



**Transcript of Sir Richard Barrons in conversation with Johan Eliasch  
Margaret Thatcher Conference on Security  
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The video recording of this panel is available on the [CPS YouTube channel](#).

Johan Eliasch: Richard is very well placed to elaborate on this subject. The UK has the highest spend of any European country on defence, security, and also intelligence, and has a significant surplus in this area versus the EU. We also have a special relationship with the US. We have a very strong NATO participation, bilateral relationships with most EU countries, and very strong ties with France and Germany on security and intelligence. With the exception of Europol and also the Prum Convention, we have everything in place to have very strong security.

Now, most of these relationships are independent of the UK's status with the EU. However, in the run-up to the referendum, there was much said about this, and I'll give you a few examples. Michael Fallon said, "The UK will be taking a big gamble with its security if it is to leave the European Union." There were former [Chiefs of Defence Staff], heads of intelligence services, that's said the same. Former Secretaries of State, Secretaries of Defense in the US said that "The UK leaving the EU would help the West's enemies." My question to you, Richard, is post-Brexit, will our security be compromised? If so, how and what can we do to mitigate any impact?

Sir Richard Barrons: Thank you. That's not a simple question to answer. I'm afraid I am doomed to give you what you will interpret as a very depressing story about Brexit and security, because I think through a mixture of accident and incompetence, we will, in parallel with the Brexit process, significantly continue to weaken our defence and security. The reason I say that is normally in a conversation with an audience like this, the focus is on the marginal effects of leaving the institutions of the European Union.

The European Union wouldn't receive our money, so it'd have left to spend on it, what is effectively a second development programme, we would leave the EU military structures. People want to know how might that reduce our security, or they want to ask, "Well, if we're good at defence and security," Johan has described how we have a surplus in these things held to be good at it, "how might that be a card that we play in securing better terms in the Brexit negotiations?"

Underlying those two questions is generally the thought that our defence and security is in a good place, and so these marginal changes are from a reasonable position. In fact, I think because of the all-consuming focus on Brexit, we are very likely to go through the Brexit process on the assumption that our defence and security is fine, when actually in many respects, as a



result of a journey travelled for the last 25 years, it is quite close to institutional failure.

We will not find the political will, or bandwidth, or resources, or societal interest to set about the transformation of the defence and security in parallel with Brexit. We will absolutely miss the opportunity to transform on the back of innovation. We will watch others in the world, who don't wish us well, developing method and capability in the defence arena that can genuinely do us harm. We will see the sort of innovation that we like to be good at going abroad first, even from our own companies. None of that is going to be a result of the business of Brexit. It's going to be an effect of the all-consuming nature of Brexit and the flawed assumption that our defence and security in our time is in a reasonable place.

Johan Eliasch: Now, I had a conversation with the Austrian Chancellor last week, which was interesting. He thought relations with the UK was very, very important, but he was very concerned that there was a lack of enthusiasm with the number of EU member states, which is contradictory to I think what Germany and France and many of the original EU 14's view on this is. This has to do mainly with the repercussions of Brexit, which for a lot of Eastern European states means less money. Now, if you were the CDS in Germany and you had to give advice to Angela Merkel flipping sides, what would you advise her to do in Brexit?

Sir Richard Barrons: The first thing I do is, if I were the CDS of Germany, I would like a conversation with the Chancellor about what do they think they mean when politicians in France and Germany or elsewhere talk about a European army, because I think they mean an army which looks like the sorts of forces they saw deployed in Bosnia or Kosovo and maybe even in Afghanistan. Light forces army, heavy bit of air power, but men in armoured vehicles, men and women actually in armoured vehicles with helmets and rifles, and they talk about battle groups.

There's a huge strategic danger that that sense of what a military force is takes root and is built as a separate European identity duplicating in part what NATO already does, and absolutely does not understand that in the time we live in, the capability that you need to protect Europe at home and its interests abroad through armed force requires a completely different level of joint and combined capability, which only NATO has and it's only the US underpinning to NATO that delivers strategic command and control. Theatre air defence, anti-ballistic missile defence, theatre level logistics, joined up training, and the resilience of having a strategic depth that the US provides.

My first plea to the Chancellor would be, if you are conceiving of building a European defence identity, we must pause and define what that means in the 21st century and not seduce ourselves that we're going to get away with a defence model fit for the minor discretionary interventions of the 1990s. I imagine that might be quite a difficult and potentially very expensive conversation.



The second thing I would say to the Chancellor is, we need to recognise how people in the world that we're not on the best of terms with, and that might be Russia but not necessarily so, but we'll say Russia and possibly in the future a resurgent, ambitious, wealthy China who have already developed a military method and military capability, which means they have an edge over what we thought was our technological advantage.

They can already cause harm in our homelands, whether that cyber or ballistic missile. There's a very good article in The Times today from the Pentagon about ballistic missiles, or new other forms of advanced conventional capability. They can cause us harm that we cannot deal with any longer, and they have developed protective means, their own air defence, for example, that means we cannot cause harm to them.

You saw a little sign of that just last week when the US Air Force shot down a Syrian jet over Syria, and it caused the Russians to be cross and to start to say that they would look at coalition aircrafts as targets. You immediately saw air forces, including the Royal Air Force, having to adjust how they operate because they know that if those Russian systems are turned on in anger and in earnest, and well done, they present a really significant problem.

If the Chancellor could accept that Europe has lost its military edge and created a scope for opportunism in the eyes of Russia and I guess others, then it has to lead to a conversation about how do you exploit the capacity for innovation in technology that exists in Europe to recreate that competitive edge. That's about building military forces that seized on the opportunity of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to restore a competitive edge, and by the way, in doing that, become more influential and more prosperous. I would hope that would appeal to the Chancellor's and Germany's engineering instincts. I think that would have made for quite a full discussion.

Johan Eliasch: I can see that being a very interesting conversation. Now, should we perhaps have a special relationship with the EU after this, along the lines of what we have with the US?

Sir Richard Barrons: I think in the realm of security, of course, we have to have a special relationship because we may change some institutional arrangements in Brexit, but will not change our geography, and will not change our shared interests in dealing with the perils of terrorism, and indeed, more state related threats that may or may not present themselves in the future. For me, it would be madness if we ended up in a world where the UK existed in its own defence and security space somehow isolated and kept out of the room from those discussions that might now occur, whether it's about terrorism or other aspects of the use or the threat of the use of force.

If that occurs, it will be as a result either of sheer incompetence in the negotiations or as a result of the generation of profound ill feeling, but it will not be in the interests of any of the parties in Europe. Yes, there must be, in



defence and security, a special relationship. I think we bring something special to the party in any case even though on a very limited scale these days. We must make sure that relationship is about employing the European Union's soft power, which is prodigious, but in the revitalisation and transformation of NATO and its remobilisation to a degree so it can cope with the contemporary range of threats, which at the minute, frankly, it can't because it's mostly asleep.

Johan Eliasch: You did mention not being left out of the room, but in her Lancaster House Speech, Theresa May did remind the EU in a friendly manner, I might add, about our surplus in this area and that we would continue to be enthusiastic as long as we were friends. Of course, as you've highlighted, that the overriding interests here are national security and security of all citizens. This is obviously a card, because we have a surplus, but could this not be used in a positive manner, i.e. doing more strengthening bilateral relationships on intelligence sharing, a bigger commitment to NATO? How do you see that?

Sir Richard Barrons: I think for the generation of political leadership across Europe right now, there is this presumption that defence and security is in a reasonable place. I mean in the last election campaign, in a YouGov poll, defence rated below "don't know" as an election issue. There is a profound reluctance to have a debate in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, about the true effects of the iterative reductions in our investment in defence, particularly military capabilities since the end of the Cold War.

We appear to be locked in a world of profound denial about the true state of our armed forces. It's clearly smaller, clearly less well-equipped, clearly hollowed out in terms of sustainability and resilience, clearly demobilised, no plans, no mobilisation plans. Although we can explain that for very good reasons, we understand why we are where we are, denying that that is the case and relying on a combination of hope and prayer that we're not somehow found out by that, I think, is not a good place to start.

In the discussion about the surplus in defence, we would need to recognise that we have huge holes in our defence fabric that that surplus is not going to tackle. I think all the signs are we're about to see that made worse as the strategic defence and security review of 2015, for which the numbers never added up. I mean if you have £24 billion worth of up arrows, but you only provide £6 billion worth of more money, and even that is later, you are going to end up in the situation, which we all know defence is facing now, where it is going to have to reduce the scope of SDSR 15 which had many good features in order to make the remnant affordable.

It seems to me not particularly plausible that we can talk about playing our defence and security surplus when actually we are about to deplete what we do on the back of the holes we have created for 25 years, and we're going to continue to deny that our armed forces are living life now inches from institutional failure every day.



Johan Eliasch: With that in mind, are we relevant enough post-Brexit? What do we need to do to reinvent ourselves? Particularly if we look at the special relationship we have with the US where we have a president, that seems to be less interested in what the intelligence agencies have to say, which makes that relationship, our special relationship, diminished in the sense that it's perhaps not as relevant anymore.

Sir Richard Barrons: I think the starting point for that is to recognise the United Kingdom and our European partners have completely bought into collective security. We have been in that situation since the end of the Second World War. We rely profoundly and fundamentally on the generosity of the US taxpayer for our security. It would be a pity given the scale of sums involved if that were to diminish.

Relationship with the United States about the security of the United Kingdom and Europe remains fundamental to all outcomes. We absolutely should do all that we can, and that means by contributing sensibly and holding other nations' feet to the fire on their contributions, all that we can to ameliorate the effects of the United States that is turning inwards and turning to the Pacific. That's clearly not in Europe's interest.

Secondly, and I've already made this point, I think we will unlock the special relationship more if we are honest with ourselves about the states of European defence, and recognise that a defence model that may have worked perfectly well for 25 years since the end of the Cold War seems, to me and I think others, unlikely to prosper in the world that it's now turning out. Whether that's a more assertive Russia, the difficulties in the Gulf, turmoil in Africa, different environment in Asia. We now live in a different world, which potentially and only potentially could bring more harm to ourselves and our interests.

If we could have that debate, and then with the United States, and I subscribed to the philosophy behind what the US will call the third offset approach of exploiting innovation and technology to reset a military edge, we should engage with that, because we do have this profound capacity for innovation in this country. If we can harness it to defence needs, principally, by seeing what's happening in the commercial sector, the panel before has made this point, and applying it in the military sector, I think that will improve our security at an affordable price, influence our allies, and deter our enemies. That needs a much richer conversation with our European partners and principally the United States, because they're already doing this.

Johan Eliasch: More investment, too.

Sir Richard Barrons: It will cost a bit of money.

Johan Eliasch: Yes. Okay. Thank you very much, Richard. There are some questions from various people. I'll start with the question from Daniel Mahoney from the CPS.



In light of Donald Trump's comments on NATO spending, have European nations been piggybacking on the American military for too long?

Sir Richard Barrons: The answer is yes, but for some of the reasons I think I've already described, it's a slightly more complicated answer. Since the end of the Cold War in 1990, very few people in Europe have felt any existential threat. In the United Kingdom, and I think in many of our European partners, we now have to confront the triple peril, which is the explosion of our public sector in the 1990s. The difficulty in paying for that explosion following the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent battle against austerity, which I gather we've now declared unsuccessful but over. Thirdly, the fatigue that set in as a result of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan about how we would force in a discretionary way, let's be honest, in our world.

In that environment, you can see why Europe has spent less, comforted by the fact that the United States spends 10 times as much. The United States is pointing out that it cannot make the case to its own people to sustain that level investment if many taxpayers in the US think we are freeloading on their work, and that they're saying that quite loudly and clearly.

The debate is more complicated because of the way the world is turning out. If we look over the fence at a number of conflicts in the world, we should recognise that we need to raise our game, restore, to a degree, our defence capability. That's going to cost money that we might prefer to spend on other things, but we may or may not have a choice to do this, and we should do it in an innovative way. I think we are absolutely the end of hoping the US taxpayer will pay for the protection of Europe in a much harder world.

Johan Eliasch: You previously said president Trump could provoke a war. Has your opinion changed six months after his presidency?

Sir Richard Barrons: I think it's not proven, but I think the capacity to turn a superpower on a sixpence through a single tweet isn't the particular strategic approach to a difficult world. I set great store by the fact that as time passes, Mr. Trump's administration is, to a degree, learning by doing. I set great store by the fact that people I count as friends, like Jim Mattis and John Kelly, are in the inner circles of that administration, have been given I think greater independence and more latitude, and will provide wise operational counsel that they might argue they're not international policymakers, but they'll provide wise counsel.

I do think we have to accept that in a world where harm can be inflicted at click speed, or as a result of the use of, for example, a conventional ballistic missile which will arrive at very short notice, there is a danger that we could end up in conflict for very poor reasons as a result of poorly controlled escalation and profound miscalculation as the red mist descends. I don't think it can be proven yet that we are immune to that danger.



Johan Eliasch: Now, the last question I have here is from Mohammed via Twitter. How realistic is the desire for a rules-based international order when the US behaves as if rules only apply to other countries?

Sir Richard Barrons: A number of comments. The first thing, I think we live in the Asian century and I think we're beginning to see the first substantive clashes between American exceptionalism which we're rather used to and indeed have subscribed to and followed, and the regeneration of Chinese exceptionalism which is saying that there are new powers in our world. It's a multipolar world now. China will become the world's most powerful economy. It has a different view of the rules-based international order.

I think we are still operating as a society, and perhaps also in our politics, in a frame of mind that assumes post the end of the Cold War, somehow the end of history Europe immune to war, which I think is very difficult to prove, but where this idea of a Western liberal democratic conception of the rules-based international order is accepted by everybody globally as the answer, and it's only a question of time. We're clearly seeing those rules challenged, Eastern South China Sea would be an example, and where people are producing other prescriptions, whether that's China, or Isis, or even in Latin America, the way cartels operate as pseudo-states.

I think we should recognise that when we say rules-based international order, we mean the thing that's worked quite well for 25 years. We need to recognise it is being challenged and it's not guaranteed to survive. In those settings, we are moving away from a time where we went to war as a matter of discretion, and we're moving into a time where we may have to go to war as a matter of necessity as these things become quite fundamental clashes. That requires the transformation and revitalisation of our national defence in preparation for this, and our collective defence. I don't think that debate has even started.

Johan Eliasch: Richard, thank you very much.

Sir Richard Barrons: Thank you.