

HOUSE OF LORDS DEBATE ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY SITUATION,
THURSDAY 19 APRIL 2018

My Lords, I welcome the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting here in London. Post Brexit, it presents an opportunity for this country to deepen further our relationships with the Commonwealth, in trade of course but not just in economic measures—in diplomacy in the UN, particularly through the UN Security Council debates; and in defence, where I see one part of the deployment of our new aircraft carriers being beyond the Suez Canal, as a UN rapid-reaction maritime force where those carriers will need accompanying vessels. Those could easily come—with enthusiasm, I think—from the Australian, New Zealand and, I hope, Indian navies.

There are three dangerous potential military crises on the international agenda: North Korean nuclear weapons; eastern Europe, focused on Ukraine; and the Middle East, focused on Syria. Any or all of these could bubble over into serious military conflict. North Korea is of concern to the UK. This is not some far-distant problem. We contributed militarily to the conflict which started in June 1950 and lost many lives. We now know that it was a proxy war. In Moscow in April 1950, Stalin had given the green light to North Korea to start it, as did Mao in Beijing in May, but for years the Chinese and Russians went through a public ritual of blaming each other for starting the war. Both were surprised by the US intervention over Korea in 1950 and by the support that it had from the UK. The UK decided on early recognition of China in 1950 and it was a carefully thought-out position, one of which Clement Attlee was rightly proud.

President Trump on Korea has been far better than many of his predecessors. It was a wise decision to ask President Xi to the US so early in his tenure in April last year, and the men have met many times since and taken the measure of each other. Mike Pompeo's secret visit is extremely encouraging, especially since he will be the US Secretary of State very soon, I hope. Many people in Europe and the US who make justified criticism of President Trump's handling of foreign affairs should remember that secrecy is an extremely important part of international diplomacy, as is the clear and concise linkage between the use of force and the importance of negotiation. It is necessary that President Trump and President Putin should meet, as soon as possible, to discuss these two very difficult issues of Syria and Ukraine.

Churchill did not say that jaw-jaw is better than war-war. He said: "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war", which is a far more toughly worded explanation of why we must always be open to negotiation while preparing for war. But secrecy and co-ordination with colleagues is vital in any defence strategy, and the Prime Minister was absolutely right to use the prerogative powers on this most recent incident. We should be quite clear about it: prerogative powers for international negotiations are an essential. I wish that some of the diplomats who speak in this House frequently would reflect on that in the appalling problems we are making for the Government in their negotiating of Brexit. Even under the infamous Article 50, there has to be some measure of secrecy, flexibility and give-and-take in any negotiations.

We need to rapidly rethink our problems with Syria. We have made three interventions over chemical weapons, correctly. First, there was Secretary of State Kerry's and Foreign Minister Lavrov's initiative to remove large supplies of sarin gas from Syria in 2013, which was far more effective than any pinprick bombing. Secondly, there was the 2017 intervention by President Trump when sarin gas was used, which demonstrated that Russia had either deliberately or inadvertently accepted some sarin gas remaining in Syria. Thirdly, there was the recent co-ordinated action on the use of gas. Of course, chlorine was not included in the 2017 negotiation. But in Syria, we now have a far more dangerous problem: the proven existence of Iranian military forces with drones in Syria, with the real probability that they are in Lebanon as well. We cannot continue to take the same attitude to Iran until it is persuaded to bring its forces back. Iran is not an aggressive nation, historically, but it is an aggressive act to deploy in Syria—particularly since Iraq now has a Shia Prime Minister and the majority in Iraq form the Government of that country. Iran no longer faces the threat that it did from Saddam Hussein and the Sunni minority that was in control of Iraq for many decades.

To come to Europe and defence, for a post-Brexit Britain the challenge is abundantly clear. It is to make an urgent decision—I am surprised it has not already been made by this Government—to increase our defence spending from 2% to, at the very least, 2.5% and as soon as possible up to 3%. President Macron said a few days ago in the European Parliament, “We share so much”—he meant with America, but he said that it is “rejecting multilateralism”. He said he was convinced that this model is more important than ever but it is “very fragile”. America as a whole is not rejecting multilateralism and I am not convinced Trump is either. It is up to us in Europe to demonstrate to the US that we will match its NATO commitment. On this Britain should take a lead, and urgently. It is important to remember that successive US Presidents have warned us that we must give a commitment to NATO if they are to persuade their people to give such a commitment. The US pays over 70% of NATO's bills. This is freeloading and it was Obama who first warned us that we were doing that. Trump has reiterated it and they are both correct. There is only one serious multilateral defence organisation in the world, and that is NATO. Anyone, anywhere who damages that is threatening international peace. This country now faces a serious decision over defence policy post Brexit. There can be no doubt whatever that we will remove ourselves from the External Action Service immediately we leave in April 2019. That External Action Service has not been a great success. Its contribution to the fighting in Ukraine through the EU-Ukraine agreement has already been commented on in Select Committee reports in this House, and I will go no further on that.

What could we do to link NATO well with the foreign policy and overall security policy of the EU when it has 27 members? That is a very serious issue. We should not rush into it; we need to gather our thoughts. An example of what we might consider is talking with our friends in NATO who are not members of the EU: Norway, Iceland and Turkey. There is no more difficult problem than how to keep Turkey in NATO. It was extremely encouraging that President Erdoğan came out in support of the action that the US, UK and France took in Syria. It is not proving easy, and there are difficult relations between the US and Turkey. They are greatly strained at the moment. There is a strong case for

considering the establishment of a NATO-EU permanent joint council—a PJC—of NATO non-EU members and NATO EU members. It needs to be small if it is to be effective. A council composed of Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the UK might make very good sense, but it is up to NATO to choose its group and the EU to choose its group. That would be the sort of linkage that we might look to post Brexit. Were that to be established, we would have no case for staying in the EU’s permanent structured co-operation on security and defence—PESCO—or for being involved in the EU’s co-ordinated annual review on defence—CARD—which aims to build up European defence planning, or the European defence fund. That raises difficult problems for us as we want joint procurement bilaterally, on a European basis or with the US. That flexibility has served us well. A lot of our Armed Forces’ sophisticated weaponry is due to industrial production agreements with US manufacturers, and we should not put ourselves in a situation where we believe there is merit in Europe being self-sufficient.

This is a troubled and difficult time. This debate is well timed. There needs to be great thought about how we proceed, but we should not underrate the importance of Putin and Trump meeting very soon. The trade-offs in Syria have to come with benefit to Russia. The trade-offs in Ukraine have to come with benefit to the United States.