

## **Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on European Affairs on “EU Defence and Security”**

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Cathaoirleach, Leas-Cathaoirleach, Deputies, and Senators, I appreciate your invitation to speak to the Committee on the subject of EU Defence and Security. My name is Scott Fitzsimmons. I'm a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Limerick. Although I was born in Canada, I consider Ireland my home, and I am proud to be an Irish citizen. For almost twenty years, I have taught and undertaken research on the behaviour of armed forces, military culture, and foreign policy decision-making. My comments today focus on Irish foreign and defence policy in the context of the contemporary European defence and security environment.

The ongoing Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine highlight the longstanding threat that Russia poses to every European country. This threat is compounded by the fact that one of the two major political parties in the United States has weakened its commitment to defend Europe from external aggression. In the wake of Brexit, the United Kingdom has also opted to stand outside of EU defence planning.

At the same time, due to the presence of considerable critical infrastructure on or near Irish territory, Ireland now bears outsized importance as an economic and strategic focal point in Europe. This makes it both a critical asset to other western countries and an attractive target to external aggressors. Approximately three quarters of the undersea data cables linking Europe with North America pass through or near Irish waters. In addition, Ireland could soon host over 100 large, power-hungry data centres, representing about 30 percent of such facilities in Europe. Moreover, Shannon Airport is a key component of the transatlantic air bridge linking Europe with Canada and the United States. In the event of a general war in Europe, it would be essential to European defence and reconstruction. These assets, when combined with Ireland's geographic position as the northwest border of the EU, make Ireland especially vulnerable to maritime and aerial threats emanating from the North Atlantic.

Even if an external aggressor lacks a reason to fear, distrust, or hate Ireland, it will deem Ireland's economic and strategic infrastructure to be critical targets in a campaign to undermine the security and defence of other EU member countries. In other words, any external aggressor that wants to seriously harm the EU may try to harm Ireland.

These are compelling reasons for Ireland to bolster its capacity and willingness to support European common defence alongside our EU allies. I would encourage our government to reconsider its modest approach to defence spending, which is guided by the LOA2 proposal contained in the 2022 Report of the Commission on Defence Forces. Our government should, instead, adopt an approach closer to the more ambitious LOA3 proposal. This will allow it to develop and maintain significant enhancements in select areas that are vital to protecting our critical infrastructure from external attacks.

These enhancements would include bolstering our capacity to undertake anti-submarine defence, air and maritime surveillance, tactical air mobility, air defence, defensive anti-tank warfare, and cyber security operations. Our government has already demonstrated its recognition of the importance of some of these enhancements through its participation in multiple EU-based Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects. However, I would encourage our government to provide the stable, long-term funding required to implement these and other enhancements through the acquisition of new equipment and technologies, such as jet fighter aircraft, remotely operated underwater vehicles, and advanced radar. Attracting and retaining qualified personnel to operate and maintain these assets will also be critical.

I would also encourage our government to reconsider its approach to military alignment. Although senior politicians have publicly stated that Ireland is not politically neutral, they maintain that our country is militarily neutral. The former claim is correct but the latter does not reflect the reality of contemporary Irish foreign and defence policy. A more accurate description of Ireland's approach to international defence and security, and one that is reflected in Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty, is what I call "one-sided alignment." Ireland maintains an expectation that our EU allies, as well as the United Kingdom, will assist us if we are attacked by an external aggressor; however, we will not reciprocate. This is not military neutrality; it is free-riding off other countries who will sacrifice for us even if we will not commit to do the same for them. To live up to our duties as a member of the EU, we should adopt a conventional approach to military alignment and pledge to use force in defence of our EU allies, when necessary.

Finally, to ensure Ireland can act when it deems necessary to assist in the defence and security of its EU allies, I would encourage our government to replace the "Triple Lock," which requires the extraordinary approval of not merely our government and the Dáil but also the United Nations to deploy more than 12 military personnel outside our borders. The permanent members of the United Nations Security Council include countries that pose potent threats to ourselves and the rest of the EU; these countries should not be allowed to exercise a veto over our ability to help defend Europe. As a sovereign, democratic country, Ireland can trust itself to make responsible decisions about the use of force outside its borders based on a legal requirement that such a decision receives the approval of both our government and the Dáil.

On the issue of European defence and security, Ireland stands at a crossroads. We can pretend that we can stand apart from the rest of the EU on this issue, or we can make the political and resource commitments required for Ireland to finally share the mutual responsibility of all EU members to uphold the defence and security of Europe.