



An Roinn Cosanta
Department of Defence

Statement by the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence, Mr. Micheál Martin T.D., at the Oireachtas Dáil Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, seeking approval for participation in two Permanent Structured Cooperation Projects and two European Defence Agency projects

Chair, 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 the following:

(i) two Permanent Structured Cooperation Projects in accordance with the Programme for Government commitment:

(a) Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations, and

(b) Critical Seabed Infrastructure Protection and the associated Category B European Defence Agency support to the project, and

(ii) two European Defence Agency projects pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009:

(a) Defence Energy Managers' Course II, and

(b) Cyber Defence Exercises.

I am happy to attend the Committee today to outline what is being proposed, and most importantly, why this is being proposed.

In a geopolitically insecure climate such as today's, it is important that Ireland makes the best use that we can of opportunities provided by our membership of multilateral fora where such cooperation can be beneficial to us in terms of developing our military's capabilities.

A key example of this cooperation in the security and defence field is Ireland's membership of the EU's Common Security & Defence Policy (CSDP), and availing of opportunities that arise from that.

As the outcomes and interventions at last year's Consultative Forum on International Security Policy showed, there is a realisation that Ireland's engagement on the issue of our own security and defence will benefit from increased focus and investment.

There is also an understanding that as a country we should maximise our engagement at global level on these issues.

During the forum, many contributors expressed a clear view in favour of working more closely with our international partners at UN level, in the EU, and via the Partnership for Peace.

As the Committee knows, Ireland's policy of military neutrality, as practised by successive Governments over many decades, means that we do not participate in military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements.

This Government has no plans to alter that policy.

It does not mean we either wish to, or can, isolate ourselves from the challenging security environment we find ourselves in today.

Nor does it mean we can ignore our responsibilities towards our own citizens or other international partners.

I think we can all agree that today's global security climate, with its ensuing threats to democracy and multilateralism, and the emergence of the largest land conflict on the European continent since World War II, is deeply concerning.

At the moment, Europe is under attack by forces hostile to democracy, hostile to the Rule of Law, and hostile of the right of States to independent self-determination.

Ireland, despite our beneficial geographic location, is not immune to that and to related threats, as evidenced by incidents in our territorial waters over the recent past.

The memberships of vital networks of bilateral and multilateral partnerships, particularly as an EU member state, and the flexibility needed to maintain them within our policy of military neutrality that we currently enjoy, assist us in developing the capabilities we need.

There is a recognition nationally that we face new and emerging threats. We are increasingly aware of the havoc that can be wreaked by malicious actors in cyberspace, a reality brought home very powerfully by the cyberattack on the HSE in 2021.

The only way to deal with cyber-threats is by working with others, in collaborating and pooling information and expertise.

At the same time, our geographic situation as an island in the Atlantic forces us to confront vulnerabilities in our offshore infrastructure.

One only has to look at what happened to Finland and Estonia when the gas connector and interconnector were sabotaged last year.

Our participation in collaborative EU projects provides us with the ability to use opportunities at to address these challenges, and to benefit from best practice and expertise from other member states.

It is important to reiterate that participation in EDA or PESCO projects or engagement with any other EU defence-related initiative under the Common Security & Defence Policy does not have any impact on Ireland's policy of military neutrality.

In addition, participation in EDA and PESCO projects assists our Defence Forces in developing the necessary capabilities for all the roles assigned to them by Government including their international peacekeeping roles.

It is in this context that I intend to seek approval to join a number of further PESCO and EDA projects, in the Logistics, Critical Seabed Infrastructure Protection, Environmental Management, and Cyber areas; all of which have been deliberately chosen, following appropriate military advice, to enhance the capability of our Defence Forces.

In commending this motion to the Select Committee, I will outline Ireland's engagement to date in PESCO and in the European Defence Agency, and the background to the four projects that Ireland wishes to participate in.

Given the value of each project, it is important that I give some time to each of them.

In summary, PESCO is a framework under which groups of Member States of the European Union come together to plan, develop and invest in shared capability projects, and enhance the operational readiness and development of their respective armed forces.

Participation in PESCO is entirely voluntary, and of the EU member states, all but Malta take part in projects under this framework.

Its objective is to enable cooperation amongst Member States that will deliver capabilities for national and international missions and operations.

Ireland's participation was agreed by Government and approved by Dáil Éireann on 11th December 2017. The current Programme for Government provides that Ireland's participation in PESCO projects will be maintained on an 'opt-in' basis, with contributions being entirely voluntary.

The Programme for Government further provides that participation in PESCO projects will be subject to the approval of the Government and Dáil Éireann.

We currently participate in four PESCO projects, which is at the lower level of engagement compared to other EU countries.

Each PESCO project that we join must align with Defence Forces capability development requirements, and hence each project undergoes an analysis for how it can deliver for Defence Forces capabilities prior to a decision to join.

Moving on to the European Defence Agency – an Agency of the European Union, composed of Defence Ministers of the 27 participating Member States.

It was established twenty years ago, "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".

The Agency is focused on assisting Member States in capability development, in obtaining better value for existing member state defence expenditure, and in improving competitiveness and securing greater efficiency, particularly in the area of research, technology and procurement.

The primary reason that Ireland joined the Agency in 2024 is to support the development of Defence Forces capabilities for peacekeeping and international crisis management operations.

I will now go into detail on each of the Projects proposed:

The first is the PESCO Project Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations.

The main aim of this Project is to support and improve strategic logistic support and force protection in EU Missions and Operations.

The benefits to Ireland's participation are twofold. Firstly, and most importantly, participation will have clear benefits in respect to Ireland's participation in the EU Battlegroup 2025 in terms of assisting with the deployment, storage and efficient transport of Defence Forces assets as part the Battlegroup training and exercise process.

In very straightforward terms, the Defence Forces will need to bring our kit and equipment to the continent as part of our participation in the Battlegroup and this project allows us to make use of existing transport and storage facilities.

It will provide us with access to a Logistics Hub where our vehicles and equipment can be safely stored and easily accessed to use during the Battlegroup exercises in 2024/2025.

We are currently an observer in this Project, but observers cannot benefit from the Project, hence the move to seek full membership.

Secondly, there are potentially longer term benefits to Ireland's participation. As I touched upon at the outset, the geopolitical situation in Europe and its hinterland is changing at a rapid and uncertain pace.

Participating in this project will also give Ireland potential options when deploying and withdrawing from missions overseas. If troops need to be withdrawn from a location quickly and there is an EU Logistics Hub close to the mission, it could provide valuable support to the Defence Forces.

Participation in this project will also enhance Defence Forces capability and knowledge in major logistical deployment, sustainment and withdrawal from operations.

The project is led by Cyprus, France and Germany, and has 14 participating Member States. The only costs associated with joining this Project are in relation to attendance at meetings and workshops.

The second PESCO project, on Critical Seabed Infrastructure Protection (CSIP) is an opportunity for us to build capability to address identified risks and areas of vulnerability, as I touched on at the outset of my speech.

This project aims to enhance cooperation among EU member states in monitoring, securing, and defending critical seabed infrastructure against various threats, including sabotage, terrorism, and espionage.

This involves developing capabilities for surveillance, reconnaissance, and response in maritime environments, as well as fostering information sharing and coordination among participating Member States.

For the first time the latest National Risk Assessment for Ireland identifies Damage to Undersea Infrastructure as a key national level risk.

Participation in this project allows us to address and mitigate this risk somewhat, as the Project will facilitate strengthening capabilities with regard to protecting critical undersea infrastructure, thereby increasing the security and resilience of this infrastructure.

The project will look at current and future technologies to inform capability development that could be used to mitigate threats to critical seabed infrastructure.

It will also provide opportunities for exercises and training activities.

The EDA also offers several forms of support to PESCO projects, including the use of EDA's project management tools and administrative support, and this PESCO project will seek support from the EDA in this regard.

This support will be captured under a separate EDA project, and is provided by the Agency at no additional cost to Member States.

Participating Member States will also formally sign an agreement with the EDA in this regard. As well as the PESCO project therefore, I will also seek Dáil approval to join the associated EDA project supporting this.

Currently the only costs associated with this project are in respect of Defence Forces attendance at meetings and workshops; and these costs will be met from within existing resources.

The third project I will seek Dáil approval to join is the European Defence Agency Defence Energy Managers' Course II.

This project is of an environmental nature, and its main aim is to increase knowledge and to improve energy management in the military, resulting in benefits in terms of energy consumption, cost, and CO2 emission reductions across the military estate.

Its key objectives are to educate participants, and to have those participants then disseminate that knowledge throughout their militaries.

The project will provide tailored training on Energy Management Systems and will include on-site visits to ensure each Member States' requirements are taken into account.

Defence Forces participation in this project will enhance their knowledge of better managing energy in military installations, and how to structure an effective energy management program. Personnel will also learn how to continuously improve energy performance involving effective management, planning, design, procurement, dual-use research, monitoring and measurement.

This project presents a significant opportunity to enhance the Defence Forces energy management efforts. There will be two courses available per year to participants and, each place on the course is at a cost of €5,000.

Defence Forces have indicated that there is a requirement to train 4-6 personnel per year.

There is also a one-off cost in Year 1 of the project of €1500 per Member State; this will contribute to ongoing update and refinement of the training material and for the development of a tool to measure energy savings achieved by the participating military installation after the completion of the course.

The duration of this Project is five years and will be renewed automatically for a further five years unless the contributing Members decide otherwise.

Approval is requested for Ireland to join the project and to continue to participate in it should it be extended beyond the initial 5 years.

To date, four other Member States have indicated that they are interested in joining the project – Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Slovenia.

The final project I intend to seek Dáil approval to join is the EDA Cyber Defence Exercises project.

Cyber Defence is something we need to enhance in our country, but it is not something we can do on our own. We need to collaborate with partners.

We live in a digital world of unparalleled connectivity where borders are irrelevant.

This project allows our Defence Forces experts to gain insight into cyber threats experienced by other member states and, importantly, learn from these in an effort to mitigate any national attacks.

The main aim of this project is to strengthen cooperation of Cyber Defence Education, Training and Exercises among the participating Member States.

It also focuses on building confidence and improving information sharing among participating Member States while harmonising the education, training and exercise programs across EU Member States and improving the knowledge, skills, and abilities of personnel for missions and operations.

Participation in this project will enable our Defence Forces access to Cyber Defence Education, Training and Exercises.

Access to these will improve the knowledge, skills, and experience of cyber personnel in the Defence Forces, and will improve information sharing to identify threats and assist with responding to cyber-attacks.

This project is an umbrella project, the lead project on cyber training within the European Defence Agency. It will plan, coordinate and execute future Cyber Defence Exercises.

Each Cyber Defence Exercise developed under this project will be established as a sub project. Approval to participate in this project will also include participation in the umbrella project and any relevant Cyber Defence Exercise that will be established under that.

Each exercise and training opportunity will be analysed and assessed against the Defence Forces capability requirement.

Depending on the scope of certain exercises, there may also be an opportunity to include the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communication, and the National Cyber Security Centre, allowing for cross Governmental learning.

All EDA participating Member States have indicated their interest in joining this project, and there is no financial cost to Ireland joining.

In summary, all the projects I have outlined today will contribute to enhancing the Defence Forces' capabilities in support of the roles assigned to the Defence Forces by Government, and as set out in the White Paper on Defence in 2015 and in its 2019 Update.

Furthermore, the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces recognises that engagement in the EDA and in PESCO is increasingly important, and that the opportunities for the enhancement of military capability development that are offered through these should be fully exploited.

The Projects cover a wide range of capabilities - many of which will also benefit our national requirements, and will benefit the national mitigation of threats.

In particular, threats with regard to cyber and undersea infrastructure are high on the list of Government's priorities, as are environmental concerns.

Education on sustainable energy and how to apply that education at military installations, at home and abroad, is an absolute requirement as we move toward a more energy sustainable way of doing our business.

In terms of our overseas deployments, the safe deployment and withdrawal of our troops from missions and exercises is of utmost importance.

Given the fragile geopolitical environment currently, there is also a need to maximize opportunities on how we can contribute to our existing commitments, as well availing of opportunities to cooperate with partners and existing projects where we may need to move our troops and equipment. Indeed, it would be remiss of us not to explore these opportunities.

Our relationship with the EDA and PESCO affords us this opportunity to lean in on these priority areas.

These are all very strong projects that should be supported, and on that basis, and in conclusion therefore, I hereby commend this Motion to the Select Committee.

Ends