

# THE PESKY ISSUE OF PESCO!

It could be argued that Irish neutrality is not affected by PESCO because participation in this EU body that aims to boost military co-operation is voluntary, decision-making remains in the hands of participating member states, it does not require integration of member states' defence forces, and there is no mutual defence clause. However, it remains a pesky issue, writes security consultant Michael Murphy.

**P**ESCO (Permanent Structured Co-operation) and the dilution of Irish neutrality is a pesky issue. Up to now PESCO has been a dormant provision of the Lisbon Treaty, specifically Article 42 (6), Article 46, and Protocol 10.

According to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, PESCO is the Lisbon Treaty's 'Sleeping Beauty' that has finally awoken after a six-year nap. Juncker had been calling for a stronger EU security and defence posture since he

was selected as president in April 2014.

The UK, due to its fear that a separate EU defence would weaken the NATO alliance, was the last obstacle to progressing implementation. With the UK obstacle weakened due to BREXIT the German-French axis seized the initiative to build momentum to proceed.

Finally agreed in December 2017, PESCO is intended to achieve closer military co-operation among those states that are ready to stick to agreed commitments. While 25 of the 28 member states signed up (including traditional neutrals Sweden, Finland and Austria), Denmark, Malta and the UK did not. Being sensitive to all things defence, Ireland did not attend the initial signing but signed up later following a very short Dáil debate.

## BINDING STATE COMMITMENTS

The binding commitments by states include increased defence expenditure, co-operation in developing new military capabilities, eliminating existing deficiencies, developing greater interoperability, and enhancing availability and readiness to deploy troops on Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations.

The process has begun with member states selecting from 47 projects that were available, the first 17 projects for joint implementation have been agreed. These projects are divided into two categories — the first in the operation dimension is intended to improve participation in CSDP missions and operations, and the second is to support capability development. Ireland has expressed an interest in participating in five of the 17 projects:

- European Training Certification Centre for European Armies;
- Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Package;



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- Harbour and Maritime Surveillance and Protection (HARMSPRO);
- Cyber Threats and Incidence Response Information Sharing Platform; and
- Centre of Excellence for EU training missions.

#### CHAMPIONS OF PESCO

Those who champion PESCO, especially the French, view it as a stepping stone to a common EU defence. PESCO commits states to not only regularly increase their defence budgets in real terms but to also devote 20 per cent to their defence spend on procurement, and two per cent on research and technology.

The new structure will create a multi-billion-euro weapons fund, and shared financing for battle groups. Currently member states who participate in EU missions abroad incur their own costs. In the future they will be funded from common funding.

It would be hard to deny that Ireland signed up for PESCO for political reasons as a sign to our EU partners that post-BREXIT Ireland is committed to being a core member of the inner EU willing to engage in every aspect of EU integration. Mr Leo Varadkar stated that he supported the new structure because it was the start of Europe taking control of its own defence and that he had a clear view that 'A Europe worth building is a Europe worth defending'.

On the military defence side of the equation, however, one could only describe government statements as confusing and contradictory. Mr Varadkar, for example, was at pains to describe neutrality as an important and valued principle that makes us stronger in the world not least in the area of international development. However, if that belief is true for Ireland then why is it not also true for the EU and why does Ireland not stay away totally from EU defence funding?

Other government ministers caused confusion by stating that Ireland could not remain neutral when it came to contemporary threats such as terrorism, mass emigration, human trafficking, cyber terrorism, cyber attacks, cyber security, and interference in elections.

#### LESS SPENT ON DEFENCE

Of course, most of these are law enforcement and intelligence issues not military defence issues, and the cyber defence of Ireland resides for some peculiar reason with the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources – and not with the Defence Forces.

An Taoiseach stated that he did not always hold the view that Ireland should be a neutral state, but that he has come to learn that the country's lack of a military force could be diplomatic asset. This is peculiar because if this state wishes to

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*Michael C. Murphy spent over 40 years in the Defence Forces before retiring in 2013 as Deputy Director of Military Intelligence at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. During his early officer career he served in operational and intelligence roles on the border facing South Armagh.*

*Subsequently he held intelligence, operational and command roles, at Defence Forces Headquarters and the 2 Eastern Brigade before returning to Defence Forces intelligence where he completed his career.*

*During his career he served in overseas operational and command appointments with the UN and NATO in Lebanon (1978, 1986, 1991) Eritrea (2002) Afghanistan (2006) and Kosovo (2008). His extensive operational and intelligence experience is complemented by several educational and training qualifications earned at home and abroad, including a Diploma in Strategic Intelligence, and an MSc in Security and Risk Management at the University of Leicester.*

*Since retiring from the military he has provided security intelligence consultancy services to private industry and has become a leading commentator across the Irish media on security and intelligence issues.*

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## SECURITY & DEFENCE

play militarily with the big states in the EU, Ireland as a state is being left demilitarised and unprotected.

Ireland spends less on defence per head of population than any other EU state and comes second in terms of lowest defence expenditure relative to GDP. While PESCO participating states have agreed to an overall collective spend of two per cent of GDP on defence it does not commit each state individually to do likewise.

Rather the participating members collectively agree to spend two per cent of their combined GDP on defence. This confirms a statement by Simon Coveney, Minister for Foreign Affairs, that *'any increase in defence expenditure for Ireland, in real terms, will be very small.'*

MOTION RUSHED THROUGH UCD's Prof Ben Tonra very accurately stated that Irish defence policy has never been the subject of sustained national debate. The Dáil debate on PESCO was a golden opportunity do so. However, the motion was rushed through the Dáil with opposition politicians claiming that there was 'no proper notice'. PESCO was approved by a vote of 75-42.

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PESCO because participation in PESCO is voluntary, decision-making remains in the hands of participating member states, it does not require integration of member states' defence forces, and there is no mutual defence clause.

There is also constitutional protection in Article 29.4.9, which would require a referendum if it is to be changed. On the other hand, it would be very difficult to argue that PESCO does not institutionalise the incremental militarisation of Europe.

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