

FINDING OUR BEARINGS:

European Security Challenges in
the Era of Trump and Brexit

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1 – THE CONTEXT CHANGES, BIGLY.

The conventional view of Europe as a “zone of peace”, already shaken by Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, was further challenged by two generally unanticipated events in 2016. The referendum in the United Kingdom on 23 June to withdraw from the European Union – Brexit — was followed on 8 November by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States.

Brexit puts Ireland at the epicentre of a severe regional earthquake. The prospect of President Trump is potentially more like a tectonic readjustment on a global scale. Both events represent a major shock to world order, with repercussions across most aspects of international politics. This paper is an initial attempt to find our bearings in one such aspect, international security policy, in and around Europe. What are the challenges for European security, and what are the implications for Ireland?

President Trump

Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric, outrageously bombastic in tone, contained an incoherent and ambiguous mix of disturbing world views. On trade the tone was protectionist, and more generally he seemed to combine a selective form of isolationism with jingoistic nationalism.

So far as international security was concerned, increased defence expenditure was emphasised. No surprise there, but two other themes were more controversial. First, he downgraded the value of the longstanding network of American alliances around the world; second, he appeared to be alarmingly confused on nuclear issues. He was casually dismissive of the dangers of proliferation, and on occasion seemed to regard nuclear assets as just another weapon. Throughout the campaign he lauded the value of “strong men” — with special reference to the Russian President - as the ultimate deal makers in foreign and security policy. Taken at face value, it is tempting to conclude that a Trumpian world order would consist of a gold-plated triumvirate, where the US always proves smarter than China and Russia, while the rest of the world awaits the early morning triumphal tweet.

Of course, that’s just campaign rhetoric, which sooner rather than later has to be translated into real world policy. Does the new administration’s foreign and security policy team offer clues to what might come out of this process? Donald Trump’s choices for the relevant posts (secretaries of state and defence, national security advisor, heads of intelligence agencies and some senior ambassadorships) reflect both his own prejudices and those of a mixed bag of isolationists, realpolitik Republicans and neo-conservatives. But what is most remarkable about this group is that, apart from several retired generals, it is largely devoid of relevant experience in the arts of government or legislative oversight. In this respect the team matches its leader.

A further distillation of campaign rhetoric can be found in the constitutional checks and balances, which have a sobering influence on presidential behaviour. This proposition may be generally valid, but rather less so in the field of security policy than in domestic affairs, particularly with regard to nuclear crises. Neither Congress nor the Supreme Court will be sharing the nuclear codes with President Trump. The President is Commander-in-Chief, with extensive executive privileges, such as targeted killings and drone strikes. Moreover, the Republican Party's majority in both House and Senate may weaken the checks and balances theory. If there is a check it is more likely to be found within the GOP, where there is a sizeable number of Trump-sceptics among elected Republicans and the broader security policy community, most notably of late, Senator John McCain.

At the best of times a new administration's formation is problematic. On this occasion there is likely to be a dangerous level of unpredictability. There is huge scope for miscalculation, both by the administration and the rest of the world.

Brexit

The British decision to leave the EU is generally seen in this country as an act of self-harm with negative collateral effects on the economy of the victim's nearest neighbour and the destabilisation of the hard-won peace process in Northern Ireland. But it also poses questions for European security in general. Although we are only at the beginning of a still very confused process, it is possible to identify some of these.

When Brexit finally happens the central structures of British defence policy are likely to stand proud amongst the rubble of complicated and painful compromises on other issues. The United Kingdom will remain a prominent member of its preferred alliance, NATO. It is already being argued in London that this will give the UK significant leverage in the forthcoming Brexit negotiations, given that NATO is also the preferred military alliance for most of the remaining EU Member States. There is a common interest in keeping the UK and the EU close together in the field of international security, but if Brexit negotiations turn sour that interest will be at risk.

The EU, for its part, is much diminished by the loss of one of its two militarily credible Member States, a permanent member of the UN Security Council with a substantial diplomatic presence and intelligence capacity. The conventional wisdom sees a silver lining on this cloud in that the hitherto persistent British blocking of further EU defence cooperation will at least start to wither away. The pace and extent of such a process remains to be seen; in the long term, the broader role of a stand-alone UK is unclear. Where will it lie on the spectrum between close partner or loose cannon?

Brexit and Trump

The Brexit referendum result and the election of Donald Trump are widely seen as reflections of a broader populist phenomenon - the adverse reaction of a significant part of the electorate in many western democracies to the impact of economic globalisation and technological change and a profound associated sense of loss of economic position and political power. Following the general crisis in 2008, this portion of the electorate has been offered a seductive explanation for their perceived plight by a set of hitherto unconnected populist parties and movements. The latter have played an increasingly successful blame game by attacking incumbent elites, migrants, minorities, the media and the broad structures of international cooperation.

The alternative world order envisaged by these hard-line populist leaders is rarely spelled out in concrete terms. By implication, the wished-for reversion to a world of self-contained nation states is a sufficient solution in itself. This will be a golden age of international harmony, with now even a hint of a sort of "populist international". The contemplation of historical precedents is not allowed to spoil the fun.

Some of the more exuberant supporters of Brexit look forward to the renewal of the "special relationship" between London and Washington. Expectations that the United Kingdom will play a more influential role in foreign and security policy than it did as a EU member state may be unfulfilled. There are at present important differences between London and Trump on major policies, particularly relations with Russia and Iran. In any case, the publication of the Chilcot Report on London's failure to use the special relationship to influence American policy on Iraq in 2003, might also serve as a reminder that the relationship is asymmetrical as well as special.

2 – CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN SECURITY

The Challenge to Multilateralism in a Geopolitical World Order

After the end of the Cold War twenty-five years ago, we grew accustomed to see the world in terms of the largely benign multilateral management of international issues. Globalisation in the economic sphere and the spread of democratic politics seemed to suggest progress in this direction. The world order would be rule-bound, based on universally accepted values and formally organised in multilateral institutions with inclusive membership.

In this view, at the global level the UN represented the apex of a broad network of agencies promoting international cooperation in many fields, while in Europe the OSCE existed (in a low-profile way) to underpin the difficult adjustments following the collapse of the Soviet Union. NATO continued, but as an organisation in search of a role; the European Union, the epitome of “soft power,” was the most dynamic element in the regional order. However, the basic elements of geopolitics, with a focus on potentially lethal conflicts and the management of power, did not go away. The Balkan wars in the 1990s and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan this century demonstrated only too clearly that there were still limits to multilateralism in the field of international security.

In the current context, given the rise of populism, it does not look likely that this situation will improve; on the contrary, harsher interpretations of a multipolar world order are likely to prevail. From what we know of President Trump, recourse to the UN will not be a prominent priority (save to pose as the champion of unilateralism, flourish his veto in the Security Council or reduce American financial support). As for Brexit, many of its principal advocates seem to regard their success as a gesture of disdain for the humiliating disciplines of the multilateral approach.

But so far as European security is concerned, the sharpest challenge to the regional order has already been mounted, with Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2014. Russia has justified this act as a necessary response to the encroachment of a hostile West (through the enlargement of NATO and the European Union) in its rightful sphere of influence. For the West, basing its view on the sovereign right of all states within the OSCE order to determine their own security policies, Russia’s claim is a pretext masking the revanchist ambitions of an authoritarian regime mobilising its domestic support.¹

Whatever its root causes, the Ukraine crisis is a radical challenge to the European security order. It has involved treaty violations, and the illegal annexation of Crimea following massive intimidation and a plebiscite without international monitors. The subsequent proxy war in eastern Ukraine is still unresolved in spite of sustained diplomatic efforts in the Minsk process.

The Ukraine conflict has led to tensions between Russia and NATO along Russia’s “near abroad” from the Baltic to the Balkans. More broadly, there has been considerable evidence over recent years of Russian attempts to influence the domestic politics of western democracies beyond this frontier zone, through support for opposition parties, disinformation campaigns and cyber interference. The latter phenomenon is notoriously difficult to pin down, given the diversity and elusive nature of its practitioners. The controversy over Russian influence in the American presidential election is unlikely to be the last case in point.

Nevertheless, the traditional geopolitical question of frontiers is the most challenging aspect for European security. A particular hot spot is the Baltic region, with a focus on the three small Baltic states which were formerly part of the Soviet Union. It involves all of the threats of “hybrid warfare” — covert support for armed proxies, cyber attacks, large-scale disinformation campaigns, and nuclear posturing. The defence of territory is again at stake.

NATO

The re-emergence of collective territorial defence has put the spotlight on NATO. The alliance’s last two summit meetings held in Wales in 2014 and Warsaw in 2016 have concentrated on deterring Russia and reassuring those most directly threatened². Support for Ukraine, not a member of the alliance, has necessarily been at arm’s length, but there has been a strong emphasis on the Baltic region, where seven NATO Member States meet Russia. Three peculiarities are worth noting; the vulnerability

¹ For these conflicting narratives, see *Back to Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project* (November 2015) <http://www.osce.org/networks/205846?download=true>

² 2014 Wales Summit Declaration: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm; 2016 Warsaw Summit Communiqué: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm

of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as former territories of the Soviet Union, the military significance of the Russian “outpost” in Kaliningrad, and the extent of the engagement of two militarily non-aligned states, Finland and Sweden.

NATO’s deterrence policy is centred on a range of military measures in order to create a “trip-wire” to ensure that any invasion would lead to the activation of the alliance’s commitment to mutual defence, contained in article five of the Washington Treaty. Any assessment of NATO policy involves two broad aspects, the alliance’s military credibility and its political solidarity. Difficult questions arise on both scores, and may be more readily grasped in unconventional forms than in official documents. A recently published, lightly fictionalised, worst-case scenario by a former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe is based on the methods of Russia’s hybrid war already experienced in the Ukraine crisis. The author is scathing about the hollowing-out of military capacity in NATO and the way in which political micro-management can prevent a credible collective posture.³

Political solidarity is an inherent problem in any alliance. The Turkish government’s increasingly authoritarian response to a failed coup in July was a case in point, but Donald Trump’s election campaign threw an even larger brick through NATO’s window. A casual remark by one of his supporters, Newt Gingrich, to the effect that Estonia was a suburb of Saint Petersburg, did not go down well in Tallinn. In the context of Trump’s admiration for President Putin and his generally dismissive view of the value of American alliances, NATO and its Member States might be forgiven for fearing Washington as much as Moscow. Post-election reassurances may not have restored morale entirely.

Moreover, the arrival of President Trump raises a perennial issue for NATO in a way which is likely to be more destabilising than usual. Rows about burden-sharing — “who pays for this collective endeavour?” — long predate Donald Trump, and the argument that allies are not doing their bit has been made well beyond the confines of his camp. The conventional benchmark of defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP tends to support it.⁴ The problem now is that Donald Trump’s approach, with the narrow mindset of a financial adventurer, loses sight of the alliance’s basic product, the commitment to mutual defence in the face of threats to its members’ security. Too much emphasis on the price of membership tends to reduce the psychological credibility of deterrence.

There remains the question of how to read Russia’s intentions. The difficulty here is that Vladimir Putin’s mode of communication is decidedly opaque (as in its own way is Donald Trump’s). It is generally assumed that he is not an expansionist in the grand style, for all the tsarist and great patriotic war mood music, and he does not possess the economic base to sustain such ambitions. But his recent actions betray a revanchist impulse on the margins, together with an obsession with status. Is “make Russia great again” a good match for “make America great again”? President Trump will attempt to make a deal with his counterpart in Moscow, but they both will have to rise well above the level of mutually compatible bombast.

Who gives what for what? The focus of public attention over the last year or so has been on the possibility of developing a common interest against the threat of jihadist terrorism arising out of the overlapping conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. This concern is hardly surprising, given the appalling humanitarian disaster in Syria. Trump seems to offer an over-militarised solution to jihadist forces and, even beyond that, to a would-be nuclear Iran. How this squares with Russia is anybody’s guess.

But for Europeans the main test of a Putin-Trump deal is likely to relate to the Ukraine issue, the European fault-line. Where does the frontier between Europe and Russia lie? We may expect talk about “spheres of influence” (hard or soft)?, and - with apologies to my Finnish friends - the necessary virtue of “Finlandisation”. But who will dare to speak of Crimea?

All of this may be negotiated above the heads of mere Europeans (and that includes a would-be stand-alone United Kingdom), who will be presented with a *fait accompli*. Meanwhile the danger of “accidental escalation” will persist. Where uncertainty prevails and loose talk is tweeted, the risk of miscalculation, mismanaged proxies and nervous border guards is all the greater. And nuclear issues are in the mix.

The European Union

The European Union is often characterised as the epitome of “soft power”, as distinct from NATO with its “hard”, military power. It is an important distinction but a narrow one. In addition to the fact there is a large measure of overlapping membership in the two institutions, security is seen in broader terms than territorial defence; since the end of the Cold War

³ For more information, see *2017 War With Russia: An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Command* (2016) Richard Shirreff

⁴ For more information on NATO defence spending, see *Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2009-2016)*: http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160704_160704-pr2016-116.pdf

the EU has developed a role in providing both civilian and military support to more than 30 international crisis management operations outside the European Union.

As a large and relatively structured diplomatic coalition the EU can bring to bear a range of instruments to exert its influence. This can be seen in its twofold response to the Ukraine crisis. Since the annexation of Crimea a policy of selective economic sanctions against Russia, renewable on a six monthly basis, has been maintained, though with evident reluctance on the part of several Member States. In addition, a multifaceted policy of support for Ukraine has been put in place, with a view to providing incentives for reforms in the governance and economic management of the state.

A second major driver of the EU's role arises from the security aspects of the migration crisis of recent years. The violent collapse of the post-Ottoman order in the Middle East, especially the civil war in Syria, has raised acute issues; humanitarian rescue, border control, and the prevention of jihadist terrorism are at the top of the agenda in several Member States. A striking feature of these challenges is that they blur conventional intellectual and bureaucratic distinctions between "internal" or "homeland" security (the domain of police forces and judicial systems) and "external" security (the domain of diplomacy and armed forces).

Thus it is not surprising that the EU has adopted a higher profile on internal security in the form of a "Security Union".⁵ The Union's external security policy has also been subject to a serious review process. Based mainly on a comprehensive consultation on the EU's foreign and security policy which was finalised just in time to coincide with the Brexit referendum, this process was given added urgency by that shock and was flanked by several member state proposals, notably from Germany and France.⁶

The most recent meeting of the European Council, on 15 December 2016, gave a general endorsement to a package of measures which are to be further refined during the first six months of 2017.⁷ These include, for example, attempts to pool costs of member state contributions to specific missions or operations, to improve rapid response procedures, and provide a civilian/military planning and command centre in Brussels. The latter proposal, often envisaged as a dysfunctional rival to NATO headquarters, turns out to be something much more limited in scope or scale.

From the inception of the EU's security and defence policy at the turn of the century the question of capabilities has been on the agenda. As Member States generally cashed in their post-Cold War "peace dividends" and favoured their national procurement procedures (which tended to be as much concerned with jobs as with the appropriate capabilities) this has been an uphill task, with limited influence from the small European Defence Agency. Possibly the main novelty in the current review process is the proactive role of the Commission, which has put a "Defence Action Plan" on the table, which envisages financial support for defence research.⁸

The question of the relationship between the EU and NATO has also been formally reviewed in the last six months. In spite of a large overlap in membership — twenty-two EU states are members of NATO and five others are involved in the Partnership for Peace programme — this has usually been a sensitive issue. Greek-Turkish tensions over Cyprus have been a persistent sticking point; so too has been the United Kingdom's insistence that EU military cooperation was the thin end of the wedge in a zero-sum competition in which the two institutions were proxies for rival "Atlanticist" and "Gaullist" power centres.

A different tone seems to be emerging, in which there is an emphasis on the search for complementarity rather than an insistence on competition. The challenge of Russian revanchism has been a wake-up call — the EU-NATO Joint Declaration was signed in Warsaw on 8 July 2016 – and the uncertainties surrounding both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have reinforced the need for a fresh look. The EU and NATO have now agreed to cooperate on selected issues, including among others hybrid threats, cyber security and maritime cooperation in the Mediterranean and Aegean. This cooperation however

⁵ *European Agenda on Security: Second Report on Progress Towards an Effective and Sustainable Security Union* (2016): http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-3681_en.htm

⁶ *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy* (2016): https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/about/eugs_review_web_6.pdf; see also *EU defence, Brexit and Trump: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (2016) Sofia Besch: https://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/pb_defence_14dec16.pdf

⁷ *European Council Conclusions, December 2016*: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2016/12/20161215-euco-conclusions-final_pdf/

⁸ *European Defence Action Plan*, (2016): https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/com_2016_950_fl_communication_from_commission_to_inst_en_v5_p1_869631.pdf

takes “full respect of the decision-making autonomy and procedures of both organisations”.⁹

What does all this add up to? It is probably wise to preface the answer by commenting on what it does not mean — a “European Army”. This stale myth persists, not least in the classical federalist aspirations of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, as well as serving as a useful bogeyman in the Brexit referendum campaign and elsewhere. But a European Army necessarily implies the existence of a federal European State, which is nowhere to be seen; and so long as NATO exists there is not even a European military alliance.¹⁰

What we are seeing is an attempt (and not the first one) to reinforce the implementation of policies agreed over the eighteen years since the EU Member States (except Denmark) started to develop their military cooperation. In short, it is a pragmatic response to a changing environment, and will only succeed if the Member States can maintain a minimal solidarity.

On this occasion (15 December 2016) the established solidarity held; economic sanctions against Russia were renewed for a further six months. But the fragility of this stance was illustrated by the conundrum facing the European Council following the rejection of the terms of the association agreement with Ukraine in a Dutch referendum on 6 April 2016. Whether a clarification of the limits of the agreement helps the Dutch revisit this issue remains to be seen.

European Security, Early January 2017 – a Snapshot

Facts on the ground. In Syria the Assad regime, assisted by Russia and Iran, has taken Aleppo. Russia and Turkey promote a ceasefire (28 December 2016), the third in the last twelve months. Meanwhile, a Jihadist lone wolf attack in Berlin killed 12 civilians (19 December 2016).

In eastern Ukraine, under the aegis of the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group, a “comprehensive, sustainable and unlimited” ceasefire was agreed to take place from midnight on Christmas Eve. It didn’t happen, to the general indifference of international media. The Minsk 2 peace process (which does not include the United States directly) will continue into 2017.

In parenthesis. Brexit – the phoney war — continues. The May government starts to woo President-elect Trump.

Noises off. President Putin seems relaxed about President-elect Trump, and expresses the need to increase Russia’s nuclear capability. President-elect Trump seems relaxed about his Russian counterpart and suggests an arms race may be necessary. He discounts his own intelligence agencies’ conclusions about Russian interference in the US presidential election. He already has China on the back foot, and has the UN in his sights, following a landmark Security Council resolution (2334) condemning the Israeli policy on settlements in the West Bank. He will take up office on 20 January 2017.

Are we seeing the first moves of a Grand Design ... or a mish-mash of reckless improvisations?

⁹ *European Council conclusions, June 2016*: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2016/06/European-Council-conclusions_pdf/; *EU-NATO Joint Declaration (2016)*: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/08-eu-nato-joint-declaration/>; *European Council Conclusions, December 2016*: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2016/12/20161215-euco-conclusions-final_pdf/

¹⁰ *Samuel Beckett’s European Army (2016)* Daniel Keohane: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/66456>

3 – IRELAND AND EUROPEAN SECURITY

Finding Our Bearings: Towards a Strategic Approach

At this juncture, with the re-emergence of the increasingly unstable European order outlined above, what are the implications for Ireland? In order to develop a strategic approach to this question, a good starting point is to think in terms of our security interests.

Foreign policy is sometimes seen as a clash between interests and values. Values reflect where we want to be, all other things being equal; interests are about where we need to be, whatever other things are up to. There is often a tension between the two, but ultimately a sustainable policy reflects a carefully considered attempt to reconcile interests and values in the prevailing circumstances. Whether we call this endeavour “statecraft” or simply the art of the possible, it is a necessary part of a strategic approach. In this light, an initial broad categorisation of interests is offered here.

Ireland’s Interests in European Security

First, it is in Ireland’s interest to help shore up multilateral cooperation on security issues. For a small state with an economy exposed to global influences this is perhaps to state the obvious. We need to be at the table, to make the most of the possibilities of collective influence. We need a UN which serves as the centre of a network which sees security in the broadest terms, consistent with the universal values in the UN Charter, and not just as a Security Council exposed to the dangers of geopolitical paralysis. We need to maintain and raise the profile of the OSCE, the most inclusive security organisation in the European region.

Second, it is in Ireland’s interest to reinforce this multilateral approach in reconciling our national interests with a common European interest as we face the challenges to European security. That is done primarily in the context of membership of the European Union, a regional multilateral group within the broader framework of the UN.

Finally, Brexit may raise new questions about what had been, before the 24 June last, a more or less settled matter — the maintenance of security in the national territory. The issue of the nature of the land border between the Republic and Northern Ireland has already received attention, but Ireland also has an interest in the management of security in the maritime domain. Fishery protection, rescue services, the interdiction of contraband or human trafficking and the surveillance of illegal overflights fall within the scope of the defence forces, requiring a clearly defined cooperation with the neighbouring state.

Dilemmas En Route

At the most general level, Ireland’s security policy reflects these concerns. Positions taken in the UN, for example, have long been based on a multilateral approach to perennial issues such as peacekeeping, nuclear non-proliferation and development. These efforts can be sustained, even in a setting which is now likely to be increasingly corrupted by vetoes and cuts in financial contributions.

But on many more specific questions policy makers will face difficult dilemmas. For example, take the policy towards Russia’s intervention in Ukraine. Here we have had to balance the claims of solidarity (with Ukraine itself and vulnerable EU partners) against the costs of countering Russian actions. Faced with an American-Russian deal to make some form of partition of Ukraine the price for some form of settlement in Syria, where will we stand?

A second sort of dilemma concerns resources. This digs deep (and painfully for those directly involved) in the business of government. Present commitments by the Permanent Defence Forces to peacekeeping and humanitarian operations probably stretch available resources to their limits. Yet Ireland is far from being a big spender in terms of defence policy. Indeed, comparative international indicators place Ireland at the bottom of the list of EU Member States, with 0.4% of GDP (the EU average is 1.3% of GDP).¹¹ This is likely to become a more difficult issue in a world where burden-sharing has risen to the top of the agenda. Does being branded as a “free rider” have a cost even outside the context of security policy?

¹¹ Data extracted in January 2017, from *Eurostat*: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

Military Neutrality: The Specific Character of Irish policy

Where does the policy of military neutrality stand in all of this? Official documents describe it as a core element of Ireland's foreign policy.¹² Taken at face value, this stance preserves the autonomy of the state regarding the defence of its territory; there is no membership of a mutual defence pact. The recent White Paper on Defence sheds light on its consequences. "Ireland must adopt a posture of preparedness and, in the event of an attack, Ireland must be prepared to act alone until the United Nations Security Council has taken appropriate measures".¹³

In effect, then, the state's security in the narrowly defined but existential contingency of territorial defence depends ultimately on a Security Council which may be paralysed by a veto by one or more of its five permanent members. In extremis, solo means solo. It may be of some comfort to read that such a threat is regarded as "unlikely but possible". We can put this down to two factors; our good fortune that the River Liffey does not flow into the Baltic, and the (generally unacknowledged) existence of nuclear restraint by the powers that be in Washington and Moscow.

Military cooperation in the context of the European Union falls short of a mutual defence pact. The relevant treaty obligations undertaken by Member States are qualified by an important formula in which the Union's policy "shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States and shall respect the obligations of certain Member States which see their common defence realised in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)."¹⁴ When this slightly opaque legal language was first adopted in the Maastricht Treaty (1991-2) Ireland was the only member state not in NATO, thus being able to call on this reserve, which appears frequently in current documents.

Our participation in EU crisis management activities (which in any case is voluntary) is also circumscribed by the so-called triple lock. The deployment of more than twelve military personnel overseas requires a formal government decision, endorsement by the Dáil and a UN mandate (again potentially exposing the state to the blocking power of the permanent members of the Security Council).

Military neutrality has long been a fixed point on Ireland's security policy compass, whatever the political configuration in power. Popular support is generally high, though it is not always clear just what is being supported. The limiting adjective "military" may be inadvertently (and sometimes deliberately?) omitted in public discourse, leading to a much broader conception of what the policy entails. It is often seen in terms of general values: pacific intent, a humanitarian approach to development and human rights, post-colonial empathy, absolute sovereignty and national identity.

However, the relevance of military neutrality to these goals is rarely spelled out by government ministers; is it a necessary prerequisite or simply a more or less important enabling factor in achieving them? Has a means to an end become an end in itself? Also, in this introspective, and often backward-looking debate it is all too easy to lose sight of what security policy is mainly about — the survival of the state and its citizens. In the more challenging security environment we are now facing it is not enough to invoke (military) neutrality and leave it at that.

Options: The Range of Choice

Do small states have any room for manoeuvre in a world where geopolitical determinism seems to be gaining the upper hand? Consider a spectrum of hypothetical positions: at one end zero engagement in collective action, at the other end a total commitment, as represented by a mutual defence pact such as NATO's article five.

For Ireland the minimum engagement would involve opting out of the EU's security and defence obligations, as Denmark did following rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. But if we assume this is a practical move (a very big if) that would not leave Ireland on a par with Denmark – then and since embedded in NATO – but without any anchor, bar an increasingly incapacitated UN.

The maximum engagement, accepting a mutual defence commitment, is also problematic. It rubs against the grain of tradition and would almost certainly involve a potentially bitter referendum campaign. There would also be the question of which military alliance to join. The EU does not have one, so would it be NATO - about to enter its Trumpian moment? Or a

¹² *The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2015), pp. 27-33: <https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebstemedial/ourrolesandpolicies/ourwork/global-island/the-global-island-irelands-foreign-policy.pdf>

¹³ *White Paper on Defence (2015)*, pp.24: <http://www.defence.ie/WebSite.nsf/WP2015E>

¹⁴ *Article 42.2 TEU*: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008M042>

bilateral alliance with the United Kingdom?

What lies between these two extreme hypotheses? At this stage, there is certainly no pressure on Ireland to give up the policy of military neutrality, and so long as NATO is there, that may remain the case. What we are being asked to do is undertake a firmer commitment to the EU's collective security and thereby make a larger commitment to international security, on a range of measures which fall short of a classical mutual defence pact. In effect, we are being asked to up our game.

In reflecting on the options open to small states, it is helpful to consider how things are done elsewhere. In the field of security policy (as in so many other areas) there is a Nordic model of interest. The “Siamese twins” of military non-alignment, Finland and Sweden, have not only adopted a more prosaic but arguably less ambiguous label than “military neutrality” for their stance. Their strategy is threefold: hold to military non-alignment (“don't provoke Russia gratuitously”), but increase military capabilities and cooperate closely with NATO (“on no account be intimidated by Russian provocation”). Aspects of this strategy may be debatable — and are indeed debated in those countries — but at least they have the merit of being related to security, rooted in the concrete predicament they face.

Since the end of the Cold War Ireland has made an increasingly professional contribution in the core activities of security policy, such as peacekeeping, but it is done on a small scale, and in a political and administrative setting which tends to treat defence as a backwater. The current absence of a dedicated cabinet minister for defence is illustrative. In recent years foreign policy — the diplomatic context of security and defence — has necessarily been focused mainly on the restoration of foreign confidence in the economy, and now faces the challenge of Brexit. Is there a danger of inadequate political attention to security issues, with a consequent lack of informed public debate?

To be fair, the previous government did publish relatively detailed policy statements on foreign and defence policy in 2015, after a long period of sleepy inattention. One of the merits of the Defence White Paper in 2015 was to instigate for the first time a regular review process in this field. The next round is scheduled to begin in June 2018; is there a case for some advance in the timetable? And for a concerted and carefully calibrated follow through at the political level?

Looking Ahead

The short term outlook for European security is bleak. The first hundred days [or more] of the Trump administration and the beginning of the formal negotiating phase of Brexit will take place against the backdrop of serial electoral challenges in Europe. Elections in the Netherlands (March '17), France (April-May '17) and Germany (autumn) will provide further opportunities for the forces of xenophobic nationalism.

This could impinge negatively on the continuing crises in the European Union. And that's only the next nine months. Indeed, Cassandras, peering fearfully or eagerly over the horizon, may wonder whether there will be an EU to leave, or a NATO to hold together. Finding our bearings won't be easy, but at least there is some comfort in the fact that the Cassandras have no better access to the future than we do.



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