

## **Opening statement to the Joint Committee on European Affairs on “EU Strategic Autonomy, including its implications for EU cooperation on defence and security”**

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Cathaoirleach, Leas-Chathaoirleach, Deputies and Senators, thank you for the invitation to speak to the Committee on the subject of ‘EU Strategic Autonomy.’ My name is Ken McDonagh, I’m an Associate Professor of International Relations and currently the Head of the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University. I have been engaged in research on EU Security and Defence policy for the last decade, including a focus on Ireland’s engagement in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, the European Parliament’s role in oversight of CSDP missions and the gendered impact of CSDP missions in the Western Balkans. My comments today will focus on the opportunities European security and defence cooperation provide to Ireland to address key gaps in our own capabilities and to address key threats to our national interests.

Addressing a meeting of EU Ambassadors, the EU HRVP Joseph Borrell argued that the EU is facing the consequences of a world where ‘we have decoupled the sources of our prosperity from the sources of our security.’ On the one hand, he argued European prosperity has benefited from low cost energy from Russia and cheap manufactured goods from China while on the other hand, it has outsourced responsibility for its security to the United States. Although the response to the Russian escalation of its war with Ukraine has mobilised more European military support than many thought possible, this support remains fundamentally underwritten by US capabilities and enablers, both practical and political. Moving to a point where the EU has the capacity to act independently in the face of external threat or crisis is the essence of ‘Strategic Autonomy’. This involves a defence industry capable of independent production of armaments and munitions, member state militaries with key capabilities both as fighting forces and key enablers of conducting modern warfare, and a political and diplomatic system fit for purpose that allows the EU to have a clear vision of the threats it faces, a coordinated voice in international affairs and an ability to match its capabilities to its political objectives in a coherent manner. The Strategic Compass, published a year ago is the latest attempt to articulate this at a political level.

In order to achieve the above objectives, the EU over the past number of years has put in place a set of key initiatives and institutions to empower member states to develop their military capabilities in a coordinated way. The European Defence Agency, Permanent Enhanced Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD), and the European Defence Fund each represent opportunities for member states to identify defence procurement, investment and development opportunities and to work with other member states to achieve these in a cost-effective and coordinated manner.

Separate to the above, as part of the programme for government a Commission on Defence was established in Ireland, this reported in January of last year. The Commission outlined three levels of ambition. The first, business as usual, would leave Ireland without any effective defence capability. The second, the option currently being pursued, allows for a significant increase in defence spending, an increase in the established strength of the Defence Forces and

basic equipment that will for the first time provide a picture of what is in our skies and seas. These are necessary and welcome steps. Level of ambition three outlines the steps required to bring Ireland's defence capabilities in-line with comparable European countries.

It is therefore important that Ireland consider carefully how we can leverage EU structures to develop our own defence capabilities. In July 2022, the Dáil approved the government decision to become full participants in 4 PESCO projects in the areas of cyber threats, disaster relief capability, Special Operations Forces medical training and mine counter-measures. This is in addition to an ongoing project on maritime surveillance that Ireland participates. Ireland is also an observer on a further 5 projects, which may develop into full participation in time.

Out of a total of 60 PESCO projects, Ireland is currently participating in less than 10%. The Commission on Defence recommended that Ireland should exploit these opportunities to a greater degree. Such an approach makes sense as Ireland seeks to rebuild its defence capabilities. Further projects such as the European Patrol Corvette, the Future Mid-size tactical Cargo aircraft or the Armoured Infantry Fighting vehicle would represent steps towards some of the Level of Ambition 3 goals outlined in the Commission report.

To circle back to the point made by Joseph Borrell quoted above, Ireland, like its European partners is now facing the consequences of decoupling our security from our prosperity. We are rightly proud to be an island with global reach, an economy that has built its prosperity on international investment in areas where cyber security is key. Ireland has benefited from living in a geopolitically stable part of the world, with no immediate enemies but the realities of the modern world have reduced the buffer zone provided by geography, bringing once distant threats to our door or placing our people in harm's way abroad. The evacuation of Irish citizens from Afghanistan relied on help from friends, France and Finland provided space on their aircraft.

We need to ask ourselves difficult questions about whether our global ambitions can be underwritten by the kindness of strangers or if we are willing to take the serious steps necessary to develop the type of capabilities that will help Ireland to be safe, prosperous and influential for decades to come. The EU initiatives toward achieving strategic autonomy present one avenue for pursuing these goals.