

Brexit and Irish Security and Defence in Europe

The UK's withdrawal from the European Union has placed key Irish security and defence roles (national defence, aid to the civil power and international security) into a new context and posed a substantial existential security challenge to the Irish state. With the difficulties surrounding the implementation of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement (WA), the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and the associated Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP), Irish policy makers are actively reviewing how each of these roles are now being impacted. It is opening new (and old) questions as to how best the State can defend itself, how it might choose to engage with its European partners, and how it can reinforce its contribution to international peace support operations.

Key points

- Brexit posed, and continues to pose, a serious security challenge to Ireland.
- Rapid change in EU security and defence is prompting a reassessment of how Ireland cooperates in this area.
- Ireland is looking to other smaller European states to identify appropriate strategies.

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Traditionally, Irish security and defence policy was driven by three interconnected policy goals: territorial defence, aid to the civil power and international security operations. With Ireland's benign strategic location, territorial defence has not been a significant issue since the end of the Second World War. The 2015 [White Paper on defence](#) clearly acknowledges that the probability of a conventional military attack on Ireland's territory is low. Ireland's non-membership of a military alliance further gives rise to the assumption that in terms of national defence, the role of the defence forces is to be prepared to act "until the United Nations Security Council has taken appropriate measures."

had established a commitment to UN Peacekeeping missions from the mid-1950s, maintaining an [unbroken service record to UN operations](#) for over 60 years. With the end of the Cold War, Ireland did not reevaluate its military non-alignment, but it did reconsider the contribution of its defence forces to international peace support. The Defence Forces adapted themselves interoperability and engagement in a variety of command structures: UN, NATO and EU. Over the last twenty years, hundreds of Irish troops have served across thousands of individual [deployments](#) in international security operations across Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and in the Asia Pacific region.

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While territorial defence is widely seen as being of marginal concern, aid to the civil power – most especially in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland – has been critical to national security concerns. The key role of the Defence Forces has been to assist the national police (An Garda Síochána – or Gardai), in the protection of the security of the State against armed subversion. Over the course of the 30 years of civil unrest in Northern Ireland, which entailed the deaths of nearly [3,500 people](#), the Defence Forces were directly engaged in border security and intelligence operations. With the [1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement](#) this function diminished in salience – although operations against residual armed militants continues.

In the years since 1998, the role of the Defence Forces in international peace support operations has significantly widened and deepened. Ireland

The UK's withdrawal from the European Union placed each of these three security and defence roles into a new context and posed a substantial existential challenge to the Irish state. With the signature and ongoing implementation of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement (WA) and subsequent Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), it is perhaps timely to review how each of these roles are now being impacted, impinging on the capacity of the state to defend itself, to engage with its European partners and to contribute to international peace support operations with other global partners.

National Territorial Defence

On the face of it, the impact of Brexit on national territorial defence has thus far been marginal. As is widely acknowledged, Ireland's military capacity is exceptionally modest in European terms with a headline force complement of 9,000 personnel

divided between the three branches of the Permanent Defence Forces (PDF): the army, naval service and air corps. Ireland is close to the bottom of the league in terms of defence spending – allocating just 0.34 percent of GDP to that end. This is the lowest defence spending of any of the EU27 member states and places Ireland at about 150th internationally. The paucity of defence spending is of course translated into an exceptionally limited military capacity. In the absence of any fighter, attack or transport aircraft, combat tanks, heavy artillery or any naval assets beyond eight offshore patrol vessels, Ireland can be said to lack the minimum conventional combat capability necessary to provide for any territorial defence based on credible deterrence.

This level of capacity, inter alia, precludes Ireland from exercising any meaningful air defence. Thus, Ireland has instead relied upon the strategic interests of NATO forces to defend their airspace. Ad hoc understandings with the UK's Royal Air Force were placed on a more formal footing subsequent to the signature in January 2015 of a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) between the British and Irish governments on defence cooperation. The published MOU speaks only obliquely about the need to strengthen situational awareness across the land, sea and air domains. It is however understood also to have led to agreement in 2016 to permit RAF identification, pursuit and interdiction of aircraft posing a potential security threat. This was reported as having been exercised in [2015](#) and [2017](#) when the RAF scrambled to intercept Russian bombers 'probing' air defences that were tracked into Irish controlled airspace.

The political sensitivities of Irish-British military cooperation are obvious but in recent years, these were ameliorated by the context of the peace process, shared membership of the European Union and joint

engagement through the CSDP. The question now arises that in the context of ongoing bilateral tensions over the implementation of the Brexit agreements and the UK's self-exclusion from CSDP, whether the MOU's bilateral provisions will continue to prove to be politically sustainable in the medium to longer term. The UK's [Integrated Review of its Defence, Security, Development and Foreign Policy](#), published in the Spring of 2021, listed Ireland as one of its "priority partners" due to its "deep shared interest in Northern Ireland" and the Common Travel Area, "which unites the two islands".

Aid to the Civil Power

It is in aid to the civil power that the impact of Brexit is most stark – and continues to threaten the existential interests of the state. It should be recalled that at the height of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, the posture of the defence forces was centred on meeting the threat posed by paramilitary groups such as the Official IRA, the Provisional IRA, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), various loyalist paramilitary groups and a plethora of short-lived splinter factions from across the political spectrum. The local capacity of the Defence forces was made up of more than eight military barracks along the 499 km border and the stationing of up to 1,500 military personnel. Working closely with An Garda Síochána, the army was focused on border security operations and intelligence gathering.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement represented several decades of painstaking political and constitutional negotiations agreed between two sovereign governments and the political parties representing two counterposed national communities. While its precise lineage remains contested, it is certainly true to say that the agreement was more than 20 years in the making, culminating in a series of negotiations which relied

in part on the support and intervention of several other international actors, including the direct engagement of US President Bill Clinton, the support of the European Union and a team of high-level international mediators who ultimately verified the demilitarisation of the Northern Ireland conflict.

right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British or both, as they may so choose and accordingly confirm[s] that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the

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The agreement itself is a carefully balanced structure of three ‘strands’ each of which addressed a particular set of relationships. Strand one addresses governance within Northern Ireland, Strand two of the agreement sets up an institutional structure to address the ‘North/South’ dimension of relationships while Strand three addresses ‘East-West’ relationships and provides for a British-Irish Council “to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands.”

Two critical points here relate directly to Brexit. The first is that the agreement was constructed within the context of Ireland and the UK’s membership of the European Union. Only on this basis was it possible to assume that the demilitarisation of the border in Ireland – and the elimination of the associated security infrastructure (watchtowers, check points, road barriers, security installations etc.) could result in an ‘open’ border on the island of Ireland. The preamble to the agreement provided that it would “develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union.” Second, the agreement was constructed on a key principle; that “the birth

status of Northern Ireland.” Brexit critically weakens both foundations.

The reasons for this are complex. While Brexit was pursued without regard to its impact on Northern Ireland, and with the wholehearted support of the largest Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, the decision of the UK Government (contrary to public and private assurances given to Unionists) to place the UK-EU customs border in the Irish Sea, created huge disquiet and some political anger within the Unionist community. For them, the continuing economic ‘union’ of Northern Ireland to the EU – and thereby Ireland – is deeply threatening to their political and constitutional identity within the UK. A myriad of small, sometimes very personal impacts have been felt, from a ban on the movement of pets between Northern Ireland and Great Britain to restrictions on the import of potted plants, the availability of medications and the willingness of British-based companies to send goods to Northern Ireland. All this has generated political tensions in Northern Ireland, up to and including Unionist threats to collapse governing structures, street demonstrations, acts of political violence and direct threats to those either building or working

in the physical infrastructure at ports designed to implement the Brexit agreements.

While all the aforementioned impacts were clearly obvious to those negotiating the agreements – and indeed specified in precise detail by the UK Government itself – UK political leaders, including the British Prime Minister, insisted that nothing would change in Northern Ireland with the delivery of Brexit. Today, UK and EU negotiators attempt – with very limited success and overhanging threats of unilateral action – to mitigate the adverse impacts of Brexit on the daily lives of those living in Northern Ireland. In reality, however, Brexit is tearing at the threads of the underlying political accommodation that rests at the very heart of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

As noted earlier, the basic conceit of the Agreement was to establish a constitutional settlement which provided for equal recognition of two national communities within Northern Ireland whether “Irish or British or both”. That formulation was accompanied by a structure of human rights protections designed to copper fasten that principle in both law and practice. The associated human rights and equality provisions of the Agreement were designed to instil confidence from both national communities in the political institutions of the Agreement and thereby the associated constitutional settlement such that both could have confidence in the political process and understand that their legitimate national aspirations could be effectively pursued within the democratic political process.

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While delayed deliveries from British online stores and the supply of chilled supermarket sandwiches may not in normal circumstance been seen as issues of constitutional significance, Northern Ireland is different. The nerve endings of identity politics in Northern Ireland are raw and exposed. Brexit, the associated Northern Ireland protocol and the very architecture of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement are all conspiring to sandpaper those nerve endings, causing real pain and political instability and threatening the fragile governance of Northern Ireland, with obvious implications for security on the island of Ireland.

In such a febrile context, the scope for political mischief from minority/extremist political groups is enormous. Layered over this is now deteriorating diplomatic relations between Dublin and London and between London and Brussels. While thus far limited to the political fringes of Unionism – and some corners of the ruling Conservative Party – demands to simply ditch the Northern Ireland protocol by unilaterally abrogating provisions of the associated UK-EU treaties, are being promoted. Even as the actual prospect may be remote, the threat of such an absolute collapse of EU-UK relations cannot be ruled out. In such circumstances, the role of the Defence Forces may become acute. On the one hand there is no option other than to seek to maintain security and law and order in the State – up and including the use of military force when called upon by the civilian authorities. But at the same time even planning for such an eventuality – never mind the possible execution of such operations – will further

destabilise politics and the peace process itself. Brexit is the original sin, with the continuing potential to aggravate the root causes of national conflict in Ireland and thereby threaten peace and security on the island.

International Peace and Security Operations

The EU's Global Strategy was launched in late June 2016, just days after the Brexit referendum result was declared. Speaking later, the High Representative spoke of the extensive advice she had received to delay if not even cancel the launch. The Union, so it was argued, had suffered a body blow and now was the time to reflect, regroup and then reconsider a diminished Europe's role in the world. Federica Mogherini did not take that advice. Indeed, she took the opportunity to assert the even greater urgency of Europe's definition of itself and to marshal its capacity to meet its own existential challenges. She also described the enormous potential for security and defence cooperation to deliver greater capacity at lower costs to national governments. In sum, she described the 'low hanging fruit' that security and defence offered to the European project, and this marked the beginning of a process in which a detailed implementation plan for security and defence was drawn together.

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In several respects, there is something of an irony involved. The UK is one of just two European states with a significant military/strategic profile of global import and the political will to deploy it. At the same time, however, the UK was among the member

states most reluctant to support EU initiatives in his field – preferring the tried and trusted framework of NATO to the rhetorical ambitions of the European Union. Brexit thus implied that the European Union would lose between 20 and 25 percent of its material capacity in the field of security and defence but would also lose one the greatest political impediments to the fruition of a more integrated European security and defence capacity. Brexit has had the corollary effect of weakening both the Union and the United Kingdom in terms of their respective geostrategic weights. The absence of any [substantive agreement in the TCA for ongoing foreign policy, security and defence cooperation](#) only makes that loss the sharper.

For Ireland, these developments have given rise to serious policy challenges. For many years, Ireland has sheltered its policy of non-membership of military alliances within the corners of debates between Atlanticists (traditionally led by the UK) and Europeanists (led by France). At the same time, Ireland participated in significant EU military missions and even commanded one of the largest such – in [Chad in 2008](#). However, that engagement was hesitant and was frequently contested in domestic politics. Brexit fundamentally shifted the axis in these debates and exposed the Irish position in a way that poses ongoing challenges

for policy makers. In 2018, the Minister of State at the Department of Defence insisted that Brexit did not give rise to fundamental strategic issues for the Defence Force's operations or for Ireland's

continuing engagement within the EU in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). However, [“it is expected that Brexit will have an impact on future developments in the Defence sphere.”](#) That has indeed proven to be case.

Irish attitudes to European security and defence might best be characterised by a paraphrase of Churchill's famous quote on the UK's relationship with Europe “We are with CSDP, but not of it. We are linked, but not compromised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed.” There is no doubt but that Ireland shares security interests with its EU partners; as a global centre for social media and data storage, dependent on critical IT and energy infrastructures, hosting the HQs of some of the highest profile global multi-national companies, and having a history where terrorism has played a role. Despite this, there is a distance; geographic, strategic and psychological that generates negative Irish attitudes towards European security and defence where cooperation is still seen as a cost – even a penalty – of EU membership. It is a bill reluctantly paid in return for prosperity.

Today that position will be much harder to sustain. First and obviously, Ireland has been on the receiving end of sustained – and for some other member states, potentially costly – solidarity. This should not be overstated and there is no explicit quid pro quo, but is it unreasonable to consider a scenario in which an even smaller EU member state at the other side of the continent is being threatened by a large third country? Could Ireland's 'solidarity' with that EU partner ever amount to coming to its aid, inter alia, with the engagement of Irish troops?

More broadly, as the Union as a whole faces increasing geostrategic uncertainty – and potentially an ongoing loss of confidence in its transatlantic

alliance – how soon might it be before debates surrounding the Union's strategic 'autonomy' become wrapped up in concepts of a European Union 'army' or army of Europeans? In truth, such declarations amount to little or nothing in practical terms. There is no prospect of the creation of a federalised European state of the sort that could raise and direct its own 'army'. However, this debate is certainly a placeholder for genuine European ambitions to deepen defence cooperation and military integration in Europe. Brexit, and the UK's absence from these debates makes these ambitions sharper. President Macron's European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and suggestions for a European Security Council may be a surrogate for his own frustrations at the limited scale, scope and ambition of the EU in this field, but it certainly foreshadows debates of greater defence ambition. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union leaves Ireland exposed on several fronts. Its hesitancy and ambivalence towards security and defence may no longer be sustainable – harder choices may be coming into view.

Conclusions

Brexit has exposed several political and constitutional fault lines. None is more serious for the UK and for Ireland than its impacts on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom. For the Irish state, these fault lines strike at the heart of existential interests: the survival of the peace process and security on the Island. More broadly, it must also focus minds on security and defence policy, the capacity and role of the defence forces, the design and implementation of national security policy and Ireland's engagement in EU security and defence – including the prospect of a 'common defence'.

Ostensibly, the European Union should have been chastened and diminished by the 'loss' of the UK.

Instead, what we have thus far seen is a European Union accelerating its defence integration and indeed raising still further the rhetorical stakes with ‘strategic autonomy’ as its goal and a ‘strategic compass’ being designed as the route map thereto. Substantial new resources have also been dedicated to that end. At the same time, EU member states continue to differ between those that prioritise migration and instability in the south and those that focus on collective territorial defence to the east. There is further differentiation between convinced Atlanticists and determined Europeanists for a definition of EU strategic autonomy and there as is yet no consensus as to whether this amounts to hedging against the prospect of US withdrawal, a necessary reinforcement of the Atlantic Alliance or even an emancipation from the United States.

Irish policy makers – and indeed those of other mid to small sized EU member states – have the task of plotting their own trajectory through the contours of European defence debates. In the case of Ireland, that trajectory has been substantially shifted by the ongoing and difficult experience of Brexit, by the changed internal dynamics of the EU that have resulted therefrom and by a reinforced political commitment to the EU which is evident across the political spectrum. Whether that shifted trajectory changes the landing zone for Ireland in the wider European debates on defence integration remains to be seen.

Further readings

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