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MENU

Lord Owen: Outside a dysfunctional EU with its common defence agenda, we must champion and strengthen Nato

 Lord Owen  18th September 2016  Comments Off

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Lord Owen was Foreign Secretary in the Labour Government between 1977 and 1979 and was co-founder and later Leader of the Social Democratic Party. He now sits in the House of Lords as an Independent Social Democrat.

NATO's proven strength was developed during the Cold War but it is still present and necessary in 2016. It embraces a command and control structure that works, effectively tying in US and European armed forces under an American SACEUR. But since 1993, EU federal aspirations have bedevilled defence and security.

It began with 'common defence' wording in the Maastricht Treaty; then Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Jacques Chirac took that defence wording further, arguing in the St Malo joint declaration in December 1998, that 'the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so in order to respond to international crises.'

This shift in policy has taxed British diplomatic skills, since it has become ever more obvious that France was operating from a different agenda, and had different military aspirations. The extent to which autonomous decision making has developed is best summed up by the French Chief of Defence Staff explicitly laying out the procedure on 28 March 2001:

'If the EU works properly, it will start working on crises at a very early stage, well before the situation escalates. NATO has nothing to do with this. At a certain stage the Europeans would decide to conduct a military operation. Either the Americans would come or not.'

The EU policy paper *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* was presented to the Heads of Government Brussels summit meeting on 28th June 2016 quickly followed on 13th July by the publication of the German White Paper on *German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*. Both papers had been held back deliberately to avoid debate during the UK referendum. These documents are likely to be the defining moment in the creation of a continental United States of Europe and the deepest political reason for the UK voting to leave the EU.

The EU Summit meeting, from which for perfectly valid reasons the UK was excluded on Friday in Bratislava, demonstrates that a staged exit for the UK is already happening. Staging is a good thing. There are many issues which we and our partners have to settle soon that cannot reasonably wait until trade issues have been negotiated. For example, stopping preparations for UK MEPs to be elected in 2019 and right of abode for EU and UK citizens which cannot be left hanging for two years. Nor the fair treatment of EU citizens employed in EU institutions.

France and Germany, without the UK, are now starting to create a European army with its HQ separate from NATO. This is the fork in the road and the UK, now heading out of the EU, can in leaving the European External Action Service (EEAS) in, say January 2017, on invoking Article 50, simultaneously strengthen NATO and champion NATO in the new debate in Washington that President Obama triggered when he rightly complained about Europe's freeloading off NATO.

Obama's open questioning of Europe's commitment means that it desperately needs European countries to demonstrate that NATO really matters to Europe and only the UK is in a position to do so, particularly now it is leaving the new EU defence structures. Over the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in 1991, where Russia was a valued partner throughout in UNPROFOR, there was one central political lesson – we needed NATO militarily to reinforce diplomacy: the Clinton Administration withheld that NATO support from February 1992 until after Srebrenica in late August/early September 1995 when NATO, far too late, acted militarily. That delay is a lesson still today as Russia and the US at last start joint targeting of ISIS.

Increasingly the European External Action Service of the EU is becoming a foreign and defence department of a government, with Embassies and Ambassadors, and is charged with implementing the EU's Common For-

ign and Security Policy (CFSP). A recent report of the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee pointed to many ways in which the range and the activity of the EEAS are inexorably increasing and so is its cost. The EEAS budget for 2012 was just short of €500 million and by 2015 it had spectacularly doubled to one billion euros. At every stage this creep was initially resisted by the British government and then absorbed whilst the Foreign Office experienced substantive cuts in its budget.

Recently the actions of the EU have been positively harmful. This was seen very clearly in the handling of the crisis in the Ukraine which predictably flared up in 2014 over Crimea. By seeking in the EU/Ukraine Association Agreement to use the language of EU defence it demonstrated to a suspicious Russia that its international power and sphere of influence was going to push right up eventually to all the boundaries of the Russian Federation. Putin then acted aggressively in the context of Russian annexation of Crimea. The mistakes made by the EU over its handling of the Ukraine continue. The Dutch referendum rejection in 2016 of the EU/Ukraine Association Agreement showed there is dissent at the manner and the substance of EU foreign policy development over Ukraine but it has still not shifted at the time of writing in September 2016.

There are people in the UK who take a largely French view that Europe alone can deal with its own defence, that we do not need the US and need not worry about a decline in NATO. The facts simply do not bear this out in terms of the money EU countries spend, the numbers in the military and the quality and total armaments held. Indeed, it is questionable whether some of our European neighbours have the necessary will and resolve in foreign affairs to make the difficult decisions.

It is essential for the reasons I have already given that the UK champions the link. The Americans have rightly warned that pursuit of a foreign and defence policy independent from them will lead them to question their financial support for NATO. President Obama, in an interview with the Atlantic magazine, said there had been a growing move in the United States against European 'free loading', and had the British government not committed to the 2% pledge on NATO spending, the special relationship would have been affected.

For the UK to have remained in the EU would have been, in my judgement, a more dangerous option for British and European security in its deepest sense – economic, political, military and social. A dysfunctional EU dragged down by a failing Eurozone is an appalling prospect, but it is the most likely one I fear given the weak state of the Italian economy in particular.

Britain must now move beyond focusing on the EU, assume a successful, good-natured Brexit, and give primacy to NATO. The Five Presidents' initiative of 2015 contained many items that are part of a federalist agenda. In doing this we must demonstrate to Americans that we in Europe will not continue to be 'freeloaders'. When the Americans see we are no longer involved in the dangerous myth of EU defence, they will listen, understanding why we are leaving the EU and giving priority to supporting NATO. In spite of the growing costs, it would be foolish to disrupt our involvement in some EU peacekeeping as members of NATO.

Following on from Bratislava, in all logic the UK would conduct our international policy in NATO, OSCE, G7, G20 and in the Commonwealth under our overarching permanent membership of the UN Security Council. It will be a policy of global internationalism which is wholly consistent with the UK's traditional foreign and defence policies. Brexit is not a break with this tradition. Rather, it is an assertion of a long-standing British view that we never intended in 1973 to be part of a federal Europe and those in Europe who wish for such a development are free to pursue it without any British veto, foot-dragging or reluctance. We are embarked on an amicable divorce.

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 Opinion  Lord Owen
