

# House of Lords: debate - Brexit and Defence

8th December 2016

My Lords, there are few constants or certainties in Brexit other than that Britain's future will be markedly different. Brexit will have far reaching implications for Britain's place in Europe and the wider world. From a security perspective the decision to leave the EU represents as significant a shift as the decision in the late 1960's to withdraw from bases East of Suez. If that was not daunting enough, Brexit also represents the biggest administrative and legislative challenge that government has faced since 1945, likely to shrink government departments' bandwidth to engage with other issues.

During the referendum campaign the subjects of foreign policy and security received scant attention. Where defence was mentioned it was in apocalyptic terms; the then Chancellor claimed that leaving the EU would trigger World War III, while the then UKIP leader argued that staying would see the UK in an EU army commanded by tin pot generals from Brussels. Sadly, because of understandable political sensitivities, the November 2015 SDSR did not assess the defence and security implications of a UK exit from the EU.

In view of the profound strategic shift that EU exit signals there is a strong case for government to undertake a fresh measured review of the key strategic judgements and policy choices. The SDSR set out that the Government will "invest more in our relationships with our traditional allies and partners and build stronger partnerships around the world, to multiply what we can achieve alone." My Lords, does this remain consistent in a post-Brexit world? Is the unilateralism of Brexit compatible with the ambition of developing with other nations a rules-based international order? The Foreign Secretary articulated this at Chatham House only last week when he said that we must, and I quote, "redouble our resolve to defend and preserve the best of the rules-based international order" and he continued by explaining the importance of such an aim in preventing return to "an older and more brutal system where the strong are free to devour the weak".

His suggestion that we shall need to redouble our effort indicates some understanding that confidence in us as a partner has been dented, at least, by Brexit, and left some confusion about our ambition. This will be a challenge, and also presents a trap as there may be the temptation to indulge in demonstrations of national defence virility. There is some ambiguity in political rhetoric with, for instance, Crispin Blunt, chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in the other place, explaining his decision to support leave on the grounds that "Yes, we would lose the benefits of being part of an emerging superstate but our vision would be global as we have the weight to count, *if not command*, alone."

The UK's armed forces and diplomatic service will need to navigate such speculation, if not confusion as to Britain's role in the world, and the uncertainty of Brexit, at the very time when political and financial resources continue to be stretched and when the international security and diplomatic environment is ever more challenging. My Lords, it will be important to be clear about our driving objective. Very many here and elsewhere, including me from this bench, welcomed the Government's commitment to spending 2% of GDP on defence.

That totemic target is now seen in its true light. 2% of what as we already face the uncertainty of variable exchange rates and the OBR's forecasts of future GDP growth. Since we import defence and economic growth is uncertain we look likely to get less for our 2 percentage commitment. Our commitment must not be to a particular spend or symbolic percentage, nor a new US President's reported and at best confused thinking on NATO, but what is needed for our security and defence – that is surely what our people expect. My Lords, clear and articulate strategy, with investment in capabilities hollowed out over the years, is essential so that there is consistency between word, will and action.