Wystąpienie Wicepremiera, Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych Radosława Sikorskiego w Royal United Services Institute

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to speak before an audience of such expertise and authority in international affairs. To speak in Britain – my homeland at the time of the Cold War – doubles the honour.

Let me begin with a few words of appreciation.

The distance between London and Kyiv is more than 1.5 thousand miles. But from the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine, Britain understood that neither security nor international justice was a function of physical distance.

In London politicians on both sides of the aisle understood that if Russian crimes go unpunished, if lands can be annexed by force, if cities can be destroyed and civilians terrorised without consequence, then the danger will not stop at Ukraine's border. It will not stop at the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, or the North Sea. And eventually, it will threaten the whole Continent, including the Isles.

That is why, since February 2022 the UK has committed almost £22 billion for Ukraine, including £13 billion in military aid[1].

For this clarity Britain deserves appreciation. Not routine diplomatic acknowledgements, but genuine recognition.

Ladies and Gentlemen, from Poland and on behalf of Poland I say – thank you!

Doing what's right in this matter does not absolve European countries – Britain and Poland included – from answering a greater question. What's

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-support-to-ukraine-factsheet/uk-support-to-ukraine-factsheet

next? What role are we to play in the increasingly chaotic and conflict-driven world?

Well-established norms are either going or gone entirely. The use of force, once a consequence of diplomatic failure, is more and more often treated as a prelude to negotiation — a way to soften up an adversary before serious talks can begin.

Willingness to compromise, once a token of good will, is now seen as a weakness to be exploited. International relations are turning into a zero-sum game – one side's gain must be another side's loss.

This is not the world Western Europeans tried to build after 1945. It is not the world Central Europeans expected to join after 1989.

For decades, we have benefited from a relatively stable international order. It lulled many of us into false sense of security. It led to reduced defence spending, to a belief that commerce would moderate power, that interdependence would put a check on violence. Comfortable assumptions but ultimately wrong. We threw out an umbrella just because it hadn't rained for a long while.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Britain remains a great country. It holds a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. It has nuclear weapons, first-class intelligence, global diplomatic outreach, excellent universities and readiness to deploy its military. It enjoys an outsize influence in Washington, the EU, the Commonwealth, and beyond. It retains a rare ability to convene, to persuade, to organise, and to lead other countries.

But it doesn't have it all. Its share of global GDP has declined. Its relative military heft has weakened, as other powers have risen. Its population has aged. Your economy faces serious structural pressures. Annual GDP growth over the last decade has hovered around 1.5% on average. These are not uniquely British problems. Many European countries face similar challenges.

Britain, once one of the greatest empires in history, has become a middle power. Uniquely influential – but still a middle power.

As mid-sized powers, Poland and the UK find themselves in a similar predicament.

By signing the Northolt Treaty last month, Brits and Poles have opened a new chapter in our relationship – one defined by closer cooperation in areas of security and defence. Poland the Britain understand the importance of military power under current circumstances. Your defence expenditure in absolute numbers is about twice as high as ours. Measured by the share of DGP, ours is twice as big as yours.

The document states that we are cognisant of the "return of warfare to the European continent and acknowledge [...] the challenges to [our] democracies and to international law and norms."

And while the Northolt Treaty is bilateral, its implications extend further. It can generate beneficial spillover effects across organizations to which we both belong, including NATO.[2]

Even the mightiest European countries, those feeling "too big for Europe", are too small for the world. Alone we are all vulnerable. Together we are a force to be reckoned with.

This leads us to the first major task: Europe needs deeper, more flexible, and serious cooperation.

Well-known divisions between old and new Europe, East and West, centre and periphery, are losing their relevance. The threats we face do not fall neatly into these categories.

The challenges in the High North, in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, in cyberspace, supply chains, energy infrastructure, and democratic institutions cannot be understood through outdated mental maps. We need formats of international cooperation that break old moulds.

[2] „The Parties shall seek to intensify their co-operation with other European partners, in order to jointly address international security challenges."

Formats are much alike tools. A hammer is an excellent tool for some tasks and utterly useless for others. The E3 — France, Germany, and the United Kingdom — may be suitable for leading coalitions of the willing in certain areas but it is hardly an optimal group for deciding on the status of Greenland, the security architecture of Central Europe and of the world, or the exploration of the Arctic. The Budapest Memorandum, the Minsk agreements – we have repeatedly seen formats fail when they exclude some of those most directly affected. It would be madness to follow the same path and expect to arrive at a different destination.

We must take a different turn. And this is where Britain has a distinctive role to play.

Even if Britain's global influence has diminished compared to its imperial past, it retains something many others envy: the ability to bring countries together, to create coalitions, and nudge them to do what's right.

The Joint Expeditionary Force is an excellent example of coalition-building among states which share threat perception and a sense of urgency. Open it up and you will soon see other countries lining up to join, Poland included. With its 770 kilometres of Baltic coastline and armed forces trained to operate in both northern and eastern theatres, we are a natural asset.

Britain's coalition-building ability should be used to its fullest extent. One should not cling to old formats simply because they are familiar. It's wiser to build coalitions the times require. And today's threats come mainly from Europe's northern, eastern and southern flanks.

Distinguished Guests,

Our second major task is to maintain close working relations with our biggest ally: the United States.

Not only with the current administration. Not only with Democrats or Republicans. Europe needs a durable relationship with the United States as a whole – but the terms of that relationship must change.

All major European strategic documents identify Russia as a long-term threat. All major American strategic documents identify China as the

central strategic challenge. Moscow and Beijing have announced a “no-limits” partnership. If both assessments are even partly correct, then the conclusion is obvious: if the Western world moves towards fragmentation, it does so at its own peril.

Europe needs the United States to deter Russia. The United States needs Europe to become stronger so that America is not forced to carry every burden in every theatre. Europe needs American intelligence, nuclear deterrence, logistics, and certain cutting-edge technologies. America needs European allies who can help manage the growing economic and technological challenges posed by China.

This is not charity. It is a shared interest, which – to pursue effectively– requires money.

There has been progress. EU Member States have significantly increased their defence spending. Reaching €380 billion last year, defence expenditure was 63 percent higher than in 2020. Defence investment has risen even more, increasing by 150 percent over the same period. Good. But not enough.

What’s to be done? Three major steps.

First, Europe must maintain interoperability with the United States while reducing overreliance on American capabilities that Washington itself has in short supply.

Investments in European research, development, and production should not be presented as a challenge to the United States. The goal is to make the alliance more effective.

American defence companies already face enormous demand from the U.S. government and customers around the world. As Washington increases its own defence spending and modernises for competition in the Indo-Pacific, American priorities will often come first. The United States cannot manufacture everything for everyone. Europe must step up – either jointly with American companies or on its own.

Second, we must implement the lessons from Ukraine.

The battlefield in Ukraine is neither purely modern, nor purely old-fashioned. It combines cheap drones used at massive scale with artillery, tanks, mines, electronic warfare, air defence, satellites and cyber operations.

The way forward is not to choose between old and new. The way forward is to integrate both.

That is why Poland is investing in modern anti-drone systems and also building the largest tank fleet among European NATO members. That is why Europe needs to have a robust repair capacity, mass ammunition production, layered air defence, long-range precision strike capability, and the will to learn faster than the adversary.

Third, we must improve logistics across Europe.

General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I, once said that while "infantry wins battles, logistics wins wars". Weapons, fuel, soldiers, spare parts, ammunition, and medical support must travel quickly to where they are needed. A brigade that cannot move quickly is a sitting duck. A tank without spare parts is disposable. Ammo locked in an unreachable warehouse is useless.

Improving military mobility must become a pan-European goal. This is why Poland advocates extending NATO fuel pipelines from ports and major military bases in Western Europe to the eastern flank. This is why roads, railways, ports and bridges are strategic assets. In this regard, the European Union, with its many infrastructure and investment programmes, is an asset.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the greatest Britons of all time once said that "you can always count on Americans to do the right thing – after they've tried everything else". I hope Europeans can rise to at least the same standard.

The date of today's speech brings me naturally to Winston Churchill. Exactly 86 years ago, not far away from here, in Westminster, he delivered his famous "Finest Hour" speech, which ended with this magnificent phrase:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."

Any analogies between our time and the years of World War II must be made carefully. False equivalents can mislead.

But to appeal for higher defence spending is not to cry wolf.

To cry wolf is to warn against a non-existent danger. The boy in the fable lied about a wolf that wasn't there.

This is not our situation.

The wolf — or rather, the bear — is already ravaging our neighbour's land. The danger is not imaginary. Nobody can deny it. Some simply still believe that the aggressor can be appeased.

A special responsibility falls on Britain's shoulders at this moment — not because it can act alone, but because it can help others act together.

Britannia will not rule the waves again. But the UK can organise and co-lead a serious democratic coalition standing for what's right.

Churchill's "Finest Hour" speech was not called one of his best because it was delivered when victory was at hand. In June 1940, the ultimate defeat seemed much more probable.

Our times are different. But they too demand clarity.

Crying wolf when the danger is not out there is foolish. It undermines trust.

Crying bear, when the beast is already at the door, is not foolish. It's a rallying cry.

We should prepare to follow it. Britain and Poland can and will do this together.

Thank you.