

HUMAN INTELLIGENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Good morning. I am delighted to be here for my first public speech as Chief of SIS – or MI6 as we are popularly known.

We have come a long way, since the 1980s when I first joined MI6, and the identity of ‘C’ was still a secret.

But it is still unusual for the holder of this office to give public speeches. This is something that I want to change, judiciously, for two reasons.

First, it is an important part of the way we hold ourselves to account, within a democracy, of how we retain public support for what we do, and – I hope – how we inspire people to want to come and join us.

Second, the changing nature of the threats we face requires a greater degree of openness from a modern intelligence agency. There is a paradox in play here, one I will try to explain more fully later in my speech. It goes as follows: to stay secret, we are going to have to become more open.

There will always be limits to what I can say. MI6 is an organisation that deals in secrets. Indeed, one of my few specified responsibilities under the 1994 Intelligence Services Act is *not* to disclose our information on an unauthorized basis. But, that said, I will share with you this morning as much as I can about our work to protect the security, and advance the interests and values, of the United Kingdom.

In my 34 years with MI6 I have seen extraordinary change in the strategic environment: from the Cold War to today’s starkly contested era, in which nation states and non-state actors, such as terrorists and organised criminals, compete across the domains of the virtual and the physical in a world of, at times, bewildering complexity.

There are elements of continuity, Russia, China and Iran, for instance, have long been three of what I might informally call the 'big four' priorities within the intelligence community; the fourth being the threat from international terrorism.

But, mostly, we are living through an era of dramatic change in the security landscape.

We have to defend ourselves as a country against a growing threat from state actors, within an international system which is not working as it should to constrain conflict and aggression. We face adversaries who are feeling emboldened, encounter fewer constraints, and are able to draw on greater resources than in the past.

We face transnational challenges from climate change to pandemics, which create an entirely new level of need for global cooperation. We must cooperate on these issues even when we compete fiercely elsewhere.

Furthermore, we live in a world transformed by digital connectivity, and stand on the cusp of revolutionary advances in technology which will affect the way we live and work in ways we cannot fully foresee.

Advances in quantum engineering and engineered biology will change entire industries. The huge volumes of data now available across the globe, combined with ever increasing computer power and advances in data science, will mean the integration of artificial intelligence, AI, into almost every aspect of our daily lives.

Others would speak to you about the benefits associated with these new discoveries... and they are myriad. But I am paid to look at the threat side of the ledger. MI6 deals with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. And the 'digital attack surface' that criminals, terrorists and hostile states threats seek to exploit against us is growing exponentially.

According to some assessments, we may experience more technological progress in the next ten years than in the last century, with a disruptive impact equal to the industrial

revolution. As a society, we have yet to internalise this stark fact and its potential impact on global geopolitics. But it is a white-hot focus for MI6.

My mission as Chief is to ensure the successful transformation and modernisation of our organisation: extending MI6's secret human relationships to reflect the changing nature of power and influence in the world; investing in the skills a global intelligence agency needs in the digital age; and meeting the technological challenge head on by opening up – to an unprecedented degree – to partners who can help us master the technologies we need for our operations, and enable us to innovate faster than our adversaries.

I will speak to you today about this mission, seen through the lens of what I earlier called the 'big four' set of threats: China, Russia, Iran and international terrorism, as well as the overarching technological challenge.

But, before that, a few words on who we are and what we do.

MI6 is Britain's overseas human intelligence agency. We recruit and run clandestine agents in other countries.

We draw on those human relationships to provide government with secret information, and to make things happen that would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

We do this for strictly limited purposes as set out in that 1994 Act: in the interests of national security, for the economic wellbeing of the UK, or for the prevention and detection of serious crime.

And everything we do is bound by UK law.

We take this very seriously. We have been given powers by the state to operate in an ethically complex area. I ask my officers to do things in their professional existence which they would not do in their private lives. A democratic society should only grant such powers

to its most ethically literate citizens, who are the very people we aim to recruit as MI6 officers, who do their work with extraordinary integrity.

I am in this job because I believe in the positive power of the human relationships MI6 builds. I have recruited and run agents overseas, and seen the risks these courageous men and women of other nations are willing to run to make common cause with us. And I have seen the difference our work makes.

What we do, as a human intelligence agency, is essential, because at the end of the day, even in a digital world, critical decisions are made by real people.

We need to understand what motivates our adversaries; their intentions, their plans, and their methods.

We need to be able to reduce the space within which they believe they can act against us with impunity – online or offline.

And we need to provide the government with options to lawfully disrupt, deter and suppress threats to the UK – wherever they originate – as well as help them take advantage of opportunities for our country and its citizens.

This is what we do in MI6 - working with our sister agencies GCHQ and MI5 and with our partners in Defence Intelligence and UK Special Forces.

We need MI6's global network of secret human relationships more than we ever have done, in an increasingly contested international landscape.

The tectonic plates are shifting as China's power, and its willingness to assert it, grows.

A large part of the UK's security and prosperity is increasingly tied up with China's actions and policies.

There are many areas where our country can cooperate with Beijing, including trade and investment, cultural links and the transnational challenges of climate change and biodiversity.

But the fact remains that China is an authoritarian state, with different values from ours. This is reflected in the threats we see emanating from the Chinese state, that coexist with those opportunities for cooperation.

The Chinese Intelligence Services are highly capable and continue to conduct large scale espionage operations against the UK and our allies. This includes the targeting those working in government, industries, or on research of particular interest to the Chinese state. They also monitor and attempt to exercise undue influence over the Chinese diaspora.

Chinese intelligence officers seek to exploit the open nature of our society, including through the use of social media platforms to facilitate their operations. We are concerned by the Chinese government's attempt to distort public discourse and political decision making across the globe.

Beijing's growing military strength and the Party's desire to resolve the Taiwan issue, by force if necessary, also pose a serious challenge to global stability and peace.

The Chinese Communist Party leadership increasingly favour bold and decisive action particularly on national security grounds. The days of Deng Xiaoping's "hide your strength, bide your time" are long over.

Beijing believes its own propaganda about Western frailties and underestimates Washington's resolve. The risk of Chinese miscalculation through over-confidence is real.

The CCP brook no dissent. Beijing has dismantled Hong Kong's 'one country, two systems' framework, and removed individual rights and freedoms, in the name of national

security. Its surveillance state has targeted the Uighur population in Xinjiang, carrying out widespread human rights abuses, including the arbitrary detention of an estimated 1 million Muslims.

Worryingly, these technologies of control and surveillance are increasingly being exported to other governments by China: expanding the web of authoritarian control around the planet.

Adapting to a world affected by the rise of China is the single greatest priority for MI6. We are deepening our understanding of China across the UK Intelligence community, and widening the options available to the government in managing the systemic challenges that it poses.

This is not just about being able to understand China and Chinese decision making. We need to be able to operate undetected as a secret intelligence agency within the surveillance web worldwide.

And we want other countries to be clear-eyed about the debt traps, data exposure and vulnerability to political coercion that arise from dependency on relationships where there is no recourse to an independent judiciary or free press.

We will seek an overlapping set of partnerships with different countries and regions on these issues – making common cause on common concerns.

Turning to the second of the “big four”, we continue to face an acute threat from Russia.

My father was posted to Moscow in the 1960s, and my first memories are of Russia. I have a deep respect for Russia’s history and culture and people. The current difficult relationship with Russia is not the one the UK wants. But we will do whatever it takes to keep our country safe and to deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats Moscow poses.

These include state-sanctioned attacks, such as we have seen in Salisbury and the Czech Republic; interference in democratic processes such as the attempted coup in Montenegro; cyber-attacks, such as the SolarWinds cyber intrusion which we and our partners publicly attributed to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service; or the use of political proxies to undermine stability in the Western Balkans. This activity is on an upward trend.

More often than not these Russian state activities are designed to be covert, or at least deniable. However, we are also seeing more brazen activity - often linked to the personal enrichment of elites around President Putin - the denial of which is increasingly implausible. The deployment of private military companies in Africa and Syria, such as Wagner, is one such example. The poisoning of Alexey Navalny is another.

We and our allies and partners must stand up to and deter Russian activity which contravenes the rules-based international system. No country, in Europe or beyond, should be seduced into thinking that unbalanced concessions to Russia bring better behaviour.

As the Foreign and Defence Secretaries have made clear in their visits to Ukraine, Moscow should be in no doubt of our allies' support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, within its internationally- recognised borders including Crimea. Ukraine is a separate, sovereign country with a separate, sovereign Ukrainian people.

Russia ceasing its destabilising activity would enable us to focus on common threats, and address Russian legitimate interests through dialogue. That dialogue might reassure Russia that, as the Prime Minister noted in his recent Mansion House speech, we have no desire to be adversarial towards Russia, to undermine or encircle it.

Meanwhile, my organisation's commitment to understanding Russia and what it is doing has been sustained for a century, and will remain a core part of what we do.

Thirdly - in the context of the state-level challenge - we remain actively focused on Iran. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, the Iranian leadership has embraced an explicit doctrine of conflict with both Israel and the West. Indeed, we deeply regret that a country with an almost unparalleled depth of history and culture such as Iran has been a source of instability across the region and beyond for over forty years.

Hezbollah, incubated in Lebanon by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Force was Iran's first foreign insurgent force; it has since grown to become a state within a state, contributing directly to state weakness and political turmoil in Lebanon. Iran has repeated the model in Iraq, where it has exploited a fragile transition to democracy to seed the country with armed gangs who are undermining the state from within, murdering those who seek to uphold the law. This month one of those Iranian armed and trained gangs attempted to kill the Iraqi Prime Minister. We see attempts to pursue similar policies in Syria, Yemen and the Gulf.

Iran has also built up a substantial cyber capability which it has used against its regional rivals as well as countries in Europe and North America, and maintains an assassination programme which it uses against regime opponents. There are many parallels with the challenge that Russia poses, and it is no coincidence that the two countries have made common cause in Syria.

As the Foreign Secretary has made clear, we will continue to work to contain the threat posed by Iran to the UK directly and to our allies in the region. That includes contesting Iran's development of nuclear technology which has no conceivable civilian use. Yesterday negotiations resumed in Vienna which provides a path back to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or nuclear deal, between Iran and the West, which would be in the interests of Iran, the region and the world. We all want a diplomatic outcome.

The fourth and final of the 'big four' challenges I referred to is the threat from international terrorism.

We retain an intense focus on developing new agent relationships and technological capabilities needed to degrade existing terrorist groups, prevent their spread, and identify unknown threats.

To do this, MI6 continues to recruit agents in the most dangerous organisations in the world. We benefit from outstanding cooperation with our colleagues in MI5 and GCHQ and from our international partners.

In the last twenty years, the UK intelligence community as a whole has disrupted dozens of overseas attack plans before they could reach the UK - saving thousands of lives.

However, Al Qaeda, Daesh and their affiliates and imitators retain an undiminished appetite for violence and the inflicting of mass casualties, and the world still presents fertile ground for radicalization. Terrorist networks have spread in the Middle East, the Sahel, Sub Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Counter-terrorism work is more difficult in a more fragmented world, with rising internal conflicts, some states regressing in economic development as a result of conflict, and the diffusion of technologies that make it easier for terrorists to conceal their planning.

The home-grown threat of terrorism - with the attendant difficulty of disrupting lone wolf attacks – means that, sadly, some attacks are always likely to get through. We saw this recently with the tragic murder of Sir David Amess MP.

Furthermore, there is no doubt about the morale boost the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has given to the extremist movement globally, as well as its emboldening effect on countries such as Russia, China and Iran.

I mentioned before that MI6 deals with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. Nowhere is that sentiment more relevant than in Afghanistan.

I am immensely proud of the contribution MI6 officers made to the Afghan mission, and to preventing Al Qaeda from carrying out another attack on the scale of 9/11.

But I won't soft soap it, the threat we face will likely increase now we have left Afghanistan. Al Qaeda and Daesh will seek to increase their foothold, and to rebuild their ability to strike Western targets.

Our priority, as the Prime Minister has said, is to stop the re-emergence of large scale international terrorist operations from a Taliban controlled Afghanistan, and to protect the UK homeland and our citizens from any threat that might emanate from there.

As an intelligence community we will now do this 'outside in': working from the outside to identify and disrupt any threats from a resurgent Al Qaeda. This is an extremely difficult task, and will rely extensively on regional partnerships as well as coordination with our allies.

At the same time, we are engaging with the Taliban and testing their willingness to cooperate. It is also the job of my Service to provide the independent secret intelligence from our sources to illuminate this murky scene. With our allies, we will be ready to disrupt Al Qaeda if the Taliban renege on their promises not to allow Al Qaeda to rebuild external operations capability and to tackle the threat from Daesh.

The context in which we have to confront the challenges I have mentioned is of course the global digital environment.

As the counter terrorism example shows, there is no longer such a thing as an analogue intelligence operation in this digital world.

Our intelligence targets have online lives. Our officers need to operate invisibly to our adversaries. And we need to be able to run our agent and technical operations in an environment in which "Made in China" surveillance technology is found around the world.

All of this requires insights from data, the tools to manipulate data and, most important, the talent to turn complex data into human insight. The combination of technological prowess and insights from human intelligence gives the UK a powerful edge. The Integrated Review elevated science and technology as a component of the highest importance to our national security and our cooperation in government and beyond will be essential shaping international norms in collaboration with allies and partners.

Our adversaries are pouring money and ambition into mastering artificial intelligence, quantum computing and synthetic biology, because they know that mastering these technologies will give them leverage.

An intelligence service needs to be at the vanguard of what is technologically possible.

This is not new: we have always been at the leading edge of innovation, from the chemistry that enabled us to produce secret writing technologies in the early days of the service, to the wireless and secure speech technologies we developed during the Second World War. And today we are founding members of the National Cyber Force - the UK's unified cyber command - which conducts cyber operations to counter state threats, terrorist, and criminals and to support military deployments.

What is new is that we are now pursuing partnerships with the tech community to help develop world-class technologies to solve our biggest mission problems.

We match the scale and resources of the global tech industry, so shouldn't try. Instead we should seek their help. Through the National Security Strategic Investment Fund we are opening up our mission problems to those with talent in organisations that wouldn't normally work with national security. Unlike Q in the Bond movies, we cannot do it all in-house.

I cannot stress enough what a sea-change this is in MI6's culture, ethos and way of working, since we have traditionally relied primarily on our own capabilities to develop the world class technologies we need to stay secret and deliver against our mission.

This is the paradox I referred to earlier in my speech: we must become more open, to stay secret.

This openness also relates to our workforce, those we wish to recruit.

Our future workforce must represent the very best of British talent, and be as diverse as the population we serve. This is my personal priority as Chief, and it will include a huge effort on recruitment. We need to increase the diversity of our workplace and draw in those who never thought of working for us before. Come and join! There is no more important or - I believe - more exciting time to work for MI6.

To my colleagues, who I serve alongside today, I want to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge the men and women of MI6 for their extraordinary achievements - and, most importantly, the brave people who work with us secretly, our agents.

I know that if you could see what they do for our country, as I do every day, you would be as proud of them as I am. They will remain in the shadows even as I steal the limelight to applaud their work.

And I should stress, it is an unbreakable principle that we never reveal or confirm the identity of our agents. Their names will go with us to our graves.

In an earlier era, Winston Churchill described the men and women of Bletchley Park, then part of MI6, who played such a critical role in defeating Nazi Germany, as the "goose that laid the golden eggs but never cackled". We retain the ethos of our predecessors. We keep our word and our secrets.

So this is how MI6 is adapting to respond to the challenges and opportunities of our era: further expanding our human relationships and networks, investing in our people and our capabilities, and opening up to new partnerships - in the technological arena and with governments - to make common cause on the greatest global challenges of our time.

There are no down arrows in any areas of our work. The demand for our intelligence keeps growing. And we have to prioritise scarce resources on new or rising state threats, while still meeting the persistent challenge from terrorists, criminals and other malign actors.

But we are determined to play our full part in detecting and deterring threats to our security and interests overseas, helping the government to manage the ambiguity inherent in key relationships, supporting our country's international leadership in security and diplomacy long into the future.

There is no doubt that we face unprecedented international challenges. But we are a resilient nation. We are an influential nation with outstanding military, intelligence and diplomatic capabilities. And we are a creative, innovative nation with immense soft power derived from our values, our history and our culture.

We should have every confidence that we can seize the opportunities of the 21st century, and navigate our country successfully through it. And my Service, MI6, will be at the forefront of that national journey.

Thank you