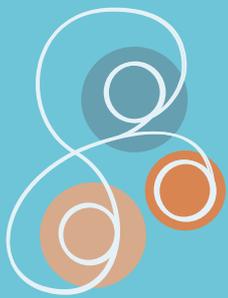


# Strategy Building for Small States in European Security and Defence

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31st March 2020

This briefing paper is the product of the last of three research-based, half-day seminars organised by the IIEA with the support of the ERASMUS+ and the Nortia academic network. The paper focuses on strategy building for small states in European security and defence.



# Strategy Building for Small States in European Security and Defence

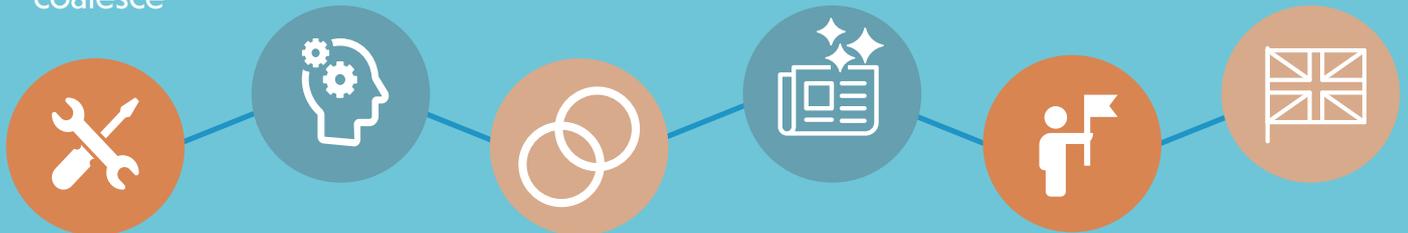
## Strategic Options for the EU: backdrop of a complex geopolitical landscape

### OPPORTUNITIES

- CSDP offers a suite of tools for Member States
- EU facilitates an exchange of intelligence and delivers valuable briefings
- Possibility for interests and positions to coalesce

### CHALLENGES

- Success stories needed for public trust
- Leadership in CFSP/CSDP
- UK's departure and security repercussions



## Strategic Options for Small States

### OPPORTUNITIES

EU security and defence initiatives



Scope to contribute to a larger EU strategy

### CHALLENGE

Fragmented landscape with many initiatives forming outside of EU's CSDP



## Strategic Options for Ireland

### OPPORTUNITIES

High achiever in multilateral fora internationally



Cooperation on global problems with like-minded states

### CHALLENGE

Lack of real national security discourse



# Introduction

In designing their security and defence strategies, policymakers at national and European levels face many choices. In the current security context, smaller states need to consider consolidating their efforts as, by and large, they lack the capacity to act effectively on their own. Like-minded smaller state groupings may also emerge, adding capacity and innovation to particular policy areas, which, in turn, may contribute substantially to common EU efforts. Furthermore, smaller states may need to 'think European' by incorporating broader European issues into their own national strategies to better shape the EU's security and defence strategy.

## Strategic Options and Issues for the Union

The EU is facing a more complex geopolitical landscape and uncertainty has increased since the release of its global strategy: *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, in 2016. Changes are particularly visible in the struggle to maintain the Iran nuclear deal, to take account relations with China as a global pole of power, and to engage on transatlantic security. Traditional threats persist in regions such as the Middle East and the Sahel while hybrid threats proliferate - even amidst the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

National publics need to see concrete added-value from European cooperation in security and defence, if they are to place further trust in EU institutions and their initiatives. Without this, they may opt to operate outside of the EU's framework in search of flexibility and greater effectiveness.

There is still a tendency among Member States to determine their security outlook through their own geographical lens. Critically, this fails to account for the diversity of threats faced in different regions and doesn't take account of other members' security concerns.

In many respects, the EU still lacks a common strategic culture. This is perhaps most visible in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) of the European Union, which is designed to drive foreign, security and defence cooperation. Despite the EU's capacity to act, the PSC is frequently divided internally, as domestic perspectives often predominate in EU security discussions.

Even where clear strategies are in place, political sensitivities may trump policy goals. This was recently demonstrated by the EU's decision to reduce its maritime operations in the Mediterranean by changing the mandate for Operation Sophia, which will now be refocused. Nonetheless, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) provides Member States with a suite of tools that can facilitate an exchange of intelligence, information, policy options and tangible mechanisms in pursuit of shared goals.

The EU's decision-making process is a critical factor in its effectiveness. While many commentators criticise the effect that national vetoes and unanimity have on the speed and quality of foreign policy decision making, the prospect of introducing qualified majority voting remains remote, as foreign and security policy are a Member State competence. It is not yet clear that such a move, even if it were politically practicable, would in fact deliver greater efficiency, legitimacy or responsibility. Small states may wish to coordinate their positions on this issue.

For most analysts, the divergence between France and Germany, as larger partner states in the EU, remains the central challenge to overcome. The EU needs the critical mass, economic weight and leadership that only these two states, acting in tandem, can provide for an effective Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). While the European Commission has shown considerable leadership with the proposal of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and its antecedents, its success remains hostage to agreement among the Member States - and especially between France and Germany - on the outcome of the EU's budget negotiations.

Despite the fragmentation of defence initiatives outside of the EU CSDP framework, there is scope to discuss how interests and positions at EU-level are prioritised. Differing interests among EU Member States need not be a barrier to cooperation and can still result in the emergence of strong, shared positions. The EU could, for example, agree on the general policy direction or goals, while allowing differentiated approaches from its members or like-minded groups thereof. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework is an example of such an approach. It offers some flexibility for Member States to take ownership of the issues important to them and to contribute to shared objectives.

However, such an approach has its limits and needs clear direction. How can the EU incentivise Member States to act constructively in favour of consensus when needed? Member States need to open discussions on the real meaning of EU solidarity in both CFSP and CSDP. This might first focus on larger interests that affect the Union as a whole. There are also clear instances of unity and solidarity, such as the EU's position on the Ukraine crisis, and the continuing consensus with the associated sanctions on Russia. The entrepreneurial role of the EU's former High Representative, Federica Mogherini, in this instance was noteworthy.

## Strategic Options for Small States

While acknowledging their limited capacity, smaller EU Member States have options to address their security and defence needs. Among the EU's security and defence initiatives, PESCO provides one strategic option for small states to pool and share and to offer leadership and innovative ideas, where they have specialist interests or resources. This is also possible on a bilateral or mini-lateral basis, as is the case with Belgium and the Netherlands, who have been particularly effective in pooling and sharing their maritime assets.

In its conception, PESCO was intended to target those Member States with a higher-end defence capacity and who sought to engage in more ambitious collaboration. In its design, Germany took an inclusive approach to membership, while France set a higher-entry threshold for states to participate. Today PESCO offers many opportunities for smaller states to address strategic needs, to better identify and share national capabilities and collectively to fill strategic gaps.

In the absence of a common strategic culture, small states perhaps also have a unique role and interest in being thought leaders. Because of their relative vulnerability, small states tend to be more sensitive to the need for cooperation, shared endeavour and consensus. To that end they might have a useful function in crafting common viewpoints – a key first step in aligning policy. Small states thus have a vested self-interest in strengthening EU-wide cooperation and coordination.

Where EU-wide coordination is not forthcoming, strategic options for smaller states still exist. Denmark, for example, is a member of both the EU and NATO, but has formally opted out of the CSDP. Nonetheless, it has joined the 'European Intervention Initiative' (EI2), a defence cooperation model devised by France which operates outside of the EU framework.

NORDEFECO, is a collaborative defence structure of Nordic countries with very different defence profiles, but who engage in a regional defence strategy and collaborative cooperation. Baltic and some central and eastern European states have similar cooperative arrangements, albeit underpinned by a shared NATO membership.

Such bilateral and mini-lateral structures are not limited to geographic clustering. The so-called Hanseatic ("Hansa") League accommodates a host of shared economic interests among a group of geographically diverse smaller EU Member States. They too might usefully turn their mind to security

and defence issues. Similarly, in the security realm, the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) is a framework which has addressed security and defence issues such as cybersecurity and strategic communication.

## Strategic Options for Ireland

The discussion of Ireland's defence strategy takes place against the same backdrop of significant geopolitical developments but with significantly fewer resources directed either towards defining their implications for Ireland or materially addressing the associated threats. Ireland also faces an increasing prevalence of hybrid threats and the blurring of the distinction between security and defence. In some sectors it is uniquely exposed.

Geography will of course continue to play the largest role in shaping Ireland's defence strategy and perceptions thereof. In such a context - and post Brexit - there may be a need for Ireland to consider further options for defence cooperation with the UK, beyond the existing bilateral agreement. Ireland's geographic distance as an island separated from the main European landmass, is reinforced by a psychological sense of distance from the centres of potential threat. With territorial threats dismissed, awareness of hybrid, cyber and other non-spatial threats remain low.

There is arguably a distinction to be made between Ireland's approach to security at home and overseas. On the global stage, Ireland is a strong performer and high achiever in development policy, peacekeeping and crisis management. This was perhaps ideally illustrated by the country's continued diplomatic presence in Freetown, Sierra Leone and its active engagement throughout the Ebola outbreak. Ireland's approach at home, however, is different.

Apart from past experiences with Northern Ireland, a national security discourse has traditionally been lacking. In this, Ireland differs from most of its European counterparts - both NATO members and non-members - where security and defence are well established features of national political conversation.

It is important to underline that strategic threats to Ireland do not exist in a vacuum but are in fact global problems, for example: *trafficking, vulnerability of deep-sea cables, and cybersecurity*, to name but a few. Ireland needs therefore to think globally about its solutions and pursue avenues for cooperation. Interconnectedness is both part of the security problem as well as being part of the security solution.

Working with likeminded states or those with similar and complementary interests will be of benefit. An example of good practice is Ireland's cooperation with Northern Ireland and the UK in air and sea rescue. Similarly, Ireland and countries such as Portugal, Spain, France and Iceland may have substantial shared concerns for maritime security in the Atlantic, while thematic interests in cyber, health and AI technologies might predominate in relations with the Nordic or "Hansa" countries.

Within the EU, Ireland has multiple opportunities to strengthen national capabilities through direct funding, shared programmes and policy design. The UN can also be a critically important and much larger multilateral framework from which to pursue the same set of policy goals.

## A National Conversation - starting at home

Meaningful cooperation with others is predicated on Ireland first setting its own priorities and allocating resources to those ends. This, in turn, requires a political process through which threats are assessed, options are considered, and decisions are made.

Ireland first needs to improve its capacity to monitor security threats. This should extend beyond analysis of current or immediate threats to anticipation of future and potential challenges. There is an urgent need for an informed and evidence-based national conversation in Ireland, among the general public and policy experts from at home and abroad - and all the while engaging political leaders. This would help to identify areas of particular concern and raise awareness, *inter alia*, of threats not simply to the territory of the state but to its society, its economy and its democracy.

Ireland urgently needs to take a broader view of its security which would include economic, financial, political and digital elements. Thus, such a national conversation needs to be underpinned by a whole of government approach, with a coordinated strategy across departments and a pooling of public and private resources.

Ireland's National Security Analysis Centre (NSAC) is a positive start in fostering such partnership between Government departments such as Defence, Justice and Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. However, there are arguments for even wider cooperation between departments and state bodies. In defending Ireland's society and its democracy, for example, the importance of social inclusion and forestalling disinformation attempts to radicalise our politics might well be seen as a security issue to be discussed and addressed.

Such a discussion on Irish security and defence policy also needs to highlight what European security and defence cooperation actually means. Misinformation can be disseminated and misunderstanding perpetuated in the public domain and often leads to a derailing of national debates. Irish politicians need to be as informed on national security issues as they often are on economic or social issues. That understanding should extend much further than traditional 'defence' issues. Siloed conceptions of security and defence urgently need to be broken down since, in reality,

security and defence exist in the wider foreign policy sphere and are linked to economic and financial stability, as well as to the threat-multiplying effects of climate change.

Small states are part of an interconnected global network, where even middle-sized states might best be described as 'small'. Security is a global public good in which we all have a stake and which is even more precious to states with limited capacity but high ambition. Views of security cannot therefore be exclusively state-centric.

In the EU, a European approach to a small state's outlook should be factored into threat analysis and a sense of European solidarity fostered. This will allow small states build an effective security strategy both at national and EU level for themselves and for their neighbours.



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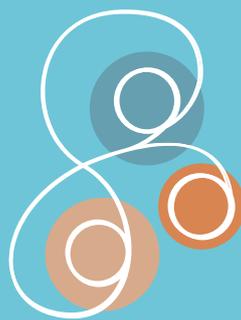
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The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for  
Citizens Programme of the European Union.



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Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



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