

*Think*

*new things*

*Make*

*new connections*

**Ditchley's 60<sup>th</sup> Annual  
Lecture: 'Reflections on the  
Present Danger' by The  
Hon Radosław Sikorski**

29<sup>th</sup> June 2024

**DITCHLEY**

# Summary of Lecture

The Hon. Radosław Sikorski, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Poland, delivered The Ditchley Foundation's 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Lecture, sharing a prescient warning of the geopolitical dangers he sees ahead. Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, he reminded the audience how earlier generations had been blissfully ignorant to the proximity of war and warned against repeating the mistakes of the past, as well as outlining the many challenges we face in the long term. Like Russia, other authoritarian states, emboldened by the West's failure to protect Ukraine, may seek to regain control over what they view as their rightful territory. Foundational international institutions may lose all credibility in this new lawless world, meaning the space for diplomatic solutions would shrink ever further. Countries now protected by the current order may seek to increase military spending and invest in their own nuclear deterrence.

There are also concerns in the immediate term. A potential influx of Ukrainian refugees this winter, as a result of the destruction by Russia of Ukrainian electricity networks, would stretch the capacities of the EU. Russian missiles violating NATO airspace, as well as cyberattacks, terrorism and political subversion outside of Russian and Ukrainian territories, threaten to expand that conflict. And the weaponisation of migrants, recruited in Africa and the Middle East and then forced over the Belarusian border with Russian instructions to strike Polish military personnel, has caused further panic and division.

However, the Minister also reminded the Ditchley audience that Russia is not without vulnerability. Firstly, Russian President Vladimir Putin's over-dependence on China demonstrates desperation and a strategic blunder, although one could also read it as evidence of his determination to succeed. Secondly, Russia's economy, in which military spending consumes up to one third of the country's entire budget, is unsustainable and will likely lead to collapse. The question for democratic states then is, can the Russian economy last long enough to cause significant military, economic and political damage and, perhaps more importantly, can we outlast it? Thirdly, Russia has lost wars before, most recently the Cold War, but also on multiple other occasions throughout history. With each defeat, Russia has reformed; in fact, Russia has only reformed after a defeat.

The Minister offered five suggestions to address the present danger:

- **Ramp up our defence production.** In 2022, EU defence expenditure reached 240 billion Euros, including a record sum of 58 billion Euros allocated to defence investment. However, Russia still produces nearly three times more artillery munitions than the US and Europe. Investment should continue to increase with the goal of outproducing Russia. Democratic states must ensure cooperation to avoid duplication and make smarter use of investment.
- **Get serious about sanctions.** We must not only increase our own capabilities, but also hinder Moscow's ability to supply its military machinery. Gazprom's 30% year-on-year revenue drop demonstrates the potential of sanctions. Other applications include blocking access to Western chips and satellites, which provide GPS guidance for missiles and bombs, and disrupting access to CNC machines, which manufacture the artillery barrels and cut steel for new tanks.
- **Champion the escalation game.** President Putin assumes we will not seize all 300 billion Euros of Russian sovereign assets. He has already written them off and does not expect to

get them back, but he does not think that we have the fortitude to take hold of them either. How could we use this to test and stretch Russia?

- **Be more political in our development assistance.** Following the fall of the Soviet Union, development aid was thought of as philanthropy from which support for political freedoms would surely follow. The West was wrong on this. We must use development aid wisely to support our friends and help them to become more resilient in standing up to our adversaries. On the other hand, if countries partner with Russia's Wagner Group (now renamed Africa Corps), then they should not be eligible for our investment. We are in competition with authoritarian powers for the material, human resources, and hearts and minds of the Global South and we should admit this.
- **Be on the offensive in the information war.** We need to recognise that the truth holds no natural advantage, and that authoritarian regimes have spent enormous sums weaponizing their narratives, however wrong or toxic. We too should be fighting in this information war. Sensible regulation of social media, for example, is now a matter of national security.

Minister Sikorski concluded his lecture with a reminder that the Republic of Poland and the United Kingdom share a vision for the world, based on international law, peace and stability. He advised that the challenge ahead was not only to prevent the war in Ukraine ballooning into a wider conflict, but also for our international institutions to prevail and our nations to prosper.

The Minister's speech emphasised the sense of urgency surrounding our current geopolitical situation. The sense that we are at a crossroads between escalation and expansion of an authoritarian alliance on one path, and a delicate, but stable peace on the other was both concerning and revealing. The Minister highlighted the blissful ignorance that settled across Poland in the summer of 1939 in the run-up to the outbreak of the Second World War, drawing a parallel to what he sees as the West's complacency towards the conflict in Ukraine in the present day. To be rudely awoken from this ignorance is no doubt shocking and concerning, but surely better than the alternative.

A link to the video and full transcript of the Minister's speech can be found [here](#).

*This Note reflects the writer's personal impressions of the lecture. No participant is in any way committed to its content or expression.*