Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary Intelligence and Security speech

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I’m delighted to be here this morning to speak on a topic which is central to our national security. It is not so long ago that the British government pretended the intelligence agencies did not even exist.

And it would have been unheard of for a Foreign Secretary to speak openly about their function and about Ministers’ responsibility for their oversight.

But we’ve moved on. In 2015, their existence is publicly acknowledged. They are accountable to Parliament. Their actions are subject to detailed Ministerial oversight: between the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and me, we spend hours every week with the agencies, ensuring that this Government is doing everything it can to keep the British people safe. But it’s right that we take such care over the agencies’ activities. Their achievements should be a source of great pride – and a source of great reassurance – to all of us.

Britain moved ahead of most of our European partners in bringing its intelligence agencies into the open.

Margaret Thatcher, a quarter of a century ago, put the Security Service on a sound legal footing.

And the government of John Major followed with legislation governing the agencies for which I am responsible, SIS and GCHQ.

Those steps were far-sighted. But public expectations of accountability and oversight of what members of the intelligence agencies do on our behalf have increased further since then.

So in this Parliament, we’ve enhanced that system of oversight and strengthened the safeguards around the agencies – putting in place the strictest Ministerial and Parliamentary oversight arrangements in the world.

We said we would publish the guidance issued to intelligence officers and service personnel on the treatment of detainees held overseas by other States. And we have.

We said we would legislate to ensure that cases involving national security information could be heard fairly, fully and safely in our courts. And we did.

We said we would strengthen independent and parliamentary scrutiny of the agencies. And we have by making the Intelligence and Security Committee a statutory committee of Parliament; giving it the scope to take evidence from any Department; and giving it the power to require information from the Agencies.

I regard the independent scrutiny and oversight that the ISC provides as a particular and significant strength of the British system.

It plays an important part in maintaining public confidence in the agencies' work – work that must remain secret if their means, methods, capabilities and, not least, the lives of our intelligence officers and those they work with, are to be protected. And that public confidence underpins the work our agencies do.

The clandestine nature of some of the threats that are launched against us; the weapons systems that are developed in secrecy to threaten our national security; the illegal proliferation of military technology; the growing challenge we face in cyber space; the threat of international organised crime; and the great lengths that individual terrorists or terrorist organisations go to in order to try and keep their plots from being uncovered all of these require that we maintain a highly effective, secret capability to identify, monitor and act against these threats before they can do us harm.

It was the Duke of Wellington, who founded RUSI in 1831, who said that: "All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is to endeavour to find out what you don't know by what you do"; what he described as "guessing what was at the other side of the hill."

The purpose of secret intelligence is to fill in the blanks where the picture created by more conventional means remains incomplete; and to provide illumination to spaces that are otherwise completely dark to us – allowing us to get an appreciation of what is at the other side of the hill.

At home, it has been crucial to preventing terrorist attacks on British citizens, with more than 40 terrorist plots disrupted since July 2005.

In Helmand during the Afghan campaign, our intelligence capability was key to protecting our troops against Taleban attacks and in reducing the wider terrorist threat in Afghanistan; and it's been key to building effective sanctions against Russia through identifying some of the principal targets for the EU sanctions regime. It's been key to putting Britain at the centre of international efforts to identify, deal with and safely dispose of Assad's stockpiles of chemical weapons in Syria; and it has played a key role as part of the global coalition to counter Islamist extremism in Iraq and Syria, in providing the information to check ISIL's murderous advance.

The sheer range of cases where intelligence has played a vital role in our response underlines the breadth of the challenge the Agencies now face.

In the last Century, we typically knew who our enemies were and where they were.

In world wars and Cold War we waged a defence of liberty against the tyranny of fascism and then communism – struggles that in turn shaped our agencies and led them into deep and enduring relationships with our 5 Eyes partners (in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) as well as other NATO allies.

But the old certainties about our adversaries have fallen away leaving behind just one: the certainty that no-one can confidently and accurately predict the source of the next major threat we will face.

Thus far, the 21st Century has been marked by uncertainty and disorder. In the place of ideologically-driven expansionist states we are now faced with a diverse range of threats, from state-sponsored aggression, to international terrorist organisations, to “lone wolf” self-radicalised terrorists, each with the intent, and sometimes the capability, to challenge our national security and damage our interests. Let me take each of them in turn.

The first is the threat posed to British citizens by international terrorist organisations.

If I had been making this speech two years ago, I am pretty confident that I would have said the threat from Al Qaeda was the greatest we then faced. Of course, Al Qaeda remains a significant threat. But so too are its affiliates and splinter groups, such as ISIL. The emergence of groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and ISIL in Syria, Iraq and Libya, simply serves to underline the pace with which the threats to our safety and security from this source are evolving.

Building up an accurate picture of these groups – who runs them, with what purpose; their strengths, their weaknesses, their intentions and their capacity to do us harm – requires painstaking work, often conducted in dangerous or hostile environments.

In some cases, such as that of ISIL, these organisations openly advertise their existence and intentions.

But others go to great lengths to remain hidden from view; sheltering behind decentralised structures, scattered over many countries, with rapidly changing command and control arrangements, often united by little more than a desire to commit violence. Gathering intelligence on these groups represents a fundamentally different order of challenge; and it is only thanks to the dedication, and in many cases the brilliance, of our intelligence officers that we have succeeded in detecting and containing these threats.

The second challenge we face – in many ways, the familiar threat – is that from potential "state adversaries". Whether it's from a North Korean regime intent on developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities; or the, at best, ambiguous nuclear ambitions of Iran, situated as it is in one of the world's most sensitive and volatile regions; or the rapid military modernisation and clear disregard for the rule on international law demonstrated by Putin's Russia, we must remain ever vigilant against the threat that other states still pose to our security, despite the competing focus on international terrorism.

In the case of Russia, for two decades since the end of the Cold War, we and our allies sought to draw our old adversary into the rules-based international system. We worked in a spirit of openness, generosity and partnership, to help Russia take its rightful place, as we saw it, as a major power contributing to global stability and order.

We now have to accept that those efforts have been rebuffed.

We are now faced with a Russian leader bent not on joining the international rules-based system which keeps the peace between nations, but on subverting it. President Putin's actions – illegally annexing Crimea and using Russian troops to destabilise eastern Ukraine – fundamentally undermine the security of the sovereign nations of Eastern Europe.

The rapid pace with which Russia is seeking to modernise her military forces and weapons, combined with the increasingly aggressive stance of the Russian military, including Russian aircraft around the sovereign airspace of NATO members states, are all significant causes for concern.

So we are in familiar territory for anyone over the age of about 50: with Russia's aggressive behaviour a stark reminder that it has the potential to pose the greatest single threat to our security – and hence continuing to gather intelligence on Russia's capabilities and intentions will remain a vital part of our intelligence effort for the foreseeable future. It is no coincidence that all of our agencies are recruiting Russian speakers again.

Like our Armed Forces, our intelligence agencies now have to plan to deal, simultaneously, with the organised efforts of a nation-state adversary, and the more amorphous menace of international terrorism.

The third major challenge that we face to our security is from the radicalisation of individual terrorists – the so-called "lone wolves".

The internet has become a source of terrorist inspiration, know-how and propaganda – presenting us with the new challenge of those who self-radicalise without even associating in the physical world with other subjects of interest. Remaining hidden from view at first glance.

Much of the narrative driving that radicalisation comes from organised terrorist groups such as AQ and ISIL. But the challenge for the intelligence agencies from “lone wolves” is particularly acute given that radicalisation can take place within a short period of time and deadly attacks can be perpetrated with limited external planning or assistance, and thus limited exposure to communication.

As we saw in the tragic events in the Lindt Café in Sydney last year, and in Paris in January, individual terrorist attacks can prove just as deadly as those perpetrated by organised and externally-directed groups, even though the task of detecting them for the police and the intelligence agencies is infinitely harder.

States, non-state actors and “lone wolves” all require the application of different techniques to meet the challenge they pose. But the sheer number and range of threats, old and new, amounts to the greatest challenge to our collective security for decades and places unprecedented demands on those charged with keeping us safe.

And as the range of threats gets bigger, so the pace of technological change with which the Agencies must keep up is getting faster, making their central task of keeping us safe ever more demanding.

The agencies have always had to innovate to stay one step ahead of their adversaries. But the accelerating pace of technological change has upped the ante as terrorists, states and others who would do us harm embrace, adapt, and abuse the technology that we so readily welcome in our everyday lives.

And it is a truism that as technology enables greater productivity, it also opens us up to greater vulnerability. So our agencies must master every technological advance.

They must understand its strengths, its weaknesses, the vulnerabilities it introduces – before our enemies can turn it against us.

The challenge is as great for the Secret Intelligence Service as it is for GCHQ. Of course, I can’t reveal their methods, but running agents and delivering intelligence from human sources becomes increasingly difficult as modern technology advances and the opportunities for subterfuge, concealment and clandestine operations are reduced. And to GCHQ, although since its birth a signals intelligence organisation, the rapid pace of development of the internet and the sheer scale of its traffic, pose new challenges – finding the needle of vital information to safeguard our security in a haystack that is growing exponentially and is already well beyond the capacity of human analysis.

Of course, there are some who will never accept that our intelligence agencies play a legitimate role in helping the State to fulfil its first duty: the duty to safeguard its citizens.

There are some who remain wilfully blind to the distinction between the unacknowledged, unregulated, underhand intelligence capabilities of a repressive regime, directed against its own people, and the agencies of this and other democratic countries, where intelligence is directed towards keeping our citizens safe and is subject to the most robust systems of oversight.

The exposure of the alleged identity of one of the most murderous ISIL terrorists over the last few weeks has seen some seeking to excuse the terrorists and point the finger of blame at the agencies themselves.

We are absolutely clear: the responsibility for acts of terror rests with those who commit them. But a huge burden of responsibility also lies with those who act as apologists for them.

So what is our response to the ever increasing complexity of the security landscape in which our intelligence agencies must operate and succeed? How do we ensure that they have the tools they need to do their job? There are three key things we need to do.

First, we need to go on backing the agencies with the resources they need to fulfil their vital mission. As we work through our long term economic plan to undo the damage of the Great Recession and ensure we have a growing economy to fund our public services, at the forefront of our minds is the need to support the activity of the unsung heroes who work, in secrecy, but with such dedication, in our intelligence agencies.

Secondly, to counter effectively the growing range of threats and the global nature of 21st Century terrorism and extremism, we must continue to strengthen our security cooperation with like-minded allies and partners. Within the strict constraints we set for ourselves, the pooling and sharing of intelligence with sister agencies helps ensure we get the broadest and deepest intelligence coverage possible. In the last five years, we have deliberately strengthened the relationships with many of our allies and partners in the Gulf region, in NATO, and beyond – rebuilding the political ties that underpin the security relationships that can provide the vital pieces of intelligence to keep the British people safe. And we must continue to build our network of partnerships to maximise our intelligence coverage, and thereby minimise the threat to our national security.

We may face some tough choices in doing so. Not all those countries with whom we might like to share information in the interests of our national security adhere to the same high standards as the UK in how they treat suspects. Sometimes a judgment has to be made.

These are often finely balanced decisions. And more and more of them are coming across my desk and the desks of my colleagues.

The third action we must take is to respond decisively and positively to the public and parliamentary debate about the powers required by our intelligence agencies to do their job in

a changed technological environment – and in doing so draw a line under that debate so that the agencies can get on with the job of keeping this country safe.

We are after all, all of us in our private lives, individuals who seek privacy for ourselves and our families, as well as citizens who demand protection by our government from those who would harm us.

So we are right to question the powers required by our agencies – and particularly by GCHQ – to monitor private communications in order to do their job. But we should not lose sight of the vital balancing act between the privacy we desire and the security we need.

There is, and there always will be, a tension between the need to ensure the agencies have every reasonable access they require in order to be able to build the fullest picture of the threats we face, how they are communicating, with whom, and with what intent; and on the other side the legitimate concern of law-abiding people to protect their private communications from intrusion and, worse, exposure.

From my position as Foreign Secretary, responsible for the oversight of GCHQ and with a full appreciation of the constraints and regulations within which they operate, I am quite clear that the ability to intercept “bulk communications data”, to subject that metadata to electronic analysis and to seek to extract the tiny, tiny percentage of communications data that may be of any direct security interest does not represent an enhancement of the agencies’ powers; rather, it represents the adaptation of those powers to the realities of the 21st Century.

But I am also conscious, in the wake of the Snowden allegations and in the light of upcoming parliamentary and other inquiries, including the work being done here at RUSI, that we will need to address public concerns about the transparency of the regulatory framework and the powers contained within it.

The forthcoming report on Security and Privacy from the Intelligence and Security Committee will no doubt make an important contribution to this debate; as will the report of David Anderson. Both of these inquiries have had full and unfettered access to the work of the agencies and I look forward to reading their conclusions.

But I am also clear, that this debate cannot be allowed to run on forever.

We need to have it, address the issues arising from it and move on, sooner rather than later, if our agencies are not to become distracted from their task.

The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I are determined that we should draw a line under the debate by legislating early in the next Parliament to give our agencies, clearly and transparently, the powers they need, and to ensure that our oversight regime keeps pace with technological change and addresses the reasonable concerns of our citizens.

This is urgent business because, while we have some of the most sophisticated and dedicated intelligence agencies in the world we are up against huge and asymmetric challenges. The agencies of states that pose a threat to us operate without the constraints of democratic oversight, rule of law or respect for human rights. We have to outperform them, within the constraints of all three. The terrorists who would seek to destroy our society only need to be lucky once. Our agencies have to be successful all the time; operating in tough and often dangerous environments; innovating in the face of new and unprecedented dangers; but representing in many ways the very best of British public service. I pay tribute to their dedication and their bravery. We recognise the scale of the challenge they face in the task ahead. And in Government, we will do what it takes to allow them to keep us safe in the future.

Thank you.

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