Debating the Future of the Defence Forces

Report of a Seminar on the Commission on the Defence Forces

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Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
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Foreword

The Irish Defence Forces—Óglaigh na hÉireann—have faced significant challenges in recent years, which many observers describe as constituting a crisis. The Commission on the Defence Forces, which was established in December 2020 with a mandate to report within a year with recommendations on the future development of the Defence Forces, provides an important opportunity for national consideration of the Defence Forces.

Determining the appropriate organisation, structure, equipping and funding of armed forces is a complex challenge: we face an environment of rapidly evolving threats, but defence planning involves a relatively long-term time horizon. Many states face difficulties in recruiting personnel for their militaries, both in general and in specialised areas, and governments have competing demands on limited resources—a problem only exacerbated by the recession arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

In order to contribute to informed public debate on the Defence Forces, the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) Standing Committee on International Affairs, together with the Commission on the Defence Forces and the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) organised a seminar on the Defence Forces and the work of the Commission, which took place on-line on 7 April 2021. The seminar brought together speakers from academia, think tanks and the policy world, with expertise in a wide range of security and defence issues. The seminar was open to the public and approximately 250 people attended.

This report provides a summary of the issues discussed and arguments advanced during the seminar. We hope the report provides a further contribution to debate on this important national issue.

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Chair, RIA Standing Committee on International Affairs

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Introductory remarks

The Chair of the Commission on the Defence Forces, Aidan O'Driscoll, introduced the Commission's work. The Commission will make recommendations for the future development of the Defence Forces on the basis of existing government policy, namely, the White Paper on Defence of December 2015 and the White Paper on Defence Update 2019. Taking into consideration Ireland's international commitments and a dynamic security environment characterised by new and emerging threats, the Commission will focus on the capabilities, structure and staffing of the Defence Forces. Particular attention is being payed to (1) the Reserve Defence Forces and how to strengthen and make best use of their potential, (2) the development of a joint-force approach, (3) cyber-intelligence and space as new areas of activity and (4) recruitment and retention of personnel.

In the first months of its mandate, the Commission has been engaged in consultations with the Department of Defence, the Defence Forces (including the Chief of Staff and senior officers) and staff associations representing all ranks and has received over 500 submissions from organisations and individuals. The Commission has also started a series of visits to barracks and bases and will soon meet with staff from the European Union (EU), NATO and the United Nations. The experience of other small developed nations will also provide insights for the work of the Commission. Following these preliminary consultations, the Commission will move from an initial issue-identification phase to a deeper analysis of particular issues and areas.

Panel 1: Small States Defence Forces

While presenting unique characteristics, Ireland shares many defence challenges with other small developed states. This panel discussed the experience of other small European countries, including issues such as the role of Reserve Defence Forces, joint-force approaches and the opportunities stemming from a closer engagement with the EU, the UN and NATO.

Discussion

Among other small EU member states, Belgium is making a conscious effort to remain politically relevant by staying militarily and strategically significant. Despite the small scale of the Belgian defence forces and the limited size of the Belgian defence budget, Brussels is determined to maintain the military capacity necessary to cooperate with its partners in a meaningful way. To acquire a range of combat capabilities that encompass army, air force and navy, Belgium has been pursuing a strategy of interoperability and even integration with both the Dutch and French armed forces. This approach has proven particularly successful with regards to the navy. Following a decade-long process, the Belgian and Dutch navies are now fully integrated.[1] In terms of land forces, the Belgian brigade is now embarking on greater cooperation with the French Armée de Terre, with the aim of achieving close interoperability.[2] The ultimate end goal would be to permanently anchor this brigade to a French division structure, so as to ensure the most effective pooling of assets and division of labour possible. The next logical step for the Belgian government would be to integrate the air force. Once again, the Netherlands would make for an ideal candidate. Brussels and Amsterdam are both acquiring several F-35s (24 and 37, respectively) and a sizeable fleet of deployable planes provides a way to make a meaningful contribution in theatres ranging from Kosovo to Libya. From a Belgian perspective, there are also great opportunities to cooperate at the EU level as well, particularly in those areas that are highly capital-intensive, such as space assets and Euro-drone projects.

The advantage of the Belgian approach is that it still provides a country's government with a lot of flexibility, in that one is not automatically obliged to deploy one's own armed forces if the partnering country is deploying. However, this strategy does entail a commitment to maintaining sufficient defence spending, so that the country can remain a viable partner. From the Belgian perspective, interoperability or integration do not threaten national

1 Frigates and minehunters are sailed by either Dutch crews under a Dutch flag or by a Belgian crew under a Belgian flag. The maintenance of frigates is based in the Netherlands, while maintenance of minehunters occurs in Belgium. The two countries share one naval academy and navy headquarters.

2 The Belgian brigade will acquire French vehicles and the two countries will develop a joint doctrine for those vehicles. The goal is to have a French brigade in Belgian uniform, so that if a French and Belgian brigade meet each other in the field, they can easily swap vehicles and carry on.

sovereignty. Given the country's strong Euro-federalist tradition, the idea of gaining sovereignty by pooling sovereignty has long been part of the political consensus. Moreover, Belgium cooperates with several different partners in different capability areas, so as to avoid becoming the annex of any one country's armed forces.

If Ireland wanted a partner for defence cooperation or even integration, it should look for a country with a similar orientation in terms of deployment. Some of the Scandinavian countries would be likely candidates, though there would not be the benefit of geographical proximity that Belgium and the Netherlands share. If Scotland were to achieve independence, it too would make an obvious defence partner for Ireland.

When it comes to the question of reserve forces, Belgium, like all EU member states, faces severe recruitment issues. Conscription was gradually phased out, starting in 1993, and since then the only reserves are retired professional soldiers. There is now a scheme to attract volunteer reservists, but it is not proving successful. The plan going forward is to distinguish between civilian and military reservists and attract the former based on specific skills sets in select areas. In this respect, the Belgian government has announced the creation of a cyber component, where civilian reservists may make an important contribution (e.g., by providing IT expertise).

Another small EU member state that Ireland can look to as it reviews its military is Sweden. Like Ireland, Sweden is a neutral country committed to upholding international law and known for its activism within international organisations. However, Sweden is confronted with a different geopolitical context, shaped by the territorial proximity to Russia and the view that any threat to the Baltic countries would likely involve incursions into Swedish and Finnish territory, air space and/or waters.

Coming out of the Cold War, Sweden could rely on a broad range of military capabilities, excluding nuclear capability. In the 1990s Sweden benefited from the post-Cold War peace dividend, reducing both defence spending and the size of the armed forces significantly and ending conscription completely. In recent years, a renewed Russian threat prompted Stockholm to commit to a significant rearmament campaign. The decision was strongly influenced by the country's unpreparedness for a military attack: in 2013, in the event of an invasion from a single direction, the country would have been able to withstand the attack for one week only. As part of the rearmament programme (detailed in the Defence Bill 2021–2025), Sweden will soon be hitting a 40% defence budget increase. By 2030, the country will meet the 2% NATO defence spending target and be able to mobilise 90,000 troops (as opposed to today's 60,000), including a home guard that will be 20,000 strong. Most of the home guard can take positions to protect vital points for mobilisation within six hours and remain on stand-by. One quarter of the home guard are used as light infantry and receive training to the same level as professional soldiers (with the exception of special operations forces). There is also a maritime component to the home guard, tasked with the defence of naval bases, as well as with transport for troops.

In terms of the optimal level of defence capabilities, the solution that seems to be receiving strongest support from the Swedish parliament entails immediate capabilities in select areas,

especially air. Sweden is also investing in close cooperation with Finland, as well as with Denmark and Norway. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, Stockholm is also keenly aware of the need to strengthen Swedish and European resilience, not least in the area of cyber-security and disinformation.

In terms of recruitment, Sweden is adopting a policy of voluntary conscription. Around 110,000 Swedish high schoolers fill a questionnaire every year, indicating their interest in being recruited for the armed forces. Between 15,000 and 16,000 individuals are called every year; they follow 11 months of military training and many are then employed for up to 6 years in the military. This strategy also seems to produce better recruits for officer positions. Once people reach 32 years of age, they are re-recruited to the home guard and the civilian components of the defence forces.

Like other countries, Sweden is confronted with the difficult trade-off between peacekeeping operations and territorial defence. Stockholm currently has forces in Mali (operating under French command), Iraqi Kurdistan and Afghanistan. However, troops rotate rather frequently in these international missions and there is a ceiling on the number of terms soldiers can be deployed abroad. The hope is for the situation to improve with more conscripts joining the armed forces in coming years.

Key takeaways

- While the types of risks may differ, small states are as vulnerable to threats as any other country and should therefore think strategically about their defence policy.
- Close cooperation with European partners and the opportunities presented by EU-level initiatives, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defence Fund (EDF), may provide advantages to small states, not least because they allow them to remain strategically relevant actors.
- Ireland, like other small EU member states, should play to its own strengths and make choices that align with the country's needs and characteristics. For example, if Ireland wishes to develop a full air defence system, a fleet of Gripen multirole fighter aircraft may be a sensible choice for a country with a small land/air space (as opposed to the more costly F-35).
- The issue of public support for the future development of the Defence Forces and possible increases in defence spending was discussed. Some participants argued that greater public awareness and understanding of likely threats is needed. In Ireland's case, it was suggested threats would more likely take the form of cyber-attacks (as opposed to classical territorial military aggression), but the consequences of such attacks could be extremely serious.
- On the subject of reserve forces and home guard, both Sweden and Belgium are opting for flexible solutions based on voluntary participation. The wide array of skills needed in modern armed forces were noted, which including non-military expertise, such as logistical or IT skills.

Panel 2: Irish Defence Forces—Threats and Roles

This panel provided an overview of the current international security environment—devoting particular attention to cyber and grey zone threats—and discussed the best ways for the Defence Forces to counter those threats.

Discussion

There has been a major change in national security threats, which extend beyond direct military aggression and can take the form of retaliatory economic measures, cyber-attacks and other grey zone threats, posing a danger to military and civilian targets alike. Ireland's high level of integration with the global economy makes it especially vulnerable to cyber-attacks, economic boycotts and disinformation campaigns. Such actions could also undermine Ireland's attractiveness as a destination for Foreign Direct Investment.

Considering threats are no longer exclusively military, armed forces should not be the only institutions responsible for a country's security. Ireland could consider a total defence strategy based on a synergy between the military, industry and civil society. This may be particularly important for Ireland in the area of cyber-security.

While Ireland is advanced in technology development, it was suggested that the country lags behind in cyber-security preparedness. As a result, it was argued, cyber-security problems have a disproportionate impact on Irish organisations and society and damage the country's international reputation. The estimated cost of cyber-crime in Ireland is €3.5 billion a year (which includes the costs companies face for 'clean-up' after cyber-attacks). According to a recent PwC Irish Economic Crime Survey, the rate and frequency of cyber-crime instances in Ireland are much higher than the global average, suggesting that the country is being targeted by cyber criminals, which in turn threatens its reputation as a safe destination for investment. Compared to Finland, another small, developed nation that is also an EU member state and a neutral country, Ireland spends considerably less on cyber-security. In 2017, Ireland was ranked 20th globally on the ICT development index but, in terms of cyber-security preparedness, Ireland currently ranks 73rd out of 161 countries.

While the Irish government has made some steps in the right direction (e.g., with the establishment of the Cyber Ireland cyber-security cluster in 2018 and the funding of research projects on cyber-security, such as CyberSkills), it was suggested that the government should be more ambitious. Cyber-security is a multi-stakeholder issue, which requires the involvement of multiple government agencies and close cooperation with all sectors of society, including industry and academia. The possible development of Defence Forces' cyber

rapid response capabilities was raised. Finally, it was argued that the country should engage in national cyber-range exercises and invest in a cyber-security research centre.

Across Europe, the need to adopt a 'whole of a society' approach to defence policy has resulted in a number of important reforms: Sweden and Finland have been following a total defence strategy since the Cold War, Latvia has introduced a national security curriculum in its schools and the Czech Republic has launched joint military-industry training exercises against grey zone threats. Larger countries are innovating as well: for instance, Germany recently inaugurated a new voluntary military service program for young people aged 16 and above.

Ireland may also be able to learn from the strategic defence/security reviews of its neighbours and partners. The recent UK Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy—which has both strengths and weaknesses—offers one such example. The panel discussion focused primarily on the Review's shortcomings. In the past, UK defence/security reviews have been variously threat-oriented, capability-driven, effects-based, treasury-constrained and foreign policy-based. It was argued that security/defence policy reviews need to take all such factors into consideration and that the recent Integrated Review had not done this. Moreover, the Integrated Review, it was argued, is overly ambitious, in that everything that the UK can or aspires to do on the global stage is listed, without properly prioritising between various threats and objectives. In terms of threat assessment, it was argued that the Integrated Review conflates actual threats (e.g. violent extremist groups, biosecurity threats, deniable proxies) with what are merely weapons or technologies (commercially available drones or chemical, radiological and nuclear weapons). While a National Risk Register can be helpful in explaining threats to the public, it should credibly and selectively prioritise risks.

Key takeaways

- Given the increasingly diverse and hybrid nature of security threats, security provision should not be exclusively reserved to armed forces, but rather be shared among all sectors of society, from the military to industry and academia.
- The institutional makeup of the government should reflect the demand for a holistic approach to security. Cyber-security poses particular challenges in terms of requiring cooperation amongst multiple government ministries/agencies and non-government actors. In the Irish case, it was suggested, further consideration needs to be given to the best institutional arrangements for delivery-effective cyber-security and the role of the Defence Forces within this.
- It was suggested that further work may be needed to identify the specific cyber-security capabilities and skills that are becoming required of the Defence Forces.

Panel 3: Envisaging the Irish Defence Forces to 2030 and beyond

This panel examined the role and possible development of the Irish Defence Forces to 2030 and beyond, which corresponds with the terms of reference of the Commission on the Defence Forces. In particular, the panel addressed the capabilities, structures and staffing of the Defence Forces.

Discussion

The panel provided some conceptual and analytical frameworks for considering Defence Forces reform. Military change was defined as any change undertaken to optimise military capabilities or operations and it was argued that this takes place via distinct processes: innovation, adaptation and emulation. Innovation refers to the development of new military technologies, strategies and organisational structures. Adaptation relates to the adjustment of existing military capabilities in response to armed conflict or security threats. Emulation is the importation of new military means and styles from other armed forces. Threat development and technological advancements will, it was suggested, ultimately inform how exactly the Defence Forces will develop in the coming years. As the role of armed forces expands to include combat missions, deterrence, peace-support operations, counter-terrorism and more, it was further stressed that civil-military cooperation is often a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the armed forces.

Reform of the Defence Forces, it was argued, should be grounded in a risk-based analysis, combining assessment of both the level of lethality and the likelihood of security risks. In Ireland's case, highly likely threats with limited casualties might include attacks on peacekeepers, problems resulting from climate change or cyber-attacks. Somewhat less likely but more lethal threats to Ireland might include marauder-style terrorists attacks (similar to the terrorist attack in Paris in 2015).

In thinking about Defence Forces capabilities, a 'golf bag' approach can also be adopted, with the Defence Forces requiring a range of different capabilities for different situations. A number of potential priority areas for the development and modernisation of the Defence Forces were suggested. Ireland's small helicopter fleet, which dates back to 2005 and 2006, it was argued, should be renovated and expanded, as helicopters provide a particularly versatile capability for militaries. It was also argued that a multipurpose navy should invest in multirole vessels: while rather expensive (€200–300 million per vessel), multirole naval vessels can be used in a variety of operations, from counter-narcotics to human security. It was also argued that the Defence Forces should acquire artillery systems for counter-battery force protection during peacekeeping operations. Finally, it was argued Ireland should invest in its special forces, expanding them to a battalion-sized force.

It was noted that over the next 20 to 30 years the Defence Forces will have to fulfil important domestic roles. For example, the Defence Forces will almost certainly have to respond to climate-related emergencies, in coordination with civilian forces. Pandemics will also pose an on-going threat. More broadly, it was argued Ireland should increase its defence capabilities in cyber space and Artificial Intelligence (AI). The country is a goldmine for international data and that data is highly vulnerable to intellectual property theft via cyber-attacks. Lastly, the issue of whether Ireland needs new capabilities to address violations of Irish maritime and air space was raised, in particular in a context in which these are already being probed by Russia.

The issue of defence and security cooperation with the UK was also discussed, where it was noted that Brexit complicates the situation. While there have been steps towards defence cooperation in recent years, it was argued that non-traditional security threats (such as cyber and disease pandemics) may be as or more important because, as immediate neighbours, the two countries are highly likely to be impacted by the emergence of transnational security problems in either state.

Key takeaways

- Reform of the Defence Forces, it was argued, should be informed by a risk-based analysis and should be oriented towards the development of a diverse range of capabilities. It was argued that Ireland should invest in its air and maritime forces, while also bearing in mind the country's long-standing role as a contributor to peacekeeping operations.
- It was suggested the Defence Forces/Department of Defence could conduct broad-ranging experimentation with scenario analysis, modelling simulations and wild cards to identify future constraints, new capacities and technological requirements.
- Ireland, it was argued, should make maximum use of its intellectual capital to face advances in cyber space and AI. The Defence Forces Communication and Information Services Corps (CIS) could be expanded. The Defence Forces might also develop a cyber reserve corps. The Air Corps, it was argued, might be best suited to address technological advancements in AI (which, among other things, are predicted to result in 80 percent remotely-piloted aircraft within the next 20 or so years).
- In the context of the Reserve Defence Force, it was argued that Ireland should overcome its reluctance to having civilian roles in sensitive areas and make use of civilians under contract where necessary (following the examples of New Zealand and Norway).

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