

Opening statement to the Joint Committee on European Affairs on “Recent developments in EU security and defence”

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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 security and defence. It is a little over 12 months since I last spoke with the committee, when I focussed on opportunities for Ireland to address its own security and defence capabilities gaps. Today, I would like to speak to three main points: 1) The challenges facing Ukraine in responding to Russia’s ongoing aggression and the implications for European security and defence 2) New initiatives at an EU level to further coordinate defence production, procurement and research since we last spoke and 3) the policy challenges facing Ireland in dealing with this new security environment.

1) The Russian war in Ukraine

Over the past 12 months, Ukraine’s ability to defend itself has been under strain. In the past few weeks, in addition to small gains in the southeast, Russia has begun to reopen a front in the Kharkiv region. While this may be a feint or a tactical manoeuvre it still signals Russia’s willingness to test the resolve of Europe and Ukraine’s other allies. To date, these allies have provided enough for Ukraine to survive but not sufficient support to win. This is a problem for the EU for a number of reasons. First, the EU has made clear it supports a European future for Ukraine, but an occupied or partially occupied Ukraine cannot become a member state. This outcome would damage EU credibility in the region and beyond. The recent announcement of a draft bilateral security agreement between Kyiv and the EU is a further public statement of EU intent, albeit it reportedly excludes direct military participation by EU member state forces in the defence of Ukraine. Second, the view of the Russian threat varies significantly among EU member states, for those who share a border and in some cases minority populations with Russia, the damage to EU credibility as a security provider may be fatal. Third, Russia has demonstrated throughout this conflict that it is a rational calculating actor, willing to escalate and deescalate in response to the level of resistance it experiences. An appeasement approach has been taken from 2008 when Russia occupied parts of Georgia and we are reaping the rewards of this approach today. If Russia succeeds in redrawing European borders through force this will have a significant destabilising effect on both the region and the world. A significant redline will have been crossed.

2) New Initiatives at the EU level in security and defence

Though Ukraine may need further support, even the limited support provided to date has exposed limits in Europe’s defence production capacity. In response the EU has attempted to move further than ever before in coordinating defence production, development and procurement in a centralised manner. First through the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) and Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), which provide EU level supports to offset the risks of joint procurement and development and to coordinate the procurement of munitions; and more recently with the launch of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European

Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) with an initial fund of €1.5 billion euro for the period 2024-2027. The purpose of the strategy and programme is to enhance the European Defence Technological and Industrial base to increase European capabilities, and particularly reduce reliance on external suppliers and the geopolitical risk this entails during times of crisis.

However, a number of caveats do need to be highlighted in relation to how dramatic an impact these initiatives will have. The first is the low level of funding available, €1.5 billion over three years across the entire EU is a small amount in defence spending terms. That figure is unlikely to significantly shift the dial on European capabilities. For this reason, some European states are arguing for common European financing for future funding cycles. Though some member states are sceptical, including Ireland due to concerns around neutrality, and Germany who have been reluctant to engage in common borrowing across a number of policy areas.

Second, member states have different interests in defence industry policy, whether to protect domestic producers or to avoid over dependence on a reduced number of suppliers.

Third, is the failure of these initiatives to involve the UK. Brexit meant that the EU lost significant military capability and any credible approach to European autonomy in security and defence needs to rebuild the link to British defence capabilities.

Finally, one of the push factors driving the EU's drive for greater self-reliance, the potential for a less reliable partner in the US, may paradoxically encourage some states to continue to purchase US weapons systems. The first Trump administration demonstrated the President's transactional approach to foreign policy, being a good customer to the US defence industry will likely outweigh any normative commitments in a second Trump White House.

However, even if the impact of the EDIS is limited in terms of developing EU military capacity, it still signals a direction of travel and is working in concert with NATO and national level initiatives that indicate an increased level of investment in European security and defence. This increased investment reflects the threat environment, and it is in this context that Ireland needs to consider its position.

3) Policy challenges for Ireland

Ireland has not been immune to this increased attention to security and defence. Ireland has also to date been an active participant in EU battlegroups and military CSDP missions, which have with one exception operated under UN mandates compatible with the 'triple lock' approach to deployment. However, the geostrategic location of Ireland and its central role in relation to communications networks has brought more external focus on our lack of capabilities. These gaps are well documented, and the government has committed to achieving at least Level of Ambition 2 as identified by the Commission on the Defence Forces 2022 report. The reality is that Ireland has significant choices to make in relation to its own security and defence. The lack of a published National Security Strategy and review process to help frame the political debate around these choices is regrettable.

Ireland has a number of gaps in capabilities and needs to decide how those gaps might be addressed. Greater integration in EU security and defence initiatives, including those outlined above but also PESCO, is one potential avenue. Closer cooperation with NATO though an enhanced Partnership agreement is another. A third is to examine more bilateral or mini-lateral arrangements with likeminded states or states with whom we share a common border. There

are examples of how these work in Central Europe where the Visegrad countries have agreed to provide for Slovakia's air defence while it transitions to F-16s, and in the Benelux countries, where the Netherlands and Belgium operate a joint rapid air response capability.

These are, unfortunately, challenging times for the security of small states like Ireland and for the security of Europe. We need to take steps to protect our interests and as a small state, these steps will likely need to be with partners. How deep those partnerships should go and with whom they should be is a vital political question that needs urgent attention.