Closing the Back Door

Rediscovering Northern Ireland's Role in British National Security

Marcus Solarz Hendriks and Harry Halem

Foreword by Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon KCB and Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT

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About the Author

Marcus Solarz Hendriks joined Policy Exchange in September 2023 as a Research Fellow in Foreign Policy and Defence. He holds both a Master's Degree (Politics and International Relations) and a BA (Arabic, Persian and Middle Eastern Studies) from the University of Cambridge.

Harry Halem is a Research Fellow in Foreign Policy and Defence. He specialises in grand and maritime strategy, defence industrial issues, and strategic history, particularly of British strategy from 1890 to 1945. Mr Halem holds an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and International Relations from the University of St Andrews, and a postgraduate degree in Political Theory from the London School of Economics, where he specialised in comparative intellectual history.

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Executive Summary

Thirty years ago, the British and Irish governments issued the Downing Street Declaration, which asserted that the UK has no "selfish strategic" interest in Northern Ireland. The Declaration was one of the key building blocks in the Northern Ireland peace process, leading to the ceasefire in 1994 with the IRA and, ultimately, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. As part of the peace process, the UK drew down its remaining active military presence in Northern Ireland, concluding Operation Banner in 2007.

No 'selfish strategic' interest does not, however, mean no 'strategic' interest. The political unity of the Union dictates that, by definition, Northern Irish and British strategic interests are one and the same. The UK therefore cannot have selfish interests in Northern Ireland, but its strategic interests are inviolable.

Although reducing the Army presence was central to the peace process, it was the closure of RAF and Royal Navy bases – a gradual process initiated after 1945 – which significantly weakened the UK's strategic position in Northern Ireland. Without a naval and air forward presence to the left of the Irish Sea, the UK's capacity to police the Western Approaches, and deploy further towards the Greenland- Iceland- UK (GIUK), is limited. This poses direct challenges to the whole British defensive system.

The Republic of Ireland's (ROI) avowed neutrality, chronically insufficient Defence Forces, and porous security state render it an unreliable strategic ally. The UK's northwestern exposure is compounded by the lack of assistance from the ROI. For decades, Irish defence spending has fallen well below 1% of GDP, producing a Defence Forces which is under-equipped, under-sized and under-staffed. In any case, commitment to its policy of neutrality precludes the ROI from engaging seriously with the UK on security issues, either bilaterally or as part of NATO.

In an age of growing geopolitical threats, this gap in the UK's northwestern defences now directly endangers its national security. Negotiated amidst intractable political violence in Ireland, and in the post-Cold War period of relative peace, the full implications of the military draw-down in Northern Ireland were concealed. The return of an aggressive Russia, actively waging war in Europe, has placed renewed strategic importance on the UK's north and northwestern flanks.

As Russia's maritime doctrine shifted in 2022 to prioritise the Arctic and Atlantic, it is incumbent upon the UK to fortify its northwestern naval and air patrol presence. Major transatlantic undersea fibre-optic cables run through the Western Approaches, upon which the digital

security of the UK and its partners – including the ROI – depend. Meanwhile, Russia has advanced its sub-surface capabilities and – as the recent uptick in reported sightings illustrates – is exploring ways to target western critical undersea infrastructure around the UK, and further north. To coordinate our collective response with our partners, we must respond in turn with a greater Royal Navy and RAF presence in the region.

As well as proving a menace in the maritime domain, Russia – alongside China and Iran – seeks to degrade the UK and its allies through unconventional means. Cyber warfare, institutional espionage, and educational and economic infiltration are all subthreshold methods employed by these authoritarian regimes to destabilise the West.

The combination of ROI's flimsy security and intelligence apparatus, unwillingness to acknowledge these threats, and soft border with Northern Ireland poses a grave back-door security risk to the UK. Adversaries are certain to target the ROI, due to its close integration into transatlantic economic and digital systems, membership of the EU, and self-imposed exclusion from multilateral security frameworks. There is already strong evidence of a subversive and illegal Russian, Chinese and Iranian presence across Irish society and sensitive institutions.

Although the ROI has embarked on a reform of its Defence Forces and security apparatus in recent years, the outcome is destined to fall short of requirements, due to a persistent lack of financial and political commitment. The entire Defence Forces, and security and intelligence apparatus, is being built almost from scratch. With defence spending to increase by only 50% by 2028, and the stubborn shibboleth of neutrality still acting as a brake on ambition, the ROI is not set to become a capable security partner any time soon.

As it stands, Sinn Féin is expected to win the ROI's next election in 2025, a party which will be no friend to British interests. Sinn Féin's long history of Anglophobia, and conflict with the British state and security services – as well as its opposition to NATO, Russian sympathies, and general anti-Western sympathies – will obstruct any meaningful recalibration of security arrangements with the UK. If Sinn Féin wins in 2025, the UK is therefore looking at many more years of an uncooperative, and likely hostile, neighbour in the face of growing external threats.

Northern Ireland is therefore the key to addressing the UK's security concerns. Resurrecting the RAF and Royal Navy presence in Northern Ireland will bolster our forward presence for maritime patrol operations around our coastline, as well as into the GIUK Gap and beyond. In light of Russian aggression, recent government strategic documents have flagged our stretched naval and air capabilities in the north. Northern Ireland can therefore strengthen our strategic options in the region, whilst alleviating the burden on other bases, such as HMNB Clyde and RAF Lossiemouth.

Shifting the paradigm of British-Irish relations – by breaking the longstanding link between a British Northern Ireland military presence, and Ireland's historically fraught past – will enable the UK to create the environment for an equitable and effective security

relationship between the ROI and the UK. The ROI is at severe risk of being compromised from within by hostile actors, perils which were illustrated by the massive Russian cyber-attack on the Irish health service in 2021. Geographical proximity, and the soft border, mean that Irish vulnerabilities are British vulnerabilities. Having signalled its renewed strategic focus on Northern Ireland, the UK can make known its interests – and willingness to assist, in an equitable manner – in the ROI's security problems.

Foreword

By Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon KCB, former UK Secretary of State for Defence, and Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT, former Secretary General of NATO and former Secretary of State for Defence

Policy Exchange has a record of bringing neglected topics of national importance to the fore. British-Irish security is one such issue.

As Defence Secretaries in different governments at different times, we know that little attention was paid to the security of the island of Ireland in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War.

We therefore welcome this new report from Policy Exchange, which powerfully reasserts the strategic importance of Ireland, and especially Northern Ireland, to the UK's national security.

Re-setting the importance of the Western Approaches is all the more urgent in the sharpening Euro-Atlantic geopolitical climate. Russia poses an acute maritime menace to both our countries as it targets the undersea fibre-optic cables, pipelines and interconnectors which underpin our critical digital and energy systems.

Russian intelligence ships and warships have been identified off the Irish coast and close to key transatlantic cables. The growing Russian, Iranian and Chinese presence in the Republic poses a backdoor threat to the United Kingdom itself.

European security is also vulnerable. Threequarters of the most critical Atlantic cables pass through or close to Ireland's borders; the Republic hosts a third of Europe's data companies. As an EU member and a hub of the international financial and technology sectors Ireland is an attractive target for those who might want to attack our economic and political systems: already we have seen cyber and pipeline attacks in the Baltic and on Europe's eastern frontier.

Ireland is now finally reviewing its defence posture. Sweden and Finland have already decided that neutrality is no longer sustainable against Russian aggression.

The Republic plays very little part in European defence co-operation; its forces, especially maritime, need rapid strengthening to be capable of defending against today's threats.

The UK should certainly encourage this, building on the initial UK-Ireland Defence Agreement signed in 2015. But the current threats to our own security are growing and urgent. What the government should do immediately is to rediscover the vital strategic importance of Northern Ireland, and fortify this weak spot in our own security.

Introduction

Thirty years ago, the British and Irish governments issued the Downing Street Declaration. In the Declaration, then Prime Minister John Major asserted that the British government has "no selfish strategic" interest in Northern Ireland,[1] an excerpt borrowed from a speech made in 1990 by Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Brooke. Over the ensuing years, the UK acted accordingly, finalising the military withdrawal from Northern Ireland by 2007.[2] The UK was eventually left with its smallest military force on the island of Ireland in modern history. The Declaration laid the groundwork for the Good Friday Agreement five years later, bringing to an end the bloody 30-year period of the Troubles. Few would argue that this was an unworthy cause.

In many ways, the Declaration was a masterful example of strategic ambiguity, designed so as simultaneously to attenuate nationalist concerns over British imperialistic motivations in Northern Ireland, and to enshrine the political unity of the UK.

However, the British military draw-down which ensued was in fact based on a fundamental misinterpretation of the Declaration. Grammar matters after all, even down to a comma. No *selfish strategic* interest does not mean no *strategic* interest. In fact, the UK quite obviously has a strategic interest in Northern Ireland by territorial definition, and per the contours of geopolitical rivalry.

That these interests are unselfish speaks to the essence of the Union – that the interests of the island of Great Britain and the territories of Northern Ireland are indissolubly intertwined. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated throughout the course of history, the security of the British Isles as a whole converges in the face of external threats. Thus – whether through lack of attention to detail, or the desire to bring an end to political unrest despite long term costs – the total withdrawal of our strategic forward presence on the western side of the Irish sea has weakened the Union strategically and politically.

Whilst the peaceful post-Cold War years hid the implications of this decision, the return of major conflict to Europe has unearthed the deteriorating security environment the UK now faces. Two factors interact to generate this environment: a neighbour in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) which is uncooperative from a security perspective towards the Union and its partners; and the lack of British forward presence in Northern Ireland, which would otherwise go some ways towards compensating for Irish intransigence. Today, Russia's war on Ukraine, China's determination to challenge the US-led world order, and subversive Iranian activity across

1. Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Joint Declaration 1993 (Downing St. Declaration), 15 December 1993, 1, https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/peace-process--joint-declaration-1993.pdf.

2. Adam Payne, Northern Ireland: in the balance, Politics Home, 29 June 2021, https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/northern-ireland-in-the-balance#:~:text=The%20army%20officially%20withdrew%20from,in%20more%20than%203%2C500%20deaths.

Europe all combine to form the most serious threat landscape that the UK has faced since 1991 at least. In this context, the island of Ireland constitutes the weak spot of British national security. This paper argues that only a paradigm shift in security arrangements on the island of Ireland can remedy this situation.

The ROI has consistently refused to contribute sufficiently to the collective security it shares with its partners. Despite the ROI's crucial position at the transatlantic gateway to Europe, persistent under-investment in the military and security instruments has left it unable to protect itself at sea, by air, and from cyber and subversive infiltration. Whilst the UK and the ROI both play crucial roles in the flow of goods, capital and digital information which powers western prosperity and security in the 21st century, the contrast in their respective commitment to defending these systems is stark.

Partly as a response to the new geopolitical environment, the ROI has embarked upon a reform of its military and security apparatus. By 2028, the government aims to restructure and bolster the Irish Defence Forces and security apparatus to respond better to the full array of the modern threat landscape. As part of the process, defence spending is on a slow trajectory towards a 50% increase between 2022 and 2028.[3]

However, the task of building a national security system from near-scratch, paired with budgetary constraints and a political culture fundamentally opposed to serious strategic thought, breeds pessimism regarding the prospects of enhanced ROI security any time soon. As a result, it will continue to be a critical weak point across the Atlantic and within Europe. With polls predicting a Sinn Féin victory in the next general election, Irish security engagement with the UK and transatlantic alliance is likely to be jeopardised until the end of the decade. Sinn Féin's enduring Anglophobia, and ambivalence towards transatlantic and European security, means that an Irish government it leads will be no friend to British strategic interests.

This paper therefore calls upon the UK to rediscover its strategic interests in Northern Ireland, in order to improve the untenable security situation on our northwestern flank. As it stands, the ROI displays sheer ambivalence towards its own security, and that of its partners. The inadequacy of the Irish Naval Service and Air Corps jeopardises the security of the Western Approaches to the British Isles, just when Russia has recalibrated its strategic doctrine and maritime capabilities to target our northern flank. Transatlantic undersea fibre-optic cables and European undersea energy infrastructure – so crucial to our collective prosperity and security – also traverse this maritime region, recreating its critical strategic importance of the 20th century. As long as the ROI cannot contribute to the defence of this zone, the UK must take this responsibility upon itself for its own security. This requires us to resurrect our naval and air forward presence in Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile, the ROI's security porousness – and soft border separating it from British territories – opens the UK up to hostile subversion through

3. Irish Government, Government announces move to transform the Defence Forces and the largest increase in the Defence budget in the history of the State, 13 July 2022, https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b3c91-government-transform-defence-forces-largest-increase-defence-budget-in-history-of-state/.

the back-door. As long as the ROI has almost no cyber resilience nor robust counterintelligence apparatus to speak of, its systemic importance to the global economic order, and direct link to the UK, will remain an enormous liability. Institutional and societal penetration in the ROI by hostile states is also probable, given its weak security state and close transatlantic and European ties. Whilst the UK cannot solve these chronic internal issues on the ROI's behalf, the seismic shock caused by shifting Northern Irish policy should impress upon Dublin that the UK will no longer tread with caution around issues affecting its national security. Afterwards, forceful British diplomatic efforts should prompt the ROI to begin contributing its fair share to the preservation of the order which benefits us all.

Chapter I presents the history of the strategic relationship of the islands of Great Britain and Ireland, in order to reveal how external aggressors have always attempted to undermine the former through the latter. As Irish nationalism gathered momentum, eventually culminating in independence, Ireland's global posture has consistently been informed by its desire to distance itself from the UK.

Chapter II analyses the contemporary strategic landscape facing the UK and the ROI. It is demonstrated that the ROI is an open target for attempts by Russia, China and Iran to subvert the transatlantic-European global system. The ROI's vulnerabilities directly affect British security, as geographical proximity means that hostile intrusion into one's sea and air space is a mutual danger. Equally, close bilateral economic and political ties ensure that cyber-attacks and espionage on one may compromise the security of the other.

Chapter III portrays the extent of the ROI's historical and contemporary unreliability as a security partner. A selectively interpreted neutrality policy, woeful military and state security apparatus – the result of decades of under-investment – and the looming spectre of a Sinn Féin government next year all merge to constitute an entirely deficient partner in the face of modern threats.

Finally, Chapter IV proposes a roadmap for resurrecting the UK's strategic presence in Northern Ireland. The Russian menace demands the restoration of a Northern Irish forward deployment platform near the Western Approaches and oceanic peripheries (west to the Greenland-Iceland-UK [GIUK] Gap, and north towards the High North). The UK's diplomatic engagement with Ireland must resolutely maintain the position that such actions fall within the boundaries of the Downing Street Declaration, and are necessitated by the ROI's inaction.

It is high time for the UK to acknowledge that the security arrangement on the island of Ireland runs counter to its interests. The Republic of Ireland is simply not a reliable partner in the current geopolitical environment, which places renewed importance on Northern Ireland's role in British defence. By breaking the longstanding linkage between a British military presence in Northern Ireland, and fraught historical tensions, the UK would signal to the ROI that it will no longer shy away from the measures necessary to protect its national security. The longer term goal will be to

create the environment for formulating a stronger, more equitable British-Irish security relationship, which is based on rational strategic interests, rather than deep-rooted political tensions.

In a clear example of Churchill's dictum that, "at the summit, true strategy and politics are one",[4] preserving the strategic unity of the Union is an inextricable component of British grand strategy. In doing so, the strategic indivisibility of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – which, despite subsequent interpretations, the Downing Street Declaration *did* enshrine – must be rediscovered.

4.   Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, abridged and revised edition (New York: Free Press, 2005), 294.

Chapter I: The Historical Basis of a Troubled British-Irish Strategic Relationship

1.1: Introduction

History demonstrates the fundamental importance of a strategic presence on the island of Ireland to British – and Irish – security throughout any period of geopolitical disruption. In fact, the two islands' security conditions have aligned so closely in the face of external threats that the strategic reality can be characterised as one of British-Irish interconnectedness, despite political friction and contemporary and historical ROI intransigence. As Irish nationalism emerged towards the end of the 18th century, calls for an independent political space, based on a distinct Irish character, began to strain this British-Irish strategic unity. In the end, political imperatives triumphed over strategic ones in 1938, when the UK forfeited its key naval bases on Ireland. This mistake – which could have cost the Allies victory in the Second World War – was only atoned for by the establishment of a strong naval and air presence in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the Cold War, the ROI's continual desire to distinguish itself politically and strategically from the UK spilled over into its relationship with NATO, creating a gap in the Atlantic Alliance for Soviet exploitation. Again, the UK compensated for the Free Irish State's strategic intransigence by building up its military presence in Northern Ireland. The underlying contradiction between strategy and politics reached its culmination point with the Troubles, however, which finally led the UK to withdraw its remaining active military presence on Ireland. As the modern geopolitical situation deteriorates, the untenable nature of the UK's strategic position – lacking a forward presence in Northern Ireland to compensate for an uncooperative and poorly-equipped Ireland – has been laid bare.

1.2: The British-Irish Strategic Relationship – Historical Foundations

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The indivisible histories of the people of Great Britain and Ireland

The close cultural, political, economic and social ties between the people of Great Britain and Ireland have extremely deep roots. Indeed, the histories of the two islands are so intertwined as to be inseparable.

Whilst Ireland has been of crucial strategic importance to Britain since the 16th century,[5] mercantile contact between the two islands long predates that. In early history, coastal settlements were by far the most viable locations for major human population centres, since maritime trade was of much greater efficiency than any land-based alternative.[6] This generated extensive cultural, economic, political, and strategic contact – both competitive and violent, and mutually beneficial – from the 11th century onwards. The Anglo-Norman Invasion of Ireland combined with longstanding economic contact between Great Britain and Ulster, Leinster, and Munster, to link British and Irish political fortunes closely.[7]

Close people-to-people relations ensured that the Irish featured in all of the major developmental phases of British modern history. Ireland contributed Jonathan Swift, Edmund Burke and George Berkeley to the English Enlightenment; Samuel Greg – pioneer of the factory system – to the Industrial Revolution; and over 100,000 Irish men and women served in the British Army during the Second World War.[8] The insoluble links between the two islands were always clearly understood.

In the 1790s, Irish nationalism emerged with the founding of the Society of United Irishmen, which took inspiration from the tenets of the French Revolution. Irish nationalism was therefore preconditioned on the rise of other nationalist movements in the modern era, rather than any unified identity distinct from Great Britain in historical, cultural, economic or political terms. Instead, much like in Great Britain and feudal Europe, the origins of an Irish polity are found in the shifting alliances between local lords competing for territories and resources. Indeed, although there is no natural geographical demarcation line between different parts of Ireland, the island itself has always been fragmented along distinct cultural and social lines. Maritime contact between the Irish east coast and the British west coast both fostered close cultural and social ties between these opposing sides of the Irish Sea, and reinforced the cultural divisions between southwestern, eastern, and northeastern Ireland.[9] This complex history partly explains the difference in affinity felt by the Irish towards the Union, a contributing factor to the politically febrile period running from 1790 until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

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10. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 78-79.

5. Halford Mackinder, *Britain and British Seas* (London: Heinemann, 1902), 19-21.

6. Geoffrey R. Sloan, *The Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations in the 20th Century* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 67-74.

7. FX Martin, "Chapter 3: Allies and an overlord, 1169–1172". In Art Cosgrove (ed), *A New History of Ireland, Volume II: Medieval Ireland 1169–1534* (Oxford University Press).

8. Geoffrey Roberts, In service to their country: Moving tales of Irishmen who fought in WWII, *Irish Examiner*, 29 August 2015, https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20350818.html.

9. See M.W. Heslinga, *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide*, (London: Van Gorcum, 1979).

Throughout the course of modern history, external rivals sought to activate Ireland as a strategic pressure point against England. Ireland presented a potential launchpad for any invasion of Britain, considering the relative ease of access an invasion force has to the British west coast through the Irish Sea, despite its notoriously choppy waters.[10] As international trade expanded and the power of the modern state developed, the role of Ireland in the British Isles' defence system became readily apparent.

During the Wars of the Spanish and Austrian Succession, France sponsored anti-English political coalitions in Ireland, while the Jacobites

attempted two more uprisings – in 1715 and 1745 – which received support from Irish Catholic aristocrats.[11] France again turned to Ireland as a lever against British power in 1796-1798 during the French Revolutionary Wars. The French Directory executed two invasion attempts, hoping to land a sizeable invasion force in Ireland that would at minimum tie down British resources and divert attention from the Continent, and at best enable an invasion of England.[12]

Although both French invasion attempts failed, the shifting European strategic situation necessitated a wholesale re-evaluation of British-Irish political relations. The 1800 Acts of Union, which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland as a modern political entity, were meant to formalise Ireland's political linkages to Great Britain, thereby solidifying the strategic unity of the British Isles against a persistent, expanding Continental threat.[13] The result was a state, recognisable today, with a distinctly multinational character. Although the Acts of Union ameliorated potential political disruption, the strategic situation nevertheless necessitated a comprehensive defence network that included Ireland, which the UK built out over the next half-decade, until Nelson's victory at Trafalgar broke French naval power and reduced the odds of an invasion.

Post-Napoleonic Britain, until the mid-19th century, was in an extraordinarily secure strategic position. The Congress of Vienna had created a reasonably stable balance of power between the major Continental actors, while also providing conservative forces in Europe an incentive to avoid war, and by extension war's domestic stresses, in light of the growth of liberalism.[14] The British strategic picture rested upon one core proposition: the identity of *European littoral sea control* and *global sea control*.[15] There was no power beyond Europe, whether in Eurasia or the Americas, that could legitimately challenge British naval dominance. Moreover, the UK held a number of crucial naval installations in the Mediterranean that, when coupled with British bases in the Channel and on the Irish coast, ensured British control of the European littoral.

The Irish role in the balance of power established by the Concert of Europe is poorly appreciated historically. The Channel prevented the Russian Navy's from breaking out into the open ocean from its Baltic base, thereby necessitating that Russia maintain cordial relations with the UK, or risk economic collapse and invasion – threat the UK nearly made good on during the Crimean War. However, France's long Atlantic coastline provided ample trade nodes and naval basing for a French fleet beyond the English Channel. By operating naval forces from the Irish southern and western coasts, the Royal Navy could ensure its ability to blockade all French trade during wartime, thereby reducing the likelihood of Anglo-French enmity through a coherent strategic threat.[16]

As French ambitions for European dominance re-emerged, France once again attempted to compromise the UK's strategic position via Ireland. France sought to instigate a subversion campaign during periods of renewed tension with the UK in the late 1800s. Moreover, the rise of

11. *Ibid.*, 99-100.

12. Donald R. Come, "French Threat to British Shores, 1793-1798", *Military Affairs*, 16:4 (Winter 1952), 174-188.

13. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 100-109.

14. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) 78-102.

15. Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 138-140.

16. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 114-119.

steam propulsion and concurrent advances in naval technology reinforced the need for access to Irish naval bases, since modern steam-powered warships, despite their speed advantage over tall ships, had to remain close to coaling stations during combat operations. The Irish coast provided an ideal set of bases for British naval operations in the north-eastern Atlantic, thereby defending British trade and serving homeland defence.[17]

Nevertheless, continued tension between the *strategic* British-Irish relationship and the *political character of Ireland* threatened to undermine the British Isles' defence system – upon which Ireland's external security rested as much as any other UK constituent nation. The strategic goal of Home Rule, from the viewpoint of homeland defence and geostrategy, was to placate growing Irish desires for a distinct political and cultural character, whilst maintaining the UK's ability to include Ireland in its strategic posture. However, the long-term political effect of Home Rule was to fuel Irish nationalism. This continued tension would eventually push the strategic relationship between the UK and Ireland to breaking point, with deleterious consequences during the World Wars and Cold War.

1.3: The British-Irish Strategic Relationship – 20th Century Disruptions

Prior to the First World War, Ireland was central to British defence planning. Ireland had its own Irish Command Scheme, which was plugged into the UK's Home Defence strategic framework. The Irish component of British Home Defence was founded upon three ports – Spike Island and Berehaven in the south, and Lough Swilly in the north – which were integrated into a UK-wide coastal defence system.

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17. *Ibid.*, 135-140.

The UK's three Irish Treaty ports. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_Ports_%28Ireland%29

During the First World War, British strategy was centred upon the blockade of Germany, considering the *Kaiserreich*'s inability, in light of its geographical position, to access the open ocean and engage in international trade.[18] Initial British policy rested upon the misguided view that Germany would unravel rapidly due to the commercial and financial disruption of the British blockade, leading to a rapid Allied victory.[19] This viewpoint was far from the mark, but the British blockade remained central to Allied strategy. The ability to defend and deploy from the three Irish ports was central to this strategy.

Although it took longer than anticipated, the British blockade became the most effective weapon against the Central Powers, because it could slowly but surely grind down German war-making capacity by starving it of resources.[20] Berlin never overcame this problem. It sought to break British naval power by drawing the Royal Navy into a naval battle on favourable conditions multiple times. But the only time the Grand Fleet and High Seas Fleet engaged in combat, at Jutland in 1916, the Germans took enormous damage – less than the British received, but far more in relative terms for a smaller Navy less capable of repairs.[21]

Germany's ultimate response was the initiation of unrestricted submarine warfare, which ultimately birthed the Anglo-American Special

18. Robert Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 743, 768-788.

19. See Nicholas Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*.

20. Eric W Osborne, *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 153-170.

21. Robert Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (London: Vintage, 2007), 658-670.

Relationship. British-American cooperation was founded upon the issue of Irish defence, once the US had entered the war in 1917 following German commercial pressure. US destroyers based in Ireland helped police the Western Approaches, serving in a truly integrated command, which along with the convoy system helped master the U-Boat threat by 1918.[22] Absent a unified British-Irish strategic space, the U-Boat campaign may well have succeeded in crippling the UK and forcing London out of the war, as it would have left it incapable of defending the Western Approaches. Clearly, the UK's strategic position in Ireland was a crucial element of its broader defence system.

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22. *Ibid.*, 203, 232-234.

The Western Approaches to the British Isles
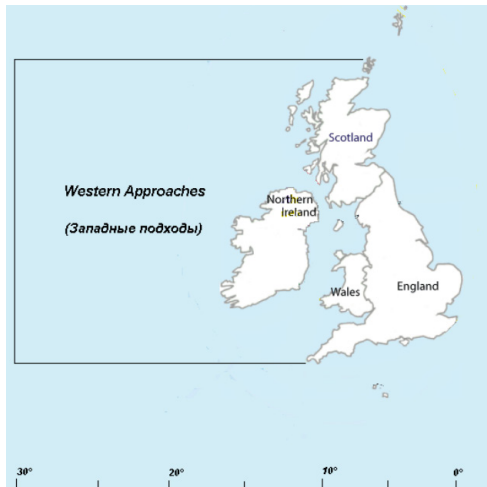
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Approaches

The Western Approaches refer to the oceanic entry paths from the Eastern Atlantic into the British Isles. Their strategic importance is perennial: they are integral to Britain's sea lines of communication, transatlantic maritime pathways, and northward deployment into the GIUK Gap and beyond. Today, major undersea cables run along the seabed, carrying digital data across the Atlantic.

As an island nation, the sea has always mattered to Britain. Indeed, naval historian and doyen of maritime strategy, Halford Mackinder, understood better than anyone the function that sea power plays in British grand strategy, and consequently, its sustained prosperity.[23] Through the lens of his geopolitical analysis, the Western Approaches are one of three vital maritime components of the British Isles. The ability to control these regions, he argued, determined the strength of Britain's strategic position.[24] Indeed, throughout history, the Western Approaches have always been essential to Britain's ability to assert sea control and sea denial around its shores, and further west into the Atlantic.

Viewed in this framework, Ireland's oceanic exposure – as the first land mass reached from the Atlantic – and proximity to Great Britain, accounts for its strategic inseparability from the whole British Isles. It is via the Irish Sea that the Great British midriff plugs into the Atlantic, north-westerly via the North Channel, and south-westerly via St George's Channel.

As this chapter shows, whenever threatened externally, Britain's security – and indeed that of Ireland –has always rested on its ability to control and deploy in the waters around Ireland. Thus, in the words of the Royal Navy's Director of Naval Intelligence in 1932, "Ireland is a vital part of our home defences".[25] With no naval base in Northern Ireland, and a ROI with no serious navy to speak of, the UK's homeland defence is severely weakened around the Western Approaches today.

Unsurprisingly, like all of the UK's Continental adversaries, Germany sought to reactivate the Irish problem for the UK. German intelligence had extensive contacts with the Irish Republican movement, and was a supporter of the Easter Rising.[26] Although the Rising failed to eject British forces from Ireland or tie down significant numbers of British troops,

26. Geoffrey Sloan, "The British State and the Irish Rebellion of 1916: An Intelligence Failure or a Failure of Response?" *Journal of Strategic Security*, 6:3 (Fall 2013), 328-357.

23. H. J. Mackinder, *Britain and the British States*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 12.

24. *Ibid.*, 11.

25. Memorandum by Director of Naval Intelligence on the Irish Dispute, 6 October 1932, ADM 178/161.

it nevertheless demonstrated the chronic vulnerability the Irish political situation posed to UK strategy and the defence of the British Isles.

The Interwar Period was defined by an unravelling of British strategy towards Ireland, with dangerous consequences once the Nazi threat matured. After 1919, British defence planning rested upon the Ten-Year Rule, the assumption that no major threat would emerge and cause a great power struggle for the next decade. Nevertheless, the British-Irish War of 1919-1921, combined with the memory of German disruption in Ireland and the U-Boat threat, impressed upon British strategists the need to maintain some strategic coherence in the British homeland defence system, even absent British-Irish political unit.[27] Like Irish Home Rule, the Irish Free State was constructed as a compromise measure, acquiescing to Irish nationalistic calls for an independent political identity, while preserving a military presence on the island, which was critical to the security of the UK.[28] Northern Ireland therefore remained an indivisible part of the Union for cultural and economic reasons, but also for strategic motivations, since it provided the UK direct access to *some* basing in Ireland, despite revised political arrangements. Indeed, it is here that Northern Ireland's unique strategic importance emerges: absent guaranteed access to all of Ireland, the UK required some unrestricted access to meet basic strategic needs for homeland defence.

The most critical element of the independence negotiations was the Treaty Ports system, under which the UK retained control over its three Irish deep-water ports: Berehaven, Spike Island and Lough Swilly. British negotiators insisted upon the Treaty Ports for strategic reasons throughout the negotiations, despite periods of Irish intransigence.[29] The Treaty Ports were as relevant to the Irish Free State as to the UK; absent integration into the British defence system, the newly-independent Irish Free State would be unable to defend itself against any predatory European power.

However, British strategic myopia and continual political tensions with the Irish Free State eventually led to the unravelling of this arrangement by 1938. After the First World War, British defence planning fragmented, as each military service pursued an independent strategic policy. The result of this inter-service competition for funding was ultimately a diminished naval presence on Ireland.[30]

Moreover, in the early-1930s, Irish politics took a distinctly Anglophobic turn with the accession of Eamon de Valera to the Irish premiership. De Valera rapidly revised the British-Irish relationship, abrogating or violating multiple clauses in the 1921 British-Irish Treaty. He then initiated an enormously self-damaging trade war against the UK, hoping to industrialise Ireland.[31] However, during negotiations to end the trade war in 1938, diplomatic pressure led the UK to consent to surrendering the Treaty Ports in order to settle the economic dispute. Given the lopsided damage Ireland incurred through the trade war, sacrificing the ports amounted to an enormous strategic miscalculation by the British. For the first time in modern history, the UK had abdicated its ability to maintain security in the Western Approaches.

27. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 177-178.

28. *Ibid.*, 179.

29. *Ibid.*, 183-185.

30. See John Robert Ferris, *Men Money and Diplomacy*.

31. Kevin O'Rourke, "Burn everything British but their coal: the British-Irish economic war of the 1930s." *Journal of Economic History*, 51:2 (1991), 357–366.

The implications of this decision became clear only two years later, when the UK found itself alone against a Europe under near-total German domination. With the Fall of France, German U-Boats gained direct access to the Atlantic, and thereby could pressure the Western Approaches, jeopardising British supplies. During the First Happy Time, in the second half of 1940, German U-Boats sank nearly 1.5 million tons of supplies carried by 282 merchant ships.[32] Combined with the German air assault on the UK, and obvious preparations for cross-channel invasion, the British strategic situation seemed increasingly dire.

Had the UK retained access to the Treaty Ports, it could have deployed Royal Navy destroyers to Ireland. These would have been able to screen convoys in the Western Approaches, particularly if the UK had also built out airfields in each Treaty Port. In the event, the UK struggled to implement a coherent system of trade protection, even with the reinstitution of convoys. London repeatedly petitioned Dublin to abandon neutrality and, at the least, accept British redeployment to the Treaty Ports. De Valera refused, privately stating that he was convinced of German ascendance.[33] In the event, the UK had to expend enormous resources building out air and naval bases in Northern Ireland, while rerouting convoys away from the Western Approaches farther north. Had the UK not preserved Northern Ireland's place in the Union, there would have been no practicable mechanism for the protection of the Western Approaches.

As with the First World War, American assistance in fortifying naval bases on Ireland came to the UK's rescue. In a move which would prove decisive in the Battle of the Atlantic, the US clandestinely deployed several hundred "advisors" to HMS *Ferret*, the British shore establishment at its new naval base at Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The UK ultimately survived the U-Boat threat with an empowered Coastal Command, and enormous expenditure into developing maritime patrol and convoy escorting capabilities at and around Londonderry, enabling its forces eventually to cover the "Mid-Atlantic Gap".[34] It was only due to American resources and British-American ingenuity that American supplies, and later, American ground forces, reached the UK for the Liberation of France. Indeed, the Anglo-American Special Relationship was again founded upon cooperation in *Northern Ireland*, necessitated by Dublin's political hostility to London.

Throughout the war, German intelligence assessments indicate that Berlin was well aware of the stresses Irish neutrality caused to the Allies. Even once the U-Boat threat was mastered, the Irish coastal "dead zone", as German analysts termed it, restricted Allied strategic options.[35] Allied intelligence officers, meanwhile, were extraordinarily nervous that well-established German intelligence activity in Ireland would tip off the *Wehrmacht* as to Operation OVERLORD's objective of landing at the Normandy beaches. Indeed, this was far from paranoia, for the Irish handed critical intelligence to Germany before the Allied assault on Arnhem, allowing the Germans to pre-empt, and ultimately withstand, the attack.[36]

The above demonstrates just how critical sustaining a military presence

32. See "WWII Ship Losses By Month", accessed via: https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/losses_year.html; See also Marc Milner, "The Battle That Had to Be Won", *Naval History Magazine*, 22:3 (June 2008), accessed via: https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2008/june/battle-had-be-won.

33. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 205.

34. John Hedley-Whyte and Debra R. Milamed, Battle of the Atlantic: Military and Medical Role of Northern Ireland (After Pearl Harbour), Ulster Medical Journal, 2015, 84)3), 183-186.

35. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 227.

36. J.P. Duggan, *Neutral Ireland and the Third Reich*, (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1989), 237.

on Ireland, and particularly in Northern Ireland, is for the UK's security in the face of external threats. Major-power conflict is always a close-run thing. Had the UK not been quite as adaptable, and had the US not been capable of applying its full industrial capabilities against the German threat, the vulnerability of the Western Approaches may well have knocked the UK out of the war. Military presence near the Western Approaches was therefore the understated lynchpin of Allied strategy in the Second World War – just as in the First – without which Germany might well have won.

1.4: The Strategic Problem from the Cold War Until Today

The British-Irish strategic relationship, which after 1937 became the UK-ROI strategic relationship, evolved following the end of the Second World War, but its baseline characteristics, and the strategic difficulties which defined it, remained largely identical. This further attenuated the strategic element of Unionism, despite its burial in the historical record.

Throughout the Cold War, the ROI occupied a curious position. The UK and US both immediately invited the ROI to join NATO upon its founding in 1949. This was spurred as the Western Approaches question remained extremely live in the aftermath of the Second World War for two reasons. Firstly, any NATO defence strategy would involve an enormous amount of follow-on forces transiting to Europe to counter a Soviet offensive, passing through the Western Approaches for a combat power build in the UK and, if possible, France. Secondly, the proliferation of strategic bombers and nuclear weapons raised the risk of a Soviet attack following that same route.

However, due to its policy of neutrality – codified in the 1937 Constitution –[37] the ROI neither joined NATO nor permitted a major NATO presence, despite its ideal positioning as the backstop to a broader European defence system. Throughout the Cold War, Ireland consented to NATO accession *only* if Northern Ireland joined the Republic.[38] The issue was, Ireland would provide no prior guarantees of either NATO membership or NATO access before this point. Hence the UK, and by extension the US, had no incentive to encourage serious talks on Irish unification, and thereby surrender NATO's last remaining potential basing locations in Ireland, at the cost of breaking the Union. Moreover, even if the ROI joined NATO, there was almost no likelihood that it would abide by its 2% of GDP defence spending threshold, which would therefore necessitate even more Allied assets to secure its air and maritime space.

From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, the UK therefore met its strategic requirements in Ireland by maintain its air and naval bases, and developing an early warning build-up in Northern Ireland. Londonderry remained the primary naval and air deployment base for Allied defence in the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap (GIUK Gap). RAF Bishopscourt, established in 1943, became the base for the transatlantic military radar system, critical to UK and allied nuclear early warning on its northwestern

37. See Chapter III for more discussion of Irish neutrality.

38. For example, in a Dáil session on 23 February 1949, Minister for External Affairs Seán MacBride explicitly links Ireland's refusal to join NATO to the presence of British forces in Northern Ireland "against the will of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people". Seán MacBride, Dáil session, 23 February 1949, quoted in Dennis Driscoll, Is Ireland Really 'Neutral'?, Irish Studies in International Affairs, 1982, 1(3), 55.

flank. The British government therefore attempted to maintain its military presence in Northern Ireland – so critical to transatlantic air and maritime defence – in a manner which did not exacerbate political tensions with the ROI.

However, with the emergence of Irish paramilitary violence against British police and military personnel in Northern Ireland, this compromise strategic relationship became untenable. With the start of the Troubles in 1969, the political relationship between the ROI and the UK deteriorated rapidly. In response, the British Armed Forces launched Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Operating from 1969 until 2007, with over 300,000 soldiers seeing service, Operation Banner holds the record for the UK's longest continuous overseas deployment.[39]

Thus, just as the UK entered a prolonged period of economic malaise, and was reducing its defence commitments around the world, the Army became embroiled in counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland. As Operation Banner was getting underway, the UK finally drew down all deployments East of Suez, fully handing over Middle Eastern strategic responsibilities to the US in 1971.[40] It also greatly curtailed its military presence in the Mediterranean, restricting itself to a ground-centric mission in central Europe.

Driven by these economic factors, and the mounting pressure against its military presence in Northern Ireland, the UK began to close bases deemed unessential to maintaining stability. It was thus mostly naval and air bases which were shut down: Londonderry in 1970, RAF Ballykelly in 1971, and Bishopscourt by 1992. With the closure of these facilities, this was the first time since the 17th century that the UK was left without a military presence on its Irish maritime flank. As the Troubles escalated, Northern Ireland became a mission exclusively for the Army, while an understanding of Ireland's role in British and Allied strategic defence receded from view.[41] Thus, even though it was the Army's presence which would be treated officially in the Good Friday Agreement, the RAF and Royal Navy's presence in Northern Ireland – which long predated the Troubles – was a secondary casualty.[42]

The official reasons given for this naval and air draw-down appear intentionally muddied. The UK and NATO justified the closure of Bishopscourt on the grounds that new, longer-range radar technology removed the need for a station in Northern Ireland.[43] However, other diplomatic and military officials at the time explained the closures as an olive branch to Sinn Féin in order to quell unrest. An unnamed official from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs argued that the closure of Bishopscourt "was important to reassure Sinn Féin who had always assumed that this was the reason why Britain was still in Ireland",[44] demonstrating again Sinn Fein's fundamental misunderstanding of British strategic interests. Meanwhile, the last captain of Sea Eagle at Londonderry, Admiral Sir Antony Morton, stated that the start of the Troubles "created a pressure that made it impossible to sustain an international allied training centre… in Londonderry".[45]

39. Andrew Sanders, *Times of Trouble: Britain's War in Northern Ireland*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 109.

40. See W. Taylor Fain. *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

41. Sloan, *Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations*, 259-260.

42. UK Government, The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland, 21.

43. *Royal Air Force News Release*, 15.90, 25 July 1990.

44. An interview with an unnamed official of the Department of Foreign Affairs, quoted in Sloan, *The Geopolitics of Anglo-Irish Relations*, 266.

45. Interview with Admiral Sir Antony Morton, 30 August 1995, in Sloan, *The Geopolitics of Anglo-Irish Relations*, 259.

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, and subsequent period of the Cold War Peace Dividend, concealed the strategic implications of the UK's military draw-down in Northern Ireland. As a result, the strategic imperative to British and transatlantic security of maintaining an Irish presence played second fiddle to desires to end the violence in Northern Ireland. Central to the ultimate resolution of the Troubles through the Good Friday Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 stated that the UK has "no selfish strategic" interest in Irish affairs.[46] As has been demonstrated, construing this as a rejection of any British interests in Northern Ireland pays no regard to the vital role played by Irish military bases throughout British modern history – nor to the indivisible unity of the Union.

The upshot of the troubled strategic relationship between the UK and ROI is that any security alignment has been disavowed. Neither has the means to satisfactorily police the Western Approaches and Eastern Atlantic – the UK due to its lack of military presence, the ROI due to the chronic deficiencies of its Defence Forces, and political comfort with depending on the security umbrella provided by others. With the return of Russia as a direct threat to European and transatlantic security, there is a real prospect that the dormant risks, engendered by the strategic myopia exhibited by the UK from the 1970s onwards, will finally emerge to endanger our national security.

46. Ibid.

Ireland Chapter II: The Current Threat Landscape

2.1: Introduction

As shown, the ability to deploy and surveil the Western Approaches and Eastern Atlantic has been fundamental to the UK's enduring security. Although the period of relative geopolitical peace between 1991 and 2021 obfuscated the implications of surrendering the Northern Irish bases, a resurgent Russian threat to Europe and the transatlantic alliance leaves the UK exposed to the fruits of its strategic negligence. In an era when technological advance provides hostile actors sophisticated means of waging unconventional warfare, the threat landscape has deteriorated significantly since the Cold War. Russia now possesses the means and intent to launch physical and cyber-attacks on the critical undersea infrastructure which connects our digital and energy systems to our surrounding partners. This places renewed importance on the UK's ability to police its territorial waters, and to work with its allies towards wider defence around the North and Baltic Sea, the GIUK Gap and, increasingly, the High North.

Meanwhile, alongside Russia, China and Iran are also engaging in cyber and espionage tactics with the strategic objective of disrupting the informational, digital and financial systems upon which Europe and the transatlantic alliance rely. Whilst all countries struggle to build the necessary resilience into their cyberspace and intelligence networks, the ROI's chronic deficiencies in these domains (Chapter III) single it out as the weak link in transatlantic-European systems.

In light of these multi-fronted assaults on Western security and prosperity, the UK must rediscover the fundamental role that Northern Ireland plays in its grand strategy. This chapter presents the threat landscape facing the UK, assesses the strategic ambitions and operational methodology of the three authoritarian aggressors, and exposes the extent to which the ROI's chronic blindness towards its own security, and continuous hostility towards its only rational security allies, endangers that of its partners.

2.2: The British Isles within Eurasian Competition

The outbreak of the Ukraine War, and rising systemic hostilities with China, illustrate that the enduring security of the incumbent global system, so amenable to interests of the UK and the ROI, is being threatened across

multiple theatres. Competition with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic, and China in the Indo-Pacific, are not isolated challenges, but are heavily interlinked in an ongoing battle across Eurasia to preserve the US-led world order against revisionist authoritarian states.[47] This geopolitical landscape is characterised by a complex array of threats: from the conventional warfare seen in Ukraine; to physical, yet below threshold, damage to critical infrastructure; to subversive tactics, such as cyber-attacks and the cognitive warfare of disinformation campaigns. Whilst the specific nature of these threats differs across the two Eurasian theatres, they are nonetheless linked by their broad tactical and operational similarities, the defensive responses they demand, and the mutual strategic ambition to challenge the US-led order.

The critical importance of approaching British national security through this broad geographical lens was successfully identified by the UK government's Integrated Review Refresh in 2023. Whilst correctly asserting the Euro-Atlantic as the priority region for protecting our security and prosperity, the Refresh confirmed the concomitant exigencies of engaging – and, where necessary, competing – with China in the Indo-Pacific.[48] In doing so, the government correctly diagnosed the Eurasian threat environment, in which attention and resources must be prioritised – but nonetheless, shared – to uphold the US-led world order on two fronts.

From the perspective of strategic prioritisation, a British grand strategy has therefore been formulated on the basis of an eastwards shift, whereby we engage closely with Continental European allies and partners in the face of the Russian threat, whilst tilting overall strategic gravity to the Indo-Pacific to support the US in its contestation with China. This rationale has informed the UK's latest flurry of diplomatic and military initiatives, from last year's UK-France Summit, to the bilateral strategic partnership with Norway, to the Hiroshima Accord signed with Japan, and the AUKUS pact with Australia and the US. The ambition is to construct a constellation of alliances and partnerships in the face of Russian and Chinese threats, in which national resources are allocated so as to combine with those of our allies, to achieve our strategic objectives across Eurasia.

This is the landscape in which both the UK and the ROI are positioned. Acting as the geographical and strategic 'gateway to Europe',[49] the UK and Ireland constitute the main highway for transatlantic goods, ships and digital communications. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the decisive importance of maintaining free maritime and air access around British-Irish coastlines and oceanic approaches has been exhibited throughout history. Although the region did not exhibit its strategically vital nature overtly during Europe's period of relative peace between the end of the Cold War and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this does not mean that it dissipated. In fact, peacetime developments have brought further strategic importance to waters surrounding the UK and the ROI, through the exponential build-up of critical maritime infrastructure, which carries energy and digital data across the Atlantic and Europe.

47. Sir John Jenkins *et al.*, The Iran Question and British Strategy, *Policy Exchange*, 17 July 2023, https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-iran-question-and-british-strategy/.

48. *The Integrated Review Refresh*, HMG, March 2023, 3; 19; 20-24.

49. Robert McCabe and Brendan Flynn, Under the radar: Ireland, maritime security capacity, and the governance of subsea infrastructure, European Security, 26 August 2023, 3.

Following the end of the Cold War, Western European states sought to maintain Continental security by establishing a mutually beneficial, integrated economic system, insured by the NATO security umbrella. From 1993, the newly-formed EU welcomed post-Soviet central and eastern European states rapidly, forming a formidable economic bloc. The EU swiftly became the most interconnected economic unit on the globe, as intra-regional trade has consistently accounted for two-thirds of the bloc's total trade.[50] Whilst the EU promoted political union and some measures to achieve collective defence and foreign policy, its fundamental principle remained that encouraging buy-in to mutual economic security would sustain the continent's stability.[51] This was similarly reflected in its post-Cold War approach to the Russian Federation, which established strong energy ties with the former adversary to create symbiotic interest in peaceful relations. A two-tiered, interconnected, transatlantic-European security system therefore characterised the period 1991-2021, whereby the continent's stability was to be guaranteed by its economic integration, with the NATO security framework acting as insurance of the last accord.

With interconnection comes interdependence, as each state has come to rely on the critical infrastructure which undergirds their social, economic, political and military systems. Returning to the global threat landscape, targeting these infrastructural sites presents a strategically invaluable opportunity to cause system-wide disruption, whose consequences will reverberate across borders. This systemic potential is obviously attractive to the ambitions of our adversaries: whether China – which seeks wholesale revision of the US-led world order, Russia – which wishes to subvert the incumbent European framework, and displace the US as the primordial power within it – or the Islamic Republic of Iran – whose survival strategy entails imposing destabilising costs on western nations to weaken their resolve in sustaining economic and diplomatic pressure on the regime.[52]

Thus, whether it is an undersea fibre-optic cable connecting the US and the UK, or a gas pipeline running from Norway to Germany, each component of these intercontinental systems represents a target through which to damage all constituents. The overarching security landscape, and all national security within it, has thus transitioned away from the protection of critical national infrastructure to that of critical infrastructure of international relevance. The UK and ROI's position at the epicentre of transatlantic movement and communications makes them both vital to the overall stability of the entire system.

The two states of the British Isles therefore comprise primary targets for adversaries seeking to undermine the transatlantic-European alliance by compromising its vital energy and communication systems. As island nations, the UK and ROI both rely upon undersea pipelines for their energy supplies. Furthermore, both are net energy importers. The UK imports 50% of its gas, with 77% crossing the North Sea from Norway.[53] Ireland is even more dependent on the international energy market, importing 100% of its oil and 71% of gas.[54] The closely aligned strategic interest that the UK and ROI have in the security of these channels is underscored by

50. Shannon K. O'Neil, The Globalisation Myth: Why Regions Matter, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022, 41.

51. EU Commission, An EU approach to enhance economic security, 20 June 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_3358.

52. Sir John Jenkins et al., The Iran Question and British Strategy.

53. ONS, Trends in UK imports and exports of fuels, 29 June 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/articles/trendsinukimportsandexportsoffuels/2022-06-29.

54. International Trade Administration, Ireland Energy Security Supply, 27 September 2022, https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/ireland-energy-security-supply.

the fact that 75% of the ROI's gas currently flows from the UK via two pipelines.[55] This figure was as high as 95% before 2016, in which year the ROI's Corrib gas field began to supply the nation.[56] The Corrib field is relatively small, and is set to go out of operation in 2030, at which point the ROI will become entirely dependent on the UK again, barring further developments.[57] Thus, for the foreseeable future, UK-ROI energy security is dependent on the security of undersea maritime infrastructure crossing the North Sea.
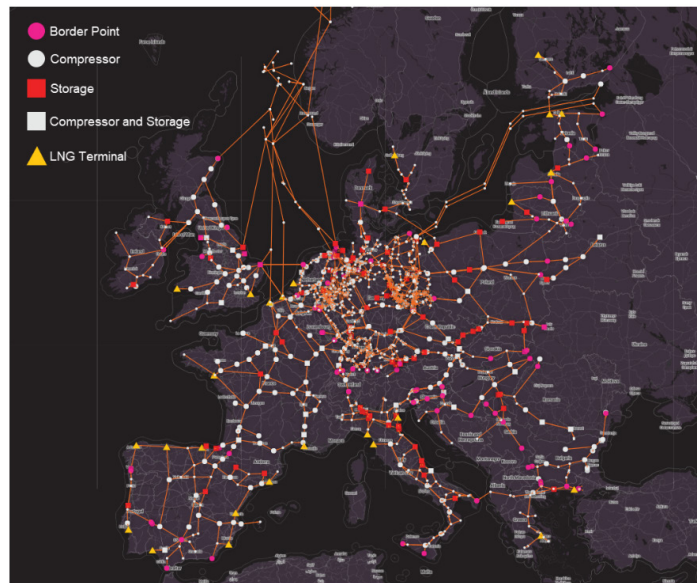
Image 2. EU natural gas pipelines network. Source: *Memgraph Lab*

EU natural gas pipeline network, 2022. Source: https://memgraph.com/blog/gas-pipelines-in-europe

Even more important to wider transatlantic-Europe security is the UK-ROI function as a major node of the northern hemisphere's undersea fibre-optic cable network. Three-quarters of all northern hemisphere undersea cables run through the ROI's territorial waters alone.[58]

55. McCabe and Flynn, 4.

56. Ireland 2050, Where does our gas supply come from?, https://irelandenergy2050.ie/questions/where-does-our-gas-supply-come-from/.

57. Privacy Shield Framework, Ireland – Energy – Oil & Gas, https://www.privacyshield.gov/ps/article?id=Ireland-Energy-Oil-Gas#:~:text=Ireland%20currently%20has%20two%20main,due%20to%20cease%20by%202021).

58. Ibid.

Source: https://www.submarinecablemap.com/
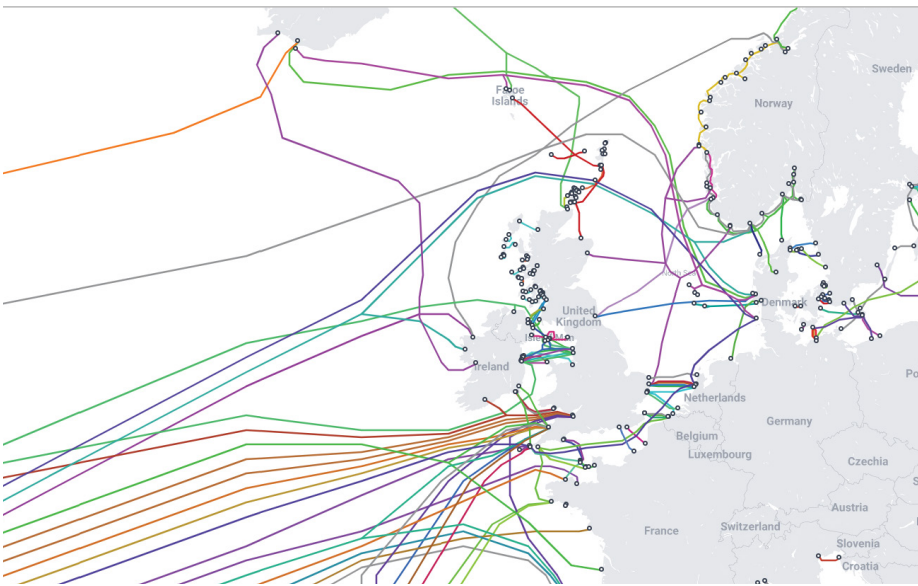
This undersea network constitutes the digital connective tissue upon which the social, economic, political, and military systems of the transatlantic community depend. Its fundamental importance to the security of all states, therefore, cannot be overstated and, as a result, nor can that of the UK-ROI node within the wider system. This affords adversaries the opportunity to infiltrate, or outright damage, the digital channels which service the entirety of the transatlantic-European economic and security systems. Furthermore, the porous international legal framework governing undersea activities, provided by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), places responsibility firmly on countries themselves to deter hostile acts. However, policing and protecting these cables rigorously requires highly sophisticated technological and operational capabilities. This renders cables exceedingly vulnerable both above and below the conflict threshold.

Crucially to the Eurasian competition landscape, whilst geography dictates that Russia alone can access this infrastructure in the Euro-Atlantic for physical explorative and exploitative purposes, cyber sabotage can originate from anywhere. It is therefore a genuine and plausible target in the entirety of the Eurasian battleground, whether by state actors (China and Iran), or non-state groups.

2.3: The UK's Exposure on its Northwestern Flank

Chapter I provided the historical context for the UK's current lack of military presence in Northern Ireland. This limits its deployment capacity through the Western Approaches towards the GIUK Gap and North Atlantic. As Russia has returned as a threat to European and transatlantic security, and climate change promises to increase accessibility to and from the High North, the full strategic implications of the Royal Navy and RAF draw-down from the 1970s is becoming clear.

Source:https://t-intell.com/2021/03/30/echoes-of-the-cold-war-why-bears-like-the-g-i-u-k-gap/
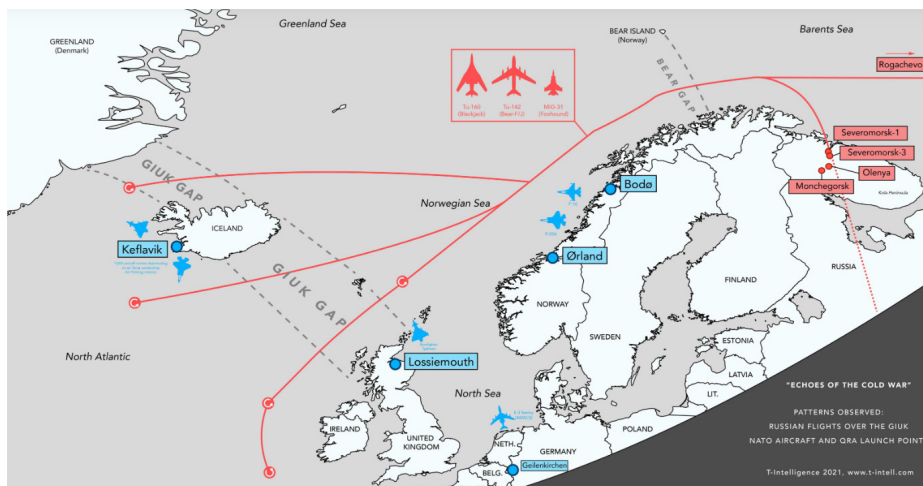
The UK's nearest deployment platforms to the North Atlantic and High North are currently HM Naval Base Clyde, and RAF Lossiemouth.[59] With four Typhoon Squadrons, nine P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, and the new fleet of E-7 Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning aircraft all hosted at Lossiemouth, the UK's northern Quick Reaction Alert is well established.[60] This enables the UK to patrol the area up to the High North, which it does alongside regional allies in order to deter Russian airborne aggression.[61] Meanwhile, the UK Air Surveillance and Control System is fully integrated into NATO's Control and Reporting Centres. Through the node of RAF Boulmer in North Yorkshire, this gives the UK high level radar coverage spanning from the Western Atlantic to 3,000 miles across Eastern Europe.[62]

Whilst the gap created by the RAF draw-down in Northern Ireland has therefore been mostly mitigated, British naval capacities on the left of the Western Approaches remain limited. Maritime patrol of these waters, and by extension the Eastern Atlantic, depend on rapid naval deployment to interdict hostile intrusion. As shown, major transatlantic undersea cables pass through this region *en route* to the UK and the European Continent. The Derry naval base was perfectly located for maritime policing deployment, which has become a renewed imperative due to the array of threats Russia poses in the maritime domain.

In 2022, Russia shifted the Arctic to its top priority region with its new Maritime Doctrine.[63] As the Baltic and Atlantic place in second and third, this shows the threat trajectory which the UK faces to the north and west. Whilst the next section details the specific Russian activities in this domain, the general implications for our northwestern defence system were articulated by the International Relations and Defence Committee's recent report on British strategy in the Arctic.[64] As the UK and its allies respond to Russia's strategic shift, the strain on attention and resources is set to intensify. Minister of State for the Armed Forces James Heappey acknowledged that existing maritime patrol capabilities in the region may

59. UK House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, Defence in Scotland: the North Atlantic and the High North, 10 July 2023, 26-27, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40994/documents/199642/default/.

60. Ibid., 27.

61. UK MoD, The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North, UK Gov, 29 March 2022, 13, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6241cd63d3bf7f32b2e52515/The_UK_s_Defence_Contribution_in_the_High_North.pdf.

62. Armed Forces, UK Air Surveillance and Control System (ASACS), http://www.armed-forces.co.uk/raf/listings/l0016.html.

63. Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 31 July 2022, (http://pravo.gov.ru/), translated by Anna Davis and Ryan Vest, *US Russia Maritime Studies Institute*, 24-25.

64. House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, Our friends in the North: UK strategy towards the Arctic, 29 November 2023, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42335/documents/210453/default/.

no longer suffice, as our current fleet of P-8 aircraft was structured to meet Russia's aims before its strategic recalibration.[65] Also last year, the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee released a report titled *Defence in Scotland*, which expressed the repeated concerns of experts that bases in Scotland are likely to be over-stretched by growing capability demands.[66]

This trend is only set to increase, as Russia's freedom to manoeuvre from the north towards Atlantic and GIUK Gap will improve as warming temperatures continue to melt the Arctic ice. The report notes that the central Arctic Ocean will be mostly free of ice in the summer by 2040-2045,[67] a development which is already turning the previously uncontested region into a new frontier of geopolitical competition. Thus, this combination of political and environmental forces is set to – indeed, already has – alter the baseline defensive needs of the UK on its northern and western flanks. With an uncooperative and unequipped Ireland (Chapter III), there is a renewed compulsion for the UK to refocus on Northern Ireland as a central element of its homeland and regional defence system.

Within this strategic context, the following sections outline the specific nature of the threats posed to British-Irish security – and as a corollary, to European and transatlantic – primarily from Russia, but also China and Iran.

2.4: The Russian Threat

The grand strategy informing Russia's global activities under President Vladimir Putin is its desire to re-wire the post-Cold War European security system, in order to displace the US as the region's great power. This ambition has ideological and political-economic rationales.

The former stems from Putin's guiding faith that his nation's geopolitical, economic, and cultural DNA grants it unalterable, enduring great power status, a belief he has articulated many times over the decades.[68] Ever since the initiation of Peter the Great's nation-building quest 300 years ago, and Catherine the Great's great southwards expansion, the centre of gravity of Russia's great power credentials has always been Europe. It is in this continental theatre that Russia has lost and regained its relative power repeatedly in the intervening years, until – in the eyes of its current President – the West brought about its last national humiliation in 1991. He is now hellbent on restoring Russia's former status, which guides his competition and contestation with the West across the globe. The kernel of this revisionist doctrine is, of course, Europe, attested to by Russia's persistent, and ultimately futile, efforts to sever the Baltic states from the transatlantic alliance, and its invasion of Ukraine.

To serve this overall ambition, Putin has structured the post-1991 political-economy of the Russian Federation, to enable his authoritarian control over national resources to channel them in their entirety towards his geopolitical aims. Having assumed power in 2000, the President dismembered the Russian oligarchy, stripped them of their assets, and awarded them to a parallel new elite.[69] This has engendered centralised control over all production and resources, but also an absence of free

65. James Heappey MP, oral evidence given to the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 5 June 2023 (Session 2022-23), 37, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42335/documents/210453/default/.

66. House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, *Defence in Scotland: the North Atlantic and the High North*, 21 July 2023, 32-33.

67. Ibid., 4.

68. Vladimir Putin speech, Russia at the turn of the millennium, 30 December 1999, https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm.

69. The phenomenon was noticeable by the late 2000s. See Daniel Treisman, "Putin's *Silovarchs*", *Orbis*, 51:1 (Winter 2007), 141-153.

market dynamics which is anathema to the economic model established by the EU. Whilst acquiescing to the energy ties established by Russian gas exports to Europe, the Russian Federation's wider economy remains insulated from the global economic system, maintaining Putin's capacity to channel national resources towards great power competition.[70] The implementation of western sanctions against Russia following the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and ongoing Ukraine War, further calcified the political-economic divergence between Russia and the West, a situation determined by the President's revisionist ambitions.

As this grand strategy has intentionally – and resultantly, through reactive measures – created deepening systemic bifurcation between Russia and the West, this in turn gives Moscow tactical options within the subthreshold context, aimed at degrading the transatlantic-European economic and security networks. Before assessing these, it is crucial to emphasise the ROI's particular susceptibility to these threats as a vulnerable entry point to these systems. Firstly, its geographical isolation from Europe, and vast oceanic exposure to the north and west, gives ready access and manoeuvrability to adversaries approaching by sea and land. Secondly, the ROI's paradoxical position as a non-NATO member, yet one which is structurally integral to transatlantic sea and air movement and digital communications, affords Russia the opportunity to target these systems within the ROI's territory, safe from triggering NATO's collective security mechanism. This particular strategic vulnerability has been heightened by Finland and Sweden's (imminent) accession. This has turned the ROI into the northwestern outlier in NATO's European territories, increasing the probability of the Kremlin targeting it as a means of destabilising the alliance through the back-door.[71]

The Russian threat to the ROI falls into two categories: conventional conflict and unconventional pressure. Whilst the former is at least hypothetically possible, due to Russia's possession of aircraft and naval forces capable of reaching Irish territory, it is parenthetical in the isolated context of the ROI; Russian territorial expansionism is part of a much broader set of issues that the NATO bloc as a whole must confront. In any case, Russia's military is locked into the brutal Ukraine War, and so there is no conceivable strategic objective for invading Ireland at present, which would justify the necessary transportation of naval equipment, forces and materiel to the Federation's Northern Fleet bases, from which to embark upon the long-winded route through the High North and Eastern Atlantic. Therefore, the Commission on the Irish Defence Forces (see Chapter III) assessment for the year 2030 and beyond – that the risk of conventional military attack is low – is correct.[72]

Instead, Russia poses a range of unconventional threats which would involve infiltration, and physical and cyber-attacks, on the ROI's critical infrastructure, national IT systems, institutions, and intelligence-based national security agencies. All of these, considering the UK's geography, are equally relevant to British interests. Hostile activity may all occur – and per the below, evidence suggests that the ROI has already experienced

70. See Sam Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin vs the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (London: Yale University Press, 2019).

71. McCade and Flynn, 17.

72. The Commission, 5.

them – below the conflict threshold, owing to difficulties in attributing blame, and porous legal governance of these domains. Through utilising such tactical variety, Moscow seeks to spread the attention and resources of security apparatus thin, so as to impose greater costs and increase the chance of success in any one area. It bears repeating that such measures would endanger both national security, and that of the European and transatlantic systems in which Ireland resides.

2.4.1: Critical maritime infrastructure

The most acute vulnerability the ROI has in the Russian context is to the critical maritime infrastructure located in its territorial waters. There are two factors behind the primordial status of this threat: the ROI's sheer vulnerability, and Moscow's significant capabilities and intent in this domain.

Firstly, as mentioned, three-quarters of northern hemisphere undersea cables travel through the ROI's waters. Four transatlantic cables land on the ROI's shores, and 12 connect the ROI to the UK, in most cases before extending onwards to the European continent.[73] Aside from the general importance of cables to a state's social, political, economic and military systems, the ROI's finance and tech-dominated economy renders its economic model even more dependent on these undersea networks. Indeed, the government's strategy for economic growth is predicated entirely on digital data transfers along undersea cables, folded into the ambition to make Ireland the central digital hub in the East-West corridor.[74] Technology allows adversaries to sabotage these cables – both with rudimentary physical damage, and cyber-attacks – and to tap them with listening devices, enabling data to be collected and decoded. Due to the interconnected nature of the global financial system and tech sector, disruption to Irish infrastructure would have massive knock-on effects for other states integrated in the international free market and US-led order.

Similarly, Russia can disrupt transatlantic-European energy channels by targeting Irish critical undersea infrastructure. Whilst the country currently relies on gas pipelines for its non-renewable energy, the government's 2021 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act commits to generating 5 GW of electricity from offshore wind farms by 2030.[75] This is therefore set to sustain the island's dependence on maritime infrastructure beyond 2050.[76] Whilst positive from an environmental perspective, this new critical maritime infrastructure will place further strain on Ireland's maritime defences, and proffer additional targets to Russia.

Secondly, the strategy of targeting critical maritime infrastructure to weaken adversaries' military-economic capabilities is enshrined in the Russian Federation's military doctrine. Indeed, it makes no secret of its intent to wage hybrid warfare on the West in this way: its SODCIT operation is designed to degrade enemies materially and psychologically by destroying critical national and international infrastructure.[77] By developing the capability to strike western military-economic targets – such as undersea cables – Russia seeks strategic advantages which do not

73. Submarine Cable Map.

74. International Connectivity for Telecommunications Consultation – Key Findings 2021, Irish Dept of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2021, 15.

75. Department of the Taoiseach, Climate Action Plan 2021 – Securing Our Future, Irish Government, 4 November 2021, https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/16421-climate-action-plan-2021-securing-our-future/#:~:text=The%20government%20has%20today%20(Thursday,devastating%20consequences%20of%20climate%20change.

76. Irish Statute Book, Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, 23 July 2021, https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/act/32/enacted/en/print.

77. Michael Kofman et al., Russia Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts, CAN, August 2021, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/russian-military-strategy-core-tenets-and-operational-concepts.pdf, 68.

carry a direct risk to life, thus reducing the risk of unintended escalation. To reiterate, the impact of incidents involving undersea cables and energy flows does not remain localised. This structural paradox enables precision strikes on specific targets to cause serious, systemic damage.

Russia has systematically funnelled its resources, and structured its naval-intelligence institutions, in order to execute this threat. The GUGI (the Deep-Sea Research Group) is the Kremlin's cross-agency unit run by the Russian Ministry of Defence and the GRU, which pools the nation's most experienced and capable naval officers, and is tasked with both protecting Russian waters and engaging in offensive missions against NATO assets. Russia has been developing its technical and operational capabilities to these ends for decades, and is now equipped with formidable sub-surface autonomous and manned vehicles for exploring, infiltrating and attacking deep-sea targets. It has been noted that the GUGI's responsibilities have expanded significantly recently, as it is tasked with both offensive and defensive capabilities, from the Arctic down to the Atlantic. Capability overstretch therefore presents the UK and its partners with an opportunity to launch pressurising expeditionary missions towards Russia, to force the GUGI to expend more attention and resources on its defensive tasks.[78]

The uptick in Russian activity around critical maritime infrastructure since the beginning of the Ukraine War indicates the alarming trajectory of this increasing threat. On over 70 reported occasions, Moscow has exhibited its intention and capacity to access and manoeuvre freely in both the shallow waters of the Baltic[79] and North Sea,[80] as well as at greater depths in the Arctic and Atlantic.[81] Indeed, the British Royal Navy spotted the GUGI's special purpose intelligence-collection ship, Yantar, near a major fibre-optic cable in the Irish Sea in August 2021.[82] The ship then progressed uncontested into the English Channel in September. In 2022, two Russian submarines were tracked travelling south towards the North Sea from the Arctic. Last year, the Royal Navy found a group of sub-surface vessels – this time accompanied by a surface ship – operating in the English Channel. The increasingly unsustainable nature of the ROI's undefended seas was perhaps again revealed at the end of last year, when a report claimed that, six months ago, the Royal Navy had intervened to chase off a Russian submarine sitting outside Cork Harbour, which had been completely undetected by the Irish.[83]

From a strategic perspective, it is unsurprising that Russia is now signalling its undersea capabilities more openly. As its conventional land capabilities are consumed in Ukraine, it is looking for other ways of achieving asymmetric advantage. As the weaker power in the conflict, the Kremlin must bide its time and find alternative courses of action to impose greater relative cost on the West. As witnessed by the state of tension which accompanies each sighting of Russian activity, the undersea domain is one such option. Russia can therefore operationalise its existing capabilities and expertise to spread panic, divert resources and, if desired, attack the systems which underpin western security and prosperity. The upshot is that the Russian threat to Irish critical maritime infrastructure is

78. Dr Sidharth Kaushal, in *Our Friends in the North*, 32.

79. Russian spy ships mapping undersea infrastructure in the North Sea, *Navy Lookout*, 20 April 2023, https://www.navylookout.com/russian-spy-ships-mapping-undersea-infrastructure-in-the-north-sea/.

80. Royal Navy and RAF track Russian vessels in waters close to the UK, *Royal Navy*, 31 August 2023, https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2023/august/31/230831-portland-and-tyne-track-russian-ships.

81. Royal Navy tracks movements of Russian submarines into the North Sea, *Royal Navy*, 22 July 2022, https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2022/july/22/220722-hms-portland-tracks-russian-submarines.

82. H. I. Sutton, Russian Spy Ship Yantar Loitering Near Trans-Atlantic Internet Cables, Naval News, 19 August 2021, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/08/russian-spy-ship-yantar-loitering-near-trans-atlantic-internet-cables/.

83. Russian submarine 'chased' from Cork Harbour by British navy, Sean O'Riordan, The Irish Examiner, 12 December 2023, https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/munster/arid-41288176.html.

likely to increase in frequency and severity.

2.4.2: Air incursion

As with the maritime domain, the ROI is entirely air blind, owing to its lack of a primary air radar, which leaves it without the ability to identify hostile incursions into its airspace. Even if it did have such a monitoring system, the Air Corps does not own the aircraft to intercept and challenge intruders. This renders its air space entirely undefended by national means.

In recent years, it was publicised that the British RAF may have had a secret deal in place since 1952 to intercept hostile actors flying in Irish air space. Whilst the Irish government has rejected the veracity of this arrangement, numerous reports – including from members of the Irish Air Corps – suggest it does indeed exist.[84] The point is that, if it does not exist, Irish air space is entirely unprotected. If it does, the UK is offering covert assistance at great cost to accommodate the ROI's reluctance to police its own air space.

Leaving aside question marks over the existence of the deal, the ability of Russian aircraft to manoeuvre in the interstice of transatlantic air space, undetected and unchallenged, would evade American and European early warning systems for longer, thereby reducing the time to launch an interceptive response. This would allow Russian aircraft to get much closer to transatlantic sovereign air spaces unopposed than if they flew south via NATO air policing in the Nordic region.[85]

Crucially, the ROI's lack of radar system does not just render its sovereign air space unguarded – which extends 12 miles from the coastline – but its Flight Information Region (FIR), which is a must larger area.

Ireland's sovereign air space and FIR. Source: https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/why-do-british-fighter-jets-protect-irish-airspace/

84. For example, see unnamed sources cited in Niall O'Connor, Air policing deal between Ireland and UK signed off without ministerial signature, The Journal, 17 May 2023, https://www.thejournal.ie/raf-aircraft-over-ireland-clearances-6068586-May2023/.

85. George Allison, Do British fighter jets 'protect' Irish airspace?, UK Defence Journal, 19 June 2022, https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/why-do-british-fighter-jets-protect-irish-airspace/.

It is assumed that, if the RAF deal exists, it grants the UK permission to launch Typhoon fighter jets to intercept unidentified aircraft, both in the ROI's FIR and its sovereign air space. If these aircraft were headed westwards towards the UK, the de facto extension of British air space to the ROI would result in mutually-strengthened air defences. Thus, whilst Russia is unlikely to strike the ROI anytime soon, the latter's air blindness hampers the transatlantic-European defences in this domain, by offering Russia an alternative flight path to get closer to the UK and the Continent whilst evading early warning systems. However, the speed of contemporary aircraft means that lengthier identification and interception response times gives Russia a potentially critical tactical advantage, when approaching from the exposed west of the ROI.

2.4.3: Cyber warfare and attacks on national infrastructure and institutions

Russia also poses an enormous cyber espionage threat, given its ability to conduct attacks targeting national IT infrastructure, social institutions, and governmental intelligence and security agencies. As in the case of critical infrastructure, the Federation is institutionally, operationally, and strategically configured to focus on activity in this domain, and has developed leading expertise over decades. State-sponsored cyber terrorism – combining ransomware and Advanced Persistent Threat attacks – against the West is orchestrated by the FSB, the SVR, the GRU's Unit 26165, and the GRU's Main Centre of Special Technologies (Unit 74455).[86]

As with critical maritime infrastructure, cyber tactics are operational below the threshold of war, making them immediate concerns. Furthermore, they have the same two-fold implications for Irish and European security. The overarching strategic calculus behind infiltration of, and assault on, national infrastructure and institutions – beyond the immediate damage caused – is similar to that of terrorism: to elicit social and institutional paranoia at the prospect of seemingly arbitrary attack and, in doing so, to exert external control over political decision-making processes.[87] In targeting a vulnerable ROI, therefore, Russia would agitate Europe with high degrees of deniability, and so at low risk of escalation.

Russia's cyber activities in Ukraine illustrate the potential of its capabilities and intentions in this domain.[88] In 2022 alone, Ukraine suffered more than 2,000 cyber-attacks originating from Russia,[89] 40% of which were targeted at critical infrastructure.[90] This was not a novel tactic, as Russia's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 was accompanied by a massive suspected cyber-attack, which hit over 200,000 internet users in western Ukraine.[91] That said, Ukraine has largely been successful in withstanding Russian cyber warfare as the war has progressed, in part due to NATO's dedicated cyber threat response cell.[92] This illustrates the importance of multilateral defensive cooperation in this domain – in which the ROI does not sufficiently engage.

Russia has already flexed its subthreshold cyber capabilities against the ROI's critical national IT systems. In 2021, the Health Service Executive

86. US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Russian State-Sponsored and Criminal Cyber Threats to Critical Infrastructure, 9 May 2022, https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa22-110a#:~:text=GRU's%20Main%20Center%20of%20Special,Systems%2C%20and%20Financial%20Services%20Sectors..

87. Martha Crenshaw, Theories of terrorism: Instrumental and organisational approaches, Journal of Strategic Studies, 10 (4), 1987, 14-16.

88. Amit Yoran, Hearing on Mobilising our Cyber Defenses: Securing Critical Infrastructure Against Russian Cyber Threats, Written Testimony to US Congressional Committee on Homeland Security 30 March 2022, 2, https://www.congress.gov/117/meeting/house/114553/witnesses/HHRG-117-HM00-Wstate-YoranA-20220405.pdf.

89. Maggie Miller, Russia's cyberattacks aim to 'terrorise' Ukrainians, Politico, 1 November 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/11/russias-cyberattacks-aim-to-terrorize-ukrainians-00077561#:~:text=While%20more%20than%20300%20of,were%20aimed%20at%20government%20groups..

90. Microsoft, An overview of Russia's cyberattack activity in Ukraine, 27 April 2022, 4.

91. Stuart Madnick, What Russia's Ongoing Cyberattacks in Ukraine Suggest About the Future of Cyber Warfare, Harvard Business Review, 7 March 2022, https://hbr.org/2022/03/what-russias-ongoing-cyberattacks-in-ukraine-suggest-about-the-future-of-cyber-warfare.

92. Daryna Antoniuk, Ukraine signs agreement to join NATO cyber defence centre, The Record, 20 January 2023, https://therecord.media/ukraine-signs-agreement-to-join-nato-cyber-defense-center.

(HSE) suffered a major ransomware attack, causing all its national IT systems to shut down. The perpetrator was later identified as the Russian-based criminal gang, Wizard Spider, whose links to the GRU are well-established, and which has pledged allegiance to the Russian government openly.[93] Last year, the ROI's National Cyber Security Centre reported that it had stopped 60 attempted cyber incidents, and had neutralised a further 500 as they were tapping for active vulnerabilities.[94] As with the HSE crisis, Russia's capacity to infiltrate the ROI's most critical national institutions may well have been evinced again last July, when the infamous Russian cybercriminal group, CL0p, claimed it had accessed 143 gigabytes of ComReg's data, Ireland's communications regulator.[95]

Aside from the patent threat to Irish national security, which in and of itself distresses the stability of the European order, these incidents signal to other states Russia's obvious cyber warfare pedigree. As well as inducing panic, this has the strategic effect of forcing nations to invest in, and focus on, bolstering their digital security and intelligence apparatus, thereby imposing costs which divert resources from more conventional defence.

2.4.4: Espionage and subversive presence

As well as accessing remote infiltration, reports abound of Russian presence in sensitive European academic and government institutions for seemingly malign purposes. In recent years, Russian agents – both civilians and intelligence officials – have been uncovered operating all over Europe, including in London,[96] Norway's University of Tromsø,[97] the ICC in the Netherlands,[98] the British Embassy in Berlin,[99] and even NATO's Brussels HQ.[100] A Swedish report released in 2021, which assessed ten years of espionage convictions in Europe, found that the overwhelming majority involved Russian infiltration, and that the frequency of cases involving Russia had increased significantly.[101] The report concludes that Moscow is targeting sensitive governmental, diplomatic and educational institutions as part of its subthreshold unconventional warfare strategy, as a means of collecting intelligence which could be used to degrade European security in the future.[102]. Moscow's routine use of its embassies for espionage in other states is well known.[103]

Given the ROI's status as an EU member state, its porous cyber security infrastructure, and critical position in international infrastructural networks, it is certain that Russia is conducting similar espionage operations here. Indeed, indicators exist in the public domain to support these concerns Last year, it was uncovered that ROI citizen Marina Sologub, who faces deportation by Australia under the charge of being a Russian spy, had previously worked in the Irish Dáil, and had established good relationships with Irish politicians.[104] She denies the charges and, according to the most recent reports, is fighting her deportation.[105]

Moreover, for many years, concerns have circulated around the intentions behind the inordinately large Russian diplomatic outfit in Dublin, which had 30 members of staff in 2022.[106] This compared strikingly with Russia's diplomatic presence at the time in other European nations with which it has

93. Cody Queen, MITRE ATT&CK: Wizard Spider and Sandworm Evaluations Explained, Cyber Reason, https://www.cybereason.com/blog/mitre-attck-wizard-spider-and-sandworm-evaluations-explained.

94. Cormac O'Keeffe, Cybersecurity chief says Ireland is under attack right now, Irish Examiner, 6 November 2023, https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-41261956.html.

95. Conor Gallagher, Russian hackers threaten to release masses of private data stolen from Irish communications regulator, The Irish Times, 19 July 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/07/19/russian-hackers-threaten-to-release-masses-of-private-data-stolen-from-irish-communications-regulator/#:~:text=A%20notorious%20Russian%20cybercriminal%20gang,the%20Government%20agency%20in%20May..

96. Daniel De Simone, Five alleged Russian spies appear in London court, BBC News, 26 September 2023, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-66923824.

97. Elisabeth Braw, Norway's Russian spy scandal should be a warning to all universities, FT, 1 November 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/92d17129-5ece-41fd-812d-c406b16a8831.

98. Dan Sabbagh, Russian spy caught trying to infiltrate war crimes court, says Netherlands, The Guardian, 16 June 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/law/2022/jun/16/russian-spy-caught-trying-to-infiltrate-war-crimes-court-says-netherlands.

99. David Mac Dougall and Scott Reid, Spies like us: How does Russia's intelligence network operate across Europe?, Euro News, 18 August 2023, https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/18/spies-like-us-how-does-russias-intelligence-network-operate-across-europe.

100. Andrew Rettman and Anton Shekhovtsov, Exposed: Who were Russia's spies at NATO HQ?, Journalism Fund Europe, 11 January 2022, https://www.journalismfund.eu/supported-projects/exposed-who-were-russias-spies-nato-hq.

101. Michael Jonsson and Jakob Gustafsson, Espionage by Europeans 2010-2021: A Preliminary Review of Court Cases, Swedish Defence Research Agency, March 2022.

102. Ibid., 28.

103. Patrick Wintour, Spy games: expulsion of diplomats shines light on Russian espionage, The Guardian, 15 April 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/15/spy-russian-diplomats-europe-espionage-ukraine.

104. John Mooney, Irish citizen accused of being a Russian spy in Australia previously worked in the Dail, The Times, 26 February 2023, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/irish-citizen-accused-of-being-a-russian-spy-in-australia-previously-worked-in-the-dail-f5xjzfbc0.

105. Conor Gallagher, Alleged spy had contact with Russian diplomat while working in space sector in Ireland, The Irish Times, 1 July 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/07/01/alleged-spy-had-contact-with-russian-diplomat-while-working-in-space-sector-in-ireland/.

106. Micheál Martin, Written answer for Dáil Éireann debate, 27 April 2023, https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-04-27/46/.

closer civil, trade and cultural ties: 22 in the UK, 10 in Poland, 12 in Germany, and 19 in France. Only the Russian embassy in the US is better staffed (37).[107] It was subsequently reported that the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, working with An Garda Síochána, had expelled four Russian diplomats, with six others leaving.[108] That said, the same report cited security sources which stated that illegal Russia networks operating within the ROI remain "almost impossible to detect once embedded".[109]

Russia's concerted infiltration campaign in the ROI was also evinced the controversy over Russia's attempts to enlarge its embassy in Dublin. In 2015, the Russian government was granted planning permission from Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council to expand its Irish embassy significantly, with several new accommodation blocks, and an underground operational "nerve centre".[110] At the time, a former MI6 officer pointed to Ireland as the perfect European location for Russian officials "hunkering down" to assist in the Ukraine War.[111] It was only after the size of the embassy came under media scrutiny that, in March 2020, the Irish government revoked the planning permission, for the reason that it was "likely to be harmful to the security and defence of the State".[112]

Visualisation of the intended expansion, with requested new builds coloured yellow. Source: https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2022/0310/1285699-russian-embassy-orwell-road-irish-government/

Russia also seems to be targeting institutions and locations involved in the ROI's maritime field. In 2020, it was confirmed that GRU intelligence agents had been mapping Ireland's transatlantic and European cables.[113] There is also concern regarding Russian presence in Irish academic institutions with maritime and oceanographic faculties. The infamous case of GRU officer Sergey Vladimirovich Cherkasov points to the potential for Russian infiltration of Irish universities. Cherkasov, who was uncovered and sentenced in 2022 after applying for a position at the ICC, spent five years studying at Trinity College Dublin, which has a sizeable Geology department.[114]

107. Ibid.

108. John Mooney, Russia accused of embedding spy networks in Ireland, *The Times*, 20 August 2023, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-accused-of-embedding-spy-networks-in-ireland-zcwn05qzh.

109. Ibid.

110. Louise Byrne, Why a Russian embassy expansion alarmed the Irish government, *RTE*, 15 March 2022, https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2022/0310/1285699-russian-embassy-orwell-road-irish-government/.

111. Quoted in article above.

112. Eoghan Murphy, S.I. No. 61/2020 – Planning and Development Act 2000 (Section 44a) Order 2020, Irish Statute Book, https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/61/made/en/print.

113. John Mooney, Russian agents plunge to new ocean depths in Ireland to crack transatlantic cables, The Times, 16 February 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-agents-plunge-to-new-ocean-depths-in-ireland-to-crack-transatlantic-cables-fnqsmgncz.

114. In the News podcast, The Russian spy who went to Trinity, 29 March 2023, https://shows.acast.com/in-the-news/episodes/under-the-radar-the-russian-spy-who-went-to-trinity-college-.

Recently, the US informed the ROI that Russia might attempt to interfere in its upcoming local and general elections. Dublin received a cable articulating the undisclosed reasons behind these concerns, which are reportedly based on an American assessment of 11 elections in nine countries in the years 2020-2022.[115] The Irish government implicitly conceded the veracity of these fears, when Justice Minister Helen McEntee – asked about the reports regarding the American cable – replied that there is "always a risk" of foreign interference in Irish elections.[116] Considering Sinn Fein's obvious hostility to a productive security relationship with the UK and NATO, and its broader unwillingness to confront any real strategic questions that face the ROI, Russia would clearly stand to gain by implementing its well-known interference methods in the ROI's upcoming election.

Moreover, the ROI is an obvious porous spot for Russian evasion of high-technology sanctions. The UK is already aware of attempts by hostile actors to partner with British universities to steal advanced weapons technology.[117] There is evidence that Russia has targeted the ROI for similar purposes, including the prevalence of ROI-produced parts in Russian weapons since at least mid-2022.[118] Absent any desire to improve its counterintelligence capabilities, the ROI will remain a hotspot for Russian technological disruption.

As with the critical infrastructure and cyber threats, espionage is employed to subvert both the ROI's national security, and that of the wider European order. By successfully, and publicly, compromising sensitive institutions, Russia may also be seeking to frustrate Ireland's future integration into the EU's burgeoning security and intelligence system, by underscoring its status as an exposed and unreliable partner in this domain. Again, this demonstrates how Ireland's paradoxical position – relatively unintegrated and isolated from the transatlantic-European framework, yet integral to its economic and security systems – renders it a probable target in Russia's struggle with the West.

2.5: The Chinese Threat

2.5.1: Chinese strategic designs on the UK and the ROI

Whereas Russian grand strategy is fundamentally limited to subverting the European order, China's purview is global. The PRC's overarching ambition is to dislodge the US as the global great power by 2049.[119]

Unlike the Russian menace in Europe, the geographical fulcrum of Sino-American competition is China's Eastern Pacific neighbourhood. The position and role of the British Isles within this Eurasian competition is therefore distinct from that with Russia, in that the islands are separated from the area of contest by over 7,000km. China is therefore unlikely to send submersible vessels into British and ROI waters to map and target critical maritime infrastructure anytime soon.

Nonetheless, the same strategic logic applies to the UK and the ROI's function in transatlantic informational and security systems, which China

115. Conor Gallagher and Jack Horgan-Jones, US warns of Russian efforts to interfere in Irish elections, The Irish Times, 6 November 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/11/06/washington-warns-irish-government-of-potential-russian-election-interference/.

116. Helen McEntee, quoted in The Journal, McEntee: There is 'always a risk' that foreign governments will interfere in Irish elections, 6 November 2023, https://www.thejournal.ie/risk-foreign-government-interfere-irish-elections-6215928-Nov2023/.

117. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/06/08/drones-cambridge-iran-raf-ukraine-suicide-universities/; https://www.ft.com/content/7f56ee54-b9b4-4e86-8db7-5854364efc75.

118. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/weapons-used-by-russia-in-ukraine-contain-parts-made-in-ireland-p32hfmx3g

119. Xi Jinping's Speech Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. October 18, 2017. P. 17, //http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf.

can similarly exploit to pressurise the US-led order. The UK has identified China as a "systemic challenge" to British interests and values, both in the *Integrated Review Refresh* and other contexts.[120] On British soil, China employs an array of subversive methods, such as IP theft, institutional and political infiltration, and the co-optation and intimidation of Chinese citizens. Given the weakness of the ROI's security state, and its position at the epicentre of the transatlantic alliance, it follows that China would stand to gain similarly from engaging in the same unconventional destabilising activities in the ROI. As with Russia, China may well therefore look to exploit the ROI's vulnerabilities in sensitive informational areas, through cyber warfare and espionage, as a means of infiltrating and degrading the transatlantic order.

It is first important to assess the function of the UK and the ROI in China's overarching strategic ambitions, so that the specific threats it poses to the two can be fully understood. Whilst Russia's rivalry with Europe is of top-tier strategic importance due to Moscow's quest to re-write the continent's security landscape, Sino-European competition plays a subsidiary role to China's overarching contest with the US.

The British parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) recent report on China is the most articulate government-level analysis of the UK's Chinese threat. Its description of how the UK fits into China's grand strategy is worth citing in full:

> The UK may not be the top priority for China when it comes to espionage and interference, but it is nevertheless of significant interest, mainly given our close relationship with the United States (US): China sees almost all of its global activity in the context of its struggle with the US. The UK is also of interest given its membership of international bodies of significance to China and the perception of the UK as an opinion-former – which plays into China's strategy to reshape international systems in its favour. These factors would appear to place the UK just below China's top priority targets, as it seeks to build support for its current 'core interests': to mute international criticism and to gain economically.[121]

Chinese interest in the UK thus has three bases: its role and importance in the transatlantic alliance; its global influence as a member of major multilateral organisations; and the economic benefit of ties with the world's sixth largest economy. Beijing currently pursues a sophisticated strategy towards the UK, and the EU, which combines these pillars with the ultimate aim of weakening the US: by establishing close economic, diplomatic and institutional links, it hopes to acquire leverage to engender non-alignment amongst the transatlantic alliance.[122] Following Brexit, China views the UK as a particularly amenable target within the European context, and as a result more investment has been funnelled from the former to the latter than into all other European economies since 2000.[123]

120. Integrated Review Fresh, 6.

121. Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, China, HMG Government, 13 July 2023, 1.

122. Ibid., 15.

123. Ibid., 16.

2.5.2: Economic penetration

Whilst the ROI does not possess the UK's global standing, it shares a strong relationship with the US due to the history of migration between the two countries. Ireland's function in the global economy as a financial and tech hub, which receives vast quantities of FDI from western partners, also renders it a likely target of China's influence-building strategy of building stakes in worldwide economies.

The ROI's status as a tax haven has attracted major western companies – including Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, IBM, Microsoft, and Apple – to establish their European headquarters there.[124] As well as being a regional tech hub, most major banks also have a large presence on the island, such as Barclays, Deutsche Bank, Revolut and Citigroup, to name a few. Lured by a low corporate tax regime in place since the 1990s, the finance and tech sectors have placed the ROI high up the leaderboard of global FDI recipients, coming in at eighth in 2022, a disproportionately high ranking relative to the ROI's geographical and economic size.[125] That same year, Ireland received over $550bn of American FDI, placing it fourth highest.[126]

More recently, ROI-Chinese trade relations have been on an upwards trajectory, with bilateral trade volume rising from €3.7bn in 2014 to €25.3bn in 2022.[127] It is important that this growth in inbound Chinese FDI has occurred during President Xi Jinping's tenure, which has pursued investment as a means of tapping into other countries' intellectual and technological reserves.[128] Indeed, the British ISC report notes that foreign investment affords the CCP the means through which to acquire technology, gain insight into complex manufacturing and supply chain systems, and generally observe the industrial and financial systems of other countries.[129]

In addition to this economic penetration, another effect of fostering these ties is that it can skew the ROI's perceptions of China, and consequently engender a low threat perception. The Irish State Defence Commission hinted at such a sentiment, as it acknowledged the long-term implications of China's hybrid capabilities for the EU's security, yet also noted the economic opportunities it presents.[130] As the economic benefits of growing ties with China increase, the Irish government's stance in Sino-American competition is unclear. The Commission on the Defence Forces states that, "as the United States becomes increasingly focused on China as a strategic challenger, Europe may no longer be able to rely on American military support to handle regional conflicts and crises".[131] Last November, Micheál Martin visited Beijing, and pledged to renew the political, cultural, and economic connections between the nations.[132] This trip was largely perceived as a bridge-building mission, following his previous comments that the ROI and private sector must remain clear-eyed about China's wider strategic objectives, which had elicited criticism in Beijing.[133]

It would appear, therefore, that the ROI's political and security class is maintaining an ambivalent stance amidst Sino-American competition, as would be appropriate given its track record in modern great power competitions. As the following subsection illustrates, this lack of clarity

124. Velocity Global, Why Global Companies Expand Into Ireland, 4 August 2023, https://velocityglobal.com/resources/blog/why-global-companies-choose-ireland/#:~:text=Facebook%2C%20Google%2C%20LinkedIn%2C%20Indeed,as%20their%20European%20home%20base.

125. FDI Intelligence, Top 10 countries by FDI stock in 2022, https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/data-trends/top-10-countries-by-fdi-stock-in-2022-82725.

126. Statistsa, Countries with highest direct investment position received from the United States in 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/188806/top-15-countries-for-united-states-direct-investments/.

127. Eurostat.

128. ISC Report, 130.

129. Ibid.

130. The Commission, 6.

131. The Commission, 8.

132. Ciara Phelan, Tánaiste to visit China this week following accusations of 'misleading' comments, Irish Examiner, 5 November 2023, https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/politics/arid-41263117.html#:~:text=Speaking%20before%20his%20flight%2C%20Mr,Government's%20priorities%20for%20the%20relationship.

133. Ibid.

regarding China's overall ambition to undermine the US-led order will leave the ROI insufficiently vigilant to Chinese attempts to infiltrate and subvert its society and institutions.

2.5.3: Chinese espionage and infiltration

As the ISC report, and one published last May by the Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship (the Canadian Report),[134] expose in exhaustive detail how Beijing is implementing subversive and unconventional capabilities in the West. Cross-examination of the British and Canadian reports exhibit a remarkable consistency across the spectrum of Chinese activity in both countries. Both are experiencing a whole-of-state infiltration of their political, economic and social domains via cyber and human espionage: from agents planted in political contexts to interfere and gather information;[135] to civilians and cyber groups conducting IP theft in academic institutions and businesses;[136] to the tapping of, and cyber-attacks on, critical infrastructure and sensitive government institutions;[137] to media and electoral interference.[138] Through significant investment in western higher education, Beijing is also charged with exerting pressure and intimidation on these institutions to influence their stance on China. In doing so, it hopes to alter its perception amongst young, educated westerners on a generational scale.[139]

That the UK and Canada have published the most detailed assessment of domestic Chinese interference certainly does not mean they are the only states being targeted. Indeed, there are markers available in the public domain which indicate that the CCP at least has the potential to engage in similar activities in Ireland.

The latest census on the size of the ethnic Chinese community in the ROI estimated the total figure at 60,000, making it the largest or second largest minority ethnic community in the country.[140] In-keeping with the CCP's growing interest in the ROI over the last decade, it purchased more land to expand its Dublin embassy significantly in 2014.[141]

As with the UK, the influx of Chinese students, and Chinese investment, into Irish universities has accelerated in recent years. Chinese students now comprise the third largest body of international students in Irish universities (3,970).[142] Irish universities have also embarked upon concerted attempts to appeal to Chinese investment, including Trinity College Dublin.[143] As of 2016, there were 13 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the ROI's educational institutions (and there is no evidence that any of these have been closed), including two Institutes at University College Dublin, and one at University College Cork.[144] Confucius Institutes have come under scrutiny for their potential role in intimidating students and stifling academic debate,[145] and are run by the CCP's Central Propaganda Department-affiliated Hanban organisation.

Reports of verified Chinese cyber-attacks on the ROI remain scarce, but this may well say more about the capacity of the latter's security services to identify such activity, rather than the former's lack of intent. That China already has the means and intent to conduct cyber penetration of

134. The Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship, A Threat to Canadian Sovereignty: National Security Dimensions of the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship, Canadian House of Commons, May 2023.

135. ISC Report, 38-40; Canadian Report, 39-40.

136. ISC Report, 103-109; Canadian Report, 18.

137. ISC Report, 34-36; Canadian Report, 55-57.

138. ISC Report, 43; Canadian Report, 38.

139. For more, see Robert Clark, The Strategic Dependence of UK Universities on China – and where should they turn next? Civitas, November 2023, https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/The-Strategic-Dependence-of-UK-Universities-on-China-.pdf.

140. O' Leary, R. and Li Lan, *Mainland Chinese Students and Immigrants in Ireland and their engagement with Christianity, Churches and Irish Society*, 2008, 2-3.

141. John Mulligan, Increase in trade with Ireland sees Chinese boost embassy, Irish Independent, 19 January 2014, https://www.independent.ie/business/irish/increase-in-trade-with-ireland-sees-chinese-boost-embassy/29928616.html.

142. ICEF Monitor, Foreign enrolment in Irish HE reaches a new high, 11 October 2023, https://monitor.icef.com/2023/10/foreign-enrolment-in-irish-he-reaches-a-new-high/#:~:text=American%20students%20accounted%20for%2014.5,China%20(11.3%25%3B%203%2C970)..

143. Jody Druce, Top Trinity Official Urged College to Maximise Chinese Investment, 11 June 2022, https://universitytimes.ie/2022/06/top-trinity-official-urged-college-to-maximise-chinese-investment/.

144. Chinese International Educational Exchange Platform, (Ireland) Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, 31 October 2016, http://www.ieeip.cn/bbx/1071727-1123792.html?id=27381&newsid=712361.

145. ICS, 105.

western government institutions, infrastructure and businesses is already well-known and well documented.[146] Like Russia, Chinese cyber and infiltration operations are performed by a combination of state and state-backed actors, as the Chinese Ministry of State Security teams up with cyber groups – such as APT10 – to compromise and degrade western IT systems. In 2022, the ROI forced a Chinese police service station in Dublin to close down, organisations which have been accused of harassing Chinese dissidents, as well as serving as overseas listening posts.[147]

Thus, just as the UK's close relationship with the US and Europe mark it out as an attractive target for infiltration, the ROI's deep integration in global financial and technology systems, and membership of the EU, present Beijing with the same opportunity. Indeed, this threat alignment spurred the CEO of the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (UK NCSC), Lindy Cameron, to urge greater British-Irish cyberspace cooperation in 2021 to resist the Chinese threat.[148] Whilst China's hostility towards the ROI may not be as overt as that of Russia, the CCP's increasing presence and engagement in Irish society follows similar patterns in other western countries. This heavily suggests that China is seeking to leverage ties with Ireland in its wider efforts to infiltrate and subvert western systems.

2.6: The Iranian Threat

The predominant destabilising impact of the Islamic Republic of Iran is, of course, felt around the Middle East, where its domestic interference in other states, proxy warfare, and ballistic and nuclear programmes cause most trepidation. Nonetheless, as Policy Exchange's recent report on the Iranian threat to the UK reveals in detail,[149] part of the regime's strategy for survival involves subversive activity across Europe. This involves funding and orchestrating terrorist attacks on foreign soil, cyber warfare and espionage targeted at critical national IT systems, developing illicit financial channels, threatening and endangering overseas dissidents, and disinformation campaigns designed to weaken social cohesion.[150] The overall contribution of this foreign interference to the regime's grand strategy for survival is twofold: to facilitate illicit financing of the Islamic Republic's nefarious activities; and to foment domestic unrest and political discord in the West, thereby deterring a united Iranian policy.

Organised criminal groups, operating in both the ROI and Northern Ireland, have been charged and convicted on numerous occasions for their links with Iran's proxy network. The Dublin-based transnational Kinahan Cartel is currently under investigation by the US for assisting in the illegal financing of Hezbollah and Iran through sophisticated international hawala banking channels.[151] Meanwhile, the New IRA, the largest dissident republican group based predominantly in Northern Ireland, is reported to have established communication channels with Hezbollah in 2017 through the Iranian embassy in Dublin.[152] In 2020, an MI5 agent infiltrated the New IRA as part of Operation Arbacia, leading to the arrest of nine individuals operating in Northern Ireland and Scotland, as they attempted to purchase weapons from Hezbollah.[153] A tenth Palestinian

146. For example, see September, May 2020; July, 2022, incidents at CSIS, Significant Cyber Incidents, https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/significant-cyber-incidents#:~:text=September%202023%3A%20U.S.%20and%20Japanese,around%20in%20their%20target's%20networks.

147. Wilhelmine Preussen, Ireland orders China to shut illegal 'police station' in Dublin, Politico, 27 October 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/ireland-tells-chinese-embassy-to-shut-illegal-police-station-in-dublin/.

148. UK NCSC, Ireland and UK partnership key in countering cyber threats, 25 June 2021, https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/news/iiea-cyber-threat-speech.

149. Sir John Jenkins *et al.*, The Iran Question and British Strategy, *Policy Exchange*, 17 July 2023, https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-iran-question-and-british-strategy/.

150. Ibid., 20-22; 46; 53-56.

151. John Mooney, Kinahan cartel: hunt for gang now linked to Iran and Hezbollah, The Times, 13 May 2023, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/daniel-kinahan-cartel-gang-ireland-iran-2023-g5klws2dd.

152. John Mooney, New IRA forges links with Hezbollah, The Times, 13 September 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/new-ira-forges-links-with-hezbollah-gq68x-8w5w.

153. Henry McDonald, Scottish MI5 spy to be crown's key witness in New IRA terrorism trial, The Guardian, 12 October 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/12/scottish-mi5-spy-crown-key-witness-new-ira-terror-trial.

individual was later charged.[154] All ten have been charged and still await their verdict.

Another terrorist group, Republican Sinn Féin (RSF) – which is proscribed and sanctioned by the US Treasury Department,[155] and rejects the Good Friday Agreement by seeking "the complete overthrow of British rule in Ireland"[156] – makes no secret of its Iranian sympathies. The following tweet, which has not been taken down, was published two days after the death of Iranian Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani:[157]

RSF is active across both sides of the Irish border, and regularly submits candidates to elections: in 2007, six RSF members ran as independents in Norther Ireland's Assembly election, gaining 2,522 first preference votes collectively;[158] meanwhile, RSF member Tomás O Curraoin is on the Galway County Council.[159]

Meanwhile, the ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict has surfaced growing concern about deeper embedment of Iran-backed groups in the Irish state. An Garda Síochána has recently shifted priority to investigating the presence of representatives from Hezbollah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine within the country,[160] as well as other groups which may be attempting to spread extremist views amongst the population, and funnelling cash into terrorist organisations in the Middle East.[161]

As well as the threat to social stability – and the risk of violence which this brings – this subversive presence affords Iran the opportunity to

154. Alan Erwin, New IRA-accused doctor's challenge against PPS dismissed, Belfast Telegraph, 30 January 2023, https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/courts/new-ira-accused-doctors-challenge-against-pps-dismissed/2131207781.html.

155. US Office of Foreign Assets Control, Sanctions List Search, https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/Details.aspx?id=7141.

156. Republican Sinn Féin Poblachtach, Objectives, https://republicansinnfein.org/objectives/.

157. Republican Sinn Féin twitter account [RepublicanSF], Twitter, 4 January 2020, https://twitter.com/RepublicanSF/status/1213562698631397376?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1213562698631397376%7Ctwgr%5E5c-34c75615b86de9cc0df46a803dff-c761713207%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thenationalnews.com%2Fworld%2Feurope%2Firish-terrorists-in-hezbollah-weapons-sting-met-with-iranian-embassy-officials-1.1079651.

158. Martin Melaugh, Assembly Election (NI) Wednesday 7 March 2007, CAIN Web Service, 7 March 2007, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/2007nia/ra2007.htm.

159. RSF1916, Tomás O Curraoin, Sinn Féin Poblachtach Councillor from Co Galway, delivering the oration at the 100th-anniversary commemoration of the Ballyseedy Massacre, Republic Sinn Féin, 18 March 2023, https://republicansinnfein.org/2023/03/18/tomas-o-curraoin-sinn-fein-poblachtach-councillor-from-co-galway-delivering-the-oration-at-the-100th-anniversary-commemoration-of-the-ballyseedy-massacre/.

160. John Mooney, Garda to evaluate Hezbollah presence in Ireland, The Irish Times, 29 October 2023, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/garda-to-evaluate-hezbollah-presence-in-ireland-xrd7jmgbd.

161. Lemma Shehadi, Ireland's intelligence services evaluate Hezbollah presence, 29 October 2023, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/uk-news/2023/10/29/irelands-intelligence-services-evaluate-hezbollah-presence/.

breach the sensitive informational channels crossing the transatlantic-European system. It is highly likely that Iran will try, as Russia and China do, to engage in espionage to access critical infrastructure and intelligence institutions. Should it be successful, it may acquire intelligence with which to put at risk the security of states in Europe, the transatlantic alliance, and its partners in other regions of the world.

The absence of a hard border between the ROI and Northern Ireland facilitates the cross-border activities of these groups – as witnessed with Operation Arbacia above – which poses an acute security risk to the UK. Thus, the defining vulnerability of the ROI's security state could, once again, present a backchannel through which hostile actors can access and degrade western security on a global scale.

Chapter III: The Republic of Ireland as an Unreliable Security Partner

3.1: Introduction

The ROI is a key component of the transatlantic-European systems which underpin the prosperity and security of the UK and its allies. The ROI is integrated into the US-led global economic system, increasingly in the burgeoning European security landscape, and somewhat in the transatlantic alliance, purely by virtue of its embedment in the constituent maritime and air routes, and digital communication networks.

However, for ideological and financial reasons, Dublin has limited itself to subpar participation in the European and transatlantic security frameworks designed to uphold collective prosperity and stability. The unavoidable fact is that the ROI grounded its security upon the transatlantic-European economic and security order, whilst freeloading off the significant investment of others in protecting it, absent any Irish desire to play a constructive part in the broader Atlantic security system. This home truth was admitted by Micheál Martin himself this year, as he put the weak state of Ireland's Defence Forces down to the long-held view that the ROI's "geographic isolation on the periphery of Europe [was] a source of security".[162]

Yet, as shown, this intentional disengagement has left the ROI as the weak link against Russian, Chinese and Iranian efforts amidst Eurasian geopolitical competition. By setting out its lack of military and security commitment to the enduring stability of the transnational systems, and the domestic political and social resistance to further participation, this chapter illustrates the ROI's unreliability as a partner against hostile actors. This places renewed importance on re-considering Northern Ireland's role in the British national security system.

3.2: Ireland's Neutrality of Convenience

Ireland has long pursued a policy of military neutrality. Whilst this is not explicitly codified in the 1937 Constitution, the Bunreacht na hÉireann, its basis is founded upon two articles which define the parameters for the state's engagement in international warfare.[163]

162. Dáil debate on the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy: Opening statement by the Tánaiste, Micheál Martin, 18 May 2023.

163. Irish Statute Book, Constitution of Ireland

The constitutional basis of neutrality

Article 28 of the 1937 Irish Constitution vests executive authority in the government. It specifies that the power to declare war, or participate in any war, must be exercised by the government, subject to the approval of the Dáil Éireann (the lower house of the Irish Parliament). This constitutional requirement ensures that any decision to engage in armed conflict is subject to democratic scrutiny and reflects the principle of civilian control over the military.[164]

Article 29 outlines the ROI's approach to international relations, emphasising the pursuit of international peace and security through adherence to the principles of international law and the ideal of collective security. It affirms that Ireland adheres to the pacific settlement of international disputes and renounces war as a means of settling international controversies.[165]

Together, these constitutional provisions provide the basis for Irish neutrality, and its commitment to avoiding involvement in military alliances and external conflicts.

Although this policy was challenged, and ultimately compromised, during the Second World War, the commitment to neutrality solidified in the aftermath of the war.[166] In 1949, Ireland left the Commonwealth, and refused for the first time to join NATO, thereby establishing its non-alignment throughout the duration of the Cold War. As subsequent efforts by the UK and the US to invite it into the alliance were rebuffed, Dublin upheld vigorously its position that neutrality was the price for the separation of Northern and Southern Ireland.[167] Thus, the ROI's neutrality has always been intricately linked with its desire to distance itself from the UK, or in other words, the incorrigible rejection of the integrity of the Union that has defined the ROI's politics since the state's creation.

As well as this historical aversion to security cooperation with the UK, economic factors have led the ROI to neglect its military and security apparatus. Large scale defence spending was perceived in the immediate post-war era as a financial drain on a newly-independent state struggling to establish a national economy. This has resulted in Ireland consistently spending far below the 2% defence budget minimum required for NATO membership, even if accession were otherwise desired. Whilst defence spending as a percentage of GDP averaged 1% from 1960-1986, it has been in continual decline since then, dipping below 0.5% from the mid-1990s.

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166. Whilst conventional history tends to cite intelligence handed discreetly to the Allies, that Ireland provided similar assistance to the Axis is a lesser-known fact. For example, Dublin handed critical intelligence to Germany before the Allied 1944 assault on Arnhem, enabling it to prepare for, and rebuff, the attack. See G.R. Sloan, *The Geopolitics of British-Irish Relations in the 20th Century*, 225.

167. Sloan, 286.

164. Ibid., Article 28.3.

165. Ibid., Article 29.1-3.
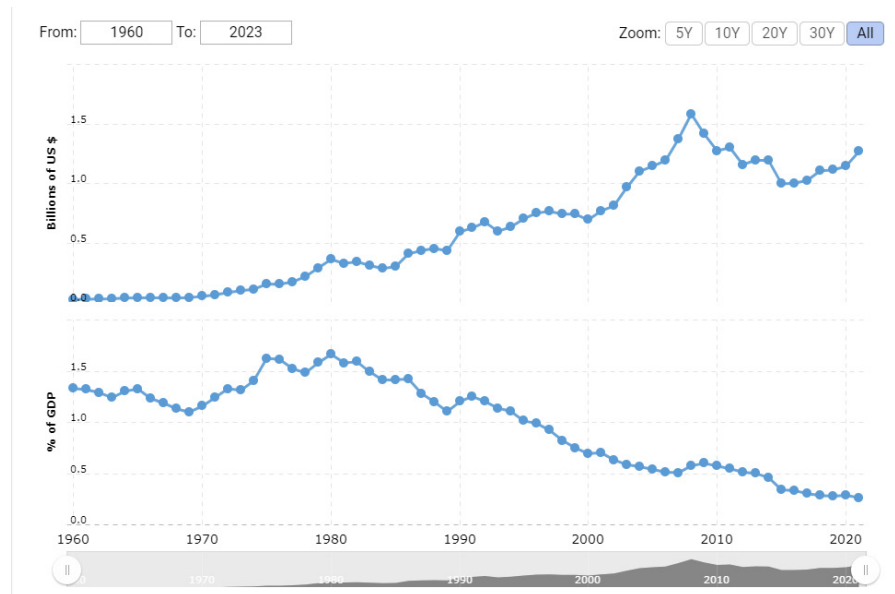
Irish defence spending in $bn, and as a percentage of GDP. Data Source: World Bank. Graph Source: https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IRL/ireland/military-spending-defense-budget

This reveals the true roots of vaunted Irish neutrality – that of geopolitical convenience enabled by the security provided by others, whereby the state is simply unwilling to pay for its own defence.[168] This hard truth is supported by the fact that the ROI's defence spending has historically been, and remains still, dwarfed by that of the other declared European neutral states: Austria, Switzerland, Finland and Sweden (until the latter two's recent bids for NATO accession). Between 2000 and 2022, these four states increased defence spending dramatically more so than the ROI: Austria ($2.8bn-$6bn); Finland ($1.5bn-$5.1bn); Sweden ($4.7bn-$7.4bn); Switzerland ($4.1bn-$6.1bn); and the ROI ($0.69bn-$1.4bn).[169]

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168. Vice Admiral Mark Mellet, Some realities for the defence of an island behind an island, The Azure Forum, 14 February 2023, https://www.azureforum.org/some-realties-for-the-defence-of-an-island-behind-an-island/.

169. Statistics from World Bank.

The Celtic Tiger: a beneficiary of, not contributor to, western prosperity

In the same period that the ROI's defence spending nosedived from its already-low base, the government embarked upon an aggressive campaign to attract FDI. This sparked a period of tremendous economic growth, as living standards were lifted from being amongst the worst in Europe, leading the Irish economy to be coined the 'Celtic Tiger' by Morgan Stanley economist Kevin Gardiner.

From 1987 to 2003, the government implemented some of the most aggressive corporate tax rate reductions in living history, in order to attract foreign investment and multinational corporations.[170] The key institution driving this lobbying campaign for global capital is the Industrial Development Agency, whose website heralds "Ireland's historic success in winning a far higher share of FDI than warranted by the size of [its] population and economy".[171]
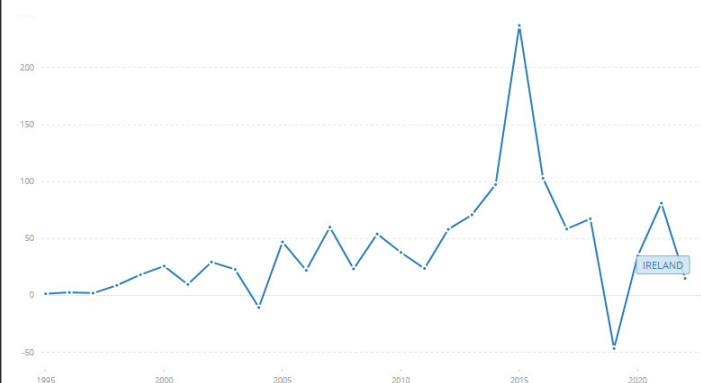
FDI net inflows into Ireland in USD bn, *Source: World Bank*

Just as the West began to emerge – at great psychological and material expense – from the Cold War, the ROI began to cash in on the new era of relative global peace. Whilst the transatlantic-European community partially relaxed its defence spending, the memory of three major 20th century conflicts ensured vigilance against total complacency. Instead of allocating an equitable share of its rapid economic growth in the same vein, the ROI repaid the favour by formulating a national policy with two implicit demands on its partners: to continue investing in international security on the ROI's behalf; and to funnel their capital into Dublin.

Indeed, concerns over the ROI's reluctance to fulfil its sovereign duty to defend itself complicated the ROI's integration into the European bloc. Even before the EU embarked upon the process of formalising a unified security and defence policy, Irish neutrality was a source of frustration for other nations. The ROI's first bid in 1960 to join the European Economic Community was rebuffed, due to its reluctance to contribute to the implied political and security pillars of economic union.[172] Thus, long before the 1998 St. Malo declaration codified a precursor to the EU's future common security and defence policy (CSDP), the ROI's neutrality was a stumbling block to its integration into the European bloc. In the end, the ROI did not formally acquiesce to the EU's common security policy until it ratified the Treaty of Nice at the second time of asking in October 2002. Even then, the government requested a carve out, insisting that common security policy should not prejudice the specific stances of certain member states.[173]

172. For example, in the Dáil debate on the issue, Socialist Labour Party member Noel C. Browne remarked that EEC membership would mean Ireland is "in fact… not neutral in the true sense of the word", Dáil Eireann debate, 5 July 1961, 191 (2), https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1961-07-05/32/?highlight%5B0%5D=bill&highlight%5B1%5D=guarantee&highlight%5B2%5D=trade&highlight%5B3%5D=trade&highlight%5B4%5D=trade.

173. EU CVCE, National Declaration by Ireland at the Seville European Council (21 June 2002), 21 June 2002, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2005/6/17/a442cb15-0528-4560-9d12-0b46fb5c75d4/publishable_en.pdf, 2.

170. Caleb Howard, Ireland: A Study in the Effectiveness of Corporate Tax Rate Reduction, Southern Adventist University, 2019 11(3), 37.

171. Industrial Development Agency, About IDA Ireland, https://www.idaireland.com/about-ida-ireland/.

Shades of Neutrality

Whilst neutrality may ostensibly appear a simple concept – military non-alignment and disengagement from overseas wars – its application across the history of international relations displays complex nuances. Over the centuries, the doctrine's development has been shaped by the overall quest to make it enforceable, and able to withstand geopolitical winds. This has driven a philosophical and political debate over competing approaches on two fronts: to what extent is neutrality best preserved in *temporary* – excluding a state from particular conflicts – or *permanent* – excluding it from all conflicts – form?; and to what extent it should be *armed* – supported by military means – or *unarmed* – supported by moral, diplomatic and legal cover alone?[174]

Examples of states maintaining policies of disengagement from external conflicts can be traced back to antiquity.[175] However, neutrality, from the Latin *neuter*, meaning "neither of two", first emerged in the Westphalian era in 18th century Europe.[176] Its origins are found in maritime law when, during the Anglo-French War, a group of Baltic nation states formed the First League of Armed Neutrality in 1780, to protect their ships against Britain's wartime policy of unlimited searching for France-bound contraband.[177] Although the League sought to uphold this principle in theory with naval support, in reality Britain enjoyed total sea control, as its Royal Navy fleets outnumbered and outpowered the collective force of the alliance. Nonetheless, as France and the United States consented to not targeting non-aligned vessels, Britain was ultimately forced to relent to diplomatic pressure to follow suit. The principle of neutral commerce was therefore established.

The second attempt at armed neutrality, however, was far less successful. In 1800 – again to uphold the free passage of shipping vessels against British attack during the War of the Second Coalition – Denmark-Norway, Prussia, Sweden, and Russia formed the Second League of Armed Neutrality. However, whereas Britain was convinced by the neutral credentials of the First League, it viewed the second iteration as an indirect alliance with France. Britain therefore violated Denmark's neutrality by attacking its fleet in 1801 – and again with the infamous bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 – setting off a chain of events which led to the rapid collapse of the Second League.

The lessons gleaned from the history of these two events for smaller states pursuing non-alignment are clear: in the absence of a robust supportive military, neutrality comes only at the behest of larger powers. Although subsequent international efforts sought to codify greater legal protection for declared neutrality, culminating in the Hague Convention of 1907 – which defined the conduct and rights of neutral states in war – most nations pursuing this policy have appreciated the necessity of investing in the defensive means to uphold it. This led to the inescapable reality that only an *armed* form of neutrality could hope to be enforced.

Despite this consistent base logic, neutrality in the 20th century displayed many tones. The policies of the five 'classic' European Cold War neutrals – Austria, Finland, Sweden, the ROI and Switzerland – were each dictated by complex amalgamations of socio-political, economic, historic and geopolitical factors.[178] The divergent strategic approaches this created can be illustrated by those of neighbouring Finland and Sweden.

After the Second World War, the looming shadow of the USSR over Finland caused "Finlandisation", whereby the former deterred the latter from developing ties with the West in return for its nominal independence. This persistent threat and proximity to a potentially hostile great power engendered a highly militarised Finnish state, resting upon the concept of total defence from the 1950s.[179] In the same period, Sweden declared official neutrality, yet covertly stretched its limits to the brink by cooperating with the US in the intelligence domain, and aiming to sneak into the American nuclear umbrella by allowing the US to station Polaris A-1 nuclear missiles just off its western coast.[180] In any case, by the mid-1960s Sweden was a threshold nuclear power, a capability developed to act as a guarantor of last resort for its neutral status.[181]

Thus, whilst both successfully preserved their nominal neutrality and, in doing so, shielded themselves from economic and military conflict, they did so via distinct combinations of diplomatic and security strategy. Whilst neutrality policies are unified by their broadly uniform *end* – avoiding open engagement in external conflicts – their *means* have been historically heterogeneous. For all intents and purposes, states have viewed neutrality as something of a moveable feast: a fixed ideology, built on flexible foundations. Furthermore, history remains ambivalent on the ultimate capacity of states to guarantee their neutrality in the face of external pressures, as witnessed by Denmark in the 19th century, as well as Belgium, the Netherlands and Finland during the Second World War.

As the post-Cold War peace era dawned, as shown above, the one constant across all neutral states, barring Ireland, has been their commitment to defence spending. The ROI therefore stands alone as a self-declared armed neutral nation, which has historically made minimal efforts to support this stance militarily. Although diverse strategies have been implemented by neutral states towards this end – with differing degrees of success – a consensus has been reached that it requires the support of a capable military and security apparatus. Without this foundation, as history has illustrated repeatedly, it amounts to a hollow policy for achieving national security, one which is – in the Irish's own words – entirely dependent on the "goodwill or enlightened self-interest of others" to preserve.[182]

174. Thomas Fischer et al., Neutrality and Non-alignment in World Politics during the Cold War, Journal of Cold War Studies, 2016, 18 (4), 7.

175. During the Peloponnesian War, the Melians struggled to exclude themselves from war between Athens and Sparta. Even before that, the Second Book of Chronicles of the Old Testament implies that King Josiah of Judah was not obliged to engage the Egyptian army as it marched on the Levant, for their war was not with the Judaeans.

176. Fischer et al., 6.

177. American Foreign Relations, Armed Neutralities – League of the armed neutrality, https://www.americanforeign-relations.com/A-D/Armed-Neutralities-League-of-the-armed-neutrality.html.

178. For more, see Neutrality and Nonalignment in World Politics during the Cold War, Journal of Cold War Studies, 2016, 18 (4).

179. Major General Pertti Salminen, Finland's Comprehensive and Military Defence doctrines responding to emerging threats and new technologies, OSCE, 25 May 2011, 1.

180. See Douglas Brommesson et al., Sweden's Policy of Neutrality: Success Through Flexibility?, in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges*, Caroline de la Porte et al. (ed), Oxford University Press, 2022, 285-6.

181. Paule Cole, Sweden Without the Bomb: The Conduct of a Nuclear-Capable Nation Without Nuclear Weapons, RAND, 1994, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR460.html.

182. Dame Louise Richardson, Consultative Forum on International Security Policy, 10 October 2023, 14.

As well as driving consistent under-investment in the pillars of national security, the ROI's neutrality obstructs its cooperation with partners as they seek to defend the transnational systems which buttress our mutual prosperity and security. In 2022, the Irish government pledged to increase defence spending 50% by 2028, but this will fall far short of resolving decades of under-investment.[183] As a result, the ROI's partners have begun to lose patience with its persistent intransigence. Last year, Finnish Lieutenant General Esa Pulkkinen – who served on the board of the Commission on the Defence Forces – publicised his frustration at the speed of progress, asserting that Russia's war on Ukraine means that the era of Irish military neutrality is now "over".[184]

3.3: The ROI's Flimsy Contribution to Allied Security

As demonstrated, the ROI has elected to opt out of full integration into either the transatlantic or European security frameworks. Nonetheless, it has limited relationships with NATO, the various initiatives within the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and regularly contributes to global peacekeeping missions. As the following section illustrates, from a strategic perspective, the glacial pace of these measures will offer neither the ROI, nor its ad hoc partners, much in the way of material security enhancement.

3.3.1: Voluntary peacekeeping

As part of the ROI's mission to present itself as a non-aligned nation committed to peace and conflict resolution, it has maintained a constant presence in UN and UN-mandated peacekeeping missions since 1958.[185] The largest overseas deployment is to the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and Irish troops are also stationed across the Middle East (including in Israel and the Palestinian Territories via the UN Truce Supervision Organisation),[186] as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These are joined by the presence of ROI civilians in civilian peace operations in Niger, Somalia, Kosovo, Georgia, Ukraine, Libya, and Mali.

The ROI's participation in these missions is governed by its Triple Lock system, which requires UN authorisation, Dáil and governmental approval. As the Irish Consultative Forum's chair report noted, the Triple Lock's origins stem back to the Defence (Amendment) (No 2) Act of 1960, but arrived into popular usage in the 2000s to assuage concerns that Ireland would be drawn into EU common defence frameworks.[187]

Alongside UN participation, Ireland has contributed to NATO's PfP since joining in 1999. Its focus in this initiative is to support missions pertaining to women and children, peace and security, civilian protection, and good governance.[188]

The extent of the ROI's commitment to these initiatives is somewhat remarkable, as approximately 8% of the Army is serving overseas at any time, and 20% of the force is drawn on over the course of each year.[189] However, whilst the ROI's desire to support these global causes provides

183. Irish Government, Government announces move to transform the Defence Forces and the largest increase in the Defence budget in the history of the State, 13 July 2022, https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b3c91-government-transform-defence-forces-largest-increase-defence-budget-in-history-of-state/.

184. Conor Lally, Irish neutrality is 'over' and Defence Forces are 'vulnerable', Finnish military expert claims, The Irish Times, 6 February 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/02/06/defence-forces-vulnerable-as-irish-neutrality-over-finnish-military-expert-claims/.

185. Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Peacekeeping, 23 August 2021, https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/international-priorities/peace-and-security/peacekeeping/.

186. UNTSO, Facts and Figures: Troop Contributing Countries, https://untso.unmissions.org/facts-and-figures.

187. Consultative Forum report, 10.

188. Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland in the Partnership for Peace Programme, 27 July 2017, https://www.dfa.ie/partnership-for-peace/ireland-in-the-partnership-for-peace-programme/.

189. The Commission, 19.

Dublin cosmetic diplomatic benefits – that of apparent political altruism in global hot-spots – it is impossible to escape the conclusion of the Commission that it is diverting defence capabilities away from home soil.[190] It is also obvious yet worth stating that commitments made through these multilateral channels do not come with reciprocal guarantees of assistance – they are entirely altruistic endeavours.

In the face of an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape, which threatens the security of Ireland and its partners, the sense of exporting already insufficient personnel and equipment is questionable. A striking comparison in this regard can be made with the German *Bundeswehr*'s latest strategic paper, which pledges to reverse the trend of committing capabilities to international missions at the expense of national security.[191]

3.3.2: The EU security framework

The EU's alignment on security and military issues experienced a step-change in 2018, when it formed its CSDP, as a subsidiary of the bloc's. Common Foreign and Security Policy. The CSDP is far from a binding security arrangement for the continent, however; at its core, it provides an operational framework for states to cooperate – entirely *voluntarily* – in peacekeeping, crisis management and conflict prevention missions under the Union's umbrella. The strategic and operational headquarters of the CSDP's myriad activities is the European command centre in Brussels.

Following Russian's invasion of Ukraine, this collective security framework was further strengthened in 2022 by the launch of the Strategic Compass, which sought to provide "an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy" by 2030.[192] The Compass proposed a host of initiatives with a 2030 deadline, most notably a 5,000 troop-strong EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, regular live exercises on land and at sea, and closer collaboration in the intelligence and hybrid threat domains.

Given the unmistakeable tension between this burgeoning EU security framework and the ROI's policy of neutrality, it is perhaps serendipitous for Dublin that the bloc's overall progress has been slow. The Ukraine War appears to have jolted policy-making circles in Dublin into exploring closer cooperation with the EU on security and defence. By the beginning of 2022, the ROI had only observed one mission of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative, and participated in one other. By June last year, it was involved in four, and observing a further 19, amounting to one third of total ongoing missions.[193] Ireland is currently awaiting acceptance into a fifth PESCO project.[194]

Neither has the ROI leant its full weight into the EU's assistance measures for Ukraine. The ROI has refused to provide military aid to Ukraine through the EU's joint military fund, instead opting to send €200mn of non-lethal and humanitarian assistance, a paltry sum compared to even limited assistance from Albania, let alone small European powers like Croatia, with a GDP some one-seventh of the ROI's.[195] Having welcomed some 75,000 Ukrainians in the first year of the war,[196] the ROI government

190. Ibid., 20.

191. German Federal Ministry of Defence, Defence Policy Guidelines, 2023, 6.

192. European Union External Action, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

193. Tony Connelly, Crossed Wires: Irish neutrality and undersea cables, RTE, 19 June 2023, https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2023/0617/1389644-neutrality/.

194. Irish Department of Defence, Strategic Framework: Transformation of the Defence Forces, September 2023, 20.

195. Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Tánaiste announces €23m in additional support for Ukraine and Moldova, 19 September 2023, https://irishaid.ie/news-publications/press/pressreleasearchive/2023/september/tanaiste-announces-23m-in-additional-support-for-ukraine-and-moldova-.html.

196. John Brady in Dáil Eireann debate, 22 February 2023, 1034 (1), https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-02-22/22/?highlight%5B0%5D=law&highlight%5B1%5D=working&highlight%5B2%5D=nato&highlight%5B3%5D=how&highlight%5B4%5D=parliament&highlight%5B5%5D=working.

is now reportedly planning to limit its support by forcing refugees to pay for their accommodation, and reducing their social welfare benefits.[197]

As it stands, therefore, the ROI still disengages from the EU in the way of tangible, sustained security assurances. The EU is yet to establish a robust defensive framework from which to provide meaningful support to a member state in the eventuality of an attack. Equally, the ROI's contribution to the CSDP initiatives is fairly limited for its size, and tiny in comparison to the bloc's larger contributors. Developments in the realms of cyber and intelligence collaboration, military exercises and expeditions to build interoperability and share best-practice methods, and defence industry and funding alignment, do show an awareness of the critical threat areas facing the EU. However, their scale, funding and voluntary basis remain fundamental issues obstructing their capacity to build systemic resilience in the face of the complex threat landscape facing the continent. The Irish Defence Forces, in their current state – the subject of the next section – therefore give nor receive much from Europe which meaningfully alters the country's stark vulnerability.

3.3.3: NATO

Despite its age-old aversion to NATO membership, the ROI does in fact engage with the alliance in a number of departments. These initiatives, however, are more notable for exposing the inconsistent application of neutrality, than for their contribution to collective security.

The ROI joined NATO's Operational Capability Concept (OCC) in 2016, whose goal is to assist non-members in reaching NATO standards, and to foster interoperability.[198] Part of the alliance's PfP programme, the OCC offers training and evaluations of force capabilities across the domain spectrum, helping them – at least in theory – to meet the standards necessary for future membership.[199] This was the path of choice taken by Finland and Sweden, as well as Ukraine, which joined OCC in 2021.

More recently, the ROI has also started testing the waters of engaging with NATO's maritime security initiative, REP(MUS).[200] Last year, Ireland observed one of the alliance's naval exercises, as it sent personnel to the Sesimbra drill off the coast of Portugal. Sesimbra involved 900 civilian and military personnel, 11 warships, and six trial ships from 15 member states.[201] Its aim was to practise interoperability between participants in the undersea domain. Ireland's peripheral involvement followed its invitation from NATO's Deputy Secretary General last year to partner with NATO's new Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell (CUICC) in Brussels. Dublin has so far not taken up this offer. There is no reason to expect that the ROI will transform into a constructive European security partner for NATO at any time in the near future.

197. Denis Staunton, Ukrainian refugees to pay for accommodation, have social welfare benefits changed, says Varadkar, The Irish Times, 5 November 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2023/11/05/ukrainian-refugees-to-pay-for-accommodation-have-social-welfare-benefits-changed-says-varadkar/.

198. NATO, Operations Capabilities Concept – Evaluation and Feedback Programme, https://lc.nato.int/operations/military-partnership/the-partnership-for-peace/occ-ef.

199. Conor Gallagher, Nato programme has been massively beneficial for Ireland and Ukraine, says Defence Forces officer, The Irish Times, 26 June 2022, https://outlook.office.com/mail/safelink.html?url=https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2022/06/26/nato-programme-has-been-massively-beneficial-for-ireland-and-ukraine-says-defence-forces-officer/&corid=0e367867-ce73-ccbb-f249-d807ae6178e4.

200. Standing for Robotic Experimentation and Prototyping using Maritime Uncrewed Systems.

201. Tony Connelly, Crossed Wires: Irish neutrality and undersea cables, 19 June 2023, https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2023/0617/1389644-neutrality/.

3.4: The Chronic Inadequacies of the Irish Defence Forces

Due to the ROI's self-imposed military and defensive isolation, the government's 2015 White Paper on Defence mandates that the Defence Forces must necessarily be equipped to "be prepared to act alone" if the nation is attacked.[202] In pursuit of this objective, the White Paper tasks the military with the exhaustive list of responsibilities below:

- "To provide for the military defence of the State from armed aggression;
- To participate in multi-national peace support, crisis management, and humanitarian relief operations in accordance with Government direction and legislative provision;
- To aid the civil power – meaning in practice to assist, when requested, An Garda Síochána, who have primary responsibility for law and order, including the protection of the internal security of the State;
- To contribute to maritime security encompassing the delivery of a fishery protection service and the operation of the State's Fishery Monitoring Centre, and in co-operation with other agencies with responsibilities in the maritime domain, to contribute to a shared common maritime operational picture;
- To participate in the Joint Taskforce on Drugs interdiction;
- To contribute to national resilience through the provision of specified defence aid to the civil authority (ATCA) supports to lead agencies in response to major emergencies, including cyber security emergencies, and in the maintenance of essential services, as set out in MOUs and SLAs agreed by the Department of Defence;
- To provide a Ministerial air transport service (MATS);
- To provide ceremonial services on behalf of Government;
- To provide a range of other supports to government departments and agencies in line with MOUs and SLAs agreed by the Department of Defence e.g. search and rescue and air ambulance services;
- To contribute to Ireland's economic well-being through engagement with industry, research and development and job initiatives, in support of government policy;
- To fulfil any other tasks that Government may assign from time to time."

Source: The Commission on the Irish Defence Forces (taken from the 2015 White Paper), 14

In the absence of allied support, this would be a monumental mandate for any the Armed Force of any country. On the back of decades of under-investment, the gap between capabilities and objectives in the case of the Irish Defence Forces is so chasmic that it remains entirely incapable of servicing almost any of these responsibilities satisfactorily.

In February 2022, the extent of the ROI's inability to defend itself or contribute to the collective defence of its allies was publicised dramatically by the Commission on the Defence Forces. In its final report, following years of investigation of the state of the Defence Forces, the board concluded that "the implicit high level of ambition in the White Paper [for the Defence Forces' objectives] is not supported by the resources actually provided for defence".[203] The report went on to write that there is therefore "a disconnect between stated policy and the actual current resources and capabilities of the Defence Forces".[204]

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202. Irish government, White Paper on Defence, 26 August 2015, 24.
203. The Commission, 15.
204. Ibid.

The Commission on the Irish Defence Forces

In December 2020, the Irish government appointed 16 members of the Commission on the Defence Forces to conduct an independent assessment of the extent to which the Irish military and security apparatus is fit for purpose in the modern day. The board comprised an array of former Irish civil servants, senior military and government officials, consultants, academics, as well as experts from other nations. The latter included a former Norwegian Chief of Defence, a Danish security policy expert, and a former director general of defence policy in the Finnish Ministry of Defence.[205] This indicated the apparent willingness of the Irish state to learn from the defence policies of states analogous in geographical, policy and historical terms.

The Commission spent over a year investigating the Defence Forces, holding public consultations, and interviewing over 1,000 personnel across its various agencies. Its Terms of Reference required a verdict on the ROI's military and security capacity to meet the global threat landscape into 2030 and beyond. The verdict, published in February 2022, was damning. It found the Defence Forces lacking the structure, funding, equipment, staffing, and institutional morale required to protect the nation from conventional and unconventional warfare.

In order to make recommendations for how to address the full gamut of these inadequacies, the Commission presented the government with courses of action linked to three Levels of Ambition (LOAs). These were defined as follows:

- *LOA 1*: "Aiming to uphold sovereign rights and serving on peace support operations to the same extent as at present".[206]

- *LOA 2*: ": Building on current capability to address specific priority gaps in our ability to deal with an assault on Irish sovereignty and to serve in higher intensity Peace Support Operations".[207]

- *LOA 3*: "Developing full spectrum defence capabilities to protect Ireland and its people to an extent comparable to similar sized countries in Europe".[208]

The ROI's capabilities across every domain – land, maritime, air, cyber, space and intelligence – were presented to demonstrate the limitations across the board. Following this, the structural flaws of the military and security apparatus were outlined, as well as the factors behind the Defence Forces' chronic staffing issues. Importantly, the Commission framed the consequences not just in Irish national security terms, but in those of the transnational systems of partners in which the ROI is integrated.

Given the lacerating assessment of present capabilities (LOA 1), the Commission judiciously advised that the government implement a rapid roadmap to reach LOA 2, before eventually attaining LOA 3. Across the domains, LOA 2 state of readiness would ensure that the Defence Forces can simultaneously protect Ireland from the range of unconventional threats, whilst contributing sufficiently to the EU security framework.

In its much-awaited response to the Commission, the government's High Level Action Plan (HLAP) of July 2022 pledged to meet LOA 2 by 2028, on the back of a 50% defence spending increase.[209] However, there was once again a disconnect between this stated ambition and action, as the government accepted only 37% of the Commission's proposals as of right, and 42% in principle. The remaining fifth were put to further consultation (see Appendix A for full list).[210] The overwhelming majority of the accepted recommendations pertained to low-tier measures and overarching structural adjustments, whereas the mid-tier operational and capability-development ones were made contingent on further deliberation. This calls into question the genuine institutional and political will to reach the 2028 ambition for LOA 2.

This concern has been fuelled by the long delay in publication of the government's Detailed Implementation Plan (DIP) for the Commission. The DIP, scheduled to be released within six months of the HLAP (end of 2022/early 2023), only just arrived last November.[211]

Thus, despite the Commission sounding the alarm over the inability of the Defence Forces to defend the security of the ROI and its partners, based on an investigation commencing in 2020, no meaningful progress has been made three years later. At this rate of change, it remains wholly improbable that the Defence Forces will be restructured and equipped to meet the conditions necessary to fulfil LOA 2 objectives by 2028.

205. Ibid., 152.

206. Ibid., iv.

207. Ibid., v.

208. Ibid.

209. Irish Department of Defence and Defence Forces, "Building for the Future – Change from Within", High Level Action Plan for the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, 13 July 2022, 6.

210. Ibid., 11.

211. Irish Department of Defence and Defence Forces, The Detailed Implementation Plan for the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, November 2023.

It is not the intention of this paper to regurgitate the findings of the Commission. However, those deficiencies which are most salient for the ROI's national security, and that of the transatlantic-Europe systems in which it functions, are listed below:

- The Army's sizeable contributions to overseas missions, and assisting An Garda Síochána with civil tasks, hamper its already-limited ability to defend the state from armed aggression.[212]
- The structure of the Defence Forces is out of kilter with NATO standards, a stated ambition of the 2015 White Paper. Neither the Army, Airs Corps nor Naval Service have a designated Chief with command authority.[213]
- The Naval Service and domestic maritime agencies currently lack the personnel or equipment for constant surveillance of the state's territorial waters and EEZ, let alone to contribute to multilateral maritime exercises and operations.[214]
- Ireland does not have a radar and acoustic monitoring system to develop a Recognised Maritime Picture to surveil its waters.[215]
- Ireland also does not possess an air radar system, meaning it cannot satisfactorily police its air space.[216]
- The air force is so chronically ill-equipped that the Commission concludes that the state "has no air defence capability of any significance".[217]
- The state's Communication and Information Services Corps (CIS) has a staffing deficiency of 35% at officer level, and 25% at technical level, rendering it unable even to meet the responsibilities of LOA 1.[218]
- As a result, Ireland is unable to offer meaningful contribution to the multilateral cyberspace initiatives in which it participates.[219]
- As the cyber domain underpins all forms of warfare in the modern era, these shortcomings threaten the wider activities and capacity of the Defence Forces.[220]
- The ROI does not have a Joint Military Intelligence Service tasked with coordinating the agencies involved in this domain. Its intelligence apparatus is insufficiently coordinated and staffed to fulfil its existing roles.[221]
- The ROI's defence policy framework omits the space domain entirely, despite its integral function in air, maritime and cyber security.[222]

212. The Commission, 15.
213. Ibid., 57.
214. Ibid., 35.
215. Ibid., 36.
216. Ibid., 39.
217. Ibid., 37.
218. Ibid., 43.
219. Ibid., 42.
220. Ibid., 44.
221. Ibid., 47.
222. Ibid., 46.

This brief overview of the Irish Defence Forces' deficiencies across all domains requires little concluding analysis. From top to bottom, the institutional structure, staffing, equipment and ambition is not there to uphold national security, leaving it entirely reliant upon the non-engagement of hostile actors. Beyond this, the absence of situational awareness in the air, maritime, and cyber domains renders Ireland blind, thus the weak spot of the transnational systems which it is plugged into.

3.5: An Ill-fated Transition

As mentioned, the Commission is part of an ongoing transition process. With the government committing to reaching LOA 2 standards by 2028, a reform process is now officially underway. However, as will be shown, these measures are progressing at a glacial pace and, without significant defence spending increases, are unlikely to result in a sufficient military and security apparatus any time soon. The ROI is therefore destined to remain a weak security partner by 2028 and beyond.

> **Ireland's security awakening**
>
> On top of its mandate to offer specific proposals for revitalising Ireland's military and security apparatus, the Commission had a far more basic objective: to bring the curtain down on a sustained "paucity of real debate on defence and security matters in this country".[223] As the Commission's report intimates, worldwide events over the past several years – from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to widening Sino-American tensions, to increasing incidents involving maritime and land infrastructure – are now being seen through the prism of Irish security in a new way.
>
> The Commission is in fact one aspect of an ongoing re-assessment of security thinking amongst the Irish political class and wider society. Last year, the government launched a Consultative Forum on International Security Policy, which provided a nationwide platform to discuss how the state's historical and contemporary security stance fits into the contemporary landscape. The Forum took place over four days in Cord, Galway and Dublin, convening experts and members of the public in open discussion spanning the geopolitical climate, national security, overseas commitments, neutrality, and accession to NATO. Although the Forum's concluding report is not binding in any way, it signalled two significant trends: a growing national awareness of Ireland's imperilled situation; and converging public sentiment on the need to update policy and strategy to meet this challenge.[224]
>
> This philosophical debate provides the backdrop for understanding the ROI's gradual shift in national and foreign policy, as evinced by the Defence Forces reforms and increasing multilateral security participation. Last November, Micheál Martin announced that the government was planning to legislate to remove the UN resolution criterion of the Triple Lock, leaving overseas deployment now dependent on government and Dáil approval alone.[225] For doing so, he was utterly lambasted by the opposition in the Dáil debate for seeking to violate neutrality.[226] It is clear, therefore, that there is little appetite for any serious reappraisal of the ROI's stance in international affairs, let alone for significantly bolstering its commitment to collective security.

As mentioned, the government has committed to implementing roughly 80% of the Commission's LOA 2 proposals. Those aimed directly at addressing the capability inadequacies listed above include:

- Wholesale structural reform of the Defence Forces, in line with the Commission's recommended structure, under a newly appointed Chief of Defence (CHOD) with appropriate military Command and Control authority of the entire Defence Forces at the strategic level.
- The creation of three new Service Chiefs for the Army, Navy and Air Force.

223. Ibid., 2.
224. Dame Louise Richardson's Consultative Forum report, 15-16.
225. Senan Moloney and Gabija Gataveckaite, Ireland to drop 'triple lock' giving UN veto on sending troops abroad, says Tánaiste in major shift on neutrality policy, 22 November 2023, https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/ireland-to-drop-triple-lock-giving-un-veto-on-sending-troops-abroad-says-tanaiste-in-major-shift-on-neutrality-policy/a1380720267.html.
226. Dáil Éireann debate, Houses of the Oireachtas, 1046 (5), 29 November 2023, https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-11-29/30/.

- The procurement and development of a maritime and air radar system.
- The procurement of a new fleet of UAS and anti-drone vehicles.
- The procurement of subsea monitoring equipment, and two Airbus C-295 maritime patrol aircraft (by end of 2023).
- The submission of a new Defence Forces' Cyber Strategy.
- Increasing the Permanent Defence Forces' total personnel from 7,600 (August 2023) to 11,500 by 2028.
- The completion of a legislative review into creating a new Joint Intelligence Service by 2028.

In theory, these measures are a step in the right direction towards improving the critical vulnerabilities. In reality, however, it is immensely improbable that the ROI is progressing towards meeting the expansive and complex threat landscape, outlined in Chapter II, any time soon.

Firstly, as suggested by both the rate of progress since the Commission's appointment in 2020, and the government's implementation timeframe, this will be a lengthy 'from scratch' process. Forming the overarching structural and institutional framework will ultimately be the first step in a top-down reform process. The hoop jumping exercise of prerequisite legal and legislative consultations before implementing most proposals is slowing every step down, evinced most strikingly by the five-year horizon for the establishment of a Joint Intelligence Service and restructured Forces chain of command. In the intervening years, developments in the mid-tier operational domain will remain static.

This has implications not only for the effectiveness of the Irish Defence Forces, but for any ambitions to contribute more meaningfully to multilateral initiatives. As witnessed with the severe shortcomings in the maritime and cyber domain – the two where the ROI is most vital to transnational infrastructural and digital systems – the nation possesses neither the manpower nor expertise to support its partners in these areas. This is not a quick fix and so, for all the lofty rhetoric surrounding the ROI's newfound commitment to security partnerships, material change is a distant prospect.

As Ireland's national maritime and cyber vulnerabilities persist, its transatlantic and European partners will remain exposed, owing to the interconnected nature of these domains. Ireland's air and maritime radar system – the *sine non qua* of a robust defence – is not scheduled to be operational until 2028. This presents the ROI with four more years – at least – of sea and air blindness,[227] leaving Europe equally exposed along its northwestern flank, just as front-line European intelligence agencies warn of a rapidly maturing Russia threat to NATO.[228] No number of joint maritime exercises and cyber coordination projects will offset this infrastructural, strategically vital black hole.

Secondly, for reasons mentioned already, the EU framework remains an improbable guarantor of security against unconventional warfare. Funding shortages, political ambivalence, and an opt-in format do not

227. Vice Admiral Mark Mellett, Some realities for the defence of an island behind an island, The Azure Forum.

228. Lucy Fisher and John Paul Rathbone, Russia remains UK's top security threat, warns intelligence chief, The FT, 30 May 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/57216d44-924c-409f-912b-fa87d52e0021.

create the basis for the level of consistent situational awareness, strategic alignment and interoperability needed to police the subsea and cyber domains against hostile exploration and exploitation.

If anything, the ROI is making progress in the reverse order of priority. Revitalising its ageing conventional equipment, and increasing Forces staffing, may support its sustained ability to contribute to overseas missions. However, these developments do nothing in the face of the unconventional threat landscape which poses the greatest risk to collective security. Reform to the intelligence services, air, maritime and cyber security domains is what will have the greatest impact on Irish security in the immediate term, and this is where progress is slowest. The government has committed to adding 100 further personnel across all its cyberspace agencies by 2028. This is nowhere near enough to prevent sophisticated hostile actors from compromising national institutions and sensitive digital infrastructure.

The upshot is that the ongoing transition of the Defence Forces and state security apparatus is not destined to develop the capabilities demanded by the full range of threats. At the current pace, it is far from assured that targets in the most critical areas will be achieved, which in any case fall short of the ambition needed to develop resilience against highly sophisticated adversaries. This endangers the ROI, but it also endangers the interconnected systems which uphold the prosperity and security of its partners.

3.6: Irish Domestic Politics

Elements in the ROI's contemporary domestic political situation also prove cause for concern with respect to its security position and ongoing reforms. The reform process has occurred under the government of the 33rd Dáil, a coalition led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is these two parties which have demonstrated the willingness to at least revisit Ireland's stance in the world, and its commitment to security.

The most recent polling indicates that the next general election – to be held by March 2025 – may turn in a completely different result. Sinn Féin currently leads the pack with 29% of the vote, 10% more than second-place Fine Gael.[229] That said, Sinn Féin's polling estimates have been trending down over the last 18 months, dropping from a high of 36% in October 2022.[230]

Sinn Féin, with its historical links to the IRA, has a long track record of ambivalence towards transatlantic security. This places large question marks on the impact that its participation in any future government would have on the ROI's current military and security developmental process. Sinn Féin has a history of being soft on – or, less generously, sympathetic towards – Russia: in 2015, it abstained from a European Parliament resolution condemning human rights abuses in Russia and its annexation of Crimea in Ukraine;[231] in 2018, party leader Mary Lou McDonald accused the government of breaching Irish neutrality by expelling a Russian diplomat after the Salisbury attack in the UK;[232] in 2019, Sinn Féin MEP

229. Irish Polling Indicator, Irish Polling Indicator, https://pollingindicator.com/.

230. Irish Polling Indicator, Irish Polling Indicator update June 2022, https://pollingindicator.com/blog/update-2022-06-13.

231. Ruth Dudley Edwards, Sinn Fein can't hide from its sorry history of Putin apologism, The Telegraph, 15 March 2022, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/03/15/sinn-fein-cant-hide-sorry-history-putin-apologism/.

232. David Young, Taoiseach denies Russian expulsion is breach of Ireland's neutrality, Irish Independent, 27 March 2018, https://www.independent.ie/news/taoiseach-denies-russian-expulsion-is-breach-of-irelands-neutrality/36749178.html.

Lynn Boylan lambasted the EU's "overly confrontational" stance towards Russia, as she voted against a move to block a new Russian gas line.[233]

On the back of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and perhaps as the prospect of electoral victory creeps nearer, the party has tempered its foreign policy stance somewhat. In 2022, Sinn Féin erased over 2,300 statements on its website, purportedly as part of an archival exorcise.[234] However, the fact that many of these pertained to Russophilic and anti-NATO sentiments (such as former Foreign Affairs spokesman Sean Crowe's call in 2014 for that "Cold War relic" to be abolished),[235] led to widespread allegations of white washing.[236] This year, Sinn Féin also resiled from its long-held pledge to withdraw the ROI's contribution to PfP and PESCO missions.[237]

That said, there is no reason to believe that these micro-measures herald a transformation in its underlying security and geopolitical principles. Firstly, Sinn Féin remains entirely committed to neutrality as is, and has resisted all efforts to revise the Triple-Lock to allow for more overseas engagement of Irish troops. The party's official contribution to the Consultative Forum repeatedly placed central focus on enshrining neutrality, rather than the importance of bolstering the ROI's military and security apparatus.[238] Sinn Féin maintains this stance in its most doctrinaire, security-corrosive manner, so austere that Foreign Affairs spokesman Matty Carthy accused the government's plan to adjust the Triple-Lock of posing a "significant threat" to neutrality.[239] Sinn Féin MP Chris Andrews lambasted the government's attempt to remove the UNSC criterion from the Triple-Lock during a Dáil debate, labelling it an attempt to "chip away" at neutrality.[240] Party MPs then piled on to the government by all voting against the revision of the Triple-Lock.[241] The corollary of this is that the party wishes for Ireland's participation in overseas missions to remain dictated by Russia and China, through their positions on the UNSC.

Secondly, despite rowing back on its threatened withdrawal from PESCO, Sinn Féin remains staunchly opposed to the EU's CDSP. Indeed, its 2020 general election manifesto included an explicit rejection of PESCO's creation, promising to ensure that the ROI "plays absolutely no part" in the initiative.[242] In the aforementioned Dáil debate on the Triple-Lock, Chris Andrews restated this opposition to the EU's growing security initiatives, and called for the ROI to "pull [the EU] back to a line of peace, justice and respect".[243] Last April, in a speech at the Institute for International and European Affairs in Brussels, Mary Lou McDonald criticised the "growing militarisation" of the EU in recent years.[244] It is clear that a Sinn Féin government would kibosh the prospects of further Irish engagement with EU security measures.

Thirdly, the party's overriding perception of Russia's assault on Ukraine also reveals fundamental inconsistencies with that of the UK and its allies. In a Dáil debate, Sinn Féin representative John Brady stated that the Ukraine War "reminds us that peace, self-determination and sovereignty are precious… Ireland understands the damaging and divisive legacy wrought by colonisation, occupation and the denial of

233. Elaine Loughlin, Sinn Féin's soft stance on Russia is clearly on the record, Irish Examiner, 1 March 2022, https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/columnists/arid-40818876.html.

234. Gabija Gataveckaite, Sinn Féin deletes thousands of statements from its website due to 'outdated content', Irish Independent, 14 March 2022, https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/sinn-fein-deletes-thousands-of-statements-from-its-website-due-to-outdated-content/41443385.html.

235. Comment, Sinn Féin removes thousands of media statements from its website, The Irish Times, 14 March 2022, https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernireland-news/2022/03/14/news/sinn-fe-in-removes-thousands-of-media-statements-from-its-website-2613771/.

236. For example, Ruth Dudley Edwards, Sinn Fein can't hide from its sorry history of Putin apologism, The Telegraph, 15 March 2022, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/03/15/sinn-fein-cant-hide-sorry-history-putin-apologism/.

237. Matt Carthy TD, Contribution on behalf of Sinn Féin to the Irish Consultative Forum on International Security Policy, 5 July 2023, 6.

238. Matt Carthy TD, Sinn Féin Contribution to Consultative Forum, 1; 2; 3; 6; 7.

239. Sinn Féin, Fine Gael policy and Fianna Fáil duplicity pose significant threat to Ireland's neutrality – Matt Carthy TD, 29 November 2023, https://vote.sinnfein.ie/fine-gael-policy-and-fianna-fail-duplicity-pose-significant-threat-to-irelands-neutrality-matt-carthy-td/.

240. Dáil Éireann debate – Wednesday, 29 November 2023, 1046(5), https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-11-29/30/.

241. Ibid.

242. Sinn Féin, Giving workers & families a break: A Manifesto for Change, 2020, 41.

243. Dáil Éireann debate – Tuesday, 28 November 2023, 1046(4), https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-11-28/17/.

244. Sinn Féin, Ireland can be a European leader of prosperity, peace and hope – Mary Lou McDonald TD, 27 April 2023, https://vote.sinnfein.ie/ireland-can-be-a-european-leader-of-prosperity-peace-and-hope-mary-lou-mcdonald-td/.

self-determination".[245] Rather than acknowledge the interlinked security risk Russia now poses Ukraine, the ROI, and Europe, Sinn Féin chooses instead to draw equivalences between Russia and the West, so as to justify its distance. This was demonstrated in another Dáil debate last February, when each of the 30 Sinn Féin MPs in attendance abstained from voting down a motion which sought to blame NATO for the war in Ukraine.[246] No Sinn Féin representatives voted against the motion.

Fourthly, there is clear structural discord between Sinn Féin's worldview and that of the US and the transatlantic community. Aside from historical and contemporary aversion to NATO, and ambivalence towards Russia, the party regularly opposes the foreign policies of the ROI's partners. In 2021, Sinn Féin Senator Paul Gavan demanded that the government "reflect" on how permission granted to the US Military to use Shannon Airport during the War on Terror violated Irish neutrality.[247] More recently, the party levelled against the US strike which killed Iranian Quds Force chief, Qassem Soleimani, for being an "illegal… harebrained and unlawful use of military force to murder".[248] In the aftermath of the strike, MP John Brady tweeted that the US has "destroyed Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan… now they want to destroy Iran".[249] Mary Lou McDonald followed suit in this chain of excoriation against the acts of the US and its Middle Eastern allies, as she requested that the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, refer Israel to the International Criminal Court for methods employed during the ongoing Gaza conflict.[250]

This is far from an alarmist take on the ROI's domestic politics, but rather a clear-eyed assessment of what a Sinn Féin government would mean for Irish and British security. There is nothing wrong with partners taking different – even opposite – stances on global issues. The underlying point is that Sinn Féin has long made a point of formulating its foreign policy *against* that of the UK, Europe and the US. Any amount of rhetorical window dressing and micro-tweaking will not alter the reality of this longstanding aversion to British and transatlantic security arrangements.

Neither is there any room for optimism over Sinn Féin's commitment to the future of the Irish Defence Forces. The party has articulated clearly that its overriding priority, upon election, would be solving the ROI's chronic housing crisis.[251] Naturally, domestic considerations are the purview of policy as much as grand strategy and security. However, even in the context of a security-averse Irish political culture, Sinn Féin has taken great care to avoid specific defence spending commitments, even as its written evidence to the Consultative Forum acknowledged the Defence Forces' historical under-investment.[252]

The concern is that, given that the ROI's reform process is already being under-funded by the incumbent government, a Sinn Féin iteration – with its ideological ambivalence and political prioritisation – will slow, if not reverse, any progress made. Thus, the reading of the tea leaves for British policymakers is that the ROI will constitute neither a willing nor capable security partner any time soon.

245. Dáil Éireann – Wednesday, 22 February 2023, 1034(1), https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-02-22/22/?highlight%5B0%5D=law&highlight%5B1%5D=working&highlight%5B2%5D=nato&highlight%5B3%5D=how&highlight%5B4%5D=parliament&highlight%5B5%5D=working.

246. Dáil Eireann debate, 22 February 2023, 1034 (1), https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-02-22/62/?highlight%5B0%5D=ukraine.

247. Sinn Féin, Catastrophic 20-year US military occupation of Afghanistan facilitated by use of Shannon Airport – Senator Paul Gavan, 17 August 2021, https://vote.sinnfein.ie/catastrophic-20-year-us-military-occupation-of-afghanistan-facilitated-by-use-of-shannon-airport-senator-paul-gavan/.

248. Sinn Féin, Irish government must immediately join the global condemnation of illegal and reckless US action – Senator Paul Gavan, 4 January 2020, https://vote.sinnfein.ie/irish-government-must-immediately-join-the-global-condemnation-of-illegal-and-reckless-us-action-senator-paul-gavan/.

249. John Brady TD [@johnbradysf], Twitter, 3 January 2020, https://twitter.com/johnbradysf/status/1213023169549946880.

250. Newstalk Youtube, 'Government must refer Israel to the International Criminal Court' – Mary Lou McDonald of Sinn Fein, Youtube, 15 November 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjABpTjg0tA.

251. Sinn Féin, Building Homes, https://vote.sinnfein.ie/housing-2024/.

252. Sinn Féin Submission to the Defence Forces Commission, 1-3.

Chapter IV: Rediscovering British Strategic Interests in Northern Ireland

It is patently obvious that rising geopolitical competition has placed renewed strategic importance on the island of Ireland for British security. An emboldened and beleaguered Putin is looking for ways to pressurise the transatlantic-European alliance and gain asymmetric advantages away from the battlefield. As demonstrated by revisions to Russia's Maritime Doctrine, as well as the recent uptick in operational activities, the Northern Route down from the Arctic to the North Sea and GIUK Gap is a priority area. Access and manoeuvrability in this region enable Russia to divert western resources and attention away from elsewhere, and to compromise and damage the critical undersea infrastructure which undergirds our digital and energy systems.

After the military drawn-down from Northern Ireland, the UK's consequent strategic vulnerability around the Western Approaches was concealed by both post-Cold War peace, and the compensatory military build-up in Scottish naval and air bases. However, the very real danger is that Russian designs on Europe's northwestern flank have tipped the precarious balance between capabilities and demands against our favour.

If the UK possessed in the ROI a reliable and well-armed partner with whom to cooperate against these threats, the post-1993 situation may have been tenable. However, in the absence of this, the strategic illiteracy arising from the post-Downing Street Declaration era – that the UK need not serve its strategic interests with any forward military presence in Northern Ireland whatsoever – is all too clear. Lacking the platforms for a forward naval or sea deployment on the western side of the Irish Sea is a clear limitation of the UK's strategic position in the region.

Meanwhile, the porousness of the ROI's security state – and the real prospect of a Sinn Féin government by March 2025 – is also of grave concern to British national security. Russia, China and Iran are united in their mutual bid to subvert the transatlantic and European community from within, through unconventional warfare in the cyber, intelligence and informational domains. Aside from the interconnectedness of the UK and Ireland's financial sectors, and IT and educational systems, the two have expansive economic, industrial and information-sharing ties. The ROI's exposure on all of these fronts is the result of – by its own admission – its chronically inadequate cyber security and intelligence

apparatus. This endangers the UK through the border-spanning nature of digital connectivity, and the desire to maintain a soft Irish border which, whilst vital to the integrity of the Union, nonetheless risks acts as a back-door into British territories for those with hostile intent.

1: Re-integrate Northern Ireland into the UK's national defence system

The new threat landscape *vis-à-vis* **Russia necessitates a Northern Irish forward presence for deployment to the north and northwest.** This requirement is compounded by Ireland's continual unwillingness to invest satisfactorily in its own security and, by extension, that of its transatlantic and European partners.

Recommendation 1: The government should therefore re-establish active British naval and air bases in Northern Ireland. It is important to reiterate that this would not violate the Downing Street Declaration. Despite the interpretation and policies of subsequent governments, the declaration did not relinquish the UK's strategic interests – and therefore, right to establish military bases – in Northern Ireland. In any case, as the withdrawal process started decades before 1993, to placate Irish wishes, the origins of this strategic miscalculation far predate commitments made during the peace process.

Recommendation 2: The government should resurrect the Derry naval base, either fitted with its own airfields, or the reinstitution of JHC Aldergrove's aircraft deployment capabilities, for maritime patrol missions to the northwest. The former base's strategic advantages – sheltered, yet near to the UK's oceanic entries – would serve fast deployment into the Western Approaches and beyond as well now as in the 20th century. A new base should be built, which is fully purposed with the infrastructure and equipment necessary for the RAF and Royal Navy to conduct maritime patrols in the Eastern Atlantic and GIUK Gap.

Recommendation 3: The Derry base, along with other facilities in Northern Ireland, should be fully integrated into our national defence command structure, expanding our strategic options in the north. As the Scottish Affairs Committee's *Defence in Scotland* paper argued, HMNB Clyde and RAF Lossiemouth are at risk of being overstretched by mushrooming responsibilities to fend off Russia in the north. Rather than limiting ourselves to one deployment point, restoring naval and air capabilities in Northern Ireland would provide two benefits: strategic optionality to complicate Russian decision-making; and alleviating the burden on existing bases and capabilities in Scotland.

Recommendation 4: Additional forward presence in Northern Ireland would facilitate offensive maritime manoeuvres against Russia to divert the GUGI's attention and resources towards defence. The GUGI's vastly increased remit risks overstretching its capabilities. By coupling Scottish facilities with northern deployment capabilities in Northern Ireland, the UK should launch more expeditionary missions

towards Russian waters in the High North. The impact would be to tip the GUGI's offensive-defensive balance in favour of the latter, thereby protecting western critical undersea infrastructure in turn.

Recommendation 5: As well as deterring and challenging Russia activity, the base also should be fitted with the full array of subsurface and sub-surface vessels and equipment for protecting critical undersea infrastructure. Utterly vital transatlantic cables pass through and near the Western Approaches, whilst the major UK-Norway gas pipelines traverse the North Sea. As seabed warfare matures as an unconventional threshold and subthreshold domain, we must be able to defend our subsurface assets. Whilst a Northern Irish presence would of course not give us the ability to monitor cables in Irish territorial waters, an advanced sensor system, combined with patrol vessels and aircraft, would enhance our ability to defend undersea critical infrastructure crossing the Atlantic.

2: Exert greater pressure on Ireland to do its part in collective security

The uncomfortable truth is that, unlike the countries which invest in their neutrality, Ireland's has never truly been earned. Rather, it has depended on the security systems built by partners, which helped maintain a three decades-long peace, during which time no rival superpower opposed the US-led order.

As the 'End of History' era has passed, so has the viability of Ireland's aversion to security expenditure. Ireland may insist that it remains neutral, but – as shown – neither Russia, China nor Iran respect this. Instead, they will continue to target Ireland as a weak link in the wider transatlantic-European systems they wish to destabilise.

Recommendation 6: By breaking the deeply entrenched linkage between British presence in Northern Ireland, and the ROI's historical-political neuroses, the UK can create the environment for an equitable security relationship in which Dublin does its fair share for our collective security. The end of the Cold War, the legacy of the Troubles, and peace era neglect, have all conspired to obstruct the formulation of a functional British-Irish security arrangement. Yet – as the long history of social, economic and political ties reveal – geography has ordained that Great Britain and Ireland will always be linked. Restoring the necessary military presence in Northern Ireland would signal the UK's conviction that rational strategic calculations can no longer be hostage to political tensions. This paradigm shift would therefore pave the way for a more constructive, threat-based bilateral arrangement to the benefit of both countries' security.

Recommendation 7: The UK should also encourage its European and NATO partners – at the governmental and diplomatic level – to impel the ROI to take its security obligations more seriously in a united front. The last few years have shown that some political and social circles in Ireland now understand the important role they must play in

their partners' security. There is therefore no longer any excuse for Ireland not to do its upmost to expedite its military and security development. As seen, the ROI's position as a weak link in interconnected systems across the cyber, maritime and air domains is receiving increasing international scrutiny. The UK should work to build a consensus with other regional partners, who all have vital interest in transatlantic maritime security, that this disregard for collective security will no longer be accepted.

Recommendation 8: As the ROI develops a fully functional military and security apparatus, the UK should, in the long-term, encourage the ROI to integrate into regional multilateral security arrangements, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force. Although the JEF began life as a NATO Framework Nations Concept, Sweden and Finland joined in 2017 whilst still neutral states, illustrating the coalition's flexibility. Its regional focus on the High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea region transposes perfectly to Ireland's own area of strategic interest. The JEF depends on mutual trust, which will take time to build with a country as porous as the Republic currently is, from the security perspective. However, it would eventually be an ideal forum for Dublin to demonstrate a new level of commitment to cooperation with its partners in the name of mutual security.

Of particular relevance to Ireland is the JEF's growing focus on the undersea domain. The JEF recently conducted a maritime surveillance patrol of undersea critical infrastructure from the English Channel to the Baltic Sea.[253] Given the ROI's outsize role in cable protection, it must be encouraged into full engagement with partners in this domain as soon as it has developed the capabilities. An additional benefit is that, as the JEF's maritime initiatives are predominantly for crisis response training purposes, they should not be perceived as any 'less neutral' than the peacekeeping missions in which Ireland already participates.

253. UK MoD, Royal Navy task force to deploy with JEF partners to defend undersea cables, UK Gov, 30 November 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/royal-navy-task-force-to-deploy-with-jef-partners-to-defend-undersea-cables.

Conclusion: The Strategic Content of Unionism

The UK-ROI relationship is clearly on unstable and unsustainable footing, considering a deteriorating geostrategic environment, and an essentially insoluble ROI political aversion to serious security improvements and a constructive relationship with the UK. This paper provides a roadmap that allows the UK to fulfil its security needs despite the ROI's manifest unwillingness to conduct any sort of substantive dialogue.

The paper, however, raises two implications, one more fundamental to the UK's political character, and one pertaining to the realities of international diplomacy.

First, the UK must articulate a full-throated defence of the political unity of the Union. The UK cannot, by definition, have selfish strategic interests in Ireland because *Northern Ireland is an integral part of the Union*. For far too long, the UK has discussed and negotiated with Dublin while accepting *explicitly* the most corrosive, radical, and unfounded of historically revisionist Irish nationalist premises. These premises – all of which delegitimate the UK as a constructive or integral actor in the British Isles writ large – only serve to aggrandise the most radical elements of the Irish political system. They therefore provide the UK with no premises to combat the most virulent lines of attack on any sort of rational strategic relationship. The Union itself must become the centre of British policy, as is only logical considering the political realities of the United Kingdom.

Second, and equally critically, the UK must actually take a strategic look at its policy towards Ireland, the ROI included. The only way to build a constructive relationship over time is by taking the Northern Ireland question off the table, and thereby compelling the ROI to confront the realities of the international strategic situation. As it stands, the strategic paradigm has been constructed in line with the political fantasyland of some Irish elements, which allows Dublin to accrue moral authority, while acting in a transparently manipulative and malicious manner deleterious towards the ROI's own interests.

Careful strategy is the handmaiden of coherent security – the UK has no time to waste.