

"A World Transformed and the Role of Intelligence"

Director William J. Burns
Ditchley Annual Lecture
July 1, 2023

Good afternoon. And thanks so much for that kind introduction, and for welcoming back to Ditchley.

I first came here in 1979, as a young and unformed Marshall Scholar at Oxford, with just enough cash to rent a black tie for the formal conference dinner and buy a bus ticket.

I must admit that my memory of the conference itself is hazy, but the effect it had on me was profound. It gave me an enduring appreciation of the power and purpose of the Transatlantic Alliance, and of the particular significance of Anglo-American partnership.

A decade later, I was a career American diplomat, working for Secretary of State James Baker. It was one of those rare "plastic moments" in history, moments which come along only a few times each century. The Cold War was ending, the Soviet Union was about to collapse, Germany would soon be reunified, and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait would soon be defeated.

It was a world of uncontested American primacy. History's currents seemed to flow inexorably in our direction, the power of our ideas driving the rest of the world in a slow but irresistible surge toward democracy and free markets. Our sometimes overbearing self-assurance seemed well-founded in the realities of power and influence, but it also obscured other gathering trends.

Our moment of post-Cold War dominance was never going to be a permanent condition. History had not ended, nor had ideological competition. Globalization held great promise for human society, with hundreds of millions of people lifted out of poverty, but it was also bound to produce counter-pressures.

In a transition memo that I drafted for the incoming Clinton Administration at the end of 1992, I tried to capture the dim outlines of the challenges ahead. "While for the first time in fifty years we do not face a global military adversary," I wrote, "it is certainly conceivable that a return to authoritarianism in Russia or an aggressively hostile China could revive such a global threat."

I tried, however imperfectly, to highlight the risks that democracies and free markets would inevitably face, in a world in which economies were globalizing but, as I put it at the time, "the international political system was tilting schizophrenically toward greater fragmentation." And I tried, as best I could, to sketch the shared global threats already posed by climate change and global health insecurity, especially the raging HIV-AIDS epidemic.

For the next quarter-century, I remained a proud and very fortunate American diplomat, serving mostly in Russia and the Middle East, and in senior positions in Washington. I shared in

diplomatic successes, and made my share of mistakes, as America's unipolar moment faded, and some of what I had tried to foresee in that long-ago transition memo began to unfold.

Today, as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, I'm afraid to say that I've now lived and served long enough to face another plastic moment –in a world that is far more crowded, complicated and contested than the one I experienced in those heady days as a young diplomat three decades ago. It is a world in which the United States is no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block – a world in which humanity faces both peril and promise.

My job now is to help President Biden and senior policymakers understand and shape a world transformed. So what I'd like to do this afternoon is sketch the main features of the new landscape before us, and what it means for the role of intelligence.

A World Transformed

We are, as President Biden reminds us, at an inflection point. The post-Cold War era is definitely over. Our task is to shape what comes next -- investing in our foundational strengths, and working in common cause with our unmatched network of alliances and partnerships -- to leave for future generations a world that is more free, open, secure and prosperous.

That is a very tall order.

Our success will depend on our ability to navigate a world with three distinctive features.

First is the challenge of strategic competition from a rising and ambitious China, and from a Russia which constantly reminds us that declining powers can be at least as disruptive as rising ones.

Second are the problems without passports, like the climate crisis and global pandemics, which are beyond the reach of any one country to address, and are growing more extreme and existential.

And third is the revolution in technology, which is transforming how we live, work, fight and compete, with possibilities and risks we can't yet fully grasp.

Those singular challenges sometimes conflict with one another, with cooperation on shared global problems both more vital and more difficult, too often the victim of strategic competition. And the revolution in technology is both a main arena for that competition, and a phenomenon in which some basic partnership is crucial to set rules of the road, to maximize the benefits of emerging technologies and minimize their dangers.

The most immediate and acute geopolitical challenge to international order today is Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine -- the biggest war in Europe since Winston Churchill sat in his bedroom here at Ditchley, dictating wartime messages to Franklin Roosevelt.

I've spent much of the past two decades trying to understand and counter the combustible combination of grievance, ambition and insecurity that Putin embodies. That experience has not only contributed to all this gray hair; it has also given me a healthy dose of humility about pontificating about Putin and Russia.

One thing I have learned is that it is always a mistake to underestimate Putin's fixation on controlling Ukraine and its choices, without which he believes it is impossible for Russia to be a major power or him to be a great Russian leader. That tragic and brutish fixation has already brought shame to Russia and exposed its weaknesses, and evoked the breathtaking determination and resolve of the Ukrainian people.

Putin often insists that Ukraine is "not a real country," that it is weak and divided. Well, as he has discovered, real countries fight back. And that is what Ukrainians have done, with remarkable courage and tenacity, as I have seen in frequent travels to Kyiv over the course of the war. They will not relent, nor will all of us who support Ukraine.

Putin's war has already been a strategic failure for Russia – its military weaknesses laid bare; its economy badly damaged for years to come; its future as a junior partner and economic colony of China being shaped by Putin's mistakes; its revanchist ambitions blunted by a NATO which has only grown bigger and stronger.

This time last Saturday, we were all riveted by the scenes of Yevgeniy Prigozhin's armed challenge to the Russian state, with Wagner paramilitary forces briefly seizing Rostov and moving two-thirds of the way to Moscow before turning back. As President Biden has made clear, this is an internal Russian affair, in which the United States has had and will have no part.

It is striking that Prigozhin preceded his actions with a scathing indictment of the Kremlin's mendacious rationale for its invasion of Ukraine, and of the Russian military leadership's conduct of the war. The impact of those words and those actions will play out for some time, a vivid reminder of the corrosive effect of Putin's war on his own society and his own regime.

Russia's aggression poses a formidable test. But China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so.

China's transformation over the past five decades has been extraordinary. It is a transformation for which the Chinese people deserve the credit, and one which our countries supported because -- as Foreign Secretary Cleverly eloquently said in April at Mansion House, "a stable, prosperous and peaceful China is good for Britain and good for the world."

The issue, therefore, is not China's rise per se, but the actions which accompany it. President Xi is embarking on his third term with more power than any Chinese leader since Mao. And rather than use that power to reinforce, revitalize and update the international system that enabled China's transformation, he seeks to rewrite it.

In the intelligence profession, we study carefully what leaders say. But we pay special attention to what they do, and here President Xi's growing repression at home and his aggressiveness abroad -- from his no-limits partnership with Putin to his threats to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait -- are impossible to ignore.

What's also impossible to ignore is the fact that, in this new era, our competition is taking place against the backdrop of thick economic interdependence and commercial ties. That has served our countries, our economies and our world remarkably well -- but it has also created strategic dependencies, critical vulnerabilities, and serious risks to our security and prosperity.

COVID made clear to every government the danger of being dependent on any one country for life-saving medical supplies, just as Putin's aggression in Ukraine has made clear to every government the risks of being dependent on one country for energy supplies. In today's world, no country wants to find itself at the mercy of a cartel of one for critical minerals and technologies -- especially a country that has demonstrated the will and capacity to deepen and weaponize those dependencies. The answer to that is not to decouple from an economy like China's, which would be foolish, but to sensibly de-risk and diversify by securing resilient supply chains, protecting our technological edge, and investing in industrial capacity.

In a more volatile and uncertain world, in which power is more diffuse, the weight of the hedging middle is growing -- economically, politically and militarily. Democracies and autocracies, developed and developing economies, and countries from the Global South and other parts of the globe, are intent on diversifying their relationships in order to expand their strategic autonomy and maximize their options.

These countries see little benefit and lots of risk in monogamous geopolitical relationships. Instead, we're likely to see more countries pursue more open relationships than we were accustomed to over several post-Cold War decades of unipolarity. And if past is precedent, we ought to be attentive to rivalries between so-called middle powers -- which have often been the match that ignited collisions between major powers.

We do not have the option of focusing on a single geopolitical pacing threat. We face an equal threat to international order and indeed to the lives and livelihoods of our people from shared or transnational challenges, of which the climate crisis poses the most clear and present danger. We can no longer talk about "tipping points" and "catastrophic climate impacts" in the future tense. They are here and now, imperiling our planet, our security, our economies, and our people.

Last month in Washington DC, you could not see across the Potomac River from CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, or take a breath without subjecting your lungs to hazardous materials because of smoke from hundreds of wildfires across Canada. Climate change is the quintessential "threat multiplier" -- fueling energy, health, water and food insecurities, setting back our progress on economic and human development, turbocharging what is already the worst period of forced displacement and migration in history, and further exacerbating instability and geopolitical tensions and flashpoints.

These two threats -- geopolitical and transnational -- are impossible to disentangle. We have to be honest, as I noted before -- competition in many ways makes cooperation more difficult. But we're going to have to do both.

To outcompete our rivals and still deliver on shared challenges, our leaders will need to deal with another immensely powerful force: a revolution in technology more profound than the industrial revolution or the dawn of the nuclear age.

Advances in computing-related technologies -- from chips to quantum to artificial intelligence -- are leading to breakthroughs of remarkable scale and scope. In just a few short months since the first public version of ChatGPT debuted last November, we've seen newer models outperform humans in graduate level entrance exams, and in assessments of doctor-to-patient engagements in medical training programs.

We see this "hockey stick" trendline time and again, outstripping our expectations, imaginations and capacity to govern the use of enormously powerful technologies -- for good or for ill. Nowhere is that more evident than in biotechnology and biomanufacturing -- which can unlock extraordinary climate and health solutions and boost our economies, but whose abuse and misuse could lead to catastrophe.

Leadership in technology and innovation has underpinned our economic prosperity and military strength. It has also been critical to setting rules, norms and standards that safeguard our interests and our values. Our Chinese rivals understand that as well as anyone, and it is therefore no surprise that they are investing heavily in emerging technologies, as a central dimension of our strategic competition.

Strategic competition, common transnational imperatives and a revolution in technology without precedent in human history make for a hugely complicated international landscape. It certainly keeps my nostalgia for diplomacy and policymaking under control, but it also sharpens my focus on transforming how we approach the role of intelligence in this transformed world.

Intelligence Transformed

Across the CIA and the U.S. intelligence community, we are working hard to meet this moment with the urgency and creativity it requires. Let me offer a few examples, from the challenges of strategic competition with Russia and China, to initiatives to harness emerging technologies, invest in the people who animate the CIA, and build the intelligence partnerships which will shape our future.

I'm proud of the work that CIA and our partners across the U.S. intelligence community have done to help President Biden and senior policymakers, and especially Ukrainians themselves, thwart Vladimir Putin's aggression in Ukraine. And I'm proud of our close partnership with our British allies, in particular the women and men of the Secret Intelligence Service, led by my friend Sir Richard Moore, for whom I have the greatest respect.

Together, we provided early and accurate warning of the war that was coming -- the essential function of any intelligence service. When the President sent me to Moscow before the war, in early November of 2021, I found Putin and his senior advisors unmoved by the clarity of our understanding of what he was planning, convinced that the window was closing for his opportunity to dominate Ukraine. I left even more troubled than when I arrived.

Good intelligence has helped President Biden mobilize and sustain a strong coalition of countries in support of Ukraine. Good intelligence has helped Ukraine defend itself with such remarkable bravery and resolve, and to launch the crucial counter-offensive that is now underway.

And the careful declassification of some of our secrets, part of a novel and effective strategy shaped by the President and senior policymakers, has helped deny Putin the false narratives that I have watched him so often invent in the past -- putting him in the uncomfortable and unaccustomed position of being on his back foot.

Disaffection with the war will continue to gnaw away at the Russian leadership, beneath the steady diet of state propaganda and practiced repression. That disaffection creates a once-in-a-generation opportunity for us at CIA, at our core a human intelligence service.

We're not letting it go to waste. We recently used social media -- our first video post to Telegram, in fact -- to let brave Russians know how to contact us safely on the dark web. We had 2.5 million views in the first week, and we're very much open for business.

If Putin's war in Ukraine is the most immediate challenge in strategic competition, Xi Jinping's China is our biggest geopolitical and intelligence rival, and most significant long-term priority.

We've been organizing ourselves at CIA over the past couple years to reflect that priority. We've set up a new mission center -- one of the dozen or so organizational building blocks of the Agency -- focused exclusively on China. It is the only single-country mission center we have at CIA, and it provides a central mechanism for coordinating work on the China mission, which extends today to every part of CIA.

I learned long ago that priorities aren't real unless budgets follow them. That's why we've concentrated substantially more resources on intelligence collection, operations and analysis on China -- more than doubling the percentage of our overall budget supporting China activities over just the last two years. We're hiring and training more Mandarin speakers. And we're stepping up efforts across the world to compete with China, from Latin America to Africa to the Indo-Pacific.

We've also sought to quietly strengthen intelligence channels with China, including through my own travels. These discreet channels are an important means of ensuring against unnecessary misunderstandings and inadvertent collisions, and complementing and supporting policymaking channels, such as Secretary Blinken's recent visit to Beijing.

Even as Russia and China consume much of our attention, we can't afford to neglect other pressing challenges on today's new and complicated landscape, from counter-terrorism to regional instability. Hardly a day goes by when I'm not reminded that CIA is an agency with global responsibilities and global reach. As we meet here this afternoon, our officers are doing hard jobs in hard places around the world, often operating in the shadows, out of sight and out of mind, the risks they take and the sacrifices they make rarely well-understood.

The successful U.S. strike last summer against Ayman al-Zawahiri, the co-founder and former leader of al-Qaeda, was a reminder of the capability and determination still focused on terrorist threats. For many years to come, we will have to perform a delicate balancing act, juggling renewed major power rivalry with all sorts of other challenges.

Meanwhile, we're transforming our approach to emerging technology issues. We've created a second new mission center, focused on technology and transnational challenges. It is already significantly expanding our partnerships with the private sector, without which we will not be able to keep pace with intelligence rivals like China, or keep ahead of them. We've also established a new Chief Technology Officer position, a first for CIA. And CIA Labs, another new program, supports research and development in crucial technologies with academic and private sector partners.

Our in-house talent remains superb. More than 60 years ago, CIA pioneered the technical collection capabilities of the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. We were an early investor in the technology you now know as Google Earth. And our specialists also developed the precursors to the lithium-ion batteries that power your smartphones today. We're constantly looking for the next breakthrough.

We're also in the midst of the most profound transformation of espionage tradecraft since the Cold War. In an era of smart cities and ubiquitous technical surveillance, spying is a formidable challenge. For a CIA officer working overseas in a hostile country, meeting sources who are risking their own safety to provide us information, constant surveillance is a very risky business. But the same technology that sometimes works against us -- whether it's mining big data to expose patterns in our activities or massive camera networks -- can also be made to work for us, and against our rivals.

Technical collection platforms are enormously important in today's intelligence world. But there will always be secrets we need a human to collect, and clandestine operations that only a human can execute.

That requires intensive training, an intensive team effort to support operations, and immense creativity and appetite for risk. It still, however, remains central to our mission.

The ongoing revolution in artificial intelligence and machine learning, and the avalanche of open source information in today's world, creates new opportunities for our analysts. When harnessed properly, AI can find patterns and trends in vast amounts of open source and clandestinely-acquired data that the human mind can't, freeing up our officers to focus on what they do best: providing reasoned judgments and insights on what matters most to policymakers, and what

means most for our interests. Our adversaries are moving fast to exploit open source information, and we have to do it faster and better than they do.

Another key priority, and my most profound responsibility as Director, is to invest in the people of our Agency. While mastery of emerging technologies will shape our future in many ways, it is the remarkable men and women at the heart of CIA who will always drive it forward. They have been operating at an incredible tempo for more than two decades, since the terrible attacks of 9/11, and we're determined to provide them the support they need and deserve.

We've completely revamped our in-house medical team, sent more medical officers out to the field, strengthened programs for families and two-career couples, and appointed our first-ever chief wellbeing officer. We're also looking for more ways to attract and retain technological talent, improving pay packages and encouraging more flexible career patterns, so that officers can move into the private sector and later return to CIA.

We're also making progress toward a more diverse workforce, taking full advantage of the richness of American society. For an intelligence service stretched across a very diverse world, that is not only the right thing to do for Americans, but also the smart thing. This past year, we reached historic highs in hiring women and minority officers. Perhaps even more importantly, we promoted into our senior ranks the highest percentages of women and minority officers in our 75-year history.

Our final priority in this new era is to deepen our intelligence partnerships around the world, and renew our commitment to intelligence diplomacy. At its core, the intelligence profession is about human interactions, and there is no substitute for direct contact to deepen ties with our closest allies, communicate with our fiercest adversaries, and cultivate everyone in between. In the nearly four dozen trips I've taken overseas in my two and a half years as Director, I've run the gamut of those relationships and challenges.

Sometimes it's more convenient for intelligence officers to navigate difficult terrain or deal with historic enemies, where diplomatic contact might connote formal recognition. That's why the President sent me to Kabul in late August of 2021, to engage the Taliban leadership just prior to our final withdrawal. Sometimes, intelligence ties can provide ballast in relationships full of political ups and downs. And sometimes intelligence diplomacy can encourage convergence of interests, support the efforts of policymakers and diplomats, and enhance competitive advantages.

Our allies, from the Five Eyes network to our other treaty partners across NATO and the Indo-Pacific, are the bedrock of our intelligence diplomacy. No relationship is stronger or more trusting than our alliance with Britain and SIS. That's a point that my friend "C" and I have reinforced to our workforces in two unusual joint town hall discussions in recent months, in Langley and in Vauxhall.

I've experienced that reality ever since I trudged up to Ditchley Park from the Oxford bus all those years ago. I saw it as a diplomat, in our collaboration with British diplomats and intelligence officers to persuade Muammar Qaddafi to get out of the business of terrorism and

give up his rudimentary nuclear program -- an adventure full of strange meetings in the middle of the night in the middle of the desert with Qaddafi, to this day the strangest leader I've ever met.

I saw it during secret nuclear talks with the Iranians, and in the tangled dangers of Iraq and Afghanistan.

And I saw that remarkable intelligence partnership in the run up to Putin's war in Ukraine, where it got a little lonely for the two of us, way out on a limb in our public predictions of the coming storm.

It is comforting to face this transformed world together, and to learn from one another as we transform our services. And it is an honor to highlight that partnership here at Ditchley, where so much of the Transatlantic spirit found its spark.

Thanks so much.