

IIEA Security and Defence Working Group: Submission to the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy

The Security and Defence Working Group of the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) is comprised of leading Irish specialists in matters of security and defence. Its membership consists of academics as well as retired senior military officers and former members of the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

The IIEA would like to acknowledge that the purpose of the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy is to mark the beginning of a conversation, rather than its conclusion. With this in mind, as Ireland reviews its international security policy, the IIEA's Security and Defence Group considers it would be useful to highlight some areas on which it may be important to focus on as part of the much longer and broader conversation about Ireland's international security policy. Among the most significant issues, which the Group has identified, is the general lack of public understanding of Ireland's international security posture as well as some of the more basic components of security and defence concepts such as what bilateral and multilateral cooperation means. The general lack of understanding, we believe, contributes to a distorted view of the role Ireland plays in the world, particularly regarding UN Peacekeeping, as well as the options available to the Irish State to augment its security through bilateral or multilateral security cooperation.

The importance of clearly communicating the nature of the threats which the Irish State faces will be of ever greater importance in developing resilience among the public to deal with such threats. Increasingly, Ireland's society is being targeted during peacetime by hostile actors through a variety of hybrid means, which generally fall below the threshold of warfare. Many of these nefarious activities are difficult to defend against using traditional military means. Such threats range from cyberattacks against businesses and critical infrastructure, threatening activity within Irish maritime spaces and the deliberate use of disinformation and misinformation to undermine social cohesion in our society. Furthermore, there is a tendency in Ireland to discuss threats in general global terms, and to avoid discussing the specific threats Ireland faces. An analysis of the threats which the state is facing communicated to the public as part of a general information campaign regarding the nature of such threats and what individuals can do to protect themselves, could play a vital role in strengthening societal resilience against hybrid aggression.

Furthermore, the Group would like to highlight the costs of insecurity to the Irish State and to the people who live on the Island, and to emphasise the state's responsibilities to its partners. The Group believes that Ireland will have to play a more active role in the security of the Euro-Atlantic area, by developing a credible means of defending itself and its resources so that it can be seen as a responsible and reliable partner for Ireland's economic and political partners.

Lack of Public Understanding of Ireland's Defence Posture Prevents a Coherent Political Approach to the State's International Security Policy

A lack of public understanding of some of the basic elements of Ireland's national and international security policy, as well as the State's defence policy, presents a clear obstacle to the formulation of a coherent approach to international security at the political level. The Group argues that deficits in public understanding have led to misperceptions in what Ireland's security policy is and should

be, potentially contributing to political polarisation when it comes to Ireland's cooperation with multilateral organisations as part of EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as well as the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP). A study on *Ireland's Views on Neutrality and NATO* conducted in 2022,¹ noted that on a self-rated scale from 0 to 10 (0 being no understanding and 10 representing a full-understanding) of the primary purpose of EU CSDP, the mean response was 2.91 or a little to no understanding of the purpose of EU CSDP.² This gap in public understanding feeds into wider discourse around Ireland's relationship with EU security and defence cooperation and the persistence of the so-called 'EU-Army' narrative.³ Gaps in public knowledge surrounding the *actual* work and purpose of EU CSDP are at risk of being filled in by narratives which are increasingly polarising and which can impede informed discussion about the ways and means Ireland can and should involve itself with EU CSDP. Another important dimension in this regard involves seeking to raise public awareness of the nature and value of partnerships, both within multilateral organisations and bilaterally.

Furthermore, there remains a persistent and deep-rooted contradiction in how the Irish public perceives the relationship between Ireland and NATO and Ireland's neutrality. This contradiction is illustrated by a Red C poll conducted in March 2022 which showed that despite 48% of respondents supporting Ireland joining NATO, 57% of the same group of respondents still wanted the state to retain its policy of neutrality.⁴ This contradiction highlights a potential knowledge gap amongst some members of the public as regards what Irish neutrality in fact means, the work that NATO does, and Ireland's ongoing cooperation with NATO as part of PfP. Moreover, these apparent inconsistencies in public opinion have continued to persist across time. An *Irish Times* Ipsos poll, conducted in June 2023, shows 61% of voters support retaining Ireland's currently model of neutrality. However, amongst the grouping who wish to see a change, representing 26% of respondents, 56% are of the view that Ireland should join NATO and 71% support closer defence cooperation as part of EU CSDP.⁵ What can be drawn from this survey is that though the majority favour a retention of neutrality, amongst those who desire change there is competing visions of what that change might look like. The competing visions are likely a product of the information deficits pertaining to some members of the public. It is contended here that this can sometimes contribute to a paralysis in the national public discourse regarding the options available to the State regarding its international security posture and can reduce the discourse to the level of binaries surrounding neutrality or NATO membership.

¹ BehaviourWise 2022 *Ireland's Views on Neutrality and NATO*. Available at: <https://www.behaviourwise.ie/irelands-views-on-neutrality-and-nato>

² BehaviourWise 2022 *Ireland's Views on Neutrality and NATO*. Available at: <https://www.behaviourwise.ie/irelands-views-on-neutrality-and-nato>

³ See The Journal.ie (2017) *You're talking about going to war: TDs concerned EU Defence deal could lead to Ireland joining a European Army*. Available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/ireland-european-army-2-3724837-Dec2017/>; and Claran McGrath (2020) *EU army warning: Ireland told to get out now as Macron and Merkel plot military wing of EU*. Express.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1321418/eu-army-brexit-news-uk-eu-emmanuel-macron-angela-merkel-leo-varadkar-ireland>

⁴ Michael Brennan 26 March 2022 *Poll shows 46% in favour of Irish troops serving in European army*. Business Post. Available at: <https://www.businesspost.ie/politics/poll-shows-46-in-favour-of-irish-troops-serving-in-european-army/>

⁵ Conor Gallagher 17 June 2023 *More people support a change in neutrality, but few agree on what it should be*. The Irish Times. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2023/06/17/neutrality-poll-more-people-support-a-change-in-neutrality-but-few-agree-on-what-it-should-be/>

Finally, this deficit in public understanding of Ireland's traditional policy of neutrality has resulted in 'neutrality' becoming a term which is fluid, elastic, and often subjective in the public consciousness. Neutrality has become an umbrella term for a constellation of diffuse concepts – including anti-militarism, pacifism, and anti-imperialism⁶ - which the public has attributed to neutrality, but which may not necessarily be integral to the Government's working definition of neutrality. Among the most prominent of these concepts is the perceived interrelationship between neutrality and UN peacekeeping. Ireland's important role in UN peacekeeping, something of which the State and the Irish public should indeed be proud, has distorted public perception of the role of the Defence Forces from people who protect, serve, and defend the Irish State, to a group of 'armed humanitarians' and where cooperation with NATO, an alliance underpinned by a nuclear deterrent, can be seen as incompatible with Ireland's role in UN Peacekeeping activities, non-proliferation and disarmament.⁷

By way of recommendation from this Group, as the conversation in Ireland surrounding the State's international security policy continues to intensify over the coming years, the Government should consider how it could engage in a public awareness campaign to ensure that these gaps in public knowledge are filled. Knowledge gaps amongst the public regarding the State's security policy can be exploited by potential hostile actors. Even still, the present state of the public knowledge gap creates significant impediments to public discourse in how Ireland should approach international security. The persistence of this knowledge deficit, coupled with the mobilisations of evocative terms such as 'EU Army' and nostalgia for how Ireland navigated 20th Century international politics, can hamper consensus building and presents a considerable obstacle for any Irish government to build a coherent approach to international security that is specifically tooled to the needs of the State in the present 21st Century geopolitical context.

The Group recommends that, following the conclusion of the Consultative Forum, work be progressed towards the development of a National Security Strategy. This long-awaited strategy document would provide a focus for discussion and give direction and guidelines for future policy.

The costs of insecurity to Ireland should be integrated into future discussions on Ireland's security policy.

As part of an ongoing reflection of Ireland's international security policy, the Government should consider the costs which insecurity could pose to Ireland including in terms of its economic, diplomatic, and international reputation and profile. Clearly, any perception that Ireland represents

⁶ Keatinge 2019 *The 'Specific Character' of Ireland's Security and Defence Policy: Reflections on Neutrality*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/the-specific-character-of-ireland-as-security-and-defence-policy-reflections-on-neutrality>

⁷ Keatinge 2022 *European Neutrals, then and now*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/european-neutrals-then-and-now>

Europe's weak link,⁸ or that it could be used as a vector of attack against Europe,⁹ could damage Ireland's relationship with other EU member states. Ireland risks appearing as if it feels little security obligation to its EU partners and that Dublin views the obligations of EU membership in largely transactional terms.¹⁰ Should this perception continue to gain prominence in other European capitals, Ireland risks losing credibility at the level of the EU which could erode Ireland's growing status as a 'soft power superpower'.¹¹

Furthermore, Ireland plays host to a considerable number of global multinational companies who have invested in infrastructure which is essential to global finance, technology, communications, and more. According to Ireland's National Cyber Security Centre, about 30% of all EU data is hosted in data centres located in Ireland.¹² Importantly, it should be noted that these data centres often no longer serve as passive repositories of data, but rather due to the growing role of cloud computing, play an increasingly important operational role in the functioning of the global internet and with it the functioning of the global communications and financial system.¹³ The considerable geopolitical risk posed to Ireland by a potential sabotage of Ireland's sub-sea cabling infrastructure has been noted in news outlets as a threat to the operations of global internet. However, it should be noted that much of this infrastructure is also owned and operated by private firms such as the Havfrue (Mermaid) cable which is jointly owned by Google and Meta and connects the United States, Denmark, and Ireland. Ireland's widely publicised inability to protect these cables as well as Russia's increasing threatening behaviour around this infrastructure could prompt some of the multinational companies based in Ireland to rethink how it invests in infrastructure in Ireland and may even prompt them to reconsider the size of their operations in Ireland altogether.

Consequently, the costs of inaction, of inadequate defence, and of insecurity ought to be factored in by Governments, present and future, when considering how to allocate resources in the fields of security and defence. Should it continue with its business-as-usual approach to security, while the geopolitical environment deteriorates, Ireland could find itself increasingly viewed as an insecure place to do business, let alone a location in which to base a multinational headquarters, which would have inevitable implications for employment and the exchequer.

The Group recommends that the Government significantly increase cooperation with partners to deal with multifaceted threats, particularly in the geographical areas and strategic domains for which Ireland is responsible. Regarding the potential to increase the State's maritime capacities,

⁸ See Eoin Drea 8 November 2022 *Ireland is Europe's Weakest Link*. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/08/ireland-military-neutrality-russia-ocean-communication-energy-infrastructure-sabotage/>; and James Wilson 2 May 2022 *Ireland is a 'weak link' in the defence of Europe, expert warns*. Newstalk. Available at: <https://www.newstalk.com/news/ireland-is-a-weak-link-in-the-defence-of-europe-expert-warns-1336978>; and John Mooney 30 January 2022 *Kremlin homes in on EU's 'weak link'*. The Times. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kremlin-homes-in-on-eus-weak-link-sjp52n86z>

⁹ Commission on the Defence Forces 2022 *Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/eb4e0-report-of-the-commission-on-defence-forces/>

¹⁰ Eoin Drea 8 November 2022 *Ireland is Europe's Weakest Link*. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/08/ireland-military-neutrality-russia-ocean-communication-energy-infrastructure-sabotage/>

¹¹ Charlemagne 18 July 2020 *How Ireland gets its way*. The Economist. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/07/18/how-ireland-gets-its-way>

¹² National Cyber Security Centre 2019 *National Cyber Security Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8994a-national-cyber-security-strategy/>

¹³ National Cyber Security Centre 2019 *National Cyber Security Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8994a-national-cyber-security-strategy/>

one option relates to increasing Ireland's existing engagement with other EU Member States through the EU Battlegroup Concept. Ireland has already benefited from becoming more interoperable with other EU Member State armed forces and more progress in this area is certainly possible.¹⁴

As the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass has outlined, Member States should increase the number and range of joint exercises and training as part of its Coordinated Maritime Presences.¹⁵ The Government could consider inviting vessels from other Member States, in line with our policy of neutrality, to participate in joint training similar to the joint training currently taking place with the EU Battlegroups.¹⁶ This would benefit both the Irish Defence Forces and the navies of other EU Member States by enhancing interoperability while demonstrating Ireland's commitment to the principles of the Strategic Compass, and it would also enhance the ability of the Defence Forces to monitor the maritime areas for which Ireland is responsible.

To conclude, the Irish State ought to continue its ongoing public consultations and assessments regarding its international security policy long after the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy concludes. It is hoped by members of this Group that the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy will serve as a genuine springboard from which Ireland, its citizens, and its policymakers can have an honest and evidence-based conversation about how the State chooses to approach its security and how it will cooperate with other multilateral organisations to defend Irish interests. The ongoing discussions would be best served by enhancing public knowledge and awareness about what Irish neutrality means in the 21st century, how Ireland already cooperates with others to ensure that it is protected in an increasingly febrile, dangerous, and unpredictable geopolitical environment, and the options that are available to Ireland going forward. Importantly, this may also assist in consensus building around what Ireland's security policy should be and can help to obviate the persistent binary discussions which often emerge.

Signed,

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¹⁴ Department of Defence 12 January 2023 *Government approves Defence Forces' participation in EU Battlegroup 2024/2025*. Gov.ie. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/9cab-government-approves-defence-forces-participation-in-eu-battlegroup-20242025/>

¹⁵ European Council (2022) . *1 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

¹⁶ The Journal.ie *Irish troops to participate in EU Battle Group*. Available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-troops-eu-battle-group-3837647-Feb2018/>

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