

DOES NSC CONSIDER THE SKRIPAL ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT TO BE ELECTION RELATED?

There's something that remains unspoken about the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal.

While most observers do not question that Russia was behind the attack, and while Russia certainly seems to be flouting their role in it, I've seen no substantiated explanation for why Russia would carry out the attempt in the way they did. It's not just that Russia conducted another apparent assassination operation in the UK even as recent press attention has focused on a series of similar attacks. But they did so using a nerve agent, justifying the kind of elevated response we're seeing from Europe and being contemplated in the US.

There were reports that Skripal was a source for either Christopher Steele or someone close to Steele, suggesting that he might be responsible for some of the dossier or the more recent, related report, that Russia's Foreign Ministry bragged about getting Mitt Romney eliminated from consideration to be Secretary of State (which might explain the timing of the attack, except that it probably required more planning than that). But Luke Harding, who has made similar denials that other deaths are related to the dossier, denies that's the case.

It is understood he had nothing to do with the dossier on Russia and Trump written by the former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele. Before Steele went into private business he led MI6's response to Litvinenko's murder. Skripal was not a source and whatever he knew about Russian military

intelligence was long out of date.

Given the response – with 10 European countries following the UK's decision to expel Russian diplomats believed to be spies – I've been wondering what the motive is. All the more so given this detail in a story on the likelihood the US will also follow UK's move.

Trump's National Security Council reached recommendations for a U.S. response to the U.K. attack at a meeting on Wednesday and presented the proposals to him on Friday. Trump discussed the issue that day with U.S. Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan, FBI Director Chris Wray, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, Defense Secretary James Mattis, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, outgoing National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and others, two people familiar with the talks said.

It's interesting enough that Wray was among the NatSec officials Trump has consulted on whether to match the British action. The FBI was key in decisions in the 2016 sanctions, including the focus on San Francisco, but this is about the UK action, not US.

But Trump consulted Rod Rosenstein, not Jeff Sessions, on the decision. Particularly given how half-assedly Sessions has adhered to his own recusal on the Russia investigation, Rosenstein's inclusion suggests the expulsion decision may be more closely linked to the Mueller investigation than otherwise known.

Perhaps Harding is lying about Skripal's tie to Steele. Perhaps Skripal has GRU connections to others running the GRU hack-and-leak operation. But the inclusion of Rosenstein makes me wonder if there's some closer tie to the Mueller investigation than we know.