

Former KGB Litvinenko's Killing and its Tremendous Multiple Consequences

by Charles Rault*

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The killing of former-FSB¹ Agent Alexander Litvinenko, who died on Nov. 23, 2006 after falling ill more than three weeks earlier could show the threats the West has to face don't only come from the Islamic world. Hostile secret services or financial interests or criminal groups are taking a more and more active part in making the West a more dangerous place to live in. Reciprocity, Strength, Respect, Vital Interests and particularly Deterrence are words which have been forgotten for too long in Europe. Besides one thinks useful to remind you that deterrence consists in the prevention from action by fear of the consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction². Initially, one thought newly British citizen Litvinenko might have been poisoned by radioactive Thallium. Actually, a thorough investigation showed he has been so by Polonium-210.

“Polonium is a highly radioactive and toxic element and is very difficult to handle. Even in milligram or microgram amounts, handling polonium-210 is extremely dangerous, requiring specialized equipment and strict handling procedures. Alpha particles emitted by polonium material is absorbed by the body and will damage organic tissue easily³” one can read on internet's blogs.

Various sources tried to elude the possible responsibility of a secret service in this affair by claiming such Polonium-210 can be easily found and ordered through the internet. Consequently, analysts made some research and found out that what can be obtained is at best a very poor-quality Polonium-210 if not a fake even though it costs \$200 at least. “Good quality isotopes sold are for university purpose and aren't toxic at all” one online retailer told. Actually, one would need millions of dollars of such poor quality Polonium-210 to obtain a toxic substance let alone this is very unstable and very risky from both legal and medical viewpoints. “One couldn't buy a big amount of such a product without raising suspicion from the intelligence community” an analyst told ISRIA. “Indeed and fortunately, such websites which have great amounts of 'isotopes' to sell are con games” he added. “That's why I strongly believe that only a secret service or a criminal group

1 ex-KGB

2 According to the US Military Joint Chief of Staff (JCS Pub 1-02)

3 Quoted from a Report found on the Internet

with ties to the intelligence community has been able to carry out such an operation undetected and successfully” another analyst concluded.

Polonium 210 is said to have a biological half life of 30 to 50 days. Thus the UK intelligence should focus its investigation on the period from October 1, 2006 to the death of Mr. Litvinenko. Radioactive traces have been found in 12 different places at least. Also, traces have been found in 4 British Airways' planes. Aboard one of them traveled a Russian businessman who also worked for the FSB in the past. He rejected accusation he might have played a role in the alleged plot to kill Litvinenko. This may be evidence the killing operation took place days before November 1, 2006, a day that has been initially considered the moment when Litvinenko fell ill. Medical data about human contamination with Polonium-210 and its effects doesn't exist or remains classified. “One should ask the Russians” a source ironically told. As a result, the UK intelligence might have quite some difficulties to reconstruct the complete scenario of what really happened to Litvinenko. “Apart from the risks it implies, such an operation is so complex and so well-thought that I can't imagine the non-implication of state-run organizations like a secret service; this could be the 'crime parfait'” a Paris-intelligence expert⁴ told on condition of anonymity. This has been probably the first time a person has been tested for the presence of polonium-210 in his body. Less objectively, “the latest developments only reinforce our thinking that it was the Russian government or some element of (Russia's) political landscape that was behind this,” said Alex Goldfarb, Litvinenko's friend and spokesman.⁵

Alexander Litvinenko accused Russia and especially Russian President Vladimir Putin of being behind his death. A former KGB and then FSB operative, Litvinenko made no college studies but entered the KGB in 1986. By 1988 he joined the Third Chief Directorate of the KGB (Military Counter Intelligence). Later he specialized himself in the combat against terrorism and organized crime. “He has been trained to be a killer” a friend of his told. He was neither 'intelligence star' nor a very influential element. However he had extended knowledge of how the post-Soviet KGB is dealing with its 'enemies' and with 'people who are disturbing’. Also, he publicly opposed President Putin by siding with billionaire Boris Berezovski and by publishing two books, Blowing up Russia: Terror from Within and Gang from Lubyanka, where he described Vladimir Putin's rise to power as a coup d'état organized by the FSB.⁶ He considered Putin was behind terrorist attacks attributed to the Chechens, especially the 1999 apartment block bombings in Russia that killed more than 300 people.

4 A former intelligence operative in the 1980s

5 12 UK sites show radioactive traces, The Associated Press

6 Amazon, Wikipédia

The killing of Litvinenko is of great importance not only because a controversial and freshly UK naturalized former KGB agent has been assassinated but because of the tremendous implications it can have on a diplomatic and military stage. That's why the notion of deterrence has been recalled in this text's introduction. That a former intelligence agent is killed by his former employers for treason isn't 'normal' but can be easily understandable. Every country in the world carried out such assassinations. What raises huge concern is that a non-conventional substance has been used in order to kill the target: Polonium-210. Neither the media nor the officials have tackled such an aspect of an affair which could (or clearly should) result in dramatic effects. Most of the analysts and intelligence officials agree that only an intelligence service or a criminal group tied to such has been able to conduct this killing. Although a part of them directly accuses Russia of being behind this; our analyst' role here isn't to designate a culprit but to assess what consequences and what response(s) such an assassination deserves.

Today, deterrence implies that the use of a non-conventional weapon against a country leads to an uncalculable response from the country which has been attacked in a first place. Given the radioactivity of the substance that killed Litvinenko, the intelligence and the political community should consider this an evidence of a non-conventional aggression on the British soil. Beyond the political and/or the criminal motivations for this crime, it has exposed thousands of people to a radioactive substance which effects aren't completely known. This exposure took place on the British soil and in British Airways planes which also are diplomatically part of the British territory. That is to say the UK has been the place of a non-conventional attack; something that's far more serious than the killing of an individual, be it a former KGB agent. For now, Britain's PM Tony Blair has been careful not to blame the Kremlin. If the latter really has to be blamed for this crime, one might regret that Blair's spokesperson Reid's claim saying that there would be no political or diplomatic barriers to the investigation is likely to remain a pious hope.

Yet Britain shouldn't favor appeasement given it would inevitably cast doubt over its credibility as a major power and over its deterrence policy. From an immediate political and diplomatic viewpoint, appeasement seems the best way to solve the 'situation' by keeping secret the fact that Russia (or any other country) has been involved and by telling Putin (or any other leader) not to re-authorize such an operation on the British soil. From a long-term viewpoint, appeasement might be the worst solution and form a dangerous precedent. Deterrence implies the defense of the vital interests and the crucial idea of reciprocity. "You 'can' attack me but beware of the consequences." Of course, the response mainly depends on at what extent the vital interests have been put at risk. A strict interpretation of the facts if a state is involved shows that a more-than-strong response has to be given to this non-conventional attack which killed a citizen, violated

the sovereignty of Britain and its integrity by exposing thousands of people to the radioactive substance. Beyond the number of people who could fall ill (or die) because of such an exposure, this is the 'principle' of deterrence the political leader has to take into account. It's Britain's PM's duty to give secret services all the means necessary to find the culprit(s) for this attack, be it (they) a country like Russia (or any other one). As soon as such have been clearly identified and that enough evidence has been collected, Britain's PM has to punish them and to sanction the country the same way a non-conventional attack has to be responded to: with ultimate seriousness and strength.

Such an attack doesn't only have tremendous consequences, it MUST have if one wants such a violation of diplomatic rules and endangering of vital interests not to occur again. The killing of Litvinenko also raises huge concern if the instigator(s) isn't (aren't) a country but a criminal group.

First, if such a group has ties with the intelligence community of a specific country, then the response has to be the same than the one explained above even though the government might have been unaware of such an operation. In order to make the world safer, the West must hold other countries responsible for Litvinenko-like attacks. Otherwise, this would be like accepting a completely asymmetric deterrence which would adapt to the situation according to the variable degree of responsibility of a country. From an operational viewpoint, and when vital interests are threatened, such a gradual response is impossible. Sure, it can be gradual according to the type of weapon used: "you launched one nuke, I launch one too" even if that may not be the perfect deterrence. But it can't be 'gradual' except to authorize countries like Russia, China or else to carry non-conventional attacks by knowing the western response would be weaker. For instance, if a Chinese nuclear weapon destroys a major US City, China has to be held responsible for this even if the attack has been plotted by a bunch of generals who suddenly decided to destroy America. Being a nuclear power also implies direct responsibility. Another instance would be Iran saying to the United States "that's not our fault, don't strike us" after Iran-funded Hezbollah carried a chemical attack in Chicago. If you're not ready to assume, then don't go nuclear, don't sponsor terrorism, don't develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Second, if such a group has no ties with neither any intelligence service nor any country, then it implies that criminal and/or terrorist groups have now reached an exceptional level of dangerousness. By having huge financial resources, these groups could now rival with States by building and using substances that can be categorized as 'non-conventional'. This makes any response from the victim very difficult as the criminal group involved can be located in various countries and operate from many different places. That's why the international community and the international relations' theories must insist on the notion of States' responsibility regarding what can be carried out from their territory or can be made by their nationals. It seems the only way to solve crisis which our time of great uncertainty and of transnational threats favors. As a result, and because the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) seems to have 'monopolize' most of the means, States should dramatically step up their combat against organized crime. The Litvinenko case could unveil their awful capacity to kill anyone, anywhere and by experimenting non-conventional substances which can put a whole population, a whole country, vital interests at risk.

The UK should make no concession in its investigation. A strong signal should be sent to those (rogue states, organized crime, terrorist groups) who'd be interested in acting the same way those who killed Litvinenko did. In this affair, determination is crucial.

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