“Our Gallant Allies in Europe”
Irish Diplomacy in a post-Brexit EU?

“To be blunt, Germany is now an indispensable partner for Ireland.”

This paper examines recent developments in the German-Irish bilateral relationship, and the implications that Ireland’s recent alliance-building with the Nordics, Baltics, and the Netherlands may have for Dublin’s relationship with Berlin. It analyses three aspects of German-Irish ties and explores the extent to which that bilateral relationship can help advance Irish interests in a post-Brexit EU. These aspects include economic preferences, common action globally through the UN, and transatlantic relations. It concludes with recommendations in each area.
Introduction

Even with the fraught process of the impending departure of Ireland’s previously closest EU partner, the UK, recent polls suggest Irish people are decidedly in favour of remaining part of the European project. How then, should Ireland adjust to losing a partner such as the UK—one which happened to have an influential European Council vote and the diplomatic capacity to back it up?

“Germany” is an integral part of an obvious—if complicated—answer. The Irish Government’s Global Ireland plan announced intentions to boost diplomatic staff in Berlin and open a consulate in Frankfurt. The recent Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) review on German-Irish relations offers 24 recommendations for how to deepen ties. However, some policy positions that enjoy broad support in Ireland are hotly debated in Germany—within and between political parties.

The East German precedent is sometimes cited in United Ireland debates and Chancellor Angela Merkel pledged “unconditional” support for Ireland early on in Brexit negotiations. At the same time, Ireland’s Finance Minister, Paschal Donohoe, co-signed letters with other EU finance ministers that were widely interpreted as direct challenges to French President Emmanuel Macron’s Eurozone reform agenda. The Dutch Government dubbed the
second of these letters a “Hanseatic Statement,” reflecting the name sometimes given to the recently-formed coalition of smaller, economically liberal Member States. Viewed from Berlin, the letters help illuminate Germany’s own European choice. Should it pursue a European policy that prioritises wide engagement and consensus-building—the option Ireland would prefer—or should it double down on Franco-German cooperation above all else?

This paper draws upon—among other sources—the Irish Government’s recent strategies, interviews with both German and Irish officials and experts, and independent research on Ireland’s European coalitions. The objective is to assess the current state of Ireland’s relationship with Germany and to provide some analysis and recommendations for where that relationship can go in a post-Brexit EU. The paper commences with some context before looking at the German-Irish relationship through three policy lenses. These include EU-level economic policies, global multilateralism, and transatlantic relations.

“Peripheral Ireland” and “Core Germany”—Ireland’s Current EU Coalition Context

Since the two countries joined the EU on the same day in 1973, Ireland and the UK have worked together to advance common interests within European institutional frameworks. Although the UK did not follow Ireland into the euro, the two states stood firmly in the Union’s economically liberal camp on issues like trade, fiscal policy, and in opposition to overregulation—even as Ireland often allied with the French and Spanish against British positions on the Common Agricultural Policy.

The comprehensive “EU Coalition Explorer” study on bilateral relationships between Member States conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) identified the UK as one of the states Ireland contacted most often on EU matters. Irish diplomats and independent experts who were polled
also named the UK as one of the “most responsive” states to the Irish Government, and one with which it had a high level of “shared interests.”\textsuperscript{11} Crucially however, ECFR’s study finds that the UK was the only Member State that reciprocally placed Ireland among its top partners in the same three categories. Irish diplomats and experts polled by ECFR gave high vote shares to both Germany and the Netherlands for “most contacted,” “shared interests,” and “most responsive.” Yet, their German and Dutch counterparts did not generally reciprocate these votes. Given Ireland’s previous alignment with the UK as an EU partner on some issues, Brexit presents Ireland, the Union’s most Europhile state, with challenges extending much further than Brexit.

By contrast, Germany is named among the “most contacted” of every single other EU Member State, is considered to have a high level of “shared interests” by all but three of its counterparts and is listed as one of the “most responsive” by all but one Member State. ECFR notes “Germany is a singular player. It has the most dense networks of interactions, tops most countries’ list of ‘essential partners,’ and is ranked as the most influential member in the EU overall.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, Ireland’s present work to deepen its bilateral relationship with Germany is key to strengthening its overall EU network.

For its part, the German Foreign Office has signaled new reciprocal interest in closer ties through its “Like-Minded Initiative,” identifying Ireland and Finland as the first two fellow EU Member States with which to pursue stronger engagement.\textsuperscript{13} The German Foreign Office notes Ireland’s “decidedly pro-European” orientation as a reason for being one of the first Member States chosen, while the German Embassy in Dublin highlights common German-Irish outlooks on free trade, multilateral commitments, and African development.

“Simply put, we looked at the European map again,” says German Ambassador to Ireland, Deike Potzel,\textsuperscript{14} noting that Brexit had also made Germany—itself having had strong ties with the UK in EU frameworks—
re-evaluate its EU network. The mutual German-Irish interest in stronger bilateral ties has already progressed to some steps at concrete implementation, beginning with a Joint Plan of Action announced in November 2018. DFAT’s recommendation of regular bilateral contact at a State Secretary level has begun, with Germany also being interested in more exchange between the Bundestag and the Dáil.

Outside of government institutions, the IIEA and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) have initiated the annual Irish-German Joint Vision Forum. This will facilitate discussions of EU matters in detail at bilateral level, by both foreign ministries. Yet forging a mutually beneficial Irish-German partnership within the EU is about more than straight bilateral links. In their paper on “Minilateralism in the EU,” SWP’s Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza note how coalitions between small and mid-size states with shared interests are much harder for Berlin to ignore. Yet, as Lang and von Ondarza note, Ireland has historically remained outside most of the EU’s “minilateral” coalitions, (such as the EPPO). However, Ireland does participate in the Eurozone, Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO), and Opting in to Justice and Home Affairs, where possible—perhaps also reflecting a general Irish scepticism of fixed intra-EU coalitions, as opposed to alliances that can shift depending on the policy issue being discussed.

Ireland’s alignment with the new “Hanseatic League,” or “Hansa,” is not without controversy. Due to its positions, which challenge French Eurozone reform ambitions—a hotly debated topic among the German political class—the Hansa presents both opportunities and risks for Dublin’s relationship with Berlin. Dublin’s economic preferences will be more readily appreciated by some German political parties than others, creating a risk of Irish positions being drawn into domestic
German debates. At the same time, a shift in Irish EU alliance thinking potentially presents Berlin with a more indispensable European partner.

Ireland’s Economic Interests and German Debates

The Hansa’s March 2018 EMU statement opposed large transfers of fiscal competence to the European level, calling instead for Member States to commit to structural reforms at national levels that would respect the fiscal guidelines agreed in the Stability and Growth Pact. German Financial Times columnist, Wolfgang Munchau, referred to the Hansa as “the Dutch and seven other dwarfs,” while HTW Berlin international economics professor Sebastian Dullien lamented how countries with less than 10 percent of the EMU’s population could “block meaningful Eurozone reform.” The Hansa’s November ESM statement particularly clashes with French positions by calling for strict conditions for any Member States needing support—including for the state concerned to improve its debt sustainability. Such measures could well resemble the conditions placed on Greece and indeed on Ireland itself during the euro crisis. France regards such conditionality as “unacceptable.”

Although Chancellor Merkel initially stayed relatively quiet, Ireland’s alignment with the Hansa has not escaped Berlin’s attention. Long-time Merkel ally, Peter Altmaier, was even present at the meeting where the first Hansa letter was written. “Germany has noticed us tilting,” says Irish Ambassador to Germany Michael Collins; “And so they’re increasingly seeing us as a bridge into the Nordic and Baltic groups, for example.”

Chancellor Merkel’s eventual Eurozone position stakes out a middle ground—not just between France and the Hansa—but also domestically.
In an extended June 2018 interview with Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (FAS), Merkel essentially supported Hansa positions, although without explicitly mentioning the group. “Solidarity from European partners should never lead us into a debt union,” she told FAS. Just prior to the interview, 154 German economics professors signed a joint letter expressing their reservations over French fiscal union proposals. These sentiments resonate well with Merkel’s Christian Democrats, even as her 2017 Social Democrat opponent Martin Schulz accused her of slowing down Eurozone reform during his campaign, pledged that under him, Germany would be less of a “northern disciplinarian.”

German reactions to France’s Eurozone reform drive show that there is no uniform consensus—either between France and Germany, or within Germany itself—on what direction Europe should take on economic questions like the euro or taxation. Indeed, there are many German voices sympathetic to Ireland’s economic liberalism. Irish engagement with Germany should focus on their connections with these voices—rather than accepting Franco-German “dominance” as some sort of inevitability.

**Being a Team Player: Germany, Ireland & Europe on the Global Stage**

“Irish-German relations are, right now at least, very transactional,” says Irish Times Germany Correspondent Derek Scally, who penned a critical op-ed following Foreign Minister Simon Coveney’s June 2018 visit to Berlin. This prompted Irish Ambassador Collins to write a rebuttal defending the results of Minister Coveney’s trip. “If Ireland decides it wants to do more than sell more to Germany, it needs to think about the relationship in a longer-term way, because this is a country that, culturally, thinks long-term,” says Scally.

Part of that long-term investment involves taking opportunities to be a team player. Should Ireland succeed in its campaign for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat starting in 2021, it will have such an opportunity—one that has not escaped German notice, with Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas,
declaring at a conference of Irish Ambassadors; “We would be delighted to hand over our seat to Ireland.” On common European foreign policy, Merkel told FAZ: “We need much more common action. In the medium term, I would suggest we develop non-permanent Security Council seats held by EU Members increasingly as ‘European seats.' We should act together as Europeans, also with France—the only remaining EU member with a permanent seat following Britain’s exit.”

With Germany on the Council until the end of 2020 and Ireland as the only EU Member running for a non-permanent seat for the 2021–2023 period, a successful Irish campaign would give Ireland the opportunity to both work together with Germany in advancing common UN priorities and to carry the European torch within the Council. Embracing and making the most of such a chance will be well-received in German policy circles, including early preparation and a handover process for common priorities. On this, Ireland can do well by following some established best practice, such as the common agenda-setting between Dutch and German diplomats even before Germany’s seat was confirmed; dialogues between Swedish, Dutch, and German civil society organisations on Security Council topics; and dedicated handover events at both embassies.

The mutual German-Irish interest in EU-Africa policy, heralded by both Simon Coveney and Heiko Maas, suggests a joint visit by the two foreign ministers and an EU delegation could be scheduled to coincide with the “handover” period, allowing Ireland to send a particularly strong signal bilaterally, as well as in European and international arenas.

From London to Dublin: Becoming Europe’s Transatlantic Bridge

Perhaps Ireland’s biggest contribution to “Team Europe” is a connection it already has. “Ireland is a vital partner for discussions on transatlantic issues,” says Ambassador Potzel. “It has strong contacts and a deep understanding that can greatly help all of us in Europe.” Accompanying those contacts is also a level of access that few others have—even if policy influence is not always guaranteed. The Irish Ambassador to Washington can often get a hearing on Capitol Hill more easily than most others, alongside
an annual full-day visit to the White House for the Taoiseach and a large Irish delegation. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar visited Berlin only days after the 2018 US trip, with Chancellor Merkel reportedly having shown keen interest in his impression of the Trump White House. As a diplomatic asset, the St Patrick’s Day White House visit is noted by others and is perhaps even more significant than generally acknowledged, given America’s recent isolationist turn. In addition, few other national holidays are as globally recognised or culturally appreciated.

Given the soft power attached to what one might call “St Patrick’s Day diplomacy,” is there a way for Ireland to better engage with its partners in a post-Brexit EU? ‘Where is it written that the US President enjoys a monopoly on a bowl of shamrock from Ireland? Munich has Europe’s largest St Patrick’s Day parade. Why shouldn’t it be visited by the Taoiseach?’ asked Scally in a 2017 op-ed. Both are valid questions, as the Munich parade happens the Sunday before 17 March and thus would not conflict with the Washington visit. But rather than simply send more senior ministers to continental Europe, why should Europeanising St Patrick’s Day diplomacy also not include inviting Europe to Ireland? How might a fellow European leader respond to the Taoiseach inviting him or her to Dublin a week before St Patrick’s Day to be presented with a bowl of shamrock—a gift previously only given to American presidents? With enough advance planning, it may prove a hard offer to refuse. The German Chancellor could be a natural choice for the inaugural recipient, with a different EU partner—or group of partners—to be invited each year. The Taoiseach would then be able to meet with that year’s guest of honour to discuss the upcoming Washington visit, listening to that partner’s perspectives while subtly reminding him or her that Europe’s voice in the Oval Office on St Patrick’s Day is Irish. The guest
of honour could also bring a delegation of his or her country’s business leaders, academics, and artists for a two-day conference. A hypothetical “St Patrick’s Day Convention” would be a natural March successor to January’s World Economic Forum in Davos and February’s Munich Security Conference. It would give Ireland the opportunity to use its soft power assets to bring Europe closer, while making its transatlantic role more structured and strategic—for the mutual benefit of Ireland and Europe as a whole. Coupled with an effort to help fund an independent German-based centre of expertise on Ireland, it could provide a way to solidify links culturally, as well as politically and economically.

Concluding Recommendations

Even given its challenges, a UK departure from the EU would present Ireland with the opportunity to further develop its reputation as a committed European, English-speaking Member State—in order to advance Irish interests, not only in Brussels, but also in Berlin and other capitals. Doing so would require Ireland to go beyond thinking of its EU membership in largely economic or utilitarian terms, and even further in the direction of a core member of “Team Europe.” In order to amplify its voice alongside other small states in an increasingly powerful Berlin, it would be well-advised to further drive its economic and trade preferences as a core member of the new Hansa. This also means understanding how the Hansa’s sometimes controversial Eurozone stances play into domestic German politics. It should also take advantage of opportunities like a potential Security Council seat to represent both itself and Europe on the world stage, and to use “handover” possibilities with Germany as a way to boost bilateral ties on global issues. Finally, Ireland’s St Patrick’s Day soft power diplomacy presents it with the chance to position itself as a key European

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interlocutor with the United States. In the end, one of Ireland’s greatest European chances post-Brexit may be determined by its capacity to dance and deal with both Boston and Berlin.

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Endnotes


12. ECFR. “The end of Angst: Germany is ready to lead in Europe.” Available at https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_end_of_angst_germany_is_ready_to_lead_in_europe


15. See ECFR https://www.ecfr.eu


ters from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden underline their shared views in the discussion on the architecture of the EMU.


22. Netherlands. Hanseatic Statement on the ESM.


32. See FAZ: www.faz.net


34. “Sweden and the Netherlands UN Security Council Handover to Germany: Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead.” Event at the Embassy of the Netherlands to Germany. 14th November 2018, Berlin.
