

Comments made by Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson last week to the Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs suggesting that Britain would not seek to obstruct EU based efforts to develop closer defence co-operation between themselves may well be sensible politically but they beg more questions that the UK Government must also be prepared to answer including how such move by the EU might damage the NATO alliance and if they did, what would Her Majesty's Government propose to do about it? Put simply, remarks made by Mr. Johnson last Friday might have been better not said.

Independent commentator Howard Wheeldon reflects that Mr. Johnson's remarks came just a few days ahead of the two-day planned meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Brussels today at which he is expected to preach that Europe's 25 other members of NATO must spend more on defence. Clearly, in the wake of in this case, well-made remarks by US president-elect Donald Trump, that European members of NATO need to take a bigger share of the cost of NATO and the inference from this that America is no longer prepared to pay 70% of alliance costs means that Europe will have no alternative but to increase spending on defence. This also suggests to me that while attaining the minimum 2% spend of GDP on defence that NATO members agreed to work toward back in September 2014 must not be allowed to be fudged and that while 2% of GDP should in my view be a marker for smaller members states to achieve others need to spend at least 3% of GDP on defence.

At their meeting starting today NATO foreign ministers will we are told attempt to agree on a set of some 40 proposals aimed at boosting cooperation between NATO and the European Union. These will include so-called hybrid threats that we now face, boosting cyber security defence and better working together at sea. I would hope that within the discussions there would also be warnings made about the dangers of weakening NATO if EU members ultimately agree on a policy of moving away from the single alliance policy structure by creating a separate EU body to handle EU defence matters.

My understanding is that NATO minister will today also discuss Alliance efforts to project stability beyond borders, including NATO support to the Counter-ISIL Coalition together with situation reports and policy in regard of commitment support for partners in the Western Balkan region. Foreign minister will tomorrow here from the NATO-Ukraine Commission before discussing the situation in eastern Ukraine ahead, no doubt, of reaffirming political and practical support measures for the Kiev based government.

Until now, United Kingdom foreign policy has been completely opposed to the creation of any separate EU command structure and that might eventually lead to the creation of what is commonly termed as a 'European Army' concept. It has done so on the basis that any diversion of interest to 'collective' EU based defence interest would undoubtedly undermine the NATO alliance.

While I completely understand that in this rather awkward pre-Brexit negotiation period, one that for many of us appears to resemble the nation currently being in 'no-man's land' territory, that there is a need for the Foreign Secretary to be rather less violent in opposition to EU proposals than in the past but I repeat that on this subject if we are not going to oppose what a handful of EU member states are struggling to get off the ground the better alternative would be that we say nothing on the subject at all.

The EU discussion on a proposal to form a new joint EU military command has not only sent out the wrong message to and within NATO allies it has, as I have already alluded, played into the hands of more explicit views made on NATO during the past summer by Donald Trump. The more specific Trump rhetoric on the matter of need for European NATO member states to pay a larger share of the NATO burden has not surprisingly rattled feathers of several EU member states that are also members of NATO. While much Trump rhetoric on various subjects will never be more than just that ♦ rhetoric ♦ and will get

watered down or abandoned when he is in the White House I am in no doubt that the US will not walk away from forcing Europe to increase the cost of its own defence and security.

If the above is true then our job in all this will be to ensure that any moves that the EU takes on defence will not be at the cost of weakening NATO and through the creation of an additional process that in my view is both unnecessary and, as far as many EU members are concerned, unnecessary duplication that is unaffordable. Even so, no matter what I might think, some kind of EU military command will undoubtedly be formed at some future point, assuming of course that the EU survives long enough for that to occur. With Britain, arguably the joint third largest contributor to the EU budget and equal with Italy, leaving the EU and with French and maybe now Italian voters readying themselves for political upheaval and more debate on the merits of remaining in the EU, there can of course be no certainty that the EU will survive in its present form.

The EU is not completely without any kind of defence structure of its own already. The European Defence Agency, an organisation based in Brussels and that was set up in in 2004 to agree foreign and security policy, to promote EU armaments cooperation and strengthen the EU defence industrial and technological base in the hope of creating a competitive European defence equipment markets is still just about alive although one is not quite sure of what it has achieved over its twelve year existence except of course to add to the overall cost of European defence.

Europe, and note that I say Europe in this context as opposed to just the EU or maybe the Eurozone, has a significant array of problems in relation to defence but one that it cannot ignore in my view is relevance. I could be wrong, but deep down I do genuinely sense that the US believes and that so too do at least some of our would-be enemies, that Europe has lost its way politically and economically and to a greater or lesser extent it has lost its relevance. Certainly, if the Trump view on NATO is to be believed, our major alliance partner is also signalling a belief that the US no longer sees Europe as being as relevant to its needs as in the past.

With the so-called populist vote combined with raised anti-establishment sentiment continuing to grow and that is clearly reaching out in order to move aside long established order, European Unity can no longer be taken for granted. Unexpected referendum votes in Britain and Italy potentially to be followed by more right-wing success in elections due to be held in other EU member states over the next two years could well, as I have already alluded, lead to significant changes in the structure of EU over the next five to ten years.

That the EU is in a state of flux, that its economy is troubled and that political dissent from what used to be minorities have grown beyond all proportion to expectations can hardly be denied. We should all be worried just as we also should also be very concerned how America sees its principle NATO allies in Europe.

Regular readers will have noted that while my chosen topic for discussion today surrounds European defence co-operation and NATO that I have chosen to categorise my views here under the UK Defence series heading. My reason for doing this is simple - anything that the EU might choose to do outside of NATO impacts very significantly on UK defence. Indeed, I will go further on this and say that any potential weakening of NATO caused by the creation of any separate European Defence Cooperation body will, if it weakens NATO, cause the UK to have to seriously rethink how it does defence as a whole.

Anything done by the EU that attempts to exclude the United Kingdom and which I would remind is not only the single largest European contributor to NATO but also the only member state that is seemingly always prepared engage and deploy force capability where necessary, would permanently damage a structure that has ensured peace, stability and political harmony within Western Europe throughout its 67 year existence. Imperfect sometimes NATO may be, but we

must not allow the alliance model to be weakened

The few of those in the European Union headquarters in Brussels, including European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker, who choose to believe that a common 'European Army' is needed to face up to raised threats from Russia and elsewhere and that will attempt to bully this proposal through have little comprehension or understanding about NATO and of what the alliance does and has achieved throughout its history.

Neither would these same harbingers who see Europe as one large political union governed by one set of rules understand that there is a potentially very high cost of doing whatever it is that they might propose in terms of creating a new EU based Military Command Structure which is presumably the necessary precursor for the creation of a European Army one day understand that with the EU about to lose its second largest financial contributor in the form of the UK that the idea is fatally flawed.

Indeed, with the EU economy teetering on the brink the idea of creating any new structure should better be considered as unaffordable. If EU President, Jean Claude Juncker believes that the cost of forming closer cooperation in the EU can be paid for by a reduction of support for NATO he is endangering the lives of all EU voters.

Although it may sound as if I am completely against increased European defence cooperation I am not. It is perfectly right that EU countries should better work together in terms of research and development and deciding whether to design and build their own defence capability. There may even be room for closer military cooperation between member states and this can only but assist the NATO mission. But any notion of closer cooperation that is political speak for creating a 'European Army' must be resisted.

I understand that the idea of closer cooperation in defence has the full backing of France and Germany and that leaders of Hungary and the Czech Republic have respectively called for the creation of a European Army to bolster security in the EU. Others have sensibly been more tight-lipped on the subject.

For now all that we know is that by what they term as being greater defence cooperation proposals and that may well be under discussion in Brussels right now include a new joint military command designed to expand EU peacekeeping missions and that this may well even include joint development of defence related capability such as military helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles. As it readies itself to roll-out its Fast Response Force one may argue that NATO already has a similar structure in place so why re-invent the wheel?

In a post Brexit arena Britain will have no say in what the EU does and on that basis one could argue that it is reasonable for our Foreign Secretary to suggest that "we are not there to block or impede further steps toward EU integration if that is what they desire". True enough but we should warn and warn again and keep banging the drum for NATO. We should remind and remind again that all countries across Europe and all NATO members must not only contribute more of their budgets to defence but they should not kid themselves that they are spending 2% of GDP on defence when they clearly are not. That includes Britain, France and Germany.

We must keep reminding that European members of NATO including the UK spent a total of \$253 billion on defence last year compared to the \$618 billion that the US spent and that if every European NATO member spent 2% of their respective gross domestic product on defence that would add \$100 billion to the total amount spent on defence.

If on nothing else, in terms of early rhetoric, Donald Trump would be correct if he were to say that 26 out of the 28 non North American members of NATO spend just 30% of what the US spends on defence. And if that is right is it any wonder then that the US is questioning Europe's relevance let alone now its resolve? Something will have to give very soon

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