

Science Diplomacy Jigsaw Exercise on the Novichok attacks

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1. INTRODUCTION

[Novichok](#) is a series of nerve agents that made headlines in 2018 when it was used to poison a former Russian spy (Sergei Skripal) resident in the UK. In the attempt Skripal's daughter Yulia was also exposed to the chemical and severely poisoned. Both individuals collapsed in a public park in Salisbury where they were found unarousable. Paramedics rushed father and daughter to hospital. A drug overdose was suspected initially, but ruled out, and attention shifted to the possibility of some chemical being the cause. Blood and urine samples were collected from both patients and analysed at the UK's Chemical Defence Establishment at Porton Down, near Salisbury, and a chemical, identified as a Novichok –type nerve agent was found in the samples and considered to be the cause of the Skripals' condition.

Before confirmation of the agent a policeman, who visited the Skripals' home, was admitted to hospital with a range of symptoms characteristic of nerve agent poisoning.¹ Nerve agents, like any chemical, cause symptoms which are dependent on the dose administered and are well characterised.² Fortunately, all three victims made a suitable recovery allowing their discharge from hospital. The policeman was the first to be discharged, followed by Yulia and then her father. Both Sergei and Yulia were unconscious for weeks, and doctors initially feared they may not survive.

Confirmation of the presence of the Novichok-type agent led to the UK Government to accuse Russia of using a chemical weapon against UK residents. Russia vehemently denied that it was to blame. The UK pointed out that this was the first aggressive use of chemical weapons in Europe since World War I and the first time a nerve agent had been used in Europe. The UK chose to exercise its rights under the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to invite the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to send inspectors to the UK to take and analyse samples.³ The OPCW subsequently confirmed that it, too, had identified a Novichok –type agent and that it was identical to the one found by the UK defence laboratory.^{4,5,6} Both the UK and Russia, along with 191 other countries, are party to the CWC.⁷

Soon after the UK accused Russia of the Novichok attack, Russia requested access to the samples the UK had collected and requested involvement in the UK investigation. The UK refused Russia's request citing the investigation as a police matter and this position has not changed. The UK has also identified two Russian individuals who visited Salisbury at the time the Skripals were poisoned as the likely suspects.⁸ The UK claims the individuals are members of the Russian security services; Russia denies this.⁹

The accusation by the UK, and involvement of the OPCW, led to acrimonious exchanges in the executive body of the OPCW between Russia and the UK. When it confirmed the presence of the Novichok agent in the samples collected, the OPCW simply noted the presence, but did not assign any blame as to the perpetrator¹⁰. At that time, the OPCW had no mandate to assign blame. Following a special conference of states parties to the CWC in June 2018, the OPCW has been given a mandate to establish a mechanism to enable the identification of perpetrators in subsequent investigations of alleged chemical weapons use.¹¹

Diplomatic relations between the UK and Russia are at a low ebb following the Novichok attack with the UK expelling 23 Russian diplomats¹² and Russia responding in kind, but also closing British Council offices in Russia – the British Council is involved in facilitating educational and cultural exchanges¹³. Many other countries, particularly in the European Union, following appeals from the UK and a sharing of the evidence the UK had collected, also expelled Russian diplomats.¹⁴

Some four months after the Skripals were poisoned two other individuals, Charlie Rowley and his partner Dawn Sturgess, resident in Amesbury, a town some 7 miles from Salisbury, became seriously ill and were also taken to Salisbury District Hospital. Again, a drug overdose was initially suspected but quickly ruled out and the presence of a Novichok agent again found in blood samples collected from the two new patients. The source of the poison was said to be a perfume bottle which Mr. Rowley allegedly found in a waste skip.¹⁵ The bottle was said to be in a wrapper mimicking a well-known brand of perfume. Dawn Sturgess is alleged to have applied the liquid to her wrists and not long after reported to have collapsed. Sadly, the dose Ms. Sturgess was exposed to resulted in her death.¹⁶ Mr Rowley was later discharged from hospital but maintains that his health has deteriorated since his exposure.¹⁷

The exercise which follows involves the principal players that were involved in this diplomatic row.

2. EXERCISE

A well-recognised interactive teaching tool known as Jigsaw was employed for the exercise. The jigsaw approach is ideal for encouraging everyone to talk and helpful if there are some in the group who may be reticent and unlikely to voice an opinion.

Above all the exercise is also a great way to discuss topics which appear somewhat dry. However, the topic chosen on this occasion and outlined below could in no way be considered desiccated.

a) Establishing groups

Accompanying this text are a set of slides which set out how to run the exercise. The exercise is configured for 36 participants but if you keep numbers similar in each group this will enable a good discussion. Any combination like 3x3, 4x4, 5x5 or 6x6 will work.

It is also possible to run groups in parallel to compare outcomes. A similar exercise has been done with 3 parallel groups comprising a total of 98 participants. Working with larger groups requires much more planning and I suggest you do the exercise with no more than 36 participants when you first try it.

I would also recommend mixing individuals up so that those who know one another are allocated to different groups. This approach ensures that everyone will have to participate. But coercion is not what the exercise is about; it is about participation. What we find with the exercise is that everyone gets a chance to talk and most will find the exchanges great fun as well as enlightening.

b) Setting the scene

Create however many groups you need depending on number of participants. Let us assume you have 36 participants as the slides indicate. Allocate 6 people to each group and give each group a designation such as UK, Russia etc. Emphasise that they all must become an expert in that country's/organisation's/bloc's position on the topic, in this case the use of a Novichok-type nerve agent. Each person needs to become expert as they will have to argue the importance of the position later in the exercise (instead of choosing one person to represent the group).

c) A brief run-through

At this stage, it will be helpful to take the participants through the whole exercise briefly so that everyone has an idea of what is to come. [The last slide to show in the run through is headed 'Outcomes'](#). The following 3 slides will be shown when the exercise is complete and everyone has reported back. It is always worth holding some information back to encourage a frank discussion.

d) Establishing positions

Now allow the groups 15 to 20 minutes to familiarise themselves with the role they have been allocated and the arguments/evidence available which supports their position ([have slide 11 on display during this section of the exercise](#)). Some may take notes, but this is not mandatory. It is also helpful to number the groups 1 to 6 (with a large number on each table) and make sure participants know their numbers. While they are discussing their role go around each table and assign a letter (A to F) to each person. So, on each table everyone will have a single letter. Ensure they keep the letter safe as the lettering will determine the next group they are allocated to.

e) Bilateral exchange between UK and EU

About 10 minutes into these first discussions encourage some bilateral interaction between the UK and the European Union group. The communication between these two is outlined separately at the end of this exercise guidance.

f) Mixing groups – exchanging views

After the initial 15 – 20 minute discussions the groups will break up. Before they do this allocate a letter to each of the tables and make this clearly visible. So, table 1 could also be table A for the second part of the exercise and table 2, letter B etc. Mark tables clearly with a large letter so that it is visible and indicate which is which before anyone moves as this will ensure participants find their assigned table promptly.

A good rule of thumb which will help you decide when to stop discussion in groups is when the noise in the room dies down as this generally indicates that discussion is starting to flag a little. It is always better to move groups around after 2 or 3 have concluded and feel they have mastered their role. Moving people around at this stage also helps to prevent any losing interest.

Now ask the groups to move so that all the A's sit together, all the B's together, all the C's etc. as shown on the slides. [Show slide 12.](#)

When everyone has moved into the new group each person will be sitting with 5 other people they have not worked with. Ask them to now begin the discussion to present their evidence and state their position. It is vital that all participants have the opportunity to argue their case. This is why they must become experts when they are in their first group as they now must be the ambassadors for their respective country or organisation. Allow the groups' discretion as to who starts talking. The discussion will now become lively as each presses their own case. It is also an opportunity to question others, challenge them and clarify points. The exercise is also about listening to other points of view and perhaps modifying positions that once seemed immovable.

During this stage of the exercise noise levels really rise in the room and this is a good sign as it indicates full participation. Hopefully there will also be a fair amount of laughter too as inconsistencies are highlighted in each case. Again, judge how long the discussion should be allowed to continue. You may want to circulate to ensure that discussions are going well, to interject to clarify points and, later, to help decide when the exchange of views has occurred and talks should conclude.

But you need to allow sufficient time for a good exchange of views as it is during this second stage when all the A's or B's etc. are together that participants have an opportunity to shine and some very good, logical arguments are made.

g) Reconvene in original group

When you judge groups have finished exchanging views, ask participants to go back to their original grouping i.e. all the 1's together, all the 2's etc. Now ask each participant to tell the others in the group what they discussed and learned. Everyone should do this. [Show slide 13.](#)

Ask each group to choose a rapporteur as this person will need to relay the groups' views to the whole room. Once everyone has recounted their discussions, have the groups consider if they would change their views. Is their own stance still tenable, or have they conceded anything/compromised in any way? If they have changed, what was it that convinced them to adopt a new position?

h) Addressing all

As a final part of the exercise ask each rapporteur to explain to the whole room what their position was initially and what their view is now after the various discussions. If views changed have them explain why they changed. Make this a plenary discussion and draw in as many people into the exchanges as you can. Attempt to identify any standout lessons and the importance of the exercise as a listening one to hear other points of view.

SUM UP the discussion. If the exercise has gone well and all have had an opportunity to talk there may be some moderating of original positions and suggestions on next steps to assist certain states, possibly even actions to help re-establish some consensus but, given the topic, consensus is much less likely.

If there is time it may be possible to undertake the exercise again. Groups assemble in their original designations, clarify their position, and then mix up again, but with different members of the other groups. After a second exchange of views bring participants back to their original groupings and repeat the feedback to the whole room. It would be interesting to see if a further round of discussions had made any difference.

3. INFORMATION FOR GROUPS (CONFIDENTIAL INSTRUCTIONS)

The following guidance is group-specific and only to be given to the group for which it is intended. This is to allow the group to formulate its position.

Some material is extracted from the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) [“Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction”](#) to enable specific groups to firm up their views. However, to enable groups to be unique and to have sufficient time for discussion the textual material given out is limited.

The following text about *definitions* should be given to all groups with the exception, perhaps, of the Salisbury residents as they are not interested in definitions, just the risk the chemicals pose to them.

Text for all groups

CWC: Article II, paragraphs 1 and 2.

“Chemical Weapons” means the following, together or separately:

Toxic chemicals and their precursors, except where intended for purposes not prohibited under this Convention, as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes;

Munitions and devices, specifically designed to cause death or other harm through the toxic properties of those toxic chemicals specified in subparagraph (a), which would be released as a result of the employment of such munitions and devices;

Any equipment specifically designed for use directly in connection with the employment of munitions and devices specified in subparagraph (b).

“Toxic Chemical” means:

Any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals. This includes all such chemicals, regardless of their origin or of their method of production, and regardless of whether they are produced in facilities, in munitions or elsewhere. (For the purpose of implementing this Convention, toxic chemicals which have been identified for the application of verification measures are listed in Schedules contained in the Annex on Chemicals.)

Group 1 – UK

Guidance:

Secret intelligence is available to you that Russia is the source of the Novichok. You also have intelligence that Russia has trained assassins in the use of poisons. You believe unequivocally that Russia is to blame.

At one point, you will have bilateral discussions with the EU, before all the groups are mixed.

Additional text:

The UK requested help from the OPCW citing the following text:

CWC Article 10 - paragraph 8

Each State Party has the right to request and, subject to the procedures set forth in paragraphs 9, 10 and 11, to receive assistance and protection against the use or threat of use of chemical weapons if it considers that: Chemical weapons have been used against it;

Riot control agents have been used against it as a method of warfare; or

It is threatened by actions or activities of any State that are prohibited for States Parties by Article I.

Group 2 – Russia

Guidance:

Novichoks were researched and developed in the former Soviet Union.

Unclear what recent work has been done on these chemicals.

Your strategy is to deny you have them and seek evidence from accusers.

Additional text:

Russia insisted that the UK should involve it in the investigations of the use of the Novichok-type agent and cited the following in support of this demand:

CWC: Article IX, paragraph 2

Without prejudice to the right of any State Party to request a challenge inspection, States Parties should, whenever possible, first make every effort to clarify and resolve, through exchange of information and consultations among themselves, any matter which may cause doubt about compliance with this Convention, or which gives rise to concerns about a related matter which may be considered ambiguous. A State Party which receives a request from another State Party for clarification of any matter which the requesting State Party believes causes such a doubt or concern shall provide the requesting State Party as soon as possible, but in any case not later than 10 days after the request, with information sufficient to answer the doubt or concern raised along with an explanation of how the information provided resolves the matter. Nothing in this Convention shall affect the right of any two or more States Parties to arrange by mutual consent for inspections or any other procedures among themselves to clarify and resolve any matter which may cause doubt about compliance or gives rise to a concern about a related matter which may be considered ambiguous. Such arrangements shall not affect the rights and obligations of any State Party under other provisions of this Convention.

Group 3 – Residents of Salisbury

Three people have been (initially) poisoned with a nerve agent in your community. You are told these agents are lethal.

1. Where were the people poisoned? – You see an area of the town cordoned off and some premises closed. Are you at risk?
2. What reassurances do you need? Businesses are affected, tourists are avoiding the town.
3. You want answers. How long will this go on?

Group 4 – OPCW

Guidance:

The OPCW is an independent organization which has a close working relationship with the United Nations.

193 States, including UK and Russia, are OPCW members and have equal rights.

The OPCW is a neutral broker. It must stick to the evidence.

The OPCW has a network of laboratories and some of these were sent samples collected by OPCW inspectors; analyses confirmed the identity of the substance claimed by the UK Government as a Novichok-type agent.

The report by the OPCW was sent to all member states but not made public at the request of the UK. The UK cited proliferation risks if the identity of the agent was made public.

Additional text:

CWC Article 10 - paragraph 8

Each State Party has the right to request and, subject to the procedures set forth in paragraphs 9, 10 and 11, to receive assistance and protection against the use or threat of use of chemical weapons if it considers that: Chemical weapons have been used against it;

Riot control agents have been used against it as a method of warfare; or

It is threatened by actions or activities of any State that are prohibited for States Parties by Article I.

CWC: Article IX, paragraph 2

Without prejudice to the right of any State Party to request a challenge inspection, States Parties should, whenever possible, first make every effort to clarify and resolve, through exchange of information and consultations among themselves, any matter which may cause doubt about compliance with this Convention, or which gives rise to concerns about a related matter which may be considered ambiguous. A State Party which receives a request from another State Party for clarification of any matter which the requesting State Party believes causes such a doubt or concern shall provide the requesting State Party as soon as possible, but in any case not later than 10 days after the request, with information sufficient to answer the doubt or concern raised along with an explanation of how the information provided resolves the matter. Nothing in this Convention shall affect the right of any two or more States Parties to arrange by mutual consent for inspections or any other procedures among themselves to clarify and resolve any matter which may cause doubt about compliance or gives rise to a concern about a related matter which may be considered ambiguous. Such arrangements shall not affect the rights and obligations of any State Party under other provisions of this Convention.

Group 5 – EU

Guidance:

Who do you believe?

Solidarity suggests supporting the UK.

What are your interests?

There will be a bilateral discussion with the UK before all are mixed.

Additional text:

CWC Article 10 - paragraph 8

Each State Party has the right to request and, subject to the procedures set forth in paragraphs 9, 10 and 11, to receive assistance and protection against the use or threat of use of chemical weapons if it considers that: Chemical weapons have been used against it;

Riot control agents have been used against it as a method of warfare; or

It is threatened by actions or activities of any State that are prohibited for States Parties by Article I.

Group 6 – Scientists (international/academies)

Guidance:

Have academies a role to play in bringing parties together, like the role Pugwash used to play during the Cold War?

Might they be neutral brokers where evidence can be exchanged, consensus found?

Is it likely that significant players (the UK, Russia) would consent to have their senior (involved) scientists take part in open exchanges?

Where, and how, would discussions take place and what would they achieve?

Would everything be done in secret? Academies invariably want discussions to be open.

Bilateral exchange between UK and EU – 10 minutes into first group discussion.

The UK shows the EU the evidence it has collected (including some intelligence material), appeals for collective support against Russia.

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