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Brexit and Irish Security and Defence

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Abstract

Brexit poses fundamental challenges to the Irish state across the public policy spectrum but critically in the area of security and defence. Traditionally, Irish security and defence policy was driven by three interconnected policy goals; territorial defence, aid to the civil power and international security operations. The prospect of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has placed each of these three security and defence roles into a new context and poses a substantial existential challenge to the Irish state. Each will be reviewed in turn; the impact of Brexit on Irish security and defence policy, the capacity and role of the defence forces, and Ireland's engagement in EU security and defence – including the prospect of a 'common defence'. We argue that these three concerns lie at the heart of national existential interests; the survival of the peace process and security on this Island.

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Brexit and Irish Security and Defence

Introduction

The decision of the UK electorate in their 2016 referendum to withdraw from the European Union poses significant and near existential challenges to the Irish state across the public policy spectrum - and none greater than in the area of security and defence.

Traditionally, Irish security and defence policy was driven by three interconnected policy goals; territorial defence, aid to the civil power and international security operations. With Ireland's benign contemporary geo-strategic location, territorial defence has not been a significant issue since the end of the second world war. While territorial defence is described as "a fundamental security requirement and responsibility" in the 2015 government White Paper on defence, it also clearly acknowledges that the probability of a conventional military attack on Ireland's territory is low. Ireland's non-membership of a military alliance further gives rise to the assumption that in terms of national defence, the role of the defence forces is to be prepared to act "until the United Nations Security Council has taken appropriate measures."

While territorial defence is widely seen as being of marginal concern, aid to the civil power – most especially in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland – has been critical to national security concerns. While this role extends over a variety of functions (search and rescue, security for bank cash transfers, prison security, crisis-response activities) the key role of the Defence Forces in aid to the civil power has been to assist, when requested, An Garda Síochána, in the protection of the security of the State against armed subversion. Over the course of the 30 years of civil unrest in Northern Ireland, which entailed the deaths of nearly 3,500 people, the Defence Forces were directly engaged in border security and intelligence operations in support of the Gardai. With the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement and its associated peace process, this function diminished in salience – although operations against residual armed militants continued.

In the years since 1998, the role of the Defence Forces in international peace support operations has significantly widened and deepened. Ireland had established an ongoing commitment to UN Peacekeeping missions from the mid-1950s, maintaining an unbroken service record to UN operations for over 60 years. These have ranged from the traditional 'blue hat' ceasefire monitoring tasks to the most robust UN interventions using military forces. With the end of the Cold War, while Ireland did not revaluate its military non-alignment, it did reconsider the contribution of its defence forces to international peace support. First by joining NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1999 and then later through the EU's development of its Common Security and Defence Policy, the Defence Forces adapted themselves to much greater operational interoperability and engagement in a variety of command structures; UN, NATO and EU. Over the last twenty years hundreds of Irish troops have served across thousands of individual deployments in international security operations in Europe (Kosovo) the Middle East (Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria) Africa (Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Eritrea,

Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Somalia, and Uganda) and in the Asia Pacific region (Afghanistan and East Timor).

The prospect of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has placed each of these three security and defence roles into a new context and poses a substantial existential challenge to the Irish state. Each will be reviewed in turn; from the impact of Brexit on the capacity of the state to defend itself, through to the implications for Ireland's multilateral engagement in international peace support operations – most especially through the European Union.

National Territorial Defence

On the face of it, the impact of Brexit on national territorial defence is marginal. As is widely acknowledged, Ireland's military capacity is modest with a total force complement of just over 9,000 personnel divided between three branches of the Permanent Defence Forces (PDF); the army, naval service and air corps and a small Reserve Defence Force (RDF) of just over 1,500 personnel. Ireland is close to the bottom of the league in terms of defence spending – allocating just 0.34 percent of GDP to that end. This is the lowest defence spending of any of the EU27 member states and places Ireland at about 150th internationally. The paucity of defence spending is of course translated into an exceptionally limited military capacity. In the absence of any fighter, attack or transport aircraft, combat tanks, heavy artillery or any naval assets beyond 8 offshore patrol vessels, Ireland can be said to lack the minimum conventional combat capability necessary to provide for any territorial defence based on credible deterrence.

This level of capacity also precludes Ireland from exercising any meaningful air defence. To date this has been limited to the operation of a small ground-based air defence system to protect high profile visits of foreign heads of state and dignitaries at national events and state visits. Uniquely in the European Union, Ireland lacks the type of radar system necessary to track and identify aircraft in its airspace that are unwilling or unable to use their transponders. Thus, in lieu of any meaningful national air defence capacity Ireland has instead relied upon the strategic interests of NATO forces to defend their airspace. Ad hoc understandings with the UK's Royal Air Force were placed on a formal footing subsequent to the signature in January 2015 of a Memorandum of Understanding between the British and Irish governments on defence cooperation.

The published MOU itself speaks only obliquely about the need to strengthen situational awareness across the land, sea and air domains. It is however understood also to have led to a formal agreement in 2016 to permit RAF identification, pursuit and interdiction of aircraft posing a potential security threat. This was reported as having been exercised in 2015 and 2017 when the RAF scrambled to intercept Russian bombers 'probing' air defences which were tracked into Irish controlled airspace.

The MOU was signed with the UK as an EU member state and several of its provisions become redundant as a result of the UK's withdrawal. Commitments to addressing shared challenges through the EU's CSDP, joint participation in EU battlegroups, building and sharing capacities developed through the European Defence Agency, and a framework agreement among the five EU Atlantic states on situational awareness all fall by the wayside. Of course, the MOU also provides for extensive bilateral cooperation - including the aforementioned agreement on air defence, but there is a broader issue at play as regards Brexit.

When the MOU was first mooted, it was described as historic, and an indication of the 'normalisation of relations between Ireland and the UK.' The political sensitivities of Irish-British military cooperation are obvious but were ameliorated by the context of the peace process, shared membership of the European Union and their associated joint engagement in military cooperation through the CSDP. The question now arises that in the context of bilateral tensions over Brexit and the UK's exclusion from CSDP, whether the MOU's bilateral provisions will prove to be politically sustainable in the medium to longer term. According to the Minister of State at the Department of Defence this is indeed the case. Speaking in the Dáil in February 2019, the Minister insisted that a three-year action plan on the implementation of the MOU had been drawn up and would be reviewed and renewed in the latter half of 2019. More problematically, he argued that the MOU was "unconnected to Brexit" and that it would continue to provide the framework for bilateral defence co-operation.

Aid to the Civil Power

It is in the area of aid to the civil power that the impact of Brexit is most stark – and threatens the existential interests of the state. It should be recalled that at the height of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, the posture of the defence forces was centred on meeting the threat posed by paramilitary groups such as the Official IRA, the Provisional IRA, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), various loyalist paramilitary groups and a plethora of short-lived splinter factions from across the political spectrum. The local capacity of the Defence forces was made up of more than eight military barracks along the 499 km border and the stationing of up to 1,500 military personal. Working closely with An Garda Síochána, the army was focused on border security operations and intelligence gathering. The latter was especially crucial and was built up based on extensive local knowledge, networks and operational experience.

Today the picture is starkly different. Following a wholesale restructuring of the Defence Forces in 2012, the army was reduced to a two-brigade structure with just two barracks now remaining along the border. Many of the troops ostensibly based at those facilities are, in fact, frequently working elsewhere - most notably on assignment in Dublin. This is a function of an ongoing personnel crisis in the Defence Forces, centred on working

conditions and pay – which has meant that notwithstanding extensive recruitment drives the Defence Forces have been unable to fulfil their declared force requirements. It has also entailed a virtual haemorrhage of mid-career officers and NCOs and their replacement by newly trained but untested recruits. Senior former officers such as retired <u>Brigadier General Ger Ahern</u> have concluded that the Defence Forces could not – in the short term at least – mount effective security operations in the border region due to personnel shortages and because those that do remain have lost all "corporate and operational knowledge" of the border region.

It is in this context that Brexit's impact on national security and defence must be assessed. The direct threat is three-fold; organised crime and cross-border smuggling, a renewed paramilitary threat targeting new border infrastructures and what might be called the threat to constitutional security arising from a weakening of the peace process.

Cross-border criminality has along pedigree in Ireland – running from the smuggling of butter during the Second World War to sophisticated fuel laundering facilities along the border today. Where borders demarcate differentials in taxes, duties, standards, and regulations, the incentive for illicit cross-border trafficking exists. The logic of Brexit suggests that – hard or soft – its very function is to increase divergence between the UK and the EU. In whatever direction that divergence occurs, it creates opportunities for illicit profits. Long-established and deeply entrenched local criminal families and gangs will be ideally placed quickly to scale up and to diversify existing operations to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise. If the incentive structure is strong enough, existing links between these 'ordinary' criminals and paramilitaries and/or international criminal networks may also be strengthened. For the state's security services such developments cannot go unanswered. Ireland's legal obligations to enforce EU law, as well as the state's responsibility to protect the health and safety of its citizens and the integrity of its own tax base will require those services to act. However, the moment civilian services are deployed, through the Revenue Commissioners, Customs and Excise, Department of Agriculture etc., they become the object of potential threat from those criminal networks, entailing a policing and potential Defence Forces response. The dangers for escalation are all too apparent.

Countervailing strategies thus far mooted (but not discussed in public) include the establishment of "strong points" away from the immediate border area but with a capacity to launch extensive mobile checks to enforce customs and other 'border' checks. While such a strategy respects the letter of the commitment to avoid the installation of a hard border infrastructure, it nonetheless creates objects – both fixed and mobile – which such criminal networks would be anxious to circumvent and, in extremis, to challenge. If such networks encompassed paramilitary elements with the will and the resources to more directly threaten state actors, the scope for violence increases exponentially.

Of course, what much of the Brexit debate to date has been focused on is precisely the avoidance of what has been termed 'border infrastructure'. This is generally understood to mean the installation of physical controls at main transit points along the border, the

elimination, limitation and/or control of transit across the border where such physical infrastructure does not exist and the provision for technology (fixed cameras, infra-red, drones, monitors etc) which would allow for the minimisation of physical checks of vehicles in transit. Such infrastructure - to varying degrees and in different compositions - is the norm across hundreds of thousands of kilometres of inter-state borders around the world. In the context of the Irish border, however, such infrastructure is immediately perceived by a significant minority as illegitimate. For those entrusted with law and security this poses a serious challenge. In January 2017, for example, the chair of the Police Federation of Northern Ireland, Mark Lindsay, warned that any plan to install customs posts or immigration controls along the UK-Irish border would be "a propaganda gift" to by-then weakened and marginalised paramilitary groups. A new lease of life would be opened to them as a means of demonstrating their political bona fides by physically attacking such infrastructure items. In turn, those responsible for the repair and maintenance of that infrastructure would likely be placed under threat as, of course, would then be the security services mandated to protect those personnel, the latter becoming "sitting ducks for the terrorists."

Here, the physical nature of the Irish border also comes into play. At 499km long, there are an estimated 300+ crossing points, varying from multilane motorways to national and local roads and unmarked (and sometimes unmapped) country lanes with any one of these crossing and re-crossing the border at several points along its length. These crossing points provide for up to 13,000 daily crossings by heavy and light goods vehicles as well as 30,000 people crossing the border daily. During the worst of the troubles, British security forces sought to control and monitor movement across the border purely to address security issues and forestall the movement of paramilitaries and their arms – with very limited success. This included the use of the latest monitoring technologies, the blocking and demolition of road crossings and border bridges and intensive intelligence efforts.

Already, the Irish state has hired and trained an additional 700 customs and veterinary inspectors because of Brexit. Garda spokespersons have thus far declined to say if there are plans to send extra Gardaí to the border with a spokesperson insisting that "This is being kept under review but is dependent on the political situation that is reached." The danger, of course, resides exactly in this political situation – where this potentially gives rise to socio-political (in)stability. In that connection the Defence Forces have already carried out a detailed mapping of the border which has established the exact number of potential border crossings. According to one report of that exercise it proved that "it would be an understatement to say (the border) is porous". Joint planning with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has identified the scale of the task of attempting to monitor and secure such a border – a challenging task even if the political situation were stable. It is that very stability which Brexit also threatens

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement represents several decades of painstaking political and constitutional negotiations agreed between two sovereign governments and

the political parties representing two counterposed national communities with the contribution of a wide swath of civil society actors across Northern Ireland. While its precise lineage remains contested, it is certainly true to say that the agreement was more than 20 years in the making, culminating in a series of high-pressure negotiations which relied in part on the support and intervention of several other international actors, including the direct engagement of US President Bill Clinton, the support of the European Union and a team of high-level international mediators who ultimately verified the demilitarisation of the Northern Ireland conflict.

The agreement itself is a carefully balanced structure of three 'strands' each of which addressed a particular set of relationships. Strand one addresses governance within Northern Ireland, establishing a finely balanced parliamentary system encompassing two elements. The first is a devolved legislature for Northern Ireland (The Northern Ireland Assembly) with mandatory cross-community voting on certain major decisions and veto powers to each of the two national communities. The second is the Northern Ireland Executive, a power-sharing political executive with ministerial portfolios allocated proportionately across all participating parties in the Assembly. That executive is then led by a First Minister and deputy First Minister representing the leading parties from their respective national communities.

Strand two of the agreement sets up an institutional structure to address the 'North/South' dimension of relationships, i.e. those between Northern Ireland and Ireland. It provides for a North/South Ministerial Council made up of ministers from the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of Ireland and it is this body's role to "develop consultation, co-operation and action" in twelve specified areas of mutual interest – six of which are pursued through North/South Implementation Bodies: Waterways Ireland; Food Safety Promotion Board, Special EU Programmes Body; North/South Language Body; InterTradeIreland; and, the Foyle Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

Strand three addresses 'East-West' relationships and provides for a British-Irish Council "to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands." This body brings together representatives of the British and Irish Governments, the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and representatives of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. A British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference is also established to "promote bilateral cooperation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of both Governments." This mechanism is also the vehicle through which the Government of Ireland's 'special interest' in Northern Ireland is recognised and which facilitates the Irish Government in putting forward views and proposals to the UK government on matters which are not devolved to the Northern Ireland government.

Two critical points here relate directly to Brexit. The first is that the agreement was constructed within the context of Ireland and the UK's membership of the European Union. Only on this basis was it possible to assume that the demilitarisation of the border

in Ireland – and the elimination of the associated security infrastructure (watch-towers, check points, road barriers security installations etc.) could result in an 'open' border on the island of Ireland. The preamble to the agreement provided that it would "develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union." Second, the agreement was constructed on a key principle; that "the birth right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British or both, as they may so choose and accordingly confirm[s] that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland." Brexit critically weakens both foundations.

We have already considered the practical implications of a return to a border which demarcates a new (and inevitably increasing) divergence in tax, duties, customs tariffs, regulations and standards. The EU's border with the UK will itself create circumstances that facilitate increased insecurity across the border region, giving new life to thus far marginalised criminal and paramilitary groups. This newly reinforced border also, however, cuts across myriad forms of cross-border cooperation which has underpinned the daily lives of many tens of thousands of people. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement built a political accommodation between two communities and two states within the common legal framework of a shared EU membership. This allowed for citizens – regardless of passports – to access state services (health, education, welfare etc), to pursue employment and training, and to share an undifferentiated market in goods and services of nearly 500 million people. In their own 'mapping exercise' the British and Irish Governments identified 156 specific areas of north-south cooperation that were underpinned by shared EU membership, and which relied in whole or in part on EU regulatory frameworks in their operation and development.

In the worst-case scenario of a no-deal Brexit, this entire superstructure is demolished overnight, potentially upending the lives of many tens thousands of people. Even in a 'soft' Brexit, difficulties must be assumed as the 'added-value' of Brexit is presumed to be the freedom of the UK increasingly to diverge from EU norms and standards as respective regulatory and legal frameworks are divorced from one another. This has the potential – by hollowing out the substance of what the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was built upon – seriously to destabilise lives in the border region, giving rise to new insecurities easily exploited by political and paramilitary entrepreneurs.

Brexit also entails the loss of tangible EU frameworks which have directly supported the ongoing peace process. The Union has to date provided significant financial support under the PEACE and INTERREG programmes while Ireland and the UK have also been partners in three EU-funded cross-border Cooperation Programmes with a total value of €650 million. As drivers of cross-border regional development they have been practical expressions of EU support for the peace process to date. The Union has also facilitated the development of projects that might otherwise have been frustrated by

political sensitivities. Perceived as a shared – even neutral – governance framework, the Union allowed for socio-economic developments to be pursued without some of the clouds of ethno-national politics.

All the above underlines the significance of a shared EU membership as the practical foundation to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Its removal inevitably weakness those foundations sets in play a dynamic which can easily see them further deteriorating over time. However, the even greater danger posed by Brexit to peace and security on the island of Ireland is the way in which it pulls at the threads of the underlying political accommodation which rests and the very heart of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

As noted earlier, the basic conceit of the Agreement was to establish a constitutional settlement which provided for equal recognition of two national communities within Northern Ireland whether "Irish or British or both". That formulation was accompanied by an entire underpinning structure of human rights protections designed to copper fasten that principle in both law and practice. The associated human rights and equality provisions of the Agreement were designed to instil confidence from both national communities in the political institutions of the Agreement and thereby the associated constitutional settlement such that both could have confidence in the political process and understand that their legitimate national aspirations could be effectively pursued within the democratic political process. In that respect, EU law provided a critical framework sustaining those equality provisions, most especially in the realms of employment law and non-discrimination rights as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

A key element here was also that of citizenship. The Agreement acknowledges "the birth right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British or both, as they may so choose and accordingly confirm[s] that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland." This provision is of course central to addressing the core conflict over national identity which has been at the root of the centuries-old conflict on the island of Ireland and the continuing divisions in Northern Ireland itself.

Brexit means – by definition – that British citizens lose all of their rights under EU law while Irish citizens in Northern Ireland lose the practical expression of those rights within the territory of the UK. Thus, for the approximately 1.8 million people born in Northern Ireland, they have the right – in international law and under the Agreement – to Irish citizenship and thereby EU citizenship. The critical danger here - and examples are being highlighted on a regular basis – is that the UK's withdrawal from the Union not only changes the geographical scope within which Irish citizens in Northern Ireland can exercise and enjoy their EU citizenship and associated rights (such as in elections to the European Parliament) but that the divergence of rights North and South arising from Brexit is creating barriers to those citizens being given equal rights and protections with

those citizens in Northern Ireland who have elected to opt for British citizenship, thereby creating differential treatment and inequality under the law.

In such a scenario – where the consequences of Brexit were visibly pulling at the threads of the basic constitutional settlement provided under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – the scope for political mischief from minority/extremist political groups would be enormous. Layering this over a deteriorating security situation along the border - with initially isolated but then escalating security actions and reactions – and the scenarios become clear. In such circumstances the role of the Defence Forces becomes acute. On the one hand there is no option other than to seek to maintain security and law and order in the border region – up and including the use of military force when called upon by the civilian authorities. But at one and the same time even planning for such an eventuality – never mind the possible execution of such operations – will itself destabilise politics and the peace process itself. In the study of conflict and security it is deemed to be a cliché that the need is not to make military action per se more effective but instead to address the root causes of conflict and their aggravating factors. In this instance Brexit has clear potential to aggravate the root causes of conflict in Ireland and thereby threaten peace and security on the island.

International Peace and Security Operations

The EU's Global Strategy was launched in late June 2016, just days after the Brexit referendum result was declared. Speaking later, the High Representative spoke of the extensive advice she had received to delay if not even cancel the launch. The Union, so it was argued had suffered a body blow and now was the time to reflect, regroup and then reconsider a diminished Europe's role in the world. Federica Mogherini did not take that advice. Indeed, she took the opportunity to assert the even greater urgency in Europe's definition of itself and to marshal its capacity to its own existential challenges both at home and abroad. Speaking later HRVP Mogherini noted the calls from a variety of European leaders for a strengthening of the Union's international capacity, she noted the breadth and depth of public support for the Union to reinforce its cooperation in the fields of defence and security and she described the enormous potential for such cooperation in delivering greater overall security and defence capacity at lower costs to national governments. In sum she described the 'low hanging fruit' that security and defence offered to the European project.

This marked the beginning of a process in which a detailed implementation plan for security and defence was swiftly drawn together to pluck that fruit from the trees. These efforts also worked with the grain of longstanding EU Commission ambitions to develop the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). Dating back to 2007, the Commission had been pressing an agenda for investment and research in new technologies and systems which would deliver greater security and defence capacities to

the member states. In addition – and in the post Brexit political storms – several member state governments and prime ministers/presidents went on the record to declare their support for more ambitious goals in the field of security and defence.

In several respects there is something of an irony involved. The UK is one of just two European states with a significant military/strategic profile of global import and the political will to deploy same. At one and the same time, however, the UK was among those EU member states most reluctant to support EU initiatives in his field – preferring the tried and trusted framework of NATO to the rhetorical ambitions of the European Union[1]. Brexit implied at one and the same time that the European Union would lose between 20 and 25 percent of its material capacity in the field of security and defence but would also lose one the greatest political impediments to the fruition of a more integrated European security and defence capacity. Brexit has the corollary effect of weakening both the Union and the United Kingdom in terms of their respective geo-strategic weights. Depending on the nature of the final status agreement between the UK and the EU both are also likely to the lose the added value of the UK's voice in EU security and defence planning and operations and the influence, input and policy substance associated therewith.[2]

UK efforts to maintain a presence within the decision-making structures of CFSP and CSDP have thus far come to naught with the EU side thus far ruling out a decision-making role for the UK in post-Brexit foreign and defence policy. This was set out in very specific terms by the European Council's legal service which insisted that no "outside interference" in the EU's decision-making process could be allowed. This was formalised in a response to a letter from the Government of Cyprus that the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement's associated Political Declaration appeared to leave open door to UK engagement. The Declaration provide that "flexible consultation" between the EU and UK was an available mechanism in CFSDP/CSDP consultations and there could be an informal structure of meetings at ministerial, senior official and "working" level. The Legal Services went on to insist, however, while such informal consultations were always available, no written documents or formal positions deriving from such consultations could ever be used to shape EU policy. They concluded that the draft Political Declaration enshrined "strong guarantees ... written in to ensure that the work of the Council and its preparatory bodies is effectively protected from outside interference".

For Ireland these developments have given rise to serious policy challenges. For many years Ireland has sheltered its policy of non-membership of military alliances within the quiet corner of debates between Atlanticists (led by the UK) and Europeanists (led by France).[3] Their brief armistice, secured at the 1999 St Malo Anglo-French summit, allowed the European Union to proceed down the road of an 'autonomous' (NB not

[1] Biscop, Sven. "The UK and European defence: leading or leaving?." International affairs 88, no. 6 (2012): 1297-1313.

[2] Whitman, Richard G. "The UK and EU foreign, security and defence policy after Brexit: integrated, associated or detached?." National Institute Economic Review 238, no. 1 (2016): R43-R50.

[3] Ben, Tonra, Kennedy Michael, Doyle John, and Dorr Noel. "Irish Foreign Policy." Dublin, Gill and MacMillan (2012).

'independent') defence capacity. Progress was slow and there were many serious reversals – such as when the bill was presented from EU military chiefs to create a European Rapid Reaction Force of 60,000 troops deployable at 60 days' notice for up to year, 3,000km away from Europe. EU leaders swiftly lowered their level of ambition, ultimately establishing in 2007 a system of permanent standby of two multinational EU battlegroups (each approx. 1500 strong) – which have never yet been deployed in any of the EU's 30+ overseas CSDP missions or operations.

Ireland engaged in these debates, participated in significant military missions and even commanded one of the largest such – in Chad in 2008. However, that engagement was hesitant and was frequently contested in domestic political terms. Brexit fundamentally shifts the axis in these debates and exposes the Irish position in a way that poses challenges for policy makers. In something of an understatement, the Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Ireland does not a have a full-cabinet rank minister responsible for defence at the cabinet table) insisted in 2018 that while the Brexit vote did not give rise to fundamental strategic issues for Defence Forces operations or for Ireland's continuing engagement within the EU in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), "it is expected that Brexit will have an impact on future developments in the Defence sphere." That has indeed proven to be case.

Federica Mogherini's implementation plan for the EU Global Strategy did indeed pluck a fair bushel of CSDP fruit. It has pursued a re-engineering of the 'battlegroups' concept and funding, raised the prospect of central EU funding for military operations (ATHENA) more generally, boosted the budget and role of the European Defence Agency, secured a EU-NATO Declaration on Strategic Partnership, initiated a coordinated annual review on defence (CARD), instituted new operational structures in civilian/military planning and conduct capability (MPCC), and set up permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) in the field of defence, creating a 'hard core' of 25 member states within CSDP dedicated to the completion of 34 specific capacity-building projects from cyber defence to maritime security. Critically too, this activity has been fused onto the Commissions EDITB programme and an ambitious proposed agenda of €40+ billion in new spending on research and development on defence technologies and the design and procurement of associated defence systems over the next seven to eight years. All of this is directed towards a profound deepening of defence cooperation and even defence integration in some areas – although it falls short of the shared defence of European borders which is still provided by NATO for most EU member states.

Irish attitudes to European security and defence might best be characterised by a paraphrase of Churchill's famous quote on the UK's relationship with Europe "We are with CSDP, but not of it. We are linked, but not compromised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed." There is no doubt but that Ireland shares security interests with its EU partners; as a global centre for social media and data storage, dependent on critical IT and energy infrastructures, hosting the HQs of some of the highest profile global multi-national companies, and having a history where terrorism has played a role.

Despite this, there is a distance; geographic, strategic and psychological that generates negative Irish attitudes towards European security and defence where cooperation is still seen as a cost – even a penalty of EU membership. It is a bill we reluctantly pay in return for markets and membership.

In a post Brexit Europe that position will be much harder to sustain. First and obviously, Ireland has been on the receiving end of sustained - and for some other member states, potentially costly, solidarity. This should not be overstated and there is no explicit quid pro quo, but is it unreasonable to consider a scenario in which an even smaller EU member state at the other side of the continent is being threatened by a large third country? Could Ireland's 'solidarity' with that EU partner ever amount to coming to its aid, inter alia, with the engagement of Irish troops?

More broadly, as the Union as a whole faces increasing geostrategic uncertainty – and a loss of confidence in its transatlantic alliance – how soon might it be before debates surrounding the Union's strategic 'autonomy' become wrapped up in very loose political talk of a European Union 'army' or army of Europeans. In truth, such declarations amount to little or nothing in practical terms. There is no prospect of the creation of a federalised Europe of the sort that could raise and direct its own 'army'. However, this debate is certainly a place holder for genuine European ambitions to deepen defence cooperation and military integration in Europe. Brexit, and the UK's absence from these debates makes these ambitions sharper. President Macron's European Intervention Initiative (EI2) may be a surrogate for his own frustrations at the limited scale, scope and ambition of PESCO, but it certainly foreshadows debates of greater defence ambition. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union leaves Ireland exposed on several fronts. Its hesitancy and ambivalence towards security and defence may no longer be sustainable – hard choices are coming into view.

Conclusions

Brexit has exposed a number of political and constitutional fault lines. – none more serious for the UK and for Ireland than its impacts on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom. For the Irish state, these fault lines strike at the heart of existential interests; the survival of the peace process and security on this Island. More broadly, it must also focus minds on security and defence policy, the capacity and role of the defence forces, the design and implementation of national security policy and Ireland's engagement in EU security and defence – including the prospect of a 'common defence'.

Notwithstanding the shape of any Withdrawal Agreement and the pursuit of a 'new' bilateral relationship between the UK and the EU, Ireland's current security and defence posture is simply unsustainable. The immediate threats of a no-deal Brexit and the medium to longer term security threats posed by any kind of Brexit have yet to be provided for. The Irish state faces profound challenges in this regard and are there, as of yet, no signs that it is prepared to address them.