

EUROPE'S WEAKEST LINK?

DEFENCE AND SECURITY IN IRELAND

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RUSSIA'S invasion of Ukraine has forced a reckoning amongst European cabinets and defence ministries in dealing with the burgeoning reality of protecting themselves in a multi-polar world. States have recognised the acute threat posed by the revanchist power and responded accordingly. Finland and Sweden have abandoned long-held policies of neutrality in favour of joining NATO.¹ Poland has undergone a substantial defence expenditure increase – bolstering its supplies of artillery, tanks and armoured vehicles.² French President Emmanuel Macron, perceiving an absence of a coherent European vision on Ukraine, has sought to energise partners with recent comments in Prague.³ However, the rush to bolster defence capabilities and deepen collective security co-operation has not been shared across all capitals. Ireland, which has long embraced a stance of military neutrality, has struggled to achieve a similar sense of

urgency in responding to the threat posed by war returning to Europe. Recently this approach has drawn more attention and at times criticism. Ireland has been called the “weak link” of European defence.⁴ A prominent think tank accused Ireland of being a ‘freeloader’ in defence which is reliant upon the Royal Air Force and the wider NATO umbrella for protection without paying for this support.⁵ These criticisms draw two questions. Firstly, what threats does Ireland face that are jeopardising European security? Secondly, what is defending Ireland? This *In-Depth Briefing* will attempt to provide an examination of the Irish strategic context in 2024 – exploring historical, political and cultural factors. It will address the challenges and offer potential solutions to some of the issues facing Ireland.

HISTORIC CONTEXT – HOPE AS A STRATEGY

Any exploration of Ireland's security position must examine

Ireland's ‘cherished’ principle of neutrality.⁶ Ireland's military neutrality is an historically complex matter. The state's articulation of the ‘traditional policy of military neutrality’ has been interpreted as a position of righteous morality.⁷

¹Phelan Chatterjee, ‘How Sweden and Finland Went from Neutral to NATO’, *BBC*, 11 July 2023.

²Giulia Carbonaro, ‘Poland Said Its Army Will Soon Be the Strongest in Europe. But Is That Possible?’, *Euronews*, 6 September 2023.

³Jason Hovet, ‘France's Macron Urges Allies Not to Be Cowardly on Ukraine’, *Reuters*, 5 March 2024.

⁴Eoin Drea, ‘Ireland Is Europe's Weakest Link’, *Foreign Policy*, 8 November 2022.

⁵Marcus Solarz Hendriks and Harry Hale, ‘Closing the Back Door: Rediscovering Northern Ireland's Role in British National Security’, *Special Report (London: Policy Exchange, 5 February 2024)*.

⁶Matt McCarthy, ‘Dáil Éireann Debate – Neutrality’, 1044 5 § (2023).

⁷Department of Foreign Affairs, ‘International Security Policy – Background Information’.

The reality is this position has in large part been due to the absence of any codified grand strategy and the fortune of existing under a broader umbrella of indirect safety from neighbouring nations.⁸ The policy of neutrality traces lineage back to the inception of the Irish Free State and was a feature of the negotiations of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.⁹ Later, the young and fragile Irish Free State chose to avoid involvement in the Second World War to protect the gains of Ireland's revolutionary struggle. Following the rebalancing of the European security order post-1945 Ireland did not join NATO. This was primarily driven by the political sensitivities of not entering a military alliance alongside the state partitioning the island of Ireland.¹⁰ However, by having bases in Northern Ireland, NATO maintained access to the Atlantic (and secured the strategically significant GIUK gap). The establishment of other bases on the remainder of the island were thus of little consequence. Former Taoisigh such as Seán Lemass and Jack Lynch articulated that the state was not neutral concerning the defence of free democracies or territories of the then titled European Economic Community. Ireland therefore historically and in the present defines its foreign policy as Neutral (capitalisation deliberate) but also not neutral.

“THE UTILISATION OF THE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION, SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE SYSTEM RESULTS IN GREATER PLURALITY IN IRELAND’S PARLIAMENT, DÁIL EIREANN.”

This dichotomy allows flexibility for policy makers when weighing up the merits of a stance on specific events. Ireland has been critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine but in maintaining its tradition of neutrality has not offered military support to Kyiv (less for demining training). The Irish government has been amongst the strongest critics of the Israeli response in Gaza, part of a longer tradition of sympathy and support amongst the nation for Palestinian statehood.¹¹ Ireland pursues a diplomacy-first approach in security matters arguing in favour of international law and conflict prevention measures. This approach is sensible for small nations who can do little when challenged by a determined and larger external aggressor. It also results in an inconsistent defence strategy which sees diplomacy as the first and only option of defence related foreign policy. Whereas comparably neutral nations such as Sweden, Finland and Switzerland maintain highly capable defence forces with modern equipment and national military service embedded in their constitutions, Ireland does not. This reflects the different geo-

political context those nations face. These nations can effectively deter and potentially defeat any external threat that chooses to invade them, imposing a high cost on an adversary. By contrast, Ireland with pronounced gaps in critical capabilities and a small under-resourced Defence Force is much more vulnerable to such a threat, relying on geography to fulfil the function of deterrence.

POLITICAL CONTEXT – CO-OPERATION & DISCORD

Having outlined the logics of Ireland's stance of neutrality it is worth reflecting on the political system that upholds this policy. Despite many of Ireland's political systems emerging from centuries of British rule there are several subtle differences today between the UK and Irish political landscape. References to European identity run more comfortably through Irish political discourse – especially from key leaders.¹² Ireland's utilisation of the Proportional Representation, Single Transferable Vote system compared to the UK's First Past the Post results in greater plurality in Ireland's parliament, Dáil Eireann.¹³ This has resulted

in coalition governments being the main system of rule since the state's inception. This system of coalition building engenders compromise and balance but at the expense of focus on national issues due to the requirement for candidates to preserve strong 'local' loyalties in seeking transfer votes.¹⁴ This context is significant when analysing the political landscape that shapes Ireland's strategic culture.

The *Policy Exchange* report characterisation that the Irish political environment will be 'uncooperative' or 'hostile' to the UK if Sinn Féin are in office

⁸Heiko Biehl, ed., *Strategic Cultures in Europe: Security and Defence Policies across the Continent*, *Schriftenreihe Des Zentrums Für Militärgeschichte Und Sozialwissenschaften Der Bundeswehr 13* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), 181.

⁹Diarmuid Ferriter, 'Irish Neutrality Isn't as Plain as We Have Been Led to Believe', *The Irish Times*, 12 May 2023.

¹⁰David McCulloch, 'Neutral - but Not Neutral', RTE, 27 February 2022.

¹¹Ruairi Casey, 'What's behind Ireland's Support for Palestine?', *Al Jazeera*, 7 June 2021.

¹²Micéal Martin, 'Speech by the Taoiseach at Plenary of the European Parliament'.

¹³Paul Mitchell, *The Consolidation of Coalition Politics in the Republic of Ireland* (London, LSE, 2020).

¹⁴Oireachtas Library & Research Service, *PR, STV and Localism in Irish Politics*, Editorial (Dublin: Oireachtas Library & Research Service, May 2011).



bears some analysis. Sinn Féin are favourites to return the most seats in the next election when Irish voters go to the polls between late 2024 and early 2025.¹⁵ Despite this it is far from certain Sinn Féin will be a single party government and will probably require at least one coalition partner to secure an effective parliamentary majority.¹⁶ The rise of Sinn Féin has broadly correlated with Ireland's financial crash in 2008 and subsequent recovery. The economic

¹⁵Lisa O'Carroll, *'Not If...but When': Sinn Féin on Path to Power in Ireland'*, *The Guardian*, 28 December 2021.

¹⁶Padraic Halpin, *'Second Irish Poll Shows Sharp Drop in Sinn Féin Support'*, *Reuters*, 8 February 2024.

¹⁷Shane Coleman, *'Red C Poll: Sinn Féin Stem Sharp Fall in Support but No Bounce for Government Parties'*, *Sunday Business Post*, 25 February 2024.

¹⁸Stephen Kinsella, *'Stephen Kinsella Meets Eoin Ó Broin'*, *The Currency*, 23 December 2021.

¹⁹Eimear McGovern, *'Sinn Féin Is Ireland's Richest Political Party'*, *The Belfast Telegraph*, 5 March 2020.

²⁰Ruth Dudley-Edwards, *'Sorry Sinn Féin but a United Ireland Just Isn't Going to Happen'*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 2022.

²¹Darran Marshall and Shane Harrison, *'Ireland's Future: Leo Varadkar and Jimmy Nesbitt Speak at United Ireland Event'*, *BBC*, 1 October 2022.

²²Rory Carroll and Ben Quinn, *'British and Irish Governments Play down Sinn Féin's Calls for United Ireland.'*, *The Guardian*, 5 February 2024.

²³John Garry and Brendan O'Leary, *'Debate over Symbols of a United Ireland Shows up a Big North-South Difference'*, *The Irish Times*, 5 December 2022.

²⁴Archie Bland, *'The Landmark Moment at Stormont Which Reneges Questions over Northern Ireland's Future'*, *The Guardian*, 5 February 2024.

²⁵Freya McClements, *'Sinn Féin Drops Opposition to Special Criminal Court'*, *The Irish Times*, 30 October 2021.

²⁶Conal Thomas, *'Pearse Doherty on Wooing Business, Sinn Féin's Wealth Tax and His Election Fear'*, *Sunday Business Post*, 18 February 2024.

²⁷Theo McDonald, *'How Long Can Sinn Féin Stay Silent on Immigration?'*, *Unherd*, 20 December 2023.

downturn that followed the Celtic Tiger boom of the 1990s and early 2000s damaged the credibility and hegemony of the parties who were in office for most of this period. Fine Gael, who have been in government since 2011, are now polling in third place out of the three main parties in Ireland.¹⁷ Sinn Féin's rising popularity has been built due to coherence on key issues such as housing, the economy and healthcare, where it has been a vocal and effective critic of the government. This has seen the party build a broad coalition of dissatisfied voters and Sinn Féin acts as the de facto opposition to the current Irish Government, a coalition of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party. This simplistic description must be countered by the reality that Ireland's parliament does not operate as a Westminster model and has no formally appointed opposition. Regardless, it is useful in understanding Sinn Féin's popularity. In the 2007 election Sinn Féin secured just 6.9 per cent of the general vote returning four Teachta Dálas. In the 2020 election it returned 37 Teachta Dálas, earning the highest vote share percentage of all parties.¹⁸ The party is now also the wealthiest in the state underlining the scale of its transformation.¹⁹ Commentators who interpret the party's success solely to resurgent Irish nationalism misunderstand the broader context.²⁰ Ireland's constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, written in 1937, referred to the 'national territory' as the whole of the island and, while the articles which made this assertion were removed as part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the position of nearly all Irish parties is that reunification is inevitable. Irish political parties articulate different approaches in achieving the aspiration for unification put forward in the constitution. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael favour a cautious and conciliatory



Picture: Sinn Féin (CC BY 2.0)

“THE FOCUS FOR SINN FÉIN WILL BE ON DELIVERING RESULTS ON THE ECONOMY, PUBLIC SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE.”

approach – seeking to attract unionists into a united Ireland, evidenced by initiatives such as the *Ireland's Future* conference.²¹ Sinn Féin used the recent return of power sharing to Stormont as evidence that reunification was within “touching distance”, however both the Prime Minister and some Irish ministers threw cold water on such calls.²²

Irish support for a united Ireland remains a complex one and not the remit of this paper, however, some consideration is useful. The research of Professors John Garry and Brendan O'Leary underscores that support for reunification is wide but not deep with conciliatory changes of symbols and anthems causing unease amongst southern voters.²³ Irish voters remain concerned with traditional political issues rather than the immediate unification of the island. Sinn Féin's rise owes as much to economics as nationalism though undoubtedly there is overlap. Sinn Féin's success in Northern Ireland's recent elections were built off absorbing the vote from other nationalist parties rather than convincing Unionists to swap sides. The focus for Sinn Féin, now leading the executive in Stormont, will be on delivering results on the economy, public services and infrastructure.²⁴ Sinn Féin have adopted signs of political maturation as they prepare for the realities of

governance across the whole island of Ireland. They have discarded a long-held stance of opposition to the Special Criminal Court, a juryless court initially established to try IRA members seeking to subvert Ireland's neutrality during the Second World War and later re-incarnated for use against Provisional IRA members during the Troubles.²⁵ Despite their self-declared stance as a left-wing party they have committed to reforming but not changing Ireland's corporation tax rate, an effective tool in attracting foreign direct investment.²⁶ This has assuaged concerns of a more radical government creating an anti-business environment. Sinn Féin's rise is best understood by considering a myriad overlapping factors. Since the economic crash it has cohered a socially progressive young left-wing vote dissatisfied with economic inequalities alongside its traditional working-class base, which has stronger republican tendencies and remains sceptical of both immigration and European integration.²⁷ The recent riots in Dublin have been one example of the challenges the party faces in keeping this base cohered ahead of an election. Rising demonstrations related to migration and high-profile incidents have seen a nascent far right movement, politically unrepresented in the Dáil, take to the streets in low but noticeable

numbers.²⁸ Reflecting tensions between their supporters the party leader Mary Lou McDonald was cautious in her response to this unrest, criticising the government for “not handling the issue well” saying that communities “had a right to full information”.²⁹ This balancing act will become more precarious with the upcoming general election.³⁰

Economically the situation is equally complex. Ireland’s economy is heavily driven by foreign direct investment, particularly American, in the financial, technological and pharmaceutical sectors.³¹ An agile tax system has created a wealthy state with 2022’s corporation tax takes alone exceeding €22 billion.³² However this economic success story masks many inequalities prevalent in the state. A housing crisis has seen the cost of a home in Dublin climb to 138 per cent higher than 2012, the low watermark of Ireland’s economic crash.³³ Median house prices in Dublin now exceed the mid-2000s height of the Celtic Tiger boom, standing at €420,000, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction amongst younger voters.³⁴ This has been to Sinn Féin’s advantage as they have positioned themselves as the most vocal party on resolving the housing crisis.³⁵ Ireland’s economic inconsistencies (strong corporation tax take juxtaposed against rising unaffordability in home ownership and cost of living pressures) are not unique within a broader European context. However, they do place into sharp contrast the frictions Ireland has in responding to emergent strategic security challenges that the state has historically avoided either by fortune or design. Convincing Irish voters that more funding should go towards defence or that joining military alliances should be undertaken are contrasted by a territory geographically distant to the Ukrainian conflict, with relatively low defence spending,



and voters ambivalent on the issue compared to traditional concerns. Sinn Féin’s foreign policy pronouncements have reinforced that neutrality would be a key commitment of the party once in office.³⁶ Ireland will enter 2025 with a government facing pressures related to public service provision and ever rising housing costs. Unrest over migration is likely to grow rather than dissipate. This government will have little stomach to undertake a serious review of defence and security matters unless the conflict comes very suddenly to its shores. The rising popularity of independent candidates combined with the continuing slide for the established parties point the way to a challenging programme of government negotiations which could last for months following the election. Security and defence matters are unlikely to receive priority attention in those talks. Ireland is unusual in not having a standalone defence minister with this portfolio shared by the minister for foreign affairs. Successive Irish cabinets have pursued a strategy of keeping their heads in the sand concerning defence. Despite the seismic shifts within European geo-politics this approach is likely to continue.

**STRATEGIC CONTEXT –
NAVEL GAZING
OR NAVAL GAZING**

Ireland is a fortuitously located small country distant to external security threats.³⁷ Its close links

politically, socially and culturally to both the UK and the USA make it a key hub of transatlantic trade and movement. Its protection in many regards is assured through the proximity of neighbours whose presence deter hostile intentions. It is difficult to imagine Russia, for example, generating the logistical reach and sustainment to undertake an invasion of Ireland to gain access to Atlantic ports or airfields. The threat of terrorism and violent dissident activity has substantially subsided since the Good Friday Agreement effectively ended the worst violence of The Troubles. Ireland’s main vulnerabilities are in the maritime sector where its small navy monitor large territorial waters, and its highly digitised economy with a services sector that is a key pillar of Europe’s economic prosperity. Ireland’s vulnerabilities to cyber-attack were laid bare in 2021 when its health service was compromised by ransomware, which was believed to be the work of a Russian criminal organisation.³⁸ In 2022 the Russian Embassy in Dublin had 30 staff members, higher than other European states whom Russia had closer ties with.³⁹ Evidentially between an unusually large diplomatic corps, naval exercises close to Irish waters and criminal cyberattacks, Russia perceives that Ireland offers opportunities of exploitation. Despite stop-start efforts to address these issues Ireland’s defence strategy remains diplomatically focused – as

evidenced by its strong ties to two major international bodies, the European Union and the United Nations. Since the inception of the Irish Republic in 1949 the state’s main military deployments have overwhelmingly been under a UN mandate supporting peacekeeping and peace-building efforts in conflict affected regions.⁴⁰ The UN’s commitment to sovereignty and self-determination ensured small nations had the backing of international support should they be attacked or invaded. Successive Irish cabinets

²⁸ Tommy Meskill, *‘Anti-Migrant Protests in Dublin More than Doubled in 2023 - Committee Hears’*, RTE, 5 March 2024.

²⁹ Cormac Fitzgerald, *‘Mary Lou McDonald: “Government Has Not Handled the Immigration Question Well”’*, *The Journal*, 4 February 2024.

³⁰ Daniel Murray, *‘The Right Turn? Inside Sinn Féin’s Shift on Immigration as Make-or-Break Elections Loom’*, *Sunday Business Post*, 20 January 2024.

³¹ Alan De Bromhead, Robin Adams, and Ciaran Casey, *‘Ireland’s Economy since Independence’*, *Economics Observatory*, 30 April 2021.

³² Harry McGee and Eoin Burke-Kennedy, *‘Record Corporation Tax Takes Predicted for 2023 by Minister for Finance’*, *The Irish Times*, 10 April 2023.

³³ *‘Monthly Property Price Growth Hits Two-Year High - CSO’*, RTE, 21 February 2024.

³⁴ Cliff Taylor, *‘What Would It Take for Dublin House Prices to Fall to €300,000?’*, *The Irish Times*, 20 December 2023.

³⁵ Eoin Ó Broin, *‘How Sinn Féin Would Fix the Housing Crisis’*, *The Irish Times*, 3 September 2022.

³⁶ O’Leary, *‘Neutrality and Palestine Would Top Foreign Policy of Sinn Féin Government - McDonald’*, *The Irish Times*, 1 June 2020.

³⁷ Keohane in Biehl, *Strategic Cultures in Europe*, 181.

³⁸ Shane Harrison, *‘Cyber Attack: When Will the Irish Health Service Get a Resolution?’*, BBC, 22 May 2021.

³⁹ Ben Quinn, *‘Russia, China and Iran Could Target UK via Irish “Backdoor”’*, *Thinktank Warns’*, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2024.

⁴⁰ Ray Murphy, *‘60 Years of Overseas Service’*, RTE, 3 August 2018.

recognised the utility in therefore strengthening and supporting the legitimacy of this approach. While the Irish Defence Forces is a relatively small force, predominantly scaled around its Army, it has a high commitment of deployed personnel on UN missions. Out of an actual strength of just over 7,700 it has 530 personnel deployed across 17 missions, predominantly in Syria and Lebanon.⁴¹ Additionally under the United Nations Standby Arrangements System, the Defence Forces maintains a contingency of up to 850 personnel for peacekeeping operations. All of this is in addition to traditional roles of sovereign defence and domestic resilience operations.



Ireland is bounded by the triple lock when it seeks to deploy more than 12 personnel on a military operation. The triple lock requires firstly the

⁴¹*Defence Forces - Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday - 23 January 2024* (2024).

⁴²Christina Finn, 'Explainer: What Is Ireland's Triple Lock Mechanism and Why Is the Govt Planning to Scrap It?', *The Journal*, 22 November 2023.

⁴³Jennifer Bray, 'Triple Lock Thunderbolt Unleashes Political Backlash', *The Irish Times*, 23 November 2023.

⁴⁴Pat Leahy, 'Ireland's Neutrality Is a Permanent Hold My Beer Position', *The Irish Times*, 1 April 2023.

⁴⁵Jacob Kirkegaard, 15 April 2024, twitter.com/jfkirkegaard/status/1779689379071455659.

⁴⁶LRT, 'Let's Not Be like Lithuania and Latvia Says Irish President Urging to Stay out of NATO', *LRT*, 20 June 2023.

⁴⁷Rory Carroll, 'Ireland "playing with fire" for opening debate of military neutrality says President', *The Guardian*, 19 June 2023.

⁴⁸Christina Finn, 'Taoiseach Hopes to Get Rid of the Triple Lock "in the Lifetime of This Government"', *The Journal*, 18 April 2024.

⁴⁹Commission on the Defence Forces, 'Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces', *Government Report*, February 2022.

⁵⁰Conor Wilson, 'Why Ireland's Defence Forces Are at a Crossroads', *RTE*, 10 June 2022.

"IRELAND'S POSITION OF NEUTRALITY, INSTEAD OF EARNING ADMIRATION FROM EUROPEAN ALLIES, HAS DRAWN THE BURGEONING REALISATION THAT THE STATE'S DEFENCE HAS BEEN UNDERWRITTEN BY OTHERS."

government, then Dáil Éireann, and finally the United Nations Security Council to mandate and approve deployments of Irish military personnel.⁴² This system is unique in requiring an external organisation to effectively have veto authority over a nation's military deployments. Tánaiste Micheál Martin argued that the triple lock is an antiquated mechanism that prevents the state from being able to respond effectively to crises. Despite the return of warfare to the European continent not all politicians share this sentiment. Sinn Féin Defence spokesperson Matt McCarthy argued that abandoning the triple lock could lead Ireland to entering military alliances such as NATO, undermining Irish neutrality.⁴³ Ireland's position of neutrality, instead of earning admiration from European allies, has drawn the burgeoning realisation that the state's defence has been underwritten by others, including the United Kingdom.⁴⁴ Ireland's recent announcement that it would not support common EU borrowing to fund defence spending saw analysts

accuse the state of being 'selfish'.⁴⁵ It is becoming more apparent to Europe that Ireland's detachment from the reality of the geopolitical circumstances is not admirable but counterproductive. President Michael D Higgins was forced to apologise for comments he made when he appeared to criticise Latvia and Lithuania for seeking collective defence arrangements by joining NATO and urging Ireland not to follow suit.⁴⁶ The President's remarks ahead of a forum on collective security in Ireland attracted equal amounts of criticism and support from politicians and the public demonstrating how divisive the issue of neutrality remains in Ireland.⁴⁷ Ireland's new Taoiseach Simon Harris spoke of his aspiration to see the triple lock removed in "the lifetime of this government" – giving it a short window with the approaching general election.⁴⁸ Noting the spats between the government and the President over the issue of neutrality it is likely that removing the triple lock will require tremendous political capital for a government in the

winter of its existence. It is also illuminating that the Taoiseach referenced Russia's security council veto as a reason for abandoning the triple lock, a sign that despite Ireland's neutrality it can recognise which nations pose a threat to European security when put on the spot.

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, the Irish government commissioned a report into the future of the Defence Forces.⁴⁹ This report outlined three levels of ambition for Irish defence following decades of under investment. Level of ambition 1 was to continue with current spending levels and accept gaps in certain sovereign defence capabilities. The report noted that continuing with current levels of investment would see the state unable to meaningfully defend itself and reduce its participation in UN and EU missions.⁵⁰ Level of ambition 2 advocated for specific and targeted increases in key capabilities such as more maritime vessels, air defence platforms and radar systems to strengthen sovereign defence

but with gaps still present in capabilities. Level of ambition 3 posited full-scale conventional capabilities, comparable to similarly sized European armies, creating a new air combat and interceptor squadron, and a fully mechanised Army formation. The Commission was unequivocal that level of ambition 3 is the only level that would enable the state to fully defend itself.⁵¹ In the summer of 2022, aware of the changed geopolitical picture, the Irish government formally announced the adoption of level of ambition 2. Defence spending would be increased to €1.5 billion per annum and a recruitment drive to grow the size of the Defence Forces was undertaken.⁵² The state announced the planned procurement of a radar system to effectively monitor Irish airspace through the creation of a Recognised Air Picture.⁵³ Additionally, plans to purchase a €200 million multi-role ship for deployment in future disaster relief scenarios were unveiled.⁵⁴ A wise investment given that in early 2022 the state was unable to track and monitor Russian vessels operating in its territorial waters.⁵⁵ The Naval Service remains unable to staff all its ships as it experiences an exodus in critical trades including engineers seeking improved pay and conditions elsewhere.⁵⁶ At the end of 2023 the Irish Naval Service could only deploy two of its eight ships.⁵⁷ Then Taoiseach Leo

“IRELAND’S ARRANGEMENT WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE WAS DESCRIBED BY A FORMER AIR CORPS OFFICER AS AN ‘OPEN SECRET’ WHICH DATES BACK TO THE COLD WAR.”

Varadkar was put on the spot at the Munich Security Conference about Ireland’s reliance on the Royal Air Force to defend its skies.⁵⁸ Ireland’s arrangement with the RAF was described by a former Air Corps officer as an ‘open secret’ which dates back to the Cold War.⁵⁹ Mr Varadkar asserted that security isn’t all about armies and noted that it was also in the UK’s interest to defend this airspace, dismissing accusations that Ireland is reliant on British protection.⁶⁰ Ireland’s novel concepts of army-less sovereign defence are yet to gain much credence amongst European partners, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Increased investment is welcome but these issues underline the severity of the challenge in realising level of ambition 2. Ireland’s insistence that other countries in the EU must protect international infrastructure such as undersea cables ignores that Ireland won’t join any alliances supporting their defence.⁶¹

Ireland is not in NATO and recent spats between the

government and the President highlight the political unpopularity of even discussing that option. Admission to NATO remains politically untenable (considering that Ireland’s defence spending amounts to 0.2 per cent of GDP – far short of NATO’s two per cent target). Small nations live and die by the quality of their strategic thought. Before Ireland would look to drastically increase defence spending creating airborne divisions and commissioning aircraft carriers it would rightly pause and ask to what end? Ireland remains geographically distant from Europe’s main threat and is surrounded by capable and sympathetic allies.

References to Ireland as the weak link of European defence are not incorrect but ignore the significant influence Ireland has globally. A strong Irish American block in the US Congress and the White House may infuriate some Tory commentators but it underpins some of America’s continued interest in Europe.⁶² Ireland’s economic success provides the EU with improved prosperity and world leading capabilities in the financial services, technology and pharmaceuticals sectors. If other nations have traditions of standing armies to assert

hard power, then critics should recognise how Ireland can provide its own means to

⁵¹ Cian Fitzgerald, ‘Explainer: Ireland’s High Level Action Plan to Enhance Its Defence Forces’, *Institute of International and European Affairs*, 2 September 2022.

⁵² Department of the Taoiseach, ‘Government Announces Move to Transform the Defence Forces and the Largest Increase in the Defence Budget in the History of the State’ (2022).

⁵³ Niall O’Connor, ‘New Radar Project to Track Jets and Drones across Irish Airspace Could Cost €300 Million’, *The Journal*, 2 October 2022.

⁵⁴ Niall O’Connor, ‘State Moves Closer to Purchase of €200m Multi-Role Ship That Will Be Largest in Navy’s History’, *The Journal*, 17 January 2024.

⁵⁵ Gareth Cornfield, ‘Russia’s Naval Exercise near Ireland Unlikely to Involve Cable-Tapping Shenanigans’, *The Register*, 1 February 2022.

⁵⁶ Niall O’Connor, ‘Naval Service Staffing Crisis Deepens as Critical Engineers Leave for Better Pay on Cruise Ships’, *The Journal*, 28 June 2022.

⁵⁷ BBC, ‘Only Two Irish Navy Ships Available to Go to Sea’, *BBC*, 24 August 2023.

⁵⁸ Conor Gallagher, ‘Munich Security Conference: Security Isn’t All about Armies, Said Varadkar, Few Were Listening’, *The Irish Times*, 18 February 2024.

⁵⁹ Stephen Murphy, ‘Irish Ministers under Pressure to Clarify “secret Deal” for RAF to Defend Ireland’s Airspace in an Emergency’, *Sky News*, 14 May 2023.

⁶⁰ Rebecca Black, ‘Taoiseach Contests Claim Ireland Is “reliant” on UK Armed Forces’, *The Independent*, 17 February 2024.

⁶¹ Aisling Kenny, ‘Concern over Ireland’s Ability to Protect Undersea Cables’, *RTE*, 29 September 2023.

⁶² John Bolton, ‘Joe Biden’s Clueless Support for Ireland Weakens the West’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 June 2022.



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support collective European prosperity and security without sacrificing its neutrality. This will however require Ireland's future governments to critically appreciate the reality of its vulnerabilities. As a connecting hub between the transatlantic alliance, it has critical undersea cable infrastructure connecting their economies. If Ireland is unwilling to appropriately invest in the means to defend these then it should be more transparent in granting access to those who can. This is in the interest of all European nations. Ireland may view itself as neutral, but it is politically and economically aligned to the European Union and the western liberal order. Russia, through its recent actions in Irish territorial waters, clearly

Irish peacekeepers serving with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in 2011.
Picture: UN Photo/Pasqual Gorriaz



“THE IRISH DEFENCE FORCES REMAIN A HIGHLY PROFESSIONAL BUT UNDER-RESOURCED AND OVERCOMMITTED ORGANISATION. THEIR STANDING AS UN PEACEKEEPERS IS RECOGNISED AS ‘WORLD CLASS’ WITH PERSONNEL OPERATING IN CHALLENGING THEATRES SUCH AS LEBANON AND SYRIA.”

views the state as aligned to its adversaries and therefore useful in its attempts to undermine them. A declaration of neutrality itself is not enough to protect the state. If the political and financial costs of joining NATO appear too steep for Irish politicians, then European or joint UK defence cooperation should be considered as the lesser of two evils. History has shown many nations that unwavering adherence to a policy of neutrality is not a conclusive strategy. As former Royal Irish Regiment officer and Wicklow man Patrick Bury noted, Ireland's “continued adoration of its history of neutrality has led to unrealistic expectations and an uninformed defence policy”⁶³

The Irish Defence Forces remain a highly professional but under-resourced and overcommitted organisation. Their standing as UN peacekeepers is recognised as ‘world class’ with personnel operating in challenging theatres such as Lebanon and Syria.⁶⁴ The death of Private Seán Rooney in late 2022 underlined the danger Irish troops continue to face on these operations.⁶⁵ Ireland has professional, well trained and adaptable forces able to

operate in austere and complex environments.

Before increased spending can resolve Ireland's defence issues interim measures are required. Greater co-operation with European partners can assuage Irish policymakers worried about the impacts of defence spending while not entering them into obligations to join expeditionary operations which could undermine Irish neutrality. It can also insulate Ireland from broader geopolitical shocks such as attacks on cyber infrastructure and transatlantic commerce routes.

Ireland's involvement with the European Union's Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO) initiative has been inconsistent with the state adopting observer status on most projects.⁶⁶ The Irish government in 2023 indicated it was unlikely it would take further steps in PESCO beyond the areas of maritime surveillance and deployable disaster relief capability.⁶⁷ The UK, despite reluctance to join PESCO, has recognised the utility in co-operation with the EU on defence

matters evidenced by the military mobility scheme.⁶⁸ If the prospect of joining NATO is unsavoury for Irish policymakers, then PESCO offers an alternative that does not carry the baggage of the alliance's misadventures in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan. It may also temper the concerns nationalists have over close co-operation with the United Kingdom's military given the historical legacy.

Greater co-operation between Ireland and the United Kingdom despite political challenges is sensible in theory. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2015 between the Irish Department of Defence and the UK's Ministry of Defence, however, there has been few substantive efforts to codify annual training exercises or joint deployments.⁶⁹ Since this Memorandum of Understanding was signed Brexit negotiations have driven a wedge between Dublin and London with the then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar lamenting what he perceived as Britain “disengaging” from the world.⁷⁰ Relations between the respective capitals remain frayed and are driven by the UK's Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act. The Irish government has taken the UK to a European court over this controversial piece of legislation.⁷¹ In response to this the Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris criticised Irish efforts to pursue justice against republican dissidents within its territory.⁷² With divergence on sensitive political issues it remains optimistic to presume political capital would be expended on increased defence co-operation. Perceptions that the UK is disengaging from the world ignore the scale of military support given to Ukraine by the British government. Conversely Ireland's admission of Ukrainian refugees per capita exceeds larger states in Europe including the UK with the Tánaiste highlighting

⁶³ Patrick Bury and Murphy, ‘No Time to Hide: The Future of Irish Defence and Security’, *War on the Rocks*, 3 March 2023.

⁶⁴ Michael O'Toole, “You Are World Class at What You Do” - Irish Defence Forces Chief's Message to Peacekeeping Troops in Syria’, *The Irish Mirror*, 1 March 2024.

⁶⁵ David Wilson, ‘Seán Rooney: Irish Peacekeeper's Death “Pierced His Family's Heart”’, *BBC*, 22 December 2022.

⁶⁶ Claire Mills, ‘EU Permanent Structured Co-Operations (PESCO): A Future Role for UK Defence?’ (House of Commons: House of Commons Library Research, 21 November 2022).

⁶⁷ Tony Connelly, ‘Govt “unlikely” to Expand PESCO Involvement until next Year’, *RTE*, 29 September 2023.

⁶⁸ Alexandra Brzozowski, ‘UK Moves Closer to Join EU's Military Mobility Scheme’, *Euractiv*, 20 October 2022.

⁶⁹ ‘UK and Ireland Sign Historic Defence Agreement’, *Defense Aerospace*.

⁷⁰ Adam Kula, ‘Irish Premier Leo Varadkar Declares His “love” for the United Kingdom and Voices Concern for Its Future Direction’, *News Letter*, 5 October 2023.

⁷¹ Rory Carroll, ‘Ireland to Launch Human Rights Case against UK over Troubles Legacy Act’, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2023.

⁷² Jayne McCormack, ‘Troubles Legacy Act: UK Challenges Ireland on Legal Move’, *BBC*, 8 January 2024.

⁷³ Christina Finn, ‘Govt Examining Evidence That Ukrainians Arriving in Ireland Are Coming from Other EU States, Says Martin’, *The Journal*, 24 October 2023.

this as an example of how Ireland assists Ukraine without direct military support.⁷³

Even before defence co-operation can be considered, the UK is likely to face challenges in bolstering Atlantic-facing security infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Any increased defence posture along this coast aimed at monitoring or deterring Russian interference would be undertaken in the face of a Sinn Fein led executive in Stormont who could hamper or block the re-establishment of a larger permanent military presence, a key consideration in the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. The image of British and Irish military co-operation on exercises or deployments would be a major test in establishing the durability of post-reunification politics on both islands. It should also be viewed as a sign of maturing and sensible relations given the new strategic context. The involvement of European forces under a PESCO umbrella may soothe the concerns of those who view joint UK-Irish defence co-operation as politically untenable.

If direct military co-operation is unachievable there are still avenues by which shared co-operation between Ireland and the United Kingdom can mitigate the strategic challenges both islands face. Greater co-operation between security and intelligence networks on tracking threats – particularly in the cyber domain – would be a natural starting place. Transparent discussions on the benefits of this co-operation would also be welcome. Firstly, by demonstrating the level of trust between both parties. Secondly by highlighting it as an example of successful co-operation it could open the door to future endeavours.

With Irish naval staffing issues unlikely to be rectified in the short term an agreement



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between the EU, UK and Ireland to create a joint maritime task force to operate in Irish waters could ease the burden placed on overworked naval crews while providing valuable operational experience for other forces – improving their capability as they ensure European security. Loan service and exchange appointments should also be considered as a means of improving awareness between UK, Irish and European forces. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine threatens European security and prosperity regardless of whether states are NATO members or militarily non-aligned. Facing up to the reality of that threat will require patience, courage and persistence. However, co-operation between Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe has brought political and economic success. It stands to reason it would be comparably advantageous for defence and security.

CONCLUSION – IF ALL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER...

Futurology is a fraught business but future Irish governments are unlikely to place defence and security co-operation on the top of their political agenda. This inaction will be less a reflection of ardent nationalism but rather a continuation of an historically convenient approach. Defence co-operation with European partners may be more amenable to Irish policymakers than joint UK-Irish efforts but Ireland will struggle to mitigate the threats it faces through its own means alone. Convincing neighbours to foot the bill and commit resources to defend Irish territory when the state appears passive on defence matters may limit that aspiration. As former Irish Army Ranger Wing officer and Teachta Dálas for Kildare South Dr Cathal Berry notes: “When Europe warned Ireland of the financial risk accumulating in our banking sector [we presumed]

we knew better. Europe is [now saying] precisely the same thing about Ireland’s defence sector.”⁷⁴ Ireland found out the hard economic reality of ignoring conventional wisdom in the 2008 crash. It cannot afford a similar shock landing in matters of security and defence.

The approach of hoping that neutrality will insulate Ireland from the shocks of a multi-polar world could present the state with a greater challenge in the future if it fails to adequately address them now. The UK remains Ireland’s nearest neighbour and both islands are vulnerable to the same shared threats given the interconnectedness of their societies. It is in their interest to co-operatively face these threats. In Ireland challenges will remain on how to achieve an improved defence posture with most political parties and voters unsure of what increased defence spending would practically achieve. Attempts to undergo a modernisation programme will require extraordinary political capital and financial costs. Expending this on defence ahead of traditional social protection areas will show the sincerity Irish policymakers have to challenge their perceived status as the weak link. Ireland’s strong relations with the European community, relative prosperity and highly professional Defence Forces provide avenues to mitigate the threats it faces. Ireland does not need to join NATO to defend itself effectively. It will, however, need to seriously address the practicalities of its stance on neutrality and gaps in critical capabilities.

If Ireland is to remain neutral it must ensure its forces have the equipment and means to defend its territory and rely on actions in place of words to achieve this.

⁷⁴ Cathal Berry, 9 March 2024, twitter.com/BerryCathal/status/1766358693543624976.