

IS IRELAND NEUTRALLY EXCLUSIVE OR NOT?



There is no question of NATO accepting Ireland as a member as we don't spend enough on our military..... defence funding would have to increase massively from 0.3 per cent to 2.5 per cent, according to Independent Senator Gerard Craughwell.

The war in Ukraine was a pivotal factor behind Ireland's first ever Consultative Forum on International Security Policy this summer, according to some political analysts. And with Ireland's policy on military neutrality on the forum's agenda for discussion, where do we now stand on supporting democratic nations in need of protection? Report By Derek Nagle.

Disarmament and non-proliferation, international humanitarian law, in addition to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and a discussion on Ireland's policy on military neutrality were the main issues on the agenda at Ireland's first-ever **international security forum**, held over a four-day period in Cork, Galway and Dublin respectively in late June.

The Forum provided an opportunity to review Ireland's current international partnerships within the realms of peace and security, particularly as a member of the UN and the EU, and our engagement with NATO through the Partnership for Peace framework. It also provided an opportunity to examine the experiences and choices of other partners in responding to the new security environment in Europe.

A veteran of both the Irish and British armies, Independent Senator Gerard Craughwell, was very vocal prior to the Forum when he questioned if President Michael D. Higgins and the Government fully understood the meaning of neutrality.

The Hague Convention of 1907 states that for a country to be considered as neutral it must firstly state its position as neutral, and secondly it must be able to defend its neutrality. "The statement by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1995 further refines the definition of neutrality as supporting neither side, neither belligerent in the event of a conflict," he said.

TWO OPPOSITE POLES

"The number of people who make passionate speeches about neutrality and being militarily non-aligned never ceases to amaze me. These are two opposite poles – you're either one or the other – you can't be both. Neutrality isn't in our constitution. With the Nice Treaty we cannot engage with a European army and there is no question of that happening in the future," he added.

When Ireland voted against both the Nice and





Since 1958 Ireland has had a continuous presence in UN peacekeeping missions, when 50 officers were deployed as observers along the Armistice Demarcation Line (ADL) between Israel and Lebanon

Lisbon Treaties one of the issues for the electorate was whether or not security and defence developments within the EU would in any way impact on Ireland's status as a neutral state. When the Government decided to re-run those referendums, they asked for and received additional guarantees and explanatory text in the form of protocols.

Essentially what this says is that the EU is cognisant of Ireland's status as a militarily neutral state and that we will not be forced within the EU to do anything without its agreement. This is a guarantee that developments in the EU on security will not alter the status of Ireland without political change - in order words, a referendum.

LOW LEVEL OF DEFENCE FUNDING

Senator Craughwell believes that there is no question of NATO accepting Ireland as a member as "we don't spend enough on our military". Defence funding would have to increase massively from 0.3 per cent to 2.5 per cent, so he feels that NATO membership is certainly not on the agenda. However, Ireland has worked alongside NATO with PFP

(Partnership for Peace) since 1999.

Ireland has also had a continuous presence in peacekeeping missions with the United Nations (UN) since its first deployment in 1958 when 50 officers were deployed as observers along the Armistice Demarcation Line (ADL) between Israel and Lebanon.



The number of people who make passionate speeches about neutrality and being militarily non-aligned never ceases to amaze Independent Senator Gerard Craughwell.

During that time over 30,000 Irish army personnel have served in Lebanon. On completion of that mission some then transferred to the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), which had been established a decade earlier.

The first peacekeeping mission with an armed Irish contingent was to the Congo from 1960 to 1964. Other subsequent peacekeeping missions have included Cyprus, East Timor and the Middle East.

Irish troops serving overseas have had a tradition of providing humanitarian assistance to the local population. This can include building repair work, providing assistance to local enterprises, repair and restoration of essential services and dental and medical care.

Ireland also served on the UN Security Council between 2021 and 2022. The three core principles underpinning this term were ensuring accountability, building peace and strengthening conflict prevention.

IMPORTANCE OF NATO MEMBERSHIP

Independent TD Dr Cathal Berry, who spent 23 years in the Irish Defence Forces including six years in the

Army Ranger Wing (ARW), echoed Senator Craughwell's comments on Ireland's lack of military spending.

He referenced to a drop of almost 30 per cent in head count over the past decade alone. "Ireland hasn't joined NATO because we have six counties occupied in Northern Ireland. If you join NATO, you must recognise territorial boundaries of all NATO states. It's a pragmatic reason rather than a principled position," he said.



"There was a saying during WWII that Ireland was 'neutral on the side of the Allies'. By the same extension we should be neutral on the side of the Ukrainians" – Cathal Berry, Independent TD for Kildare South

The Kildare South TD, who had served with the Defence Forces overseas in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans and led an ARW unit in Chad in 2008, greatly values the importance of NATO, which he explained in more detail... "If it wasn't for NATO there would be Russian tanks at the Polish border right now. Anyone who thinks otherwise is utterly deluding themselves. It's a little bit odd that there's a lot of 'NATO bashing' going on. We needed their assistance to extract our citizens from Sudan. We take any assistance that's available and the following week we tell NATO how evil they are. It really is the definition of Irish duplicity."

He further noted that Ireland does not meet the criteria for being a neutral state, claiming that we cannot protect ourselves on land, sea and cyberspace nor deny our territory to other countries. He noted that there are different perspectives on neutrality.

"If we look at Switzerland – some people would describe it as a 'super neutral' as in the ultimate neutral state. However, it has a huge army and a massive arms industry as well as conscription. Swiss guards also protect the Vatican which is a separate state. That's their version of neutrality," according to Deputy Berry.

EU MILITARY ASSISTANCE MISSION

In his opinion, the support given by Ireland to the Allies during WWII is infinitely larger than the support we're currently providing the Ukrainian people. This is entirely consistent with Ireland's policy and traditions for decades. He believes that we support democratic states and recognise that there are authoritarian extreme regimes that need to be challenged and checked. He believes that we are doing this quite effectively.

"There was a saying during WWII that Ireland was 'neutral on the side of the Allies'. By the same extension



Political scientist and Emeritus Professor at the European University Institute, Brigid Laffan points to a layer of discussion around NATO in Irish society, which she finds very problematic "because we are neutral, we think we are 'better' than other countries".

we should be neutral on the side of the Ukrainians,” he said. “Indeed, Irish military instructors recently returned from Germany where they trained Ukrainian troops in combat medicine, and this was part of our commitment to the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAN Ukraine).

“The programme was developed last year and involves a co-ordinated training regime of the UAF (Ukrainian Armed Forces) by EU member states. In April this year a Defence Forces Mobile Training Team also provided specialist explosive disposal techniques and demining training to the UAF over a one-month period in Cyprus. The programme was in partnership with the Cypriot National Guard.”

‘NEUTRALITY PURISTS’

Prof Brigid Laffan, political scientist and Emeritus Professor at the European University Institute, believes the war in Ukraine was a pivotal factor behind the event as the whole security environment of Europe has altered fundamentally.

Laffan, who played a key role in the neutrality debate during the Consultative Forum, believes it was inevitable that Ireland would have to begin to think about its security policy and international security more generally in terms of threats.

She used the term ‘Neutrality Purists’ to describe the very vocal element of Irish society who are politically represented by People Before Profit (PBP) party and various other traditional peace groups.

“I don’t think that a majority of the Irish electorate would vote for NATO membership. Sinn Féin is the interesting party as they’re obviously politically

strengthening and could be in government. They now recognise that you need to fund and equip the army properly, but they have traditionally not liked Ireland’s engagement in EU defence co-operation with **PESCO (Permanent Structured Co-operation)** or particularly PFP. But I would predict that in government they wouldn’t pull us out of either” she said.

Prof Laffan believes that there’s a layer of discussion around NATO in Irish society, which she finds very problematic “because we are neutral, we think we are ‘better’ than other countries”. She referred to this as a sort of ‘moral normative stance’.

“It’s inevitable that the EU will become a more serious security and defence player over the next 20 years. The EU won’t have a European army so that’s not the issue. What is more important is how much engagement Ireland will have or want in co-operative arrangements on training for mine management, sea surveillance and collaborative procurement of ammunition. In my view we must be involved,” she added.

There are real tangible security and defence issues that Ireland as a sovereign state has got to address, she pointed out, adding “For me it would be much better to try to discuss these in terms of what is the appropriate security policy for Ireland in the 21st century – not this NATO/Neutrality binary that gets us nowhere.”

For background information and video streams of presentations visit
www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/e2a6b-consultative-forum-on-international-security-policy/



While there is no EU army and defence remains exclusively a matter for member states, the EU has taken steps to boost defence co-operation over the past few years. (Pic: European Defence Agency)