



UK poisonings: Putin just upped the ante in war with the West

March 19, 2018 **Stephen Blank** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence

As events last week showed, Vladimir Putin continues to open new offensives in his war against the West. Not only did Russia seemingly poison an ex-Russian spy, his daughter and 21 other British citizens, his forces might have murdered another émigré opponent, Nikolai Glushkov in London.

Beyond that, the New York Times revealed large-scale probes and attacks on America's civil infrastructure. In addition, the Russian armed forces threatened to attack U.S. forces and their allies in Syria if they harmed Russian soldiers when attacking Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, for his use of chemical warfare. So we ought to be clear as to what all these events signify.

First, these events highlight the increasing brazenness of Russian defense policy. Putin thinks he is winning over a bunch of weak-willed Western states that cannot even generate sufficient allied power to punish Moscow for its attacks. Certainly, the British response to the unleashing of chemical warfare in the U.K. was a craven one. Rather than going after Russian money, London expelled some diplomats, thereby confirming to Moscow that it is weak and unable or unwilling to defend itself.

The same may be said of President Trump who will not admit we are under attack by Moscow. He has offered no coherent counter-strategy against Moscow. Consequently, Moscow feels free to threaten U.S. military personnel and infrastructure in new, and previously unheard of, ways.

Second, we see a clear expansion of the means of war. Moscow is waging an unrelenting cyber and information war (for Moscow they are two sides of the same coin) against the West while trumpeting the militarization of the domestic Russian scene, the economy, and Russian political consciousness.

This strategy has expanded to support for terrorism in Ukraine and the U.K., military probes against other allies like Norway (also revealed recently), the support the use of chemical warfare in Syria and its actual use in London.

Russia has violated chemical warfare conventions, like that of the 1925 Protocol, which included the Soviet Union. Russia has also shown to be utter unreliability as a dialogue partner for future arms control initiatives. Besides the chemical warfare capability we should now be on the alert for Russian biological warfare capabilities that probably have been revived or were never shut down after the Cold War.

Certainly, Russian literature is studded with examples of researchers looking to combine biological weapons against the mind with the use of psychological warfare or information warfare to achieve mass effects. While this may sound fantastic, clearly there is an interest in such things in a country that has established itself as an incorrigible recidivist regarding arms control.

These factors point to a geographical expansion of the theaters of war. It also shows the erosion of the boundaries between the targeting of combatants and civilians, through the use of chemical warfare or targeting infrastructure. This opens the way to a new manifestation of total war in our time. Add to that, Russian nuclear threats. These attacks will continue and expand in scope until and unless the West unites to thwart them.

Western leaders, particularly President Trump, have been AWOL, appearing unwilling or unable to believe that these threats are actually happening. Then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was one of the few to say the attacks in London were "almost beyond comprehension."

Indeed, experts (including myself and Edward Lucas) have been warning for years that Putin's war against the West was in full swing — not beginning in 2014 but a decade or so earlier. The unwillingness to act in the face of all this information appears almost as a dereliction of duty and failure to defend the U.S. and its allies.

One thing is certain, until and unless Russia meets strong resistance these probes will continue and grow in territorial and operational scope. The lack of resistance feeds Putin's narrative that he confronts only weak-willed irresolute, corrupt societies and leaders.

A lack of coherent resistance will fuel what he admits to be his excessive tolerance for risk as he escalates further and further. Instead of defending ourselves and allies from a position of strength, we continue operating from weakness both real and as perceived in Moscow.

Stephen Blank, Ph.D., is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, focused on the geopolitics and geostrategy of the former Soviet Union, Russia and Eurasia. He is a former professor of Russian National Security Studies and National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. He is also a former MacArthur fellow at the U.S. Army War College.