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A Cathaoirleach,

Please accept this as a submission on behalf of Sinn Féin to the public consultation process of the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy.

As you know I attended each day of the Consultative Forum hearings in Cork, Galway and Dublin. During the proceedings Sinn Féin was also represented by Reada Cronin TD, Thomas Gould TD, Pat Buckley TD, Mairead Farrell TD, Ruairí O Murchú TD, Chris MacManus MEP and a number of other elected representatives including Councillors.

Proceedings at the forum were well-managed and many of the discussions were interesting and informative. I commend you for your role as Cathaoirleach in this regard.

However, the presence of protests at each of the hearings underlines a deep distrust on the part of a significant cohort of the Irish public as to the government's objectives in establishing the Forum. Many, myself included, believe that the Forum was more an attempt to reshape public opinion than it was a genuine attempt at public debate and engagement.

Notwithstanding the merits of all those who participated in the Forum, there was clearly a poor representation of speakers who had a track record of promoting Irish military neutrality and of championing the principles of conflict resolution and peace building. We believe that the Forum would have been better served with a better balance of participants.

I wish to also reiterate our disappointment that government refused to provide a formal role for the opposition within the process.

Neutrality must be the cornerstone of Irish Foreign Policy

Sinn Féin's vision is for Ireland to play a constructive role in the wider world; committed to diplomacy, humanitarianism, peace building and co-operation with other states on global challenges including poverty, world hunger, climate change, conflict resolution and migration.

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An independent foreign policy and military neutrality are crucial to allow Ireland to play that important role in the wider world. We should be proud of our military neutrality and resist attempts by those who seek to recast it as a weakness or a failing.

The legacy of Irish neutrality is our role in working for nuclear non-proliferation, our humanitarianism, our contribution to the drafting of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, our peacekeeping and the proud record of our UN peacekeepers in Lebanon, Congo, Chad, South Sudan and elsewhere. This has been our contribution to making the world a better and safer place.

Being proud of our neutrality means being proud of those who served on UN peacekeeping missions, including those who fought and died in the Niemba ambush, those who fought and whose bravery has long been recognised at the siege of Jadotville, and all of those who died on UN peacekeeping duty, including Private Seán Rooney who was killed in December of last year. Sinn Féin is proud of those who have served this country and we are proud of Ireland's history in seeking peace rather than conflict.

We therefore believe that the starting point of any conversation on Ireland's approach to defence and international security must be an acknowledgement that military neutrality has served us well.

We welcome any opportunity to participate in public discourse on foreign, security and defence policies. Such a debate has been sorely lacking over the past number of decades. Irish governments have made important, often crucial, decisions with very little engagement with the Irish public and often, even, with minimal Oireachtas debate.

Hard-won reputations may be easily lost. Sinn Féin believe that the historical role of the Defence Forces as a neutral force engaged in UN Peace Keeping is something that the Irish people are proud of, and rightly so. Therefore, any decisions that could lead to significant shifts in Foreign and Defence policies must only be considered following a robust engagement with the Irish people.

Constitutional change

It is because of the potential long-term implications of fundamental decisions affecting Foreign and Defence policies that Sinn Féin believe that there should be a constitutional framework underpinning the agreed approach of the Irish people inserted within *Bunreacht na hÉireann* - Constitution of Ireland.

Both Malta and Austria, EU member states, have enshrined their military neutrality within their constitutions. Ireland should do the same.

While any constitutional article could be amended at a later stage with the agreement of the Irish people, it would provide an overarching framework guided by the principles of Neutrality and Conflict resolution. It would ensure that an Irish government could not act against those principles, in a manner that could undermine Ireland's international reputation, without authorisation of the Irish people.

The approach that Sinn Féin advocate in this regard is that:

- A Citizens Assembly be established with a view to agreeing a wording of a constitutional amendment. Terms of reference will ensure
 - o That the principles of Military Neutrality and non-alignment will be central to Ireland's Foreign and Defence policies. That Ireland's primary objective internationally will be to facilitate the resolution of conflict and war.
 - o That such principles require government to adequately invest in the capacity and capabilities of the Defence Forces.
 - o That such provisions will not hinder government or the Defence Forces from participating in Peace-Keeping or Humanitarian missions or programmes, and that co-operating with others internationally in that respect will be permitted.
 - o That such provisions will not prevent government or Defence Forces from undertaking actions required to protect Ireland's sovereignty, security or the safety of Irish citizens when necessitated.
- The proposals of the Citizens Assembly will be brought to the Oireachtas for approval or amendment following the receipt of necessary legal advices.
- That a formal proposal to amend the Constitution be put to the Irish people via a Constitutional referendum.
- That, should the Constitutional Amendment be carried by referendum, the Irish government will engage with EU institutions and Member States with a view to recognising the integrity of neutral states within the EU treaties.

All deliberations surrounding Foreign and Defence policy must also be all-Ireland in nature, considering the other constitutional change that is likely to be put to the people of this island in the coming years – that of Irish unification. In that regard the citizens assembly must be representative of the whole island.

Global Security Environment

Sinn Féin recognise that the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine has utterly changed the global security environment.

In the midst of such a world-defining moment, it is correct that there be public discourse in relation to Ireland's defence and international security policy, and it is incumbent upon government and political parties to reflect upon our responsibility to safeguard our country and our citizens. It is also important to reflect upon how Ireland can be best placed to uphold the principles of democracy and the rule of law internationally.

In our view, and we believe this is shared by the majority of Irish public opinion, Ireland is best placed to invest our energies and resources in conflict resolution rather than conflict participation.

This is not isolationism. It does not mean that Ireland cannot take positions as to identifying the aggressors in any conflict scenario. On the contrary, as is rightly the case with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, our position as a neutral country provides a strong platform on which to identify breaches of international law, occupation, annexation and military aggression when they present.

Nor does it mean that Ireland cannot take actions in response to such aggression and breaches of international law. Ireland can and should advocate for sanctions, diplomatic and economic, seek to amend trading relationships and provide non-lethal and humanitarian supports to states who are the victims of such actions.

Above all, in response to the changed Global Security Environment, we must ensure that the Irish Defence Forces are capable of fulfilling the roles expected of them.

Historic underinvestment of our Defence Forces must be redressed

Successive governments have overseen systemic underinvestment in our Defence Forces. We are unable to monitor, never mind defend, our skies and seas - and we are unable to adequately secure ourselves against modern threats.

Numbers within the Defence Forces have reached critically low levels. The decades-long undermining of our Defence Forces is shameful.

The current numbers within the Defence Forces is a shocking indictment of the current parties of government.

The current numbers are:

- Army:	6,305
- Naval Service:	755
- Aircorps:	704
- Total:	7,764

There is clearly a retention crisis within the Defence Forces that has worsened since this government came into office. While an intensive recruitment programme is imperative, it is vital that the causes of retention problems are addressed. It was therefore disappointing that there was no formal participation from Defence Forces representative organisations such as PDFORA, RACO and RDFRA at the Consultative Forum.

To address the retention and recruitment crises action must be taken regarding:

Political Commitment: Our Defence Forces need a government that will support our Defence Forces at every level and make an unequivocal commitment to delivering a realisable career path for all those current in, or considering joining, any service of the Defence Forces. Such a government will also commit to doing everything necessary to support and protect our Defence Forces in their fulfilment of all responsibilities imparted on them. In government Sinn Féin will make those commitments.

Terms & Conditions: Government must enter into intensive engagement with Defence Forces representative organisations in order to address the issues that have led to the retention and recruitment crisis. Such engagement must lead to a full evaluation of salaries, allowances and supports available across all levels of the Defence Forces.

Chief among immediate measures must be the application of the Working Time Directive to the Defence Forces.

Culture: The experiences of all those who join our Defence Forces must be a positive one. It is imperative that the issues raised by organisations such as the Women of Honour, and subsequently outlined by the Independent Review Group, are addressed as a matter of urgency. The Terms Of reference for any statutory Inquiry must include the measures requested by the Women of Honour organisation in order to ensure maximum confidence in this process.

Reserve Defence Forces: The current strength of the RDF stands at a dismal 1,351 members in the Army Reserve and just 79 in the Naval Service Reserve. These figures represent an utter disregard by successive governments that have allowed our reserves to reach such critical levels. While 1,000 applications were received to the RDF in 2022 only 100 recruits have been inducted from those applicants. That points to systemic problems that the current government appears unwilling to address. A fundamental rethink and restructure is required to build capacity of our Reserve forces.

Commission on the Defence Forces: It will be impossible to deliver the recommendations of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces without addressing the recruitment and retention crises as outlined.

There is broad political consensus that Ireland should strive to reach Level of Ambition 2 contained within the Commission report. The realisation of this level of ambition 2 should be a priority and necessary budget allocations must be provided to move to this point, particularly in terms of the purchase of equipment and other capital acquisitions as a matter of urgency.

While the High-Level Action Plan for the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces published in March 2023 did indicate progress being made in a number of areas, it is universally too slow while in some areas there has been virtually no progress at all.

Sinn Féin also believe that upon reaching Level of Ambition 2, it may be required to pursue some measures contained within Level of Ambition 3 where optimal for national defence purposes.

Cyber Security: From a very weak starting point before the Cyber attack on the HSE, which caused so much disruption and financial cost, there has been a marked improvement in the work of the National Cyber Security Centre. The Consultative Forum heard that Cyber and Hybrid threats are the greatest risks facing a country such as Ireland. Therefore, investment in the National Cyber Security Centre must continue and be continuously reviewed, accounting for international best practise in every sphere. Every government department, state agency and essential infrastructure provider must operate to best standards as laid down by the Centre.

While the Defence Forces are closely engaged with the National Cyber Security Centre, it operates under the direction of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Future development of the centre must also give consideration to the prospect of moving the centre under the direction of the Department of Defence in recognition of the source of potential threats.

International & EU Organisations

Sinn Féin understands the obligations of the Government in respect of agreements made with international partners.

We particularly value the role that Ireland has played within the United Nations framework. The UN has its flaws, notably the veto of the five permanent members of the Security Council, but it is the best hope we have for an international institution capable of upholding and, where necessary, enforcing international law.

Ireland should be a global champion for the United Nations.

In that respect it is imperative that the Triple Lock be maintained in terms of our participation in Peace Keeping operations. It should be noted that the Triple Lock does not prevent our active engagement as outlined above and should never be a barrier to defending Ireland's security or sovereignty, or in protecting Irish citizens abroad when required.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments have used membership of NATO's Partnership for Peace and PESCO as mechanisms to further undermine neutrality. A further critical flaw in their approach has been that they have signed Ireland up to increasing participation in EU arrangements while simultaneously overseeing the downgrading of our Defence Forces in terms of both numbers and capacity.

In the first instance Ireland, as a neutral country, must develop our Defence Forces in both respects.

Sinn Féin have confirmed that, in government, we will not withdraw Irish troops from existing, pre-committed operations and exercises.

In respect of future decisions, however, we will take a different approach from that of the current Government. That approach will have the unequivocal starting point that we are a neutral and independent State, and will have the objective of building upon our proud tradition of participating in UN peacekeeping missions and supporting conflict resolution across the globe. That should be the position of the current government parties also.

The alternative trajectory is one that would place Irish Defence Forces personnel increasingly aligned with EU military structures. The stated position of many government representatives that we should also abandon the triple lock could lead to the deployment of Irish Defence Force members to overseas missions without a UN mandate. The consequences could be far-reaching and long-lasting and could undermine the role that Ireland is best placed to play at an international level.

All future proposals in respect of engagement by the Defence Forces in international, including EU, security organisations and frameworks should be referred by the Dáil to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for considered and detailed scrutiny. And the current government should apply the same practice for any further membership of PESCO or PfP operations that they propose. This would address the lack of democratic oversight of Irish engagement in these organisations that was cited during the Consultative Forum hearings.

Conclusion

Ireland's story on Foreign, Security and Defence policy is one that we can be proud of.

Ours is a country that suffered from colonialism and conflict to become one that has been a voice of the oppressed all over the world while operating within a European and western sphere

in which we have also played a positive role. Ireland was a leading voice that help bring an end to the apartheid regime in South Africa. We can do so in other regions too, such as being a voice against the ongoing apartheid, occupation and annexation in Palestine.

We can increase Oversees Development Aid to 0.7% of Gross National Income and support countries affected by food shortages, climate change and conflict through humanitarian aid and other structures.

We can build our Defence Forces for the next generation, creating an Army, a Naval Service and an Air Corps that can monitor and defend our skies, seas and territory, can protect Irish citizens abroad when necessary and can continue to play an important, and growing, role in peace-keeping and conflict resolution. We can do this with a strengthened Defence Forces that are respected and valued, who are assured of positive experiences and career paths that will allow them to serve with dignity.

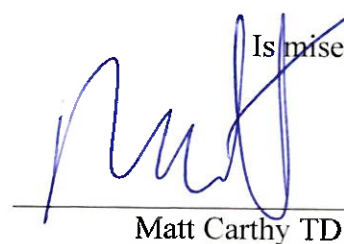
The Peace Process in Ireland continues to serve as a beacon of hope in many conflict regions in the world. Ireland can be a champion for dialogue, for co-operation and for integration. The ongoing and intensifying discussions around Irish Unity can become a global inspiration for a better future.

Ireland's story is one that we can be proud of. We have flaws and there are failures which cannot be ignored. But Ireland's story, above all is one of hope.

We must share that hope with the wider world. That is best done through Neutrality and an Independent Foreign policy.

I thank you for giving this submission your due consideration. I look forward to reading your final report.

Is mise,



Matt Carthy TD.

Sinn Féin spokesperson on Foreign Affairs & Defence.