedly failed to use its influence over the Syrian Regime to bring an end to this terrible suffering.

Mr Speaker, from the outset, the UK has been at the forefront of the European and transatlantic response to these actions.

In response to the annexation of Crimea, we led the work with our EU and G7 partners in constructing the first sanctions regime against Russia.

We have stepped up our military and economic support to Ukraine, including directly training almost 7,000 Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel.

We are the second largest contributor of monitors to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission.

We are driving reform of NATO to better deter and counter hostile Russian activity and our commitment to collective defence and security through NATO remains as strong as ever.

Indeed, our armed forces have a leading role in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence with British troops leading a multinational battlegroup in Estonia.

In the Western Balkans, we stepped up our support to our newest ally, Montenegro, when it suffered an attempt by Russia to stage a coup.

While our Western Balkans Summit in July will enhance our security co-operation with all our Western Balkans partners, including on serious and organised crime, anti-corruption and cyber security.

We are building up our defences against Russia's cyber threat more broadly – investing almost £2 billion in our National Cyber Security Strategy and have opened a new National Cyber Security Centre which is actively working with international partners, industry and civil society to tackle this threat.

We are also working with our European partners to support the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki.

We are calling out Russia's malign behaviour in cyber space – as we did last month when together with the US and other allies we attributed the NotPetya cyber-attack to the Russian military.

And we are investing millions in countering Russian disinformation efforts – including more investment in public service and independent media operating in the Russian language, both through projects in the Baltic States, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. And through reinvigorating the BBC Russia Service as an independent source of news for Russian speakers.

As the House knows, we already have the largest Defence budget in Europe and second largest in NATO, meeting the 2% standard and set to increase every year of this Parliament.

We have also commissioned the National Security Capability Review, which will report shortly, and the Modernising Defence Programme to ensure that our Defence and Security capabilities are optimised to address the threats we face, including those from Russia.

Following the incident in Salisbury we have of course taken further measures.

We are dismantling the Russian espionage network in our country and we will not allow it to be rebuilt.

We are urgently developing proposals for new legislative powers to harden our defences against all forms of Hostile State Activity.

This will include the addition of a targeted power to detain those suspected of such activity at the UK border; and considering whether there is a need for new counter-espionage powers to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile activities of foreign agents in our country.

We are making full use of existing powers to enhance our efforts to monitor and track the intentions of those travelling to the UK who could be engaged in activity that threatens the security of the UK and our allies.

This includes increasing checks on private flights, customs and freight and freezing Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they may be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents.

We are also cracking down on illicit and corrupt finance, bringing all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites – neither of whom have any place in our country.

We have given our law enforcement agencies new powers in the Criminal Finance Act and we will table an amendment to the Sanctions Bill to ensure that the UK cannot be a home for those who trade illicit finance or commit human rights abuses.

And crucially, Madam Deputy Speaker, because this threat from Russia is an attack on the whole international rules based system and the collective security of the UK and its allies, so we must continue to work closely with all our international partners.

That includes through the new security partnership we want to build with the European Union as part of our new relationship after we have left.

And as I said in my speech in Munich, when we leave the EU it is right that the UK will pursue an independent foreign policy. But around the world the interests that we will seek to project and defend will continue to be rooted in our shared values.

And nowhere is this more true than in standing up to Russia's hostile actions and refuting its attempts to undermine the international rules based order.

As President Macron said on Friday, Russia's actions in Salisbury were "...an act of aggression against the sovereignty of an ally, which demands a reaction."

And as I set out in my statement earlier, the EU and its Member States have already taken some immediate actions, including withdrawing the EU's ambassador from Moscow.

And as I announced today, 18 countries have announced their intention to expel more than 100 Russian intelligence officers, including 15 EU member states as well as the US, Canada and the Ukraine.

And this is the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in history.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if the Kremlin's goal is to divide and intimidate the Western Alliance then their efforts have spectacularly back-fired.

Today's actions by our allies clearly demonstrate that we all stand shoulder to shoulder in sending the strongest signal to the Kremlin that Russia cannot continue to flout international law and threaten our security.

As I argued at last week's European Council, we must reappraise how our collective efforts can best tackle the challenge that Russia poses.

But we must and will proceed on a rigorous and legally sound basis, which is why the Council mandated Foreign Ministers to consider how best to proceed and to report back ahead of the next Council.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I have made clear before, we have no disagreement with the Russian people who have achieved so much through their country's great history.

Indeed, our thoughts are with them today – and especially the friends and families of those who died in that awful shopping centre fire in Kemerovo in Siberia.

Neither should we wish to be in a permanent state of perpetual confrontation with Russia.

Many of us looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope.

We would much rather have in Russia a constructive partner ready to play by the rules.

But while we should continue to keep open this possibility, we must also face the facts. President Putin's regime is carrying out acts of aggression against our values and interests within Europe and beyond.

The challenge of Russia is one that will endure for years to come.

As a European democracy, the United Kingdom will stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies in the European Union and NATO to face down these threats together.

We will defend our infrastructure, our institutions and our values against attempts to undermine them.

And we will act to protect our national security and to keep our people safe.

And I commend this motion to the House.