

Think
new things
Make
new connections

Ditchley Foundation Annual Lecture: A World Transformed and the Role of Intelligence

Saturday 1st July 2023 (1600 BST)

CIA Director Bill Burns delivered the 59th Ditchley Annual Lecture on 1st July, describing a world transformed and the role of intelligence. This note summarises the on-the-record portion of the lecture, along with some Ditchley reflections on the speech and the subsequent global media coverage.

The US and its allies have to adapt to a world of permanently contested primacy. The post-Cold War dominance of the US drove the world more broadly towards democracy and free markets. But, as Director Burns had warned as a senior State official at the time, potential negative trends and counter-pressures had loomed on the horizon from the beginning. Those trends have now solidified into current reality with strategic competition with China and Russia's war in Europe, one representing the challenge from a rising power, and the other showing that a declining power could be a different type of threat. The post-Cold War era is definitively over and the US is no longer the only big kid on the block. The road ahead is full of both peril and promise. We have to invest in our foundational strengths and work with our allies to support free, open, and prosperous societies.

Tangled national and transnational threats. Strategic competition with a rising, ambitious China and war with a declining but disruptive Russia are making addressing transnational threats such as the climate crisis and global pandemics more difficult. All this is playing out against the backdrop of a technological revolution that will fundamentally transform human lives. The revolution in technology is a primary arena for strategic competition, which highlights the need for partnership amongst like-minded countries for maximised benefit and minimised danger.

A very bleak assessment of Russia. It would be a mistake to underestimate President Putin's fixation and resolve on controlling Ukraine. He has staked everything on his belief that he can outlast the West in the conflict. But Putin has underestimated Ukraine, as evident by the remarkable fight that a so-called "not real country" has put up against Russia. The Ukrainians will not relent, nor will foreign support for their efforts. Mr Putin's war is having a corrosive effect on his regime as well, as reflected by Mr Prigozhin and Wagner forces' coup attempt. CIA has a once in a generation opportunity as a result, with 2.5 million views of a recent video message via Telegram that encouraged disaffected Russians to get in touch.

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The challenge of China. China's transformation—in part driven by US support—is extraordinary, with its intent and increasing power to reshape the international order undoubtedly real. Many would agree that a stable and prosperous China is good for the world but President Xi Jing Ping seems intent on rewriting the international system as opposed to reinforcing and revitalising it (a system that ironically made China successful in the first place). While the Ukraine war is the immediate challenge, China is the long-term priority. The CIA recognises this and has doubled its resources on China and established a single country mission centre.

De-risk and diversify not decouple. Globalisation means continuing deep economic ties between China and the West and any thought of decoupling would be foolish. But growing strategic competition has highlighted critical vulnerabilities and the risks of being overly dependent on just one country. The answer is to de-risk and diversify critical supply chains, thereby managing a delicate balancing act.

The power of the hedging middle. Amidst de-risking trends, the weight of the hedging middle is growing economically, militarily, and politically. Countries that fall in this category are primarily focused on diversifying relationships to expand their strategic autonomy. As a result, open marriages are likely to become more popular in this current geopolitical environment. Additionally, history has shown us that conflicts between middle powers can often drag larger powers into the mix as well, and we should be alive to this concern.

Climate change is now a major intelligence priority. Both the international order and the livelihoods of individuals are threatened by shared or transnational challenges, among which climate change is the most concerning. We cannot talk in the future tense about the challenges it poses; they are here now and having a real, damaging impact on the world. Additionally, climate change is a quintessential threat multiplier, having major impacts in other threat areas like energy security, forced displacement, and health.

A profound technological revolution. The innovations in computing-related technologies semiconductors, quantum, and artificial intelligence are remarkable in both scale and scope. However, they pose a double-edged sword; as is most obvious perhaps in the biotech and biomanufacturing fields, these technologies can both unlock extraordinary benefits for society, whilst also potentially unleash catastrophe. Rules, norms, and standards are key to driving innovations forwards, but most important is the need to innovate faster and better than our rivals, whilst still delivering on shared challenges such as climate.

The value of intelligence. The work that the CIA and intelligence partners in both America and the UK have done has been crucial to thwarting Russian aggression on Ukraine, providing an early and accurate warning of the war, supporting the current Ukrainian counter-offensive, and denying Putin the false narratives he has often invented in the past. And yet, the landscape of intelligence and espionage is rapidly changing amidst technological revolutions. Especially with AI and machine learning, these technologies pose new opportunities for analyses in a way that can better allow officers to provide reasoned judgements and insights to policymakers.

Issues out of the spotlight still matter. As important as issues like Russia and China are, it is important to remember that there are other challenges facing the world, from counterterrorism to regional instability. As an agency with global responsibilities and reach, CIA will always need to strike a balance between renewed major power rivalries and a wide range of issues.

Invest in people as well as technology. Especially in diplomacy, human interactions and direct contact are important for both strengthening existing ties and communicating with fierce adversaries. The CIA is investing in its staff as the agency's core capability, having just appointed a chief wellbeing officer.

The transatlantic relationship. In our current era of geopolitical tensions, deepening intelligence partnerships and renewing commitment to intelligence diplomacy are essential. While all alliances—from the Five Eyes network to NATO and the Indo-Pacific alliances—are valuable, there is perhaps no relationship stronger than that between the US and UK. There is true value and importance in maintaining British-American intelligence relationships.

Director's reflections

Director Burns' speech was striking in its bleak assessment of President Putin and Russia in the aftermath of the attempted coup. The war has become truly existential for President Putin and there is no sign he will, or perhaps even can, give up on his determination to outlast the West in Ukraine. The implications are profound for all of us as the counteroffensive battles through minefields and trenches. Short of complete Russian military collapse, there is unlikely to be a military tipping point that brings Russia to the negotiating table. The most likely end to the war therefore is renewed instability in Russia, with chaos at home eroding military command and control abroad. Director Burns made clear that the US had had nothing to do with the Wagner coup attempt – Russian business – but was he equally clear that the war in Ukraine is corroding President Putin's power and opening up doubts about the future of the regime, illustrating this through the once-in-a-generation opportunity for CIA to recruit new Russian contacts. It is not surprising that it was this aspect of the speech that has been reported around the world and in many languages. Nor is it surprising that the Russian government is reportedly furious.

For Ukraine's allies, this bleak assessment has serious political and economic implications: in the face of undying hostility from President Putin's Russia, what guarantees can be provided to Ukraine in anticipation of NATO membership? How can long term political support for Ukraine be sustained in the West as the war stretches on and on? How can war time levels of production of military equipment for Ukraine be managed in the context of peacetime economies and squeezed national budgets? What could a collapse of regime in Russia look like and how could it be contained and a way out of chaos navigated? All questions that Ditchley will want to continue to help like-minded countries to explore.

If the Russian part of the speech was strikingly pointed, then on China Director Burns was notably measured. Yes, China is trying to rewrite the international order and the USA must

oppose this in its own and broader democratic interests. But decoupling would be foolish. It is this aspect of the speech that led media stories in the Indo-Pacific. China linked commentary acknowledged the positive signal sent by the speech but questioned its sincerity. China wants to the US to stop “blockading” foundational technologies and to slow efforts to build a US orientated network of alliances in the region: in other words to give up on the main planks of US policy, which is not going to happen. On the one hand Ditchley is supporting the development of western policy controls on technology but on the other continues to try to keep lines of discussion with China open.

On climate, then CIA’s new priority typifies the broader dilemma for governments and non-governmental organisations alike. As climate action moves from a campaign to delivery (and if it doesn’t then we’re doomed), how can organisations orientated around national interests and national threats, regroup around non-human transnational threats? The non-human angle is important here as terrorism was transnational but still the work of people. What are the mechanisms for the delivery of international coordinated action on climate and how can they be supported? A yearly COP conference is enough to set goals but what more is required and how can such a multilateral challenge be taken forward in current circumstances? Political deliverability is a key priority for Ditchley’s growing body of work on climate.