

Reflections on the Present Danger

Ditchley Park, 27th June 2024

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this prestigious lecture in such a history-laden venue in such challenging times. And just before the UK general election. Let's give credit where credit is due to the outgoing government, and not only for the Conservatives' solid support for Ukraine. Brexit is more controversial but if I had the EU's job of the Commissioner for Finding the Benefits of Brexit, I would propose at least three:

First, thanks to Brexit we have at last created an EU defence budget, which the UK consistently vetoed; It's proven handy in funding billions of euros military assistance to Ukraine.

Two, Brexit has settled the issue of whether or not member states lose their sovereignty. I was born in Communist Poland and if we had tried to leave the Warsaw Pact or COMECON we would have been invaded by Soviet tanks. That's what lack of sovereignty looks like. You left the EU and nobody tried to stop you. Therefore, you were sovereign all along.

Third, Brexit has deprived EU citizens of privileges not enjoyed by other foreigners partly thanks to which fewer of them try to come here. There used to be over 1 million Poles in the UK. There are now about 700,000. Good. We want our Poles back.

With Brexit done, let's get to the business at hand.

Let me begin by taking you back to a particularly tragic moment of Polish history.

'There will be no war!' – many said with conviction. Photographs from the time show riverbanks and beaches swarming with people,

their faces beaming with smiles as they enjoyed the sun during that unusually hot summer. Holiday makers flocked to the Baltic Sea resorts. Even the urban beaches in the country's capital were full of sunbathing city dwellers. In the manor house I've rebuilt, happy people celebrated a lavish wedding.

All this in Poland, in June, July and August 1939.

Some years later, Kazimierz Wierzyński, a poet, offered his take on these last peaceful days of August 1939:

"We had been thinking about war for a few months, but it still seemed unbelievable to us. We had less of that peaceful bliss which over the years had become Europe's chloroform; we knew that if we had to fight, we would fight, but no one fully reached the end of these thoughts [...]. We lived like this day by day, only the clocks kept going at their own pace."

"Peaceful bliss which had become Europe's chloroform". Although written in 1944 the expression sounds as though taken out of today's paper.

It lies in human nature to look away when dangers loom on the horizon. It was true then and is now.

When in February 2022, at the Munich Security Conference, I told the members of the Ukrainian delegation that the Russian invasion was imminent and inevitable the room fell silent.

Not only Ukrainians were reluctant to accept the early warnings. Many more Westerners were equally dismissive. Some of them right until the first Russian shells began hitting homes, schools and hospitals.

Now, over 850 days later, brave Ukrainians are still fighting for their lives, while we – and by "we" I mean the broadly understood West – have entered what the prime minister Donald Tusk called the "pre-war period".

It is not an empty slogan.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To many of you the danger may still seem distant. Just as the Covid virus did when first reports on the new “pneumonia” taking its toll in Wuhan came out. In fact, it is much closer than we want to admit.

Russia’s destruction in the last few months of Ukraine’s electricity generation, means we face the prospect, this very winter, of millions of Ukrainian refugees, many of them elderly, fleeing to Europe again. That will stretch and stress our own societies. Just as Putin wants. Just as he managed to do with Syrian refugees in 2015, with colossal consequences for political dynamics throughout the West.

Russian missiles routinely violate NATO’s airspace, not only in the vicinity of the border. In December 2022 a stray missile flew over half of Poland crashing just ten kilometres from my house – a 3-hour drive from Berlin.

Our Eastern border with Belarus is also under regular assault. Migrants recruited in Africa and the Middle East are brought to Russia and then sent to forcibly cross the border fence. 90 percent of those we catch have Russian visas in their passports. We have Belarussian border guards on tape instructing them how to strike a Polish soldier or policeman even if they wear a flak jacket. Last month they succeeded and killed private Mateusz Sitek. We will not yield to this new form of hybrid war and we appreciate both EU and British assistance in building technical facilities and fortifications.

Putin and his cronies regularly rattle their nuclear sabre.

All this on top of a myriad of “Made-in-Russia” threats we have faced for years: disinformation, cyber-attacks, political subversion, sabotage operations.

Let me remind you of just a few recently reported by the media:

- Two German-Russian nationals were arrested in Bavaria for allegedly plotting to attack military and logistics sites.

- In Czechia, the country's transport minister accused Russia of an attempt to destroy the railways signalling systems.
- In Lithuania two Polish thugs paid by Russia beat up Leonid Volkov, one of the late Alexei Navalny's closest advisors.
- In Poland two Belarusians and a Pole were detained and accused of planning arson attacks in shopping centres, restaurants, and building depots under orders from a 'foreign country'.

The British have also been given a taste of the Russian "political culture". The murder of Alexander Litvinenko; the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter; espionage leading to diplomatic expulsions...

Just a few weeks ago the British media reported on the arrest of two individuals hired by Russian intelligence to set fire to a London warehouse containing aid shipments for Ukraine.

Most recently, a Russian hacker group called Qilin targeted British hospitals and demanded a £40 million ransom. Critically ill children at Evelina Children's Hospital had their treatments delayed or cancelled.

The list goes on and on. Russia develops, tests, and improves its methods as we speak.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Think of the journey we as the West have travelled over the last three decades. Exactly 35 years ago – when the communist bloc started to shake after partially free elections in Poland, and finally collapsed two years later – many of us believed in democracy's triumph. It seemed that the horrors of the 20th century had been overcome. That we finally learned to live in peace.

It was a time when people demanded we tear down the walls separating countries. Now the people want their walls back up again.

And no wonder. Threats seem to lurk around every corner and societies crave protection – from deadly viruses, from uncontrolled illegal migration, from acts of foreign sabotage and – above all – from war.

Back then we hoped that a thick network of international trade, business and personal ties would make another cold war – with two blocs pitted against each other – unthinkable. And yet here we are.

China’s “limitless” partnership with Russia might become the bedrock of one of these two blocs. Russia displaced Saudi Arabia as the main exporter of crude oil to China. Beijing is also an indispensable client for Russian gas. The relation, although unequal, is mutual. The value of Chinese exports to Russia between 2021 and 2023 increased by 63 percent. Among the exported items – the so-called dual-use goods, which feed Russia’s military machine.

“Russia would struggle to sustain its assault on Ukraine without China's support”, the U.S. secretary of state, Antony Blinken, openly admitted. But it’s not only China. The Islamic Republic of Iran has so far provided the Kremlin with thousands of drones. North Korea has sent millions of rounds of ammunition. Putin’s recent visit to Pyongyang – first in almost a quarter of the century – concluded with an agreement pledging mutual aid if either country faces “aggression”. Russia seems no longer committed to denuclearizing North Korea. Kremlin’s reliance on this and other rogue states is growing heavier.

Some argue these partnerships reveal Putin’s weakness and desperation, and that by making Russia overly dependent on China he is making a strategic blunder. True, but his actions also illustrate to what lengths he is ready to go not to lose in Ukraine. Russia has adapted its entire economy and society to war purposes. This year’s military expenditure might consume up to one third of the country’s entire budget.

Will this lead Russia's economy to an inevitable collapse?

Probably. The question is when, and what we can do to hurry that up. For much of the Cold War the Soviets would – proportionally speaking – spend on defence much more than Putin does now, and yet it took decades for the USSR to finally disintegrate.

By that time, the new authoritarian alliance we now see emerging is sure to cause significant damage. Not only of military and economic nature. The coalition is broader and more comprehensive, fighting the West also in the information sphere, seeding hate, lies and division across the world.

What was unthinkable three decades ago is once again becoming reality. The world is on the brink of a global rivalry of two blocks – one democratic and one authoritarian – competing not only economically and militarily but for humanity's hearts and minds.

The United States and the EU together with Britain are two of the three biggest economies in the world. But that economic power will not be enough if we do not work together to overcome this new threat. Where we choose to act together, and how we choose to act together is what will make the difference.

We must focus even more of our efforts on Ukraine. Russia can and should be beaten. To show Putin and his advisors that they have judged us poorly, and that they will have to reconsider their approach to the West. If we fail, instability will spread, and the autocracies will grow bolder. They will believe they have defeated NATO, the most powerful military alliance in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I say this because Russian aggression against Ukraine is not a local skirmish but a brutal, colonial war with far-reaching consequences.

Should Putin prevail, the ripple effects of his actions would be felt not just in Europe but around the world. Let me name just a few:

First and foremost, millions of Ukrainians would fall under the rule of Kremlin's regime. They would be either relegated to a second-class citizenship, or deported deep into Russia and replaced with ethnic Russians, as is the case on the Ukrainian territories already occupied by Putin's army.

Second, millions of Ukrainians would seek refuge from this new "Russian order" either in the European Union or across the Atlantic, provoking another migrant crisis. As I have noted, we already face that prospect in just a few months.

Third, Russia's victory would embolden other leaders keen on regaining control over what they see as their spheres of influence.

Fourth, Putin's triumph would undermine other countries' trust in security guarantees they now enjoy. This may lead them to look for enhanced protection, including with nuclear deterrence.

Fifth, international institutions – above all the United Nations where Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council – would lose all their remaining credibility. Space for diplomatic solutions to any future conflicts would shrink even further.

If Russia prevails, chronic instability will spread not only across Europe but around the world, giving extra fuel to a global coalition of dictatorships we can already see emerging.

Putin will win this war unless we stop him. And we can.

Contrary to its insane propaganda, Russia is not invincible. It has lost its share of wars:

- the Crimean War in 1856;
- the war against Japan in 1905;
- the first World War;
- the Bolshevik invasion against Poland in 1920 only stopped at the gates of Warsaw;

- the Winter War with Finland of 1940 in which Finland lost territory but saved its independence;
- the war in Afghanistan where the Soviet army was humiliated by the Mujahideens equipped with American weapons;
- and finally the Cold War.

Each of these losses shook up the Russian political system, forcing the authorities to introduce some reforms.

The Kremlin can be stopped and even beaten – we just forgot about it.

Ronald Reagan used to say his strategy vis-à-vis Soviet Union was simple if not simplistic: “We win, and they lose”. I like this approach.

What is true is that democracies have recently suffered far too many defeats. We assumed that free trade would turn post-Soviet Russia into, if not a liberal democracy, then at least a responsible stakeholder.

It did not.

We bet that if we admit China into the WTO she would at least liberalise its economy.

It did not.

We thought that toppling reprehensible regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq could bring stability to the whole region.

It did not.

We bet that the Arab Spring would do to the Middle East what the collapse of Communism did to Eastern Europe.

It did not.

No wonder we have lost confidence.

But Ukraine is winnable because we are helping our friends to do what they want to do anyway. They are risking their lives every day to join us - which is the best validation there is of our values

and our system. They just need the means to achieve it. And we need to win this one in order to prove to our citizens that our political system can not only care and protect but also to deliver success.

If you agree then we need to ask ourselves comrade Lenin's question: what is to be done? The list could be long, starting perhaps with not handing the reins of the free world to charlatans. But I offer to you five practical suggestions:

First, we need to **ramp up our defence production**. In 2022 defence expenditures of the EU member states reached €240 billion, including a record sum of €58 billion allocated to defence investment. This year 23 of 32 NATO countries will spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on defence with Poland topping the list.

However, we must act smartly. Lack of cooperation leads to duplication and multiplication of similar defence systems within the EU. We can save billions of euros per year providing we successfully coordinate our actions. We should act together and we should act fast.

When over 80 years ago president Roosevelt called on the United States to become "the arsenal of democracy" his words were followed by swift actions.

American industry delivered almost two-thirds of all the Allied military equipment produced during the war and American aviation grew from about 2,500 airplanes to nearly 300,000 by the war's end.

Now, two and half years into Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia produces nearly three times more artillery munitions than the US and Europe. This has to change.

Outproducing Russia is not an end in itself but a means to contain and constrain a regime gone wild.

This must be achieved not only by increasing our capabilities but also by hindering Moscow's ability to supply its military machinery.

Gazprom's gas sales fell by over 50 percent and its revenues by almost 30 per cent year-on-year – the biggest drop in quarter of the century. The Russian giant is now a loss-making company! This proves that if applied properly the sanctions do work and that is why we must prevent all attempts to circumvent them – including by Western companies seeking to illegally benefit from the war.

Second, we should **get serious about sanctions**. We need a more joined up approach designed to seriously damage Russia's ability to wage war. Sanctions should be an integrated part of a larger policy. We should map out Russia industrial vulnerabilities sector by sector and target them using the most efficient tools for the job; Diplomatic, cyber, financial, covert, kinetic – using Ukrainian capabilities – and trade sanctions. We should measure the impact and follow up until the capability in question is degraded.

What if we actually came together to stop Russian access to western chips and satellites which provide GPS guidance for their missiles and bombs – like the ones which hit Kharkiv on the 22nd of June, killing three people and wounding 52? What if we came together to disrupt Russia's access to the vital CNC machines which produce artillery barrels and cut steel for new tanks? This could prevent hundreds of vehicles from ever reaching the frontline.

Most urgently we need to deny Russian missiles and drones access to Western parts of Ukraine. This would allow the Ukrainians to focus their own air-defence in the East of the country. This would give shelter for Ukrainian refugees this winter, meaning they can remain safe in their homeland. It would thus foil Putin's cynical

plan to provoke a catastrophic humanitarian refugee crisis this November.

Third, we need to re-learn how to **champion the escalation game**.

For example, we could be seizing all 300 billion euros of Russian sovereign assets. Putin has already written them off, he does not expect to get them back. But he also doesn't think we have the fortitude to take hold of them either. So far, we have proven him right. We should look to test and stretch Russia in every theatre and every domain, making Putin wonder where we might challenge him next.

Fourth, we should get both humbler and **more political in our developmental assistance**.

In the decades of the "end of history" and expanding globalisation, it was legitimate to think of developmental assistance as global philanthropy. If democracy and free markets were universally acknowledged to be the best systems to live under, then indeed the job left to do was to fight disease, improve infrastructure and support education. With the rising tide of prosperity, surely the support for political freedoms would follow.

Afghanistan is perhaps the starkest counterfactual. We poured tens of billions into building Afghan roads, hospitals and schools. And what have we got? The same Taliban theocracy with slightly better roads, hospitals and schools.

If the world is not necessarily going our way and we are in any case an ever shrinking portion of humanity and the global economy, we should become more realistic and more focused on what can be achieved. Instead of lecturing others on democracy and the finer points of Alexis de Tocqueville we need to support our friends to become more resilient to stand up to our adversaries.

Russia and China are peddling their own version of 'international development' throughout Africa and beyond. Instead of schools Russia offers murderous mercenaries, disinformation campaigns and corruption. China doesn't ask for transparency, or democratic conditionalities in its ruthless pursuit of markets, political power and vital natural resources.

You cannot win with Wagner group, now renamed Africa Corps, with vaccines and wells, however noble such assistance may be. What good will come from, for example, heavily taxing Chinese electric vehicles in Europe if the same cars will then conquer African and South American markets?

Instead of offering lectures and sanctions for breaking Scandinavian standards of democracy, we need to join the competition for markets, information space and – ultimately – influence. If we do not acknowledge that we are in competition with the authoritarian powers for the material and human resources of the Global South, we can hardly win.

Lastly, we need to go on the offensive in the information war. Since the end of the Cold War we have arrogantly assumed that we do not need to wage information war because we were telling the truth and reliable information will eventually prevail in the 'marketplace of ideas.' Our opponents have currently surmised that there isn't a marketplace of ideas and that bad information, or lies, or ludicrous conspiracy can bamboozle millions of people.

Accordingly, they have spent enormous sums on weaponizing their narratives, however wrong or toxic. We ignored the fact that many people dislike uncertainty and prefer bad information that confirms their biases. We have allowed social media to use techniques that grab our attention and make them a lot of money

but destroy social trust and the mental health of our children.

There is nothing sacrosanct about the business models of companies that destroy our democracy and empower our enemies. What is illegal in the analogue world should be just as illegal in the digital world. We came to licence and regulate newspapers, radio and television. It is high time for sensible regulation of social media as a matter of national security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Poland and the United Kingdom share the same strategic vision. It is based on the fundamental assumption that international law is the guardian of peace and stability. Only by joining forces and acting decisively can we deter attacks on our territories and defend our interests. Poland consistently supports close, comprehensive cooperation between the UK and the EU's security and defence frameworks. We hope to engage in structured discussions on military capability development, rapid response forces, cybersecurity, countering hybrid threats and disinformation.

We appreciate the UK's engagement in ensuring security of northern Europe. The UK provides forces to NATO battlegroups in Estonia and Poland, contributes to NATO air policing over the Baltic States, and supports Polish air defence. Your country is also involved in securing critical maritime infrastructure through its own northern initiative, the Joint Expeditionary Force. During his last visit to Warsaw, Prime Minister Sunak asked Poland to join this initiative. Should the next government maintain the offer I will urge my cabinet colleagues to accept it.

The United Kingdom is an indispensable part of the transatlantic and, primarily, European security architecture. On the issues of

common security we see eye to eye and we walk hand in hand. You sure are an island but you are a European island.

Distinguished Guests,

Putin regretted the fall of the Soviet Union and he decided to have a re-match. A new axis of autocracies is challenging our values, our security and our way of life.

The divisions are no longer geographic, or even ideological. Instead, a network of kleptocrats, wielding the tools of propaganda, surveillance technology and military force are trying to rewrite the rules of international politics, bringing back an era when might makes right, manipulating divisions within our own societies for their benefit.

Our job is to prevent wider conflict, but also to prevail. Together, as part of an international alliance of democracies, we can do it.

Thank you.