

SPEECH BY THE RT HON LORD OWEN IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS
DEBATE ON UK DEFENCE FORCES, 23 NOVEMBER 2017

Lord Owen (Ind SD) My Lords, the issue before us all is that defence expenditure has to be increased. There can be no ifs or buts about that. For the next five years, the National Security Council will have to find an increase from 2% to 2.5% as the bare minimum. That body is looking at cyber, development, defence and foreign policy. It is the right body to give a remit to this new review that it will be funded to this extent. Without that, frankly, it will not be serious.

Europe has been freeloading on the United States, as far as NATO is concerned, for long enough. Britain, coming out of the EU, has to demonstrate to the Americans that we are committed to NATO's defence. Without that, we will not maintain the support of the American people for their commitment to NATO. Everything that we see indicates that that is vital. Why?

President Putin has admitted that he considered putting Russian nuclear forces on full alert at the time of maximum tension over Crimea, which shows how unwise it is to assume that Russian nuclear strategies are anywhere near the same as ours in NATO. It is also true that President Putin has threatened to base nuclear forces in Crimea and that he has deployed missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads in Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave in the Baltic Sea which neighbours Poland and Lithuania. I do not wish to exaggerate—Russian Federation military power is far less than that of the old USSR. The relevant concern we have is the growth in the belief among informed NATO military opinion that Russian conventional forces are now able to punch a hole in NATO's conventional defences, particularly in the Baltic region. This is the rational case for increased NATO defence spending. Not to allow it is, in my view, to put NATO's whole deterrent strategy at risk.

It is also vital that in this review we look at the role of the aircraft carrier. Aircraft carriers are huge and hugely expensive, so we have to find a way of making a contribution worldwide through a rapid reaction force committed not only to NATO but, more importantly, to the UN. It should operate worldwide from Oman, and be part of a global British strategy for the next decade that will be beneficial to us in achieving greater prosperity and a global profile. In that context, we must look at the amphibious forces. What is envisaged for the Royal Marines, and for the ships that are necessary, raises very serious questions. How many of us were pleased about the intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000? Without that amphibious capability, our capacity to intervene would have been negligible—in fact, the intervention would have been so dangerous that we could not have undertaken it.

There are big tasks ahead. We now have an integrated structure that looks at our overall international policy. If that means we have to take more from the overseas budget, I would, extremely reluctantly, accept it. There are ways of achieving it within the normal rules, provided that they are changed. For instance, the HMS "Ocean" mission to the British Virgin Islands during the emergency was not a defence expenditure and should be met out of the foreign aid budget. It is ridiculous to be told that OECD rules imply that we cannot use our foreign aid budget because this country was previously considered to be a medium-sized economy. A lot of those OECD rules are out of date and if they cannot be changed, we have to change them unilaterally. The foreign aid budget is potentially extremely important, but day after day we hear how it is grotesquely badly used. The British public will not go on accepting that. It may be that the House of Commons does not have the willpower to change the present resolution, but we in this House have a responsibility to remind Commons Members of their responsibility to the defence of Europe and not to allow this burden to be borne only by the American people.