

MICHAEL LOTHIAN

Member of the House of Lords, former Conservative Member of Parliament

Ali ASLAN

Michael Lothian, every time we meet it seems like the crucial period for Brexit; it was so last year and seems to be so at this particular time. I am very curious to hear how you assess the current state of Brexit, although I understand that you will already be a step ahead in your talk and discuss the UK in a post-Brexit world.

Michael LOTHIAN

I am delighted to have been asked to give a British contribution to this European discussion. I had hoped, after doing so last year, that this year Brexit would be settled and I would have an easier time than I had last year, but unfortunately that is not the case. Brexit seems to grind on and on, and like Margaret Thatcher once said she would go on forever, I wonder whether Brexit will as well.

I want to start with a simple premise, that the UK is leaving the European Union with Brexit, but it is not leaving Europe. That is an essential factor – we are an inextricable part of Europe. Our security is part of Europe's security. Our democratic traditions and cultural values, let alone our history, are inextricably linked with those of Europe, but we are an island, and the problem arose there. We have never felt at ease with the constricts of the EU. We could have lived quite happily with the *Europe des Patries* of General de Gaulle. We could have made progress in the Economic Community, which is what we originally joined, but we were always uncomfortable with the drive towards ever-closer union and eventual integration, and that is where the crisis arose.

I want not to look back over the Brexit arguments but forward to the post-Brexit future. Many areas, for now, remain shrouded in the mists of uncertainty if not the obfuscation of the negotiators, so it is otiose to discuss where the negotiations have got to. That is not a criticism; I did many negotiations in my time as a minister, and it is the end of the negotiations that are always the most difficult and where you keep your cards closest to your chest.

Brexit will not be without pain on the economic front, of course, not only for the UK but for the rest of the EU as well, and we have to face that. Brexit involves fundamental change, and fundamental change causes turbulence, in the short term at least. While some of this turbulence can be mitigated, in the longer term my own view is that water will find its own level, and in the end mutual self-interest will bring about a resumption of profitable trade even if that takes a little time.

However, there are certain areas already where we should be looking closely at our future role in Europe. First of all, regarding security, in the face of current global insecurity, it is already necessary to envisage a coordinated European response, and I use the word 'European' because this is not about the EU. It is about the wider capacity of the nations of Europe, inside and outside the EU, to deliver at a number of different levels. The first of these is intelligence. I have an interest in intelligence; I am still on our intelligence committee in the UK. The ability, in this turbulent period, with growing sophistication of terrorist methods, to enter and monitor various levels of cyber- and communications activity of these terrorists has already become crucial, and it is generally accepted that the US through the NSA and the UK through GCHQ are at the cutting edge of the ability to do this. All European nations have the capability to one degree or another, but there is no room here for false pride. Combining and sharing intelligence is a no-brainer. The US and UK already do it at a very high degree and more widely as well, and we have done so for a long time. We may not stop every insurgent plot, but between us we do stop the vast majority of them because of our ability to share this information.

Brexit may create a little *amour propre* from all sides, but it would be madness to allow it to adversely affect our counter-terrorist programmes. We should already be preparing to ensure, if anything, that the UK and the nations of the EU can share the maximum of intelligence most effectively to combat international terrorism. This is an urgent matter of cooperation, and it serves no one to have senior EU members threatening to expel the UK from the Galileo project, to which we have contributed, after all, for a long time.



The next area where we will need to cooperate is in facing the cyber challenge, which is also becoming an increasing threat. The scope of cyber warfare is expanding exponentially, and we have already seen in certain parts of Europe, not least in the Baltics, the damage it can do. No one nation is likely to be able to combat it alone. Highly sophisticated cooperation and collaboration will be required, and we need to be working urgently on that vital area now.

Another vital area will be on the defence front, with all the various elements that this must encompass. The US will increasingly turn its attention away from the Atlantic theatre over the next decade or so towards the Pacific and the existential military and economic challenge of China. This is not just Mr. Trump talking about this; very senior levels of the administration recognise that fact and hope that we do as well. It will not necessarily mean the end of NATO in its present form, or indeed the US military support for the European theatre. However, Europe in the widest sense will have to undertake more of the heavy lifting, and the UK, in my view, is central to this. It is generally accepted in military circles that, in this engagement, the military forces available to the member states of the EU alone would not be fit for purpose in filling the breach that will leave.

The world around Europe becomes ever more fraught, and it is a dangerous fantasy to believe that the European military capacity could step up to the plate without a substantial British component involved as well. British military might may be sorely diminished from our glory days, but we still have the equipment and the expertise to make our participation vital, particularly in a war scenario where boots on the ground may matter less than technical know-how and top-flight machinery. This will be even more the case because these are Britain's current military strengths. Add to that our acknowledge expertise in the field of special forces, which will increasingly become the weapon of choice in any land war, and Britain's role will become even more relevant.

British will have a significant role in Europe in the future, and I have to say we will be more than ready to play our part.

Ali ASLAN

Let me ask you one simple question, and if possible get a quick yes or no answer. Regarding this momentum building in the UK, with people demanding a second referendum, saying they want to do this again, do you think a second referendum is realistic and will take place?

Michael LOTHIAN

I do not think it will, for two reasons. One is that we cannot have a second referendum without a parliamentary vote in favour of it, and legislation, and if you look at the British parliament at the moment, there is a majority for nothing, so I do not think a majority would ever back it. Secondly, the argument for it is that this will somehow be a different referendum. It is the same referendum on the same question, and once you get into that, it is not part of our constitution to have referenda. You have a second referendum, and then a third and a fourth; when do you stop?

Ali ASLAN

People are saying they were not really informed about the ramifications of this particular decision.

Michael LOTHIAN

You must know this as a broadcaster – if you have a referendum on a yes or no basis, it is very difficult to get a full debate on every single issue. It is bad enough during a general election, and what is being suggested at the moment is a rerun of a yes-or-no referendum; I do not think the result would necessarily be any different.