



**Jim O'Callaghan TD**  
**DUBLIN BAY SOUTH**



The Secretary,  
The Consultative Forum on International Security and Defence Policy,  
International Security Policy Section,  
Department of Foreign Affairs,  
80 St. Stephen's Green,  
Dublin 2.

20 June 2023

**Re: Consultative Forum on International Security and Defence Policy.**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to submit for the consideration of the Consultative Forum a speech I delivered in Dáil Éireann on 18 May 2023.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

**Jim O'Callaghan TD**

**Speech in Dáil Éireann on Consultative Forum on  
International Security and Defence Policy**

**Jim O'Callaghan TD**

**18 May 2023.**

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I commend the Minister and the Government on the decision to establish a consultative forum on international security and defence policy. Given what has happened in the world over the past 18 months and the technological advancements that have taken place over the past ten years or so, it is appropriate that Ireland gives consideration to how we will deal with security and defence in the years ahead.

Some Members are concerned about the establishment of a forum; I have to say I am not. I do not know the individuals who will be called before the forum, but I know that any decisions that are ultimately made on defence and security by this country will be made by its elected representatives, by its Government and by the people in this House.

It is important to point out, however, that military neutrality has served this country well. When it comes to a recognition of the role that military neutrality has played, however, we all must have an understanding that the basis for that policy is primarily what is in the self-interest of this country.

Some people have looked back to the role of neutrality in Irish history. Something that is fairly consistent throughout is that it has always reflected what was believed to be in the self-interest of Ireland at the time that policy was made. Earlier a colleague mentioned the famous photograph from 1914 when James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army had a sign up saying, "We serve neither King nor Kaiser ...". That was correct in 1914 but, in 1916, that was not necessarily the case. In 1916, James Connolly and the other leaders of the Irish Rebellion were referring to our "gallant allies in Europe," because at that stage it suited the national interest to be purportedly in favour of our "gallant allies" in the efforts to get away and to establish

our own sovereignty and independence. That was also part of the reason, if we look at our policy of neutrality in the Second World War, Éamon de Valera insisted upon Ireland having a position of neutrality. It was primarily out of self-interest. De Valera did it because he believed that the best way of continuing and enforcing Irish sovereignty was by having a policy of military neutrality when it came to the Second World War.

Some people look at the Irish position of neutrality during the Second World War and regard it as inappropriate. Some even regard it as being shameful. I thoroughly disagree. When you look at other countries at that time, America did not join the Second World War until Pearl Harbour was attacked. Even after that, they did not declare war on Germany; Germany declared war on them.

We need to recognise that the policies of Ireland and, indeed, political parties, on neutrality change on the basis of what is in our self-interest. I noted, Sinn Féin, during the Second World War, was not supportive of Irish neutrality, but the position that we adopted at the time, in the 1940s, was an appropriate and correct position. In fact, many Irish people's lives were saved as a result.

When we look at neutrality, we need to recognise that what it means in an Irish context is that we will not participate in exclusively military alliances. Article 28 of the Constitution states that we can go to war, if we so wish. If the Government wishes to go to war with another country, it can. All it requires is the approval of Dáil Éireann and, therefore, we are not a pacifist country but we are a country that, through policy, has decided that it will not enter into exclusively military alliances. In practical terms, what that means for this country is we need to ask: do we wish to join NATO or not? My opinion is that we should stay out of NATO because, I believe, that is in Ireland's self-interest. It may be the case if we were in the Finnish Parliament, and we were discussing Finland's joinder of NATO, we probably would have a different position today than what we would have had two years ago. It is a decision that we should not be embarrassed about stating should be made on the basis of what is in this country's self-interest.

It is important that we distinguish between defence and security policy, on the one hand, and foreign policy, on the other. When it comes to foreign policy, I absolutely believe that Ireland should have at the centre of its foreign policy a position based on

morality and what we believe is correct. However, when it comes to the defence and security of this country, primarily what should be driving us is self-interest. That, in fairness, I believe, is what the Government has done to date and what we intend to do in the future.

Of course, we are participating in certain military manoeuvres with our membership of the EU.

We are members of Permanent Structured Cooperation, PESCO, the EU common defence arrangement and participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace project. It is fair to say that all the Government parties and the vast majority of Opposition parties support that position. I do not think that contradicts our position of military neutrality.

When we look at the concept of Irish neutrality and question whether to join NATO, we must look at that question away from the brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia that took place last year. Not all military conflicts will be as straightforward as that one with respect to brutality, illegality and the wholesale opposition to it we have seen throughout Europe and around the world. In this century, I suspect military disputes will not be as clear-cut as was the case with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Let us also be aware that article 29 of the Constitution states that the pacific settlement of international disputes is our objective. That is how we should approach international disputes. In fairness to the Government, that is how it has approached the dispute in Ukraine and others throughout the world. We seek to resolve them through pacific settlement but recognise that when there is brutality, as is the case with the Russian invasion, that is not always possible.

One of the other factors we need to take into account when we look at the core issue of whether Ireland should join NATO is that if we were to do so we would have to contribute 2% of our GDP to be spent on military warfare, military installations and military equipment. I do not believe the Irish people would wish to see their money invested in that. It would be a huge amount of money and is not something we wish to see. I suspect everyone recognises that Ireland is not, and will not be in the near future, in any way a strong military power.

However, as other speakers have stated, and as the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence has recognised, we need to spend more money on our defence infrastructure. We must ensure we have basic capacity in place to do basic defence

procedures, whether that is radar or protecting our seas and navigating those waters. That is why I welcome that, with the new policy being put in place, we will see further moneys invested in our defence and in our armed forces.

I listened carefully to what the Tánaiste said about the triple lock. The world is now in an unusual position where the architecture of the UN Security Council was put in place in the aftermath of the Second World War. The five permanent members of the Security Council all have a veto. It seems impossible to change that. To change any provision of the United Nations Charter, the support of a permanent member of the United Nations is needed. The possibility of removing that veto or the permanent members is gone. That will not happen in the real world of politics. Will we find ourselves in a situation where the triple lock is still in effect, meaning that Russia can veto decisions made by the people of Ireland to become involved in certain peacekeeping measures? There is an issue. We are just denying reality if we say there is not an issue.

I presume the consultative forum will invite experts and persons who have knowledge of defence capacity to give appraisals of Ireland's position. I regret to say that I suspect that, if it is a thorough job, it will show there are many deficiencies in Ireland's security and defence. I think back to many years ago. Ireland always had the protection of being an offshore island behind an offshore island in the west of Europe. However, as military prowess has increased and the world has become smaller, our geographical advantage will become less significant as time progresses. The world is becoming a much more uncertain place.

We must ensure we have a stronger defence and security policy in place. That does not mean that we should give up our military neutrality or join NATO. We are one of the few European Union countries that is not a member of NATO. Cyprus, Malta, Ireland and Austria are not members. Not being with the majority does not mean that we are occupying a position that is unpopular or that we should abandon it.

Protections were expressly put in place in the protocol to the [Lisbon Treaty](#) by our colleagues in the EU to recognise Ireland's neutrality. That position is respected throughout Europe and the world. We are probably in a stronger position diplomatically because we come to disputes from a militarily neutral point of view. As has been repeatedly stated, however, being militarily neutral does not mean we are

politically neutral. That is clearly the case in our Constitution. We are clearly not politically neutral with respect to our international involvement over the years. That does not mean we need to get involved or align ourselves in military alliances.

We need to invest more than €1.5 billion a year in our Defence Forces. A huge amount of work needs to be done. We must ensure the equipment is in place and that there is a recognition that people working in the Defence Forces should be respected and honoured by elected representatives and by the people. That is why I commend the work being done by the Tánaiste and Government on the consultative forum. I wish the consultative forum well. I know persons have said in this House that they would have welcomed a citizens' assembly. Every entity that is set up, whether it is a citizens' assembly or a consultative forum, will come to the topic it has been asked to discuss and debate with its own preferences, prejudices and points of view. People should not be deterred by or fearful of that. We know that any decision in respect of defence and security will be made by the elected representatives of the Irish people. Let us not be fearful of hearing what a consultative forum has to say about this issue. Those who believe in Ireland's neutrality should be able to stand and defend it, debate it and discuss it. We should not treat it in the same way we treat many contentious political issues, that is, not to talk about it because to talk about it is to threaten it. That is not the case. I welcome the consultative forum and look forward to seeing its outcome.