

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

Dé Céadaoin, 29 Samhain 2017

Wednesday, 29 November 2017

The Select Committee met at 4.40 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies

Seán Barrett,	
Lisa Chambers,*	
Noel Grealish,	
Paul Kehoe (<i>Minister of State at the Department of Defence</i>),	
Maureen O'Sullivan,	
Aengus Ó Snodaigh.*	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputies Darragh O'Brien and Seán Crowe, respectively.

Teachta / Deputy Brendan Smith sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Ireland's Participation in European Defence Agency Projects: Motion

Chairman: The purpose of the meeting is to consider the motion that was referred to the select committee on the joint procurement arrangement for the EU SatCom market and the European Centre for Manual Neutralisation Capabilities, pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. Under the terms of the Dáil motion of 21 November, the committee must consider the matters and, having done so, report back to the Dáil not later than 30 November. I welcome the Minister of State with responsibility for defence matters, Deputy Paul Kehoe, and his two officials from the Department. I thank the officials for forwarding the briefing material in advance. The format of the meeting is that we will hear the opening presentation of the Minister of State and then take questions from members. I invite the Minister of State to make his contribution.

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The following motion was placed on the Order Paper of Dáil Éireann and referred to the select committee:

That Dáil Éireann approve Ireland's participation in two European Defence Agency projects – (1) Joint Procurement Arrangement for EU SatCom Market and (2) European Centre for Manual Neutralisation Capabilities, ECMAN, pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

In commending the motion I will briefly outline the function of the European Defence Agency and the background to the programmes in which Ireland wishes to participate. 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 agency.

The European Defence Agency is an agency of the European Union and composed of the Defence Ministers of the 27 participating member states and the European Commission. Ireland participates in the framework of the agency and contributes in the region of €400,000 to the annual cost of running it, including the cost of its annual work programme. The agency is focused on assisting member states in capability development, obtaining better value for existing spending levels, improving competitiveness and securing greater efficiency, particularly in the areas of research, technology and procurement of defence capabilities.

The primary reason for Ireland's participation in the European Defence Agency is to support the development of Defence Forces capabilities for peacekeeping and international crisis management operations. The Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 regulates Ireland's participation in the agency's *ad hoc* projects. It prescribes that participation in category A projects, category B projects or programmes is subject to Government and Dáil approval. A category A project is where all member states join, unless they specifically opt out, while a category B project is where two or more member states come together to pursue a particular initiative.

I will now give a brief outline of Ireland's involvement in EDA projects to date. Following Government and Dáil approval, Ireland has participated or is participating in the following areas: a programme on force protection that involved measures to protect military forces engaged in operational activities; a programme related to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear protection; projects in the area of maritime surveillance and networking; a project focused on counter improvised explosive devices manual neutralisation techniques; and a project concern-

ing co-operation on cyber-ranges in the European Union, the aim of which is to maintain and improve cyber-resilience, in addition to the levels of awareness, insight and expertise of member states' personnel.

The proposal brought forward by me today is to seek approval for Ireland to participate in two EDA projects - one in the area of satellite communications and the other in the area of manual neutralisation capabilities.

With regard to the joint procurement arrangement for the EU SatCom market, the aim is to provide commercially available satellite communications – fixed and mobile – in addition to related services through the establishment of one or more framework agreements on behalf of the contributing members, to promote ease of access and improve efficiency. Access to the SatCom procurement project is open to the European Defence Agency's participating member states, EU entities and certain third parties.

The provision of strategic satellite services is an essential prerequisite for the major deployment of troops overseas and in support of other major operations. It is vital that the Defence Forces maintain appropriate systems and procedures for the provision of strategic satellite services efficiently and potentially at short notice. The project represents an opportunity to procure satellite services in an efficient, cost-effective and timely manner through the achievement of potential economies of scale with pooled demand across EU member states and institutions.

Satellite services play a critical role in enabling the Defence Forces to access reliable communications services anywhere and at any time. When deployed on operations overseas, the Defence Forces utilise strategic satellite services as their primary system for providing communication links both in the field and back to Defence Forces headquarters. In that regard, I refer to satellite communications supports location and GPS services in battlefield systems; Defence Forces command and control systems; desk to desk dialling; video conferencing; Defence Forces intranet access; access to strategic applications, including Defence Forces personnel and inventory management systems; and access to welfare support services such as Internet access and home phone facilities for personnel. The primary communications channel to Naval Service vessels on operational deployments is also via satellite which also supports its maritime surveillance systems.

In addition to the potential cost savings, participation in the project would provide the Defence Forces with security of supply and backup in the event of any failure on the part of the current supplier or an urgent operational requirement that cannot be met under the current contract.

I will now give some detail on the second EDA project. The ECMAN category B project is a follow-on activity of the European Defence Agency's category B programme on manual neutralisation techniques, MNT, courses and exercise programmes. Ireland's participation in the programme was approved in 2013 and the project will finish in 2018. The aim of the follow-on project is to continue to develop manual neutralisation capabilities to the highest standards so as to retain capacity in dealing with improvised explosive devices, IEDs, when it is not possible to destroy or disrupt a device through other means. The follow-on project will provide personnel with access to a training system designed to continuously update and improve the safety of explosive ordnance disposal personnel operating in an extreme environment. It also enables those already qualified in manual neutralisation techniques courses and exercise programmes through previous participation to maintain skill levels through an efficient re-licensing arrangement linked with refresher courses. Officers trained in manual neutralisation techniques enable the

ordnance corps to guarantee continuous support for the explosive ordnance disposal and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear improvised device disposal teams. Participation in the programme will deliver the essential number of personnel to meet requirements over time. This capability is highly specialised and unavailable elsewhere owing to its highly sensitive and classified nature and mainly developed as part of multinational framework arrangements.

Manual neutralisation capability is required in situations where the operational environment determines that the risk of causing a device to detonate – for example, a controlled explosion – is unacceptable. In addition, recovering devices intact can have a profound effect on investigations where even the smallest piece of evidence such as DNA on a piece of adhesive tape inside an improvised explosive device or the use of particular components can help to identify the perpetrator or terrorist group involved. Explosive disruptors are no longer the weapon of choice in such incidents. Manual neutralisation techniques training is also important when dealing with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence type incidents such as those using ricin and other white powder events.

On the financial aspects, there are no costs to the Exchequer arising from participation in the EU SatCom market project. Costs will arise only if the service is availed of on a pay-per-use basis.

In respect of the second project, the European Centre for Manual Neutralisation Capabilities, ECMAN, the cost to the Exchequer for Ireland's participation is €75,000 per year for each of the six years of the programme - a total of €450,000 over the lifetime of the project. The costs will be met from within existing resources.

In conclusion, Ireland's participation in the European Defence Agency affords us the opportunity to keep abreast of best practice and new developments in the defence environment, particularly as it impacts on multinational crisis management operations. The Government's White Paper on Defence published in August 2015 states that Ireland will identify opportunities to participate "in multi-national capability development projects within the framework of the EDA in support of the Defence Forces' operations, capacity and capability." The two projects discussed today are prime examples of how the Defence Forces can develop their capabilities in satellite communications and in manual neutralisation capabilities. I commend the motion to the committee.

Chairman: We all will have new words and phrases in our vocabulary after that statement.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: These two measures look relatively benign and in the Minister of State's conclusion, the argument seems to be to ask who would deny our Defence Forces the opportunity to keep abreast of best practice and new developments. However, the point is that there are considerations and concerns that we are increasingly moving towards being part of a greater EU militarisation policy. There is no doubt that this will threaten our neutrality and the good standing in which our peacekeeping missions are held. I will take the example of Operation Sophia. We were respected because of the humanitarian work being done by the Naval Service on the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. Suddenly, we agreed to become part of this big EU naval mission, which I believe is totally discredited now because what has happened is those people who were taken in by this navy and brought to these detention centres having been mistreated by some elements of the Libyan coastguard and other boats in the area. We just had an informal meeting with one of the leading NGOs. The figures given regarding the rape of women and men in these detention centres were staggering and frightening. While these two measures look relatively benign, we cannot help but ask whether they are the first steps in

a much bigger campaign and movement that will really endanger our neutrality and place us in a very vulnerable situation. In respect of the Minister of State's comment about how it impacts multinational crisis management operations, who defines the crisis and how do we come to an agreement regarding what is a crisis of which we want to be a part?

Deputy Seán Barrett: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation. I would like to follow on from what Deputy O'Sullivan has said. I say this because of my respect for the Defence Forces and the work they have done over the years and as a former Minister for Defence. We must be extremely careful here. There is a constant need for attention which worries me that we are not being dragged into something that was never really our remit and that it would affect the great work we do in peacekeeping and conflict prevention. It is like what Deputy O'Sullivan said. The humanitarian approach of the Naval Service was excellent and the manner in which it carried out its duties was superb but then the follow-on involved being dragged into something that is now putting a big question mark over it. We must recognise that we are a neutral country. We are a member of the EU but we are a neutral country. As it is the one thing that has helped us in mission after mission in terms of peacekeeping and respect throughout the world, we must be extremely careful that we are not being dragged along with the others. Let the others play more games but we should really be clear as to where we stand.

I read one of the documents with which we were supplied. Section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 provides:

The Government shall not approve participation by the State in a project or programme referred to in *subsection (1)* unless it is satisfied that such participation would contribute to the enhancement of capabilities for United Nations mandated missions engaged in peace keeping, conflict prevention or the strengthening of international security in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

That says it all for me and that is the gospel that we should follow. We should not be dragged along because we are in the EU and want to be one of the buddies with the rest. That is not our role. Our Defence Forces are small but carry out unbelievable work. I am sure the Minister of State has, like myself, visited various small involvements in different parts of the world where we had 30 or 40 officers who were key people in a big organisational operation in terms of peacekeeping. I have been going on about this for a long time because I am deeply nervous that we are being dragged along with the rest of the boys and girls. This is why I was very anxious that we debate this. To be truthful, what is annoying me a bit is that this motion was put before the Dáil for approval before it came here. It should have come before us before it went to the Dáil for approval. It was passed by the Dáil. If we are going to participate-----

Chairman: On a point of clarification, the Dáil referred it to us for consideration. It goes back to the Dáil tomorrow.

Deputy Seán Barrett: Yes, but it was passed.

Chairman: No, it was referred to us.

Deputy Seán Barrett: My apologies.

Chairman: It goes back to the Dáil tomorrow.

Deputy Seán Barrett: Well then I am wrong and I apologise.

Chairman: That is okay. It was just a clarification.

Deputy Seán Barrett: I understood that it came to us because we were looking for things but it should automatically come here. I am open to discussion and I appreciate the Minister of State and his staff are doing the best they can in terms of what the demands are but we cannot be careful enough. It is not about being a wimp or being afraid of being with the big boys. It is important for us, with Defence Forces that are small but which are highly skilled in certain areas. Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan’s comments were about what can happen through being dragged into something having participated in a very worthwhile project involving our Naval Service saving lives. One can be dragged into things without really expecting it. Therefore, we should stick very carefully to what these Acts say. I do not doubt the Minister of State’s integrity or of that of his staff for one minute but I am just saying is that it should go out loud and clear that while we are members of the EU, when it comes to matters of defence, we have restrictions because of our neutrality and these are the guidelines. The Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 clearly states what the Government shall not approve and, therefore, that makes it quite clear.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Deputies O’Sullivan and Barrett are speaking in the same vein regarding our neutrality. Participation in the EDA projects is not a form of common defence. Let me state that it does not impact on Ireland’s neutrality. If anybody looks back at my record at all European meetings, whatever the debate is, they will see that the number one thing I always ask for is that our policy on neutrality is respected. Irrespective of the nature of the project in which we are participating, I seek legal advice to ensure we are not entering a space that raises questions about neutrality. As a former Minister for Defence, Deputy Seán Barrett will have had many opportunities to visit Irish peacekeepers stationed overseas. Given our involvement in UNIFIL, I have no doubt he visited Lebanon on numerous occasions. Older soldiers tell me that the threats they face nowadays are much more sophisticated than the threats they faced ten, 20 or 30 years ago. We must keep pace with the latest technologies and participating in these projects gives us the technical expertise to enable us to carry out peacekeeping duties with the United Nations.

I attended a UN peacekeeping conference in Canada two weeks ago. The UN demanded from all participants at the conference that they make a greater contribution to UN peacekeeping. To do so, we must be able to keep up with the best other countries and those countries with which we work alongside in UN duties. Interoperability was a new word for me when I was appointed Minister of State with responsibility for defence. I am now fully aware of the importance of achieving interoperability and being able to operate with like-minded countries, neutral or otherwise.

A number of other EU member states are also neutral. I continually highlight our policy of neutrality at meetings with my counterparts.

Deputy Barrett referred to our participation in Operation Sophia. The vast majority of the work done by the Naval Service as part of Operation Sophia involves rescuing migrants and bringing them ashore in Italy. The role is similar to the humanitarian work previously done in the region by the Naval Service.

I understand that all European Defence Agency projects must be approved by the select committee before going to the Dáil. I do not have a problem with that approach as it is only right and proper that members have an opportunity to question the Minister of the day on the reasons we are participating in such projects.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. I will comment briefly before Deputy Ó Snodaigh

contributes. I share the views expressed by Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan and Seán Barrett on neutrality and the respect that our policy has garnered for Ireland throughout the world over the decades. The views expressed by the Deputies are often aired at meetings of the joint committee. The particular provision in the 2009 Act is very good and must be adhered to strictly. I am pleased to note the Minister of State’s comment that he outlines our position on neutrality at every meeting of European Union defence Ministers. As he will be aware, a parliamentary meeting is held on the Common Security and Defence Policy under each Presidency. At the small number of such meetings I have attended, I have spoken out strongly about our adherence to neutrality, pointing out that we will not deviate from it.

The point made by Deputy Barrett is that we all share a concern at the back of our minds that things may be happening that run counter to the thrust of our policy on neutrality, which is firmly adhered to and supported by the overwhelming majority of the population. In that context, we are proposing, as part of our work programme for 2018, that the Minister of State appear before the committee at least three times each year to update members on developments in the European Union. We have an arrangement under which the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade reports to the joint committee on Council meetings. These meetings with the Minister do not take place as often as they should for reasons of scheduling, either on the part of the committee or Minister. The joint committee cannot meet when it wishes as only certain time slots are available. In addition, we have a substantial work programme.

Apart from appearing before the select committee to present Estimates or legislation, we propose that the Minister of State attend formal meetings of the committee at least three times per annum to update members on developments in the Council of defence Ministers, including proposals, follow-up and so forth. We will make this proposal in our work programme for 2018 to ensure members are kept abreast of what is happening and, I hope, to allay any fears that may arise among members of the public and Members of the Oireachtas. I am sure the programme will be agreed by the committee.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: My experience of attending Council meetings in the past 18 months has been that the same issue appears repeatedly on the agenda and people say the same thing in a different way. The most important aspect of these meetings is that every country, specifically the neutral countries, has an opportunity to outline its policy on neutrality. It is often the case that officials from the Department have had wording changed to reflect our policy of neutrality.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Before addressing some of the specific matters, like the Chairman and Deputies O’Sullivan and Barrett, I approach all motions of this nature with a healthy degree of suspicion. I have argued for some years at the committee against many of the defence motions connected with the European Union that come before the committee and cautioned that we are increasingly creeping into an EU militarised structure. We will debate this issue in the coming week on a major proposed change to Irish defence strategy involving our participation in PESCO or permanent structured co-operation on defence. We will deal with that proposal in some detail in the House and members will be aware of my views on that issue and our policy of neutrality.

A number of issues are not completely clear with regard to the European Union’s SatCom market, to which we are signing up. France became the 24th member of SatCom in August last, which was very convenient given that the contract for the delivery of SatCom was signed recently with one of France’s biggest companies, Airbus Defence and Space. As the world’s second largest space communications company, there is a logic to the decision to award the contract to Airbus but it is also strange that France did not sign up to SatCom until that contract

was signed.

There appears to be a suggestion that the Defence Forces current contract is insufficient. According to the Minister of State, the project will provide the Defence Forces with security of supply and back-up. I was not aware of any problem with the supply of satellite communications for the Defence Forces. Are we liable to pay the current supplier to exit the contract early? In the event of any failure on the part of the current supplier to meet urgent operational requirements because it is not sufficiently flexible, that is a problem with whoever negotiated the contract in the first place. If one is negotiating a contract for the supply of satellite communications, it must be flexible and services must be provided at a moment's notice in the event of troops being deployed and requiring such services.

The Minister of State indicated there are no costs to the Exchequer. While there is no immediate cost evident, is there a cost in terms of ending the contract with the current supplier? What is the cost per use? One cannot argue there is no cost if a cost arises each time the system is used.

Another issue arises with the SatCom project. It is probably hosted on the Eurostar or one of the other satellites that Airbus has spinning around the earth, looking down on us all. Who else would share that satellite? They are not for a single purpose and there have been embarrassing situations in the past where rival companies who were sharing the same space. I think there was a case some years ago where Vatican TV was embarrassed because there was something inappropriate also coming out on the same channel. Can we guarantee that whatever system is used is not also being used by our rivals? We are a neutral country but if we are buying into a system which is to be shared by the other 23 members so far, and there may be more because France is the latest one to join, will that cause a problem?

I concur with the other members on the explosive ordinance or detonation and the respect that those who are involved in this are held across the world. I recognise the training which members of the Defence Forces who are attached to the ordinance sections have given in war torn areas and countries which are coming out of wars to ensure that areas of land are safe, and I have no problem with that. I have several queries, however. They are talking about using Irish personnel, but the information that I have is that there is a major crisis of personnel in terms of members in the ordinance section in the Defence Forces, with a shortfall in skilled members. If that is the case, and we are committing eight of the most skilled people to get trained on this manual neutralisation capabilities in the European centre, can we afford to release them? I think that we should and I am not opposed to it but there is a question of whether we can afford it if we have international commitments and commitments at home, because one still sees the green trucks regularly moving around the country. It is provided that the €450,000 that this project will cost will come out of existing resources. It was not in the Estimates for next year. If €450,000 is coming out of other resources, what will lose out? The Defence Forces, like every section, do not have spare cash lying around. It is €50,000 short of €0.5 million. It is money that should be found and it should have been in the Estimates, although perhaps that was not possible because we had not passed it then.

Like other Deputies, I think these proposals are benign, for the most part, but they are an additional step towards our being subsumed, or more accurately, having our self-sufficiency undermined, where before we were self-sufficient and were capable of looking after ourselves. We did not rely on international satellites or training. In common with other Deputies, I am not opposed to the motion.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: On bomb disposal, there are two personnel annually, so there will not be eight people at any one time.

Regarding the charge, we pay a standing charge of €400,000 annually to the EDA. There are other areas where we are able to benefit from being members of the EDA. Then we have the ECMAN project to which the Deputy referred, which has a cost of €75,000. I am not sure what head that might be under in the Estimates but I will find out and revert to the Deputy with an answer.

The goal for the new SatCom Market project is to provide a cost-effective SatCom service solution for the benefit of EDA participating member states and EU institutions. The Defence Forces currently have a commercial contract in place for the provision of these services which the Deputy inquired about. Participation in this project will provide the Defence Forces with security of supply and back up in the event of any failure on the part of our current supplier, with whom we will not be breaking our existing contract. It will be used only if there is a failure on the part of our current supplier or an urgent operational requirement which cannot be made under the current contract. It will be beneficial for operations overseas, on maritime patrols and Operation Sophia. The cost is on a pay-by-use basis, without any standing charge. The EDA is not there to make money. I cannot give an exact cost of involvement if we have to avail of the service but the rate would be very keen. If there was a sudden breakdown in the existing service we will be able to tap into this SatCom, and we pay for whatever we use.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I thank the Minister of State for his responses. I have no problem with his answers on the European centre for manual neutralisation capabilities but on the SatCom, if we are retaining the current supplier and we will also sign up to a new supplier in the event of an emergency or whatever-----

Deputy Paul Kehoe: We are not signing up to a new supplier.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Government is signing up to EDA in the event of a system collapse.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Absolutely, but there is no cost to the Exchequer whatever -----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Initially.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: There is no cost to the Exchequer for SatCom unless we use it. It is a standing service for all members of the European Defence Agency. If there is a problem with the service provided to us by our existing provider and we have to go to the back up service of the EDA, it is only then that the charges kick in.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I understand that. I will continue with this line of thought. We have signed up to European battle groups, for instance. The logic with this interoperability is that if Ireland is involved in an EU battle group, all the telecommunications systems would be the same if we are working with armies from other countries. If they have signed up to the same satellite communications, and the logic is that one would use that when based overseas, not necessarily in Ireland, that means that there is a potential cost to the Exchequer because one still has the existing supplier. I am not opposed to it, I am merely saying that there is a logic here. Would there then be a cost of us having to switch some of our equipment or is the equipment sufficiently new that it can switch between satellite providers at a moment's notice if required? One could have a situation in Mali, for instance, where there is a detachment of Irish troops. Are they working on their own? Are they working through their own satellite provider

or will they be with the other EU troops there, collectively, working off a different communications system? That would involve a cost. It might be minor, and the Minister of State is correct that the European Defence Agency is not there to make profit but it must also pay Airbus for the guaranteed space to be available 24-7, which is what the contract would be. The space on that satellite would have to be sufficient for all the EU's military missions and operations into the future. I presume whoever negotiated the contract with Airbus would have done that. I do not know enough about satellites and how they work to figure out how much would be required, but I understand that if there are two satellites they sometimes go out of range so it is necessary to switch between different satellites. The advantage of going with Airbus is that it has so many satellites one is never in the dark at any one time. There is a logic to it but we should not present it as not having any cost. It has a potential cost in the future. That might be a better way of presenting it.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Let us say the Government decides tomorrow morning that we are to participate in a mission somewhere in Africa or wherever. I am not sure whether the existing contract we have is negotiated every 12 months, but it is a fixed contract for the overseas missions we have, be it Operation Sophia for the Naval Service or an operation for the Air Corps. If we were to undertake a new mission we would have to renegotiate a package with the existing provider. If that provider was unable to provide us with a service, the EDA gives us another option in the future. From my perspective, if the EDA package is more acceptable or better priced than the existing contractor we have, one would go with the keenest price and the most secure provider.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I wish to make two points. EU military missions in African countries are in extremely fragile states such as Mali, Somalia and the Central African Republic. While those are not partner countries for Irish Aid, Irish Aid is involved. There could be a situation where an EU military mission goes into a fragile, vulnerable country that we are supporting in a humanitarian way. How can we reconcile the military operation with the humanitarian one?

The other point I wish to make relates to Libya. The Minister of State can correct me if I am wrong but there was no UN mandate for what happened in Libya, yet our Naval Service was taking part in this EU mission in Libya. There are contradictions and there is a potential contradiction into the future. It is not with these two particular pieces but in the future.

Deputy Seán Barrett: On a separate matter, is the peacekeeping college still operating in the Curragh?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Yes.

Deputy Seán Barrett: One of the most pleasant things I encountered when I was in the Minister of State's position was a visit I received one day from the US military attaché to Ireland. He came to see me to find out if he could recommend to his superiors in the United States that they send some key officers to Ireland's peacekeeping college. He said to me, "You know, Minister, we do not know anything about peacekeeping". He said, "We just train our soldiers on how to use the best equipment in the world and we send them out on peacekeeping missions". It brought home to me the difference between what we are about and what the big powers do. They use force and move in, but we occupy a special little niche. We are renowned throughout the world for our peacekeeping qualities. We do not go about armed to our tonsils with bombs, bullets and the like. We have methods of dealing with people. I recall visiting Lebanon. My wife was with me. One day while I was out visiting outposts she was taken away to visit the

homes of various leading local mukhtars and so forth as part of the build-up of goodwill.

We are unique. I believe that is what is so special about our method of peacekeeping. We need not compete, and I am not saying we do or that the Minister of State is proposing it, with other big powers that are spending a great deal of money. It is innate in our people that we are very good at peacekeeping. Sitting down, having a cup of tea and a chat and getting information is every bit as important as having spies on the ground. It is unique. The peacekeeping college is something we should put up in lights. It exists, but very few people know about it. It uses the skills that we have developed over the years. Ordinary personnel spend some time in the peacekeeping college sharing their experiences with those who want to learn about our methods. It is interesting that we have this reputation.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I will respond to Deputy Barrett before responding to Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan. The peacekeeping school is very important for the Irish Defence Forces. It is part of the education of both enlisted personnel and cadets, as peacekeeping is one of the topics enshrined in their training. I am not sure if members are aware of the peace and leadership institute proposed in the programme for Government. It is a concept the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces are bringing forward with the support of the Government. It will be an institute specifically based on Ireland’s participation in peacekeeping. We are doing some groundwork on that at present with regard to potential courses and how people could participate in it. Personnel from European Union member states participate in the peacekeeping school, as well as personnel from further afield outside Europe, just as we send some of our officers abroad to talk about peacekeeping, peacekeeping operations and so forth.

Irish peacekeepers are really well inspected. One sees that when one goes abroad and sees them in operation and how the local people respect the participation of the Irish. I extended an invitation to the committee members to visit one of our missions abroad, in Lebanon or wherever, and that invitation still stands. It is important for the committee members to see how the Irish participate on the ground. We can arrange that at any time without a problem.

To reply to Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan, Operation Sophia is a UN mandated mission. We signed up to Operation Sophia under a UN mandate. It is absolutely within our policy of neutrality to participate in Operation Sophia. We do not go near the Libyan coast. We train the Libyan coast guard as part of the operation but we do not go near the Libyan coastline. If we pick up migrants we bring them to the Italian authorities.

With regard to humanitarian and Irish Aid agencies, I feel very strongly that if the Irish Defence Forces are on a mission abroad they should link up with the humanitarian and aid agencies to assist them in every way possible. I spoke about this at a recent event. It is most important for members of the Defence Forces. We do a great deal of humanitarian work in Lebanon and elsewhere. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade gives us, through the ambassadors’ offices, a budget that the Defence Forces spend on humanitarian projects on the ground such as water, schools, education, sports fields or whatever, to help the local community. It is form of bridge building and relationship building within the communities wherever we participate. One of the more practical examples is in Lebanon because we have participated there for many years. The Deputy is right to say it is important that we help humanitarian efforts.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for engaging with members who raised important issues in the discussion. We will have meetings in 2018 particularly regarding the European dimension to allay any fears we in the Oireachtas and that members of the public have.

SFATD

Message to Dáil

Chairman: In accordance with Standing Order 90 the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence has completed its consideration of the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann approves Ireland's participation in two European Defence Agency Projects – (1) Joint Procurement Arrangement for EU SatCom Market and (2) European Centre for Manual Neutralisation Capabilities (ECMAN) pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

The select committee adjourned at 5.45 p.m. until 5 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 December 2017.