

SPEECH BY THE RT HON LORD OWEN TO THE HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY

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I listened to Henry Jackson when he was a Democrat Senator and it is an honour to speak to a Society that carries his name.

There are three very dangerous potential military crises on the international agenda. North Korean nuclear weapons, Eastern Europe focussed on the Ukraine and the Middle East focussed on Syria. Any or all of these could bubble over into military conflict.

North Korea

North Korea is of concern to the UK. We did contribute militarily to the conflict which started in June 1950. As we say in *British Foreign Policy After Brexit* we now know 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 the Russians went through a ritual of blaming each other for starting the war. Both were surprised by the US intervention over Korea and in the support they had from the UK.¹ The UK decided on early recognition of China in 1950 and it was a carefully thought out position one of which Clement Attlee was proud. The war only ended in 1953 when Eisenhower sent a message through Nehru, then Prime Minister of India, to Mao that unless the Panmunjom talks ended quickly he was prepared to use a tactical nuclear device targeted on North Korea far from any centres of population as a demonstration that he was not prepared to wait indefinitely for a peace settlement. It is very right and proper that China and the US take a measure of joint responsibility for once again creating a peaceful settlement between North and South Korea which will have to involve, if the North Korean nuclear weapons are to be abandoned, specific nuclear guarantees from President Xi to North Korea that he will not allow them to be attacked and likewise from President Trump to South Korea.

Suffice to say that American policy under President Trump on Korea has been far better than under many of his predecessors. It was a wise decision to ask President Xi to the US so early in his tenure in April 2017 and President Xi was far sighted in accepting that invitation and not fussing about the meeting being held in Florida rather than Washington. They took the measure of each other and that has been obvious as events have unfolded. The news that the CIA Director Mike Pompeo has secretly visited North Korea is very encouraging, particularly since he will soon be US Secretary of State.

Many people in Europe and in the US who make justified criticisms 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 perhaps worth reminding everyone of the famous quotation

¹ David Owen and David Ludlow, *British Foreign Policy After Brexit* (Biteback Publishing, 2017), p.18

of Winston Churchill. He did not say that “Jaw, jaw is better than war, war”. He said, “meeting jaw to jaw is better than war.” A far more toughly worded explanation of why you should always be open to negotiation while preparing for war.

Ukraine

I know people will say what preventative use was the Budapest Memorandum signed in December 1994 by Russia, the Ukraine, the US and the UK and separately by France, when Russia annexed Ukraine and changed the territorial map of Ukraine.² It is a very relevant and fair point and we need to learn lessons from this over Korea as well as in Europe.

On the recognition of Crimea President Putin has remained intransigent and has drawn a comparison to the earlier declaration of independence by Kosovo of the US, UK, France and Germany, saying we keep hearing from the US and Western Europe that Kosovo is some special case. Putin asked what makes it so special in the eyes of our colleagues and went on to say how Russia saw itself in the world: “Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected.” This use of examples of Western actions, often controversial in their own right, to legitimise their own activity is an area in which the Russians have become adept, even though the rationale behind the examples they quote may be completely at variance with their own intentions.

The situation in Ukraine has deteriorated since the second peace agreement (‘Minsk II’) being signed in February 2015. The role of the EU and its member states in managing the negotiations with Ukraine on the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement and ultimately in dealing with the subsequent crisis, has come in for much serious criticism. Lessons from that debacle should lay the foundation for a new British foreign policy after Brexit. It is arguably one of the greatest mistakes in European diplomacy since Munich in 1938. Richard Sakwa in his article, ‘The Death of Europe?’ in *International Affairs*³ wrote,

The Ukraine crisis exposed the flaws in Europe’s post-Cold War development...In the Ukraine crisis the EU not only proved inadequate as a conflict regulator but itself became the source of conflict. The EU’s ill-prepared advance into what was always recognised to be a contested neighbourhood provoked the gravest international crisis of our era, but once the crisis started Europe was sidelined.

Anyone who wants the UK to tie themselves in on 1 April 2019 to remaining closely involved in the EEAS (European External Action Services) does not understand the opportunities Brexit carries with it. We constantly hear Brexit discussed only in economic terms. Regaining control of one’s own foreign policy is a plus. Learning the lessons of the folly of British detachment from the handling of the Ukraine by the EU is essential. It should also be remembered that it was the pushing forward of all the pretensions of EU defence policy in the wording of the Agreement which made the Kremlin believe that while Ukraine might never become a member of NATO the EU defence policy was to be the new

² Ibid, p. 169 and p. 178.

³ The Death of Europe? Continental Fates after Ukraine. *International Affairs*, May 2015.

replacement for Article 5 with an implied automatic commitment to come to its defence. If eventually the EU want to bring Ukraine into membership that is up to them. We in the UK should resist them coming into NATO.

George Kennan exposed the error of taking NATO up to all of Russia's borders very clearly in an article in the *New York Times* in February 1997 and again in an interview in that same newspaper in May 1998.⁴ The House of Lords 2015 Report on the crisis in Ukraine wisely comments:

While we are clear that NATO is a defensive alliance, for the Russians NATO is seen as a hostile military threat, and successive rounds of NATO's eastern enlargement have, as the Russians see it, brought it threateningly close to the Russian border. EU enlargement, as it has become conflated with NATO enlargement, has also taken on the aspect of a security threat. These views are sincerely and widely held in Russia, and need to be factored into Member States' strategic analyses of Russian actions and policies.⁵

The Middle East

The seven year civil war in Syria has metamorphosed into a very dangerous situation where the Iranian Islamic Republican Guard corp (RIGC) is on the ground in Syria and almost certainly in the Lebanon. Hitherto as part of my strong support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran (JCPOA) enshrined in UN Resolution 2231 unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council in January 2016 I have always argued that Iran cannot easily be called an aggressive country as it has remained within its own boundaries for centuries. This new deployment outside Iran is impossible to justify particularly given that Shia majority in Iraq now has a Shia Prime Minister and the largest number of MPs while governing with an input from the Kurds and the Sunni minority. No longer can Tehran believe that they are under military threat from Baghdad or that their national security can ever again be threatened as it was by Saddam Hussein during the eight-year war in the 1980s.

There will not be peace in the Middle East if Iranian Shia forces remain in effect on Israel's borders. This is a new very dangerous geopolitical development that will not be accepted by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel nor the United States and nor should it be accepted by the UK. Seven RIGC officers died in the Israeli strike on the drone launch site in Palmyra on 9 April that came a day after the chemical attack in Douma. It is impossible to see this issue being resolved peacefully with the necessary total withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria without the involvement of Russia. There are incidentally dangers for us in the UK in linking the Russian involvement in the attempted murder of the former Russian GRU agent, Skripal, in Salisbury with Russia's role in Syria. The two are very different. Both have to be dealt with but in very different ways.

In Syria Russia has had a naval base there since 1972. That was transformed with an air base in 2015 when there was a very real risk that the different groups of anti-Assad forces

⁴ *British Foreign Policy After Brexit*, pp. 167-8.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 168.

were about to take Damascus by force and these included ISIS which were based in the suburbs of Damascus. Russian airpower saved Damascus. This was the moment for President Obama to have engaged with Russia over their intervention positively and say, “you protect Damascus and we, with other NATO countries, will help Turkey protect Aleppo.” Yes, it would have involved a partition of Syria for some years but how much better Syria would have looked if that had been agreed than the situation we now face three years later?

We need to rethink very rapidly in NATO our military strategy and not believe that three well-judged interventions over chemical weapons have done much to change the present strategic challenge. Those interventions were, firstly, Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov’s initiative to remove very large supplies of sarin gas from Syria in 2013. A far more effective check than the pinprick bombing envisaged. Secondly, the 2017 intervention by President Trump when sarin gas was used again and demonstrated that Russia had either deliberately or inadvertently accepted some remaining. Thirdly, the recent coordinated action by the US, UK and France on Syrian poison gas installations including chlorine not covered in the 2013 UN supervised eradication programme.

Conclusion

There will either be war in the Middle East over Syria and a possible increased military activity in Ukraine or there will be a meeting between President Trump and President Putin trying to resolve these two potential conflicts. The reason for this linkage is very simple and one which I have developed in linked speeches in November 2017 to the Centre for Iranian Studies in Tel Aviv and to the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.⁶ It is a simple fact that Russian influence is the vital ingredient for peace in Syria and the Middle East and American influence is essential in Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

For a post Brexit Britain the challenge is abundantly clear. It is to make an urgent decision to increase our defence spending from NATO’s target figure of 2% of GDP to 2.5%; to put the weight of our diplomatic and military effort into NATO and to show that the speech President Macron made to the European Parliament on 17 April is wrong and defeatist and that in opposing authoritarian powers Europe can rely on the United States.

Macron said, “we share so much [with America] but it is rejecting multilateralism. I am convinced that this model is more important than ever but it is very fragile.” America as a whole is certainly 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 the NATO 2% GDP commitment and where possible will increase that amount. NATO is not a lost cause; it remains the best multilateral defence organisation in the world. Just as the US is conducting a bilateral approach to North Korea so we have seen over Syria the US wanted the UK and France to be involved. Many US Presidents, however, have warned NATO countries that they cannot go on paying over 70% of NATO costs in US dollars. It needs more pounds and euros. It was President Obama who first accused us in Europe of ‘freeloading’; something

⁶ Both speeches are available on www.lorrdavidowen.co.uk

that President Trump has reiterated. They are both correct. In this area money talks and that is why I put it first. After money comes organisation.

There is only one multilateral organisation for defence that is serious in the world and that is NATO. Created in 1948 it carried forward the command and control structures that we developed for D-Day. Congress accepted NATO whereas they did not accept Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations. NATO has proved itself under successive US SACEURs. It is the British responsibility post-Brexit to demonstrate to the American people, irrespective of who is President, that we are determined that NATO should survive and that we, post-Brexit, will make a full-hearted commitment and not play games with EU defence.

All this means that on exiting the EU on 31 March 2019 as I have already indicated we should no longer be a member of the EU's EEAS, an organisation which incidentally is restarting the debate on whether it should be conducted under Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). We should switch UK resources – money, diplomats and military figures - from the EEAS to NATO.

We should retain, of course, at all times a deep-seated security relationship with the EU in terms of sharing intelligence, fighting terrorism, joint police activity, and forging mechanisms for the closest cooperation between the wider Europe and EU defence. But we are not – and should not be – institutionally part of EU defence. Some structures within it may prove to be of mutual advantage to have British participation but we cannot make that decision in the short period available to us between now and when we leave the EU on 31 March 2019. It may be possible to come to firmer conclusions by 1 January 2021 when our negotiations on a free trade area and other matters will have hopefully come to an agreed end by the EU deadline of 31 December 2020.

To be pushed prematurely into a structural arrangement with EU defence would be to throw away one of the essential pillars of Brexit. To take just a simple example. Surely, as a first step, we owe it becoming a non-EU European country to discuss our future relationship with fellow European members of NATO who are not in the EU defence arrangement: Turkey, Norway, Iceland and Montenegro. It is a very important objective for NATO to keep Turkey firmly within that organisation. That is not proving easy to do. President Erdogan importantly supported the recent US, UK and French air strikes. But relations between Turkey and the US are strained. There is a strong case for considering the establishment of a NATO and EU permanent joint council [PJC] between NATO non-EU members and NATO EU members. It needs to be small to be effective, a council composed of Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Spain, Turkey and UK, might make very good sense. We can all suggest alternative countries, but this would have to be settled with EU representation being agreed by the EEAS and the non-EU membership being agreed by NATO itself.

Were such a NATO PJC to be established, for instance, there would be no case for the UK staying in the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation on security and defence, PESCO. Nor for being involved in the EU's coordinated annual review on defence, CARD, which aims to build up European defence planning. The European Defence Fund raises different

and difficult questions as does EDIDP, the European Defence Industrial Development Programme and the EDA, European Defence Agency. The problem here is that the UK believes in joint procurement for defence either with the EU or with the US or bilaterally and we will want to retain that flexibility continuing with procurement partnerships already underway and building new ones. But unlike France, and to some extent Germany, we do not want as a matter of principle to aim for self-sufficiency in Europe on defence procurement and to positively exclude US participation. We have become ever more comfortable with US procurement cooperation and involvement, not just over our nuclear deterrent but over sophisticated weaponry which has kept our defence forces on the cutting edge of science and technology.

There is a group in Whitehall who are not reconciled to Brexit, who are pushing hard for decisions to be taken in these areas of defence policy on an absurdly short timescale. Post Brexit defence policies will take time to evolve and a lot of consultation and the UK military voice needs to be heard loud and clear.

The first priority, however, is to make the tough political choice. We need to spend more. We are being advised by serious Generals in the UK and in the US that on current spending policies NATO is not able to check a conventional arms attack on the Central Front in Europe without falling back earlier than ever on tactical nuclear weapons, something we have not even contemplated since the middle 1960s. That is not an acceptable alternative. Just as Russia has reequipped itself very significantly over the last decade we in NATO on a multilateral basis must do the same.

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