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Diplomatic Madness: the Expulsion of Russian Diplomats



How gloriously brave it seemed, some 23 nations coming together like a zombie collective to initiate a fairly ineffectual action in of itself: the expulsion of Russian diplomats or, as they preferred to term it, intelligence operatives.

It all began in celebratory fashion in Britain, when Prime Minister Theresa May decided to push the issue with the expulsion of 23 in the wake of the poisonings of Sergei Skripal, his daughter Yulia, and Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. Russia, in a reciprocal effort, retorted in kind.

Since then, the number of states similarly inclined to reduce Russia's diplomatic set has grown.

This is a time for mania, and the Trump administration will not be far behind in participating in anything that reeks of it. From the United States, 60 have been ordered to

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leave, including 12 at the United Nations. 16 EU countries and six non-EU members have also joined in the fun.

Issues of politicised intelligence are always matters of convenience for a particular state. The vision of a balanced intelligence officer conveying material to an obligingly balanced politician is one best done with.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by a triumvirate of states from the Anglosphere who all, in parts, ignored, distorted, and manufactured suitable “intelligence” in the name of eradicating weapons of mass destruction, attests to that need. Be wary of the misuse or use of material concerned with chemical weapons or other such WMDs.

The latest expulsions have an air of rhythmic repetition. Even Seumas Milne, a spokesman for Jeremy Corbyn of Britain’s Labor opposition, saw a troubling parallel. There is, he noted, “a history in relation to weapons of mass destruction and intelligence which is problematic, to put it mildly.”

Never you mind that. UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson deems “the smug, sarcastic response that we’ve heard from the Russians” as evidence of guilt, a distinctly low threshold of evidentiary vigour. States are taking sides and extolling the virtues of “international rules” and “shared security”.

For all that, China and India have stood back; certain European states refuse to follow suit, preferring caution. A club with certain credentials for membership has formed, with sides being taken. All of this has taken place on faith.

Political advantage is already being claimed by May, suggesting that there is something far bigger than those poisonings that took place in sleepy Salisbury. This is a government on life support barely holding the Brexit process together. A good show was required, and May is delivering it. With implausible confidence, she has told parliamentarians that Russia’s western spy network had been “dismantled”.

What Britain can do, the United States can do boisterously better, and Washington made a good fist of it by sending sixty Russian diplomats packing. The Seattle consulate office would close. One administration official suggested that the move was occasioned by “its proximity to one of our submarine bases and Boeing.”

This adds to the emerging story of some grand ploy supposedly to impair Russian espionage capabilities, ostensibly to punish it for using a nerve agent on British soil. The expulsions “make the United States safer by reducing Russia’s ability to spy on Americans and to conduct covert operations that threaten America’s national security.”

Veteran cynics of this are bound to point out that Russian surveillance of US citizens is less developed than Washington's own vast capacities, aided on by the not-so-humble types in Silicon Valley. As President George W. Bush erred with unintended accuracy, the enemies of the United States “never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people – and neither do we.”

Impairing Russia's intelligence gathering capacities is only going to be a temporary measure at best, a pruning of the tree rather than a savaging to its roots. “It is likely,” suggests Alexey D. Muraviev, “they will restore their intelligence-gathering capacity very quickly.”

The spectacle of certain smaller powers, subservient to the Anglo-American line, has also become tediously predictable. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop took their spots on the pro-expulsion train. The number leaving Canberra, two “undeclared intelligence officers,” is unimpressive and tokenistic.

The joint statement by Turnbull and Bishop is a point-by-point regurgitation of Johnson's presumptuous gruel. The decision “reflects the shocking nature of the attack – the first offensive use of chemical weapons in Europe since World War II, involving a highly lethal substance in a populated area, endangering countless other members of the community.”

The latest staging of moral outrage is dangerous in one fundamental aspect. It is a show that diplomacy is being abandoned, adding more succour to the image of Russia as unrepentant villain and the West, more broadly described, as appropriately righteous. Such a stance ignores the more constructive role played by Moscow in security issues and debates, be it North Korea, Iran or anti-terrorist initiatives. The Kremlin, far from being discouraged in standing down, will undoubtedly do the reverse. Dogma and politics, for the moment, are in the ascendancy.