



Ambassador P. S Raghavan

Convenor, National Security Advisory Board
Former Indian Ambassador to Russia (2014-16)

Overview

- The Viral Impact of Skripal Case.
- Syrian conflict continued its messy course.
- Russia & US subscribed to the Tashkent Declaration on Afghanistan.
- Re-elected President Putin prioritized a socioeconomic agenda.

The Viral Impact of Skripal Case

The poisoning of a former Russian double-agent (a Russian military intelligence operative recruited by MI6) and his daughter in the southern England town of Salisbury on March 4, generated shock waves in Russia-West relations, whose turbulence has not abated.

Sergei Skripal, who was arrested in Russia in 2006, was part of a Russia-UK spy swap – 4 in Russian custody sent to UK, in return for 10 in British custody – in 2010 and has been living in England since. Within days of the incident, UK PM May announced in Parliament that Skripal had been poisoned by a class of nerve-agent that had been developed in Russia. Shortly thereafter, she fixed responsibility on Russia and announced the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats from UK as a retaliation.

There was an extraordinary show of solidarity with UK from the United States, EU, and NATO/G7 countries. The leaders of the United States, UK, France and Germany issued a joint statement on March 15, drawing attention to the use of a military-grade nerve agent, “of a type” developed by Russia, accepting UK’s briefing that Russian responsibility was “highly likely” and its assessment that “there is no plausible alternative explanation”. The European Council on March 22 also pronounced Russia guilty of the attempted assassination on the same grounds. On March 26, the United States declared 60 Russian diplomats *personae non grata*, including 48 from Russian missions/posts, but also 12 from Russia’s mission to the UN (ignoring the legal position that they are accredited to the UN, not to the US). The Russian Consulate General in Seattle was ordered to be closed. In quick succession thereafter, Germany, Canada, Poland and France expelled four Russian diplomats each; Lithuania, Moldova and the Czech Republic three each; Australia, Albania, Denmark, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands two each; Belgium, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Finland, Croatia, Sweden and Estonia one each. Ukraine expelled 13 Russian diplomats and NATO ordered the reduction in staffing of Russia’s mission to NATO from 30 to 20.

Russia vehemently denied any responsibility for the crime, rejecting the evidence produced by UK as circumstantial and inaccurate. FM Lavrov said that the fact that neither did the UK bother to provide any

proof, nor did its allies demand any, showed that it was a political conspiracy, rather than a rigorous enquiry process. Russia highlighted the UK Labour Party's demand for proof and the variation between assertions of UK's PM and Foreign Secretary and the statement of the UK Government's defence laboratory that it could not establish the nerve agent as originating from Russia. Russia also asserted that there was a body of open source literature in NATO countries, revealing that toxic agents of the Novichok class had been developed in research laboratories in UK, the United States, Sweden and the Czech Republic, and hence the use of such an agent does not automatically incriminate Russia. There were a number of pertinent questions, including: (a) even if it did want to avenge the perfidy of a double agent, why should Russia wait 8 years after his release to do so? (b) would it not have found a more inconspicuous way to eliminate him without incriminating itself? (c) why would Russia do it just before its Presidential elections and in the runup to the FIFA World Cup, to which it is trying to attract a glittering international presence?

Russia said the UK refused to share any information with it about the incident or the nerve agent used. Instead, according to FM Lavrov, UK PM May issued an ultimatum, demanding that Russia should confirm, within 24 hours, either that the Russian leadership had ordered the poisoning of the Skripals, or that its chemical arsenal had gone out of its control – in effect, offering a choice of the crime to which it should plead guilty.

Russia's protestations of innocence cut no ice with Western countries. The only consolation was that 9 EU countries and one NATO country (Turkey) did not join the expulsion bandwagon.

In its turn, Russia expelled 23 British diplomats from Russia, demanded the closure of the British Consulate General in St Petersburg and ordered the termination of the activities of the British Council in Russia. 60 US diplomats were expelled and the US was asked to close its Consulate General in St Petersburg. Similar retaliation was promised for expulsions from other capitals.

Even while pointing to the total absence of Russian motive for the staging and timing of this incident, Russia (through FM Lavrov) offered multiple possible motives to support its suspicion that British agents had themselves organized it. One among them was that UK was in a difficult spot in the Brexit negotiations and was losing popularity at home, since it could not wrest from the EU the concessions it has promised its people. Hence it needed a diversion.

Whatever the truth of the allegations and counter-allegations, the Skripal incident has had a dramatic impact on Russia-West relations. The US response jolted the Russians out of their belief that there is some daylight between President Trump's policy inclinations and the actions of his Administration vis a vis Russia. President Trump telephoned President Putin on March 20 (after the Skripal incident and after his joint statement with the French, German and UK leaders) to congratulate him on his re-election and (according to the White House press note) the two leaders "resolved to continue dialogue about mutual national security priorities and challenges". However, the Russian satisfaction with this call was short-lived. President Trump subsequently spoke on telephone with European leaders about Russia's "chemical weapon attack", and the US decision on the expulsions was announced by the White House. There can be little doubt that the wave of Russian expulsions from European countries owes more to American pressure than to solidarity with the British. At a time when a number of European countries were pushing to "normalize" relations with Russia, the Skripal incident has succeeded in hardening the collective European attitude towards Russia. It has strengthened transatlantic relations, thereby strengthening US leverage in its various confrontations with Russia. It has revived calls in the US to implement more rigorously the sanctions against Russia enacted by the US Congress in 2017, which provide for their extra-territorial application against companies anywhere in the world, which engage with Russian entities or in sectors covered by the sanctions. Indeed, if Russia was really involved in the Skripal incident, it would be nothing short of a spectacular own goal in the run-up to the FIFA World Cup, scheduled in June-July 2018.

The durability of the Western solidarity with UK and against Russia will be tested in the coming months. The contentious issues in the UK-EU negotiations on Brexit, which were overshadowed by the European Council's deliberations on Skripal, will still need to be addressed. Separately, France and Germany have shown some keenness to re-engage with Russia and Ukraine in the Normandy format, reclaiming some of the ground lost to the US Special Envoy for Ukraine. The four countries issued a joint statement on March 29, reiterating their commitment to implementing all aspects of the Minsk Agreements, "including

security, political, humanitarian and economic issues". Though UK has suspended all bilateral contacts with Russia, France confirmed on March 29 that President Macron's visit to Russia in May would go ahead as planned. Germany plans to press ahead with the Nordstream 2 project for a Russia-Germany undersea gas pipeline, in which French, Dutch and Austrian companies will also be participating, and to which the US and a number of European countries, including UK, Denmark, Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic Republics, are opposed. Ten EU countries are slated to participate in the Russia-hosted 2018 FIFA World Cup, the quadrennial pinnacle of global football competition; this may dull their appetite to sustain an overly hostile stance against Russia. The US, on the other hand, is not involved in the World Cup, has a relatively small trade and investment exposure to Russia (about one-tenth of that of Europe) and can gain both politically and economically by ratcheting up the pressure on Russia – though at the long-term geopolitical expense of strengthening China.

Syrian Developments

The outlook for the Syrian conflict and the political settlement remained uncertain, reflecting the uncertainty about US policy. The continuation of active US military presence in Syria, announced by then Secretary Tillerson in January, seemed in some doubt after contrary statements and tweets from the White House. However, US military activity on the ground did not indicate any change in US posture.

Meanwhile, Russia reported that 90% of the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta was cleared of "terrorist groups". Over 128,000 civilians were evacuated from the area, through an organised "humanitarian corridor", under the supervision of representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). The movement of militants, with families, to rebel-held areas of Idlib province was also facilitated. In an effort to counter allegations of human rights violations, the Russian Defence Ministry placed on its website live broadcasts of the evacuation from video cameras located in the region, as well as from CCTV cameras installed at various checkpoints.

Russia continued to allege that the US was sabotaging efforts to eradicate terrorist forces from Syria. FM Lavrov cited "increasing evidence" of support for Jabhat al-Nusra (under its new name), so that it is available for "Plan B" of "western partners", which involves regime change and a breakup of Syria. Russian MFA accused the US of strengthening its military presence in the Al-Tanf camp on the Syrian-Jordan border and ensuring the continued blockade of the Damascus-Baghdad highway. It also drew attention to discoveries of caches of weapons, including chlorine and other chemical agents, in territories liberated from rebel control, apparently to build up a counter-narrative to impending accusations of use of chemical weapons by Syrian Government forces.

The Syrian political process, which had effectively been stalled after the tepid outcome of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi in end-January (see Review, January 2018), remained in limbo, though Russia continued to keep in regular contact with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. In a joint press conference with the UN envoy on March 29, FM Lavrov reiterated that the Russian initiatives and the Astana process will continue to operate "under the guidance of the United Nations and in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254". Though Russia, Iran and Turkey continue dialogue in the Astana format, action now lies with the UN envoy, who has to constitute a representative Constitution Commission to take the process forward. This has a realistic chance of progress only when US perspectives on the future shape of Syria are clearer.

Russia US Interactions on Afghanistan

FM Lavrov led the Russian delegation to the high-level conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent (March 26-27), which included participation of Afghan President Ghani and Ministerial or senior official representations from major European countries, all Central Asian countries, China, India, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United States, EU and UN. USA was represented by Under Secretary of State Thomas Shannon.

The declaration voiced “strong backing” for the Afghan government’s offer of direct talks with the Taliban, “without any preconditions”, and calls upon the Taliban to accept this offer. It supports direct peace talks between the Afghan government and “reconcilable elements of the Taliban”, adding that an inclusive peace agreement should include renunciation of violence by the Taliban and severance of ties with Al-Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh and other Transnational Terrorist Networks (TTNs). The declaration stipulates that all security assistance should be provided only through the Afghan Government and expressed strong opposition to “financial support, material assistance or arms to the Taliban and ISIS/Daesh”. The declaration, therefore, managed to square the circle by supporting the “unconditional” offer of direct talks with the Taliban and also incorporating the conditions that the Taliban should renounce terrorism and accept the Afghan constitution, thus enabling the diverse participation (including India) to sign on.

While the declared official positions of Russia and the US converge, they continued to trade accusations on Russian support for the Taliban. The Russian MFA dismissed allegations by the Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan that Russia is arming the Taliban, citing US-published evidence that the Taliban has sourced its weapons and ammunition requirements from Afghanistan itself. It quoted a recent Pentagon report that it is unable to account for about \$3 billion of weapons supply to Afghanistan. It noted that, while accusing Russia of collusion with the Taliban, the US has itself encouraged the Afghan government to offer direct talks with the Taliban without any pre-conditions, which is what Russian contact with the Taliban was seeking to achieve.

President Putin Re-Elected by a Big Majority

The Presidential elections of March 18 returned the predictable result of an overwhelming victory for President Putin. The Russian Election Commission said he received over 76% of all votes cast, with a voter turnout of over 67%. This works out to a neat figure of just over 50% of all eligible voters.

In his victory address to the nation, President Putin declared that economic and social issues would be his top priority: economic growth, job-creation, increasing real incomes, infrastructure development, education, healthcare, environment and housing. The recent emergence of the Russian economy from recession to modest growth and the increase in oil prices create some favourable conditions for this agenda, though the continued standoff with the West (and its potential exacerbation) may create difficult headwinds. The critical question really is whether a fourth-term head of state (or fifth-term, if his de facto role in 2008-12 is considered) will have the drive to push through this difficult agenda against external political and economic odds.

(The views expressed are personal)

The Author can be reached at raghavan.ps@gmail.com
