



**An Roinn Cosanta
Department of Defence**

**Statement by Minister for Defence, Mr Simon Coveney T.D., at the Oireachtas Dáil
Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, seeking approval for Irish
Participation in a European Defence Agency project.**

30 March 2021

Chairman, Members,

The following Motion has been placed on the Order Paper for Dáil Éireann and was referred to this Committee:

That Dáil Éireann approves Ireland's participation in a European Defence Agency Project – Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) Networking – Operational Support and Development (MARSUR III) pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

In commending the motion to the Select Committee, I will briefly outline the function of the European Defence Agency and the background to the programme that Ireland wishes to participate in.

The European Defence Agency was established by a Joint Action of the Council of the European Union in 2004, "to support the Member States and the Council in their effort to improve European defence capabilities in the field of crisis management and to sustain the European Security and Defence Policy as it stands now and develops in the future".

On 6 July 2004, the Government approved Ireland's participation in the framework of the European Defence Agency. It is an Agency of the European Union which is composed of Defence Ministers of the 26 participating Member States – Denmark does not participate due to its opting out on CSDP issues. Ireland participates in the framework of the Agency and contributes to the annual costs of running the Agency including its annual work programme.

The Agency is focused on assisting Member States in capability development, in obtaining better value for existing member state defence expenditure, improving competitiveness and securing greater efficiency, particularly in the area of research, technology and procurement of Defence Capabilities. The primary reason for Ireland's participation in the Agency is to support the development of Defence Forces capabilities for peacekeeping and international crisis management operations.

The Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 prescribes that participation in EDA projects or programmes is subject to Government and Dáil approval. Capability development projects with the EDA are classified either as a Category A project, where all Member States join unless they specifically opt out, or a Category B project where two or more Member States come together to pursue a particular initiative.

Ireland has participated in a number of Category A and Category B projects over the years. Four of these are now completed.

These projects covered capabilities such as Force Protection, CBRN (Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear) Protection, CIED (Counter Improvised Explosive Devices) and earlier Maritime Surveillance projects.

There are four current and ongoing EDA projects which Ireland is participating in, these projects relate to Cyber Defence Training; Satellite Communications; Counter Improvised Explosive Devices Training; and Military Search Capacity Building.

The proposal I am putting to the Committee today is to seek approval for Ireland to participate in a follow-on the EDA project in relation to Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) Networking – Operational Support and Development (MARSUR III).

Ireland has participated in the MARSUR Project since its inception.

MARSUR Networking provides a secure information network amongst the European maritime operations centres to share maritime and naval information in a secure manner in the interests of European maritime security. The technology used to communicate is known as the MEXS (MARSUR Exchange System). This system has been developed by the participating Member States since the first MARSUR project. The project aims to avoid duplication of effort and to use available technologies, data and information exchange to enhance cooperation in simple, efficient and low cost solutions to enhance situational awareness in support of surveillance and security in the maritime domain.

The Naval Service have been participating in the MARSUR projects since 2012, this third iteration, MARSUR III, is a follow-on project, a continuation of the work done to date with the aim to further enhance and improve maritime surveillance.

Previous iterations of this project have received Government and Dáil approval. This third iteration remains true to the objectives of the previous projects with its aim to further develop a capability that fulfils the need of maritime surveillance information sharing and networking.

The EDA MARSUR projects strengthen the Recognised Maritime Picture – in simple terms a Recognised Maritime Picture is an image or map that shows all vessels and activities that are present in a particular maritime area. It links to national and international data and information on vessels, the marine environment, infrastructure etc. that has been compiled from various monitoring and surveillance systems.

Enhanced exchange of information plays an important part in protecting maritime trade, the maritime environment and natural resources and in countering illicit activity in the maritime domain. The MARSUR projects have assisted Member States, including Ireland, in enhancing situational awareness so as to combat drug trafficking and people smuggling and other illicit activities.

MARSUR III, as a follow on project, will look to improve and upgrade the current technology to support the exchange classified information; provide support to EU maritime operational engagements and Common Security and Defence Policy missions/operations; and develop new functionalities such as artificial intelligence and big data processing.

MARSUR III will last for 6 years with the possibility of extending for a further 2 years. In that regard, I am seeking approval for Ireland's participation in the project for the life of the project including any extension.

The cost of participation is €50,000 per year for the life of the project.

There are 15 other EU Members states preparing to join the MARSUR III project including Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. This level of engagement is indicative of the projects value and importance in terms of maritime surveillance and security.

Participation in this project will further enhance the capability of our Defence Forces to undertake the roles assigned to them by Government, both at home and overseas. As the State's principal sea-going agency, the Naval Service provides a unique sea-going capability. The Naval Service is multi-tasked with providing a fishery protection service, general maritime patrolling and are ready to respond to, for example, an aid to the civil power request, a pollution incident, or a search and rescue or recovery mission.

Having access to both national and international data on maritime surveillance through the EDA MARSUR projects is essential for the Naval Service to continue to provide this important role. It is the system that has been used both on overseas missions and at home; it was used by the Naval Service when engaged in Operation Sophia, the EU security mission in the Mediterranean, and in a national context supports Naval Service security and defence operations within Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The EDA Maritime Surveillance Project is one of the longest running projects in the EDA and is an excellent example of Member States working together to develop effective technical solutions in support of common interests and endeavours.

I commend the Motion to the Select Committee.

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