

Speech

Remarks by the Tánaiste at the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy in Cork

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Consultative Forum on International Security Policy

University College Cork, 22 June 2023

Remarks by the Tánaiste

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Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you President O'Halloran for the warm welcome to UCC. I would like to thank the university, and in particular Professor Andrew Cottey and his team for partnering with us in hosting this Consultative Forum.

I can think of no better place to open the proceedings of the Forum than here in Cork and in University College Cork.

As an academic centre of excellence, University College Cork provides an appropriate space for reflective consideration of the issues involved.

The Forum aims to build a deeper public and political understanding of the international

The Forum aims to build a deeper public and political understanding of the international security environment and Ireland's role in this complex world.

I am confident that, as a country, we can and should have a respectful and informed debate, from which we can all learn.

I am also very conscious that there are a variety of opinions in the country about the appropriate direction of foreign and security policy and it is important that all voices are heard.

What we are embarking on for the next four days is not, as I have said many times, a binary discussion on the issue of neutrality.

What we have ahead of us over the next four days with 80 speakers with a wide range of experience, expertise and perspectives, discussing a variety of issues that make up our international security policy. I see this debate as a logical continuation of the tone and the level of ambition that this government has set in exerting Ireland's influence abroad.

In a statement earlier this week, I recalled our principled and successful membership of the UN Security Council in 2021/2022 and strong defence of multilateralism; our leadership at the EU, including in ensuring a unified approach to Brexit; our Global Ireland strategy.

The record levels of Overseas Development Aid that we have provided, focused on ending poverty and food insecurity; our commitment to double our international climate finance by 2025; and our consistent work in Northern Ireland in support of the Good Friday Agreement.

As a country we should be deeply proud of this record. We should be deeply proud of our peacekeepers, our diplomats and officials, our development workers who, day after day, advance Ireland's interests and values across the world.

And we should be proud of the fact that we have become a confident and outward looking country and people, secure in our place in Europe and the world, and actively addressing the global challenges of conflict, hunger and climate change.

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a fundamental duty of every Irish Government to put in place policies and practises to keep Ireland and her people, safe and secure.

Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine, blatantly violating the UN Charter and international law, has fundamentally changed the geopolitical and security landscape in Europe.

In its wake, countries all over Europe have examined and re-examined their foreign, security and defence policies.

Ireland is no different. To shy away from doing so – or to do so behind closed doors – would be a fundamental mistake and an abrogation of responsibility.

Nobody should fear a discussion of this kind. No one should fear thoughtful analysis or new ideas or hearing different perspectives and different viewpoints.

Ireland's commitment to the UN Charter, to the rules-based multilateral order is not in doubt.

Ireland's policy of military neutrality, which has served us well for decades, will not be changed by this government.

But none of this means that we should isolate ourselves, or assume we have nothing to learn from, or contribute to, the wider debate about European security.

Ireland's commitment to a values based foreign policy, to multilateralism, and to a policy of military neutrality, does not insulate us from the new reality we find ourselves in. And we must respond to that.

In this the 50th year of our EU membership, it is more important than ever to recognise, understand and discuss our place at the heart of Europe, including in relation to the European Union's common foreign and security policy.

That discussion should also include our work at the OSCE – the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – which is the world's largest regional security organisation, as well as almost a quarter of a century of engagement with NATO under the Partnership for Peace programme.

We have always believed that the multilateral system, with the United Nations Charter at its heart, remains our strongest protection, and our most important global security asset.

As a neutral country, our security, indeed, our very existence as a sovereign state, relies on the compliance by all nations, however large and powerful, with the rules-based

international order.

A little over a decade after Ireland joined the League of Nations, Éamon De Valera travelled to Geneva in 1935 and addressed the Assembly, memorably saying, and I quote:

“Make no mistake, if on any pretext whatever we were to permit the sovereignty of even the weakest State amongst us to be unjustly taken away, the whole foundation of the League would crumble into dust. If the pledge of security is not universal, if it is not to apply to all impartially . . . if one aggressor is to be given a free hand while another is restrained, then it is far better that the old system of alliances should return and that each nation should do what it can to prepare for its own defence”.

De Valera was making these remarks as part of his own government’s determined effort to defend the integrity of the League of Nations, just a short few years before the Second World War.

As we turn to the reality of the world in 2023, we find ourselves living once again in extraordinary, violent and challenging times. Times in which we have once again witnessed the most blatant disregard for international law on our own home continent of Europe.

Yesterday, I attended the Ukraine Recovery Conference in London. I heard harrowing accounts of devastation and destruction in Ukraine from the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Denys Shmyhal. It was a sober reminder of the devastating human impact of war.

Two years ago it seemed unimaginable that there would be a large-scale land war in Europe. That we would see the largest displacement of people across the continent since the Second World War. That homes across Ireland would be opening their doors to receive almost 90,000 Ukrainians feeling this appalling conflict.

During our membership of the UN Security Council in 2022, we saw first-hand Russia abusing its position on the Council– preventing the Council from acting, or even speaking collectively, in response to the invasion of Ukraine, with its cynical use of the veto, and spreading disinformation.

Russia has also paralysed European regional peace and security bodies, including the

OSCE.

Today, just as in the 1930s, the “pledge of security” that De Valera spoke of must be universal and apply equally and impartially to all. Might is not right.

We cannot allow the more powerful or those with imperial ambitions to prevail.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the reality of the new threat environment in global security was brought home to all of us in Ireland in 2021 with the ransomware attack on the Health Service Executive.

Hundreds of thousands of patients were affected and the costs of dealing with the fallout amounted to more than €10 million, and this in the middle of COVID.

Ireland’s geography and military neutrality did not protect us from that attack, and it will not protect us from potential future attacks.

And the simple fact is that Ireland’s economic and international success, our vibrant indigenous and multinational business sector, our digitalised economy and the global communications and energy infrastructure that runs through our waters, make us uniquely vulnerable to new and emerging threats.

Our discussions here take place less than 15 miles from Haulbowline, the main naval base and headquarters for the Irish Naval Service.

Many of you will remember that, just last year, Russia attempted to hold a naval exercise in our Exclusive Economic Zone just weeks before their unprovoked and illegal war on Ukraine.

Our own territorial waters - and our wider Exclusive Economic Zone, our ‘EEZ’, which is close to 7 times our land area - is an area of critical and strategic importance for Ireland.

Approximately three quarters of Ireland’s natural gas is imported via pipelines. Ireland’s EEZ is home to fibre optic cables that carry some 97% of global communications.

That is why this afternoon we will be discussing cybersecurity and maritime security and critical infrastructure. We need to fully understand the threat environment, and develop

systems to ensure that such infrastructure is adequately protected.

Later sessions of the Forum will also examine disinformation and the insidious nature of the deliberate manipulation of information. This is an enormous challenge.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The threat landscape that we face is complex.

We, as an independent and sovereign nation need to invest in the military and civilian expertise and capabilities required to adequately respond.

The Independent Commission on the Defence Forces, which reported in February 2022, recommended significant changes for the Defence Forces and Defence provision in Ireland.

Its recommendations covered Defence Forces structures, defence capabilities, human resources, the Reserve Defence Force and funding, amongst other issues.

On foot of these recommendations, as a government we approved multi-annual funding increases, to reach a defence budget of some €1.5 billion by 2028, index linked to inflation. This will amount to a near 50% increase in defence funding by 2028.

This single biggest investment in the history of the State shows a strong commitment on behalf of Government to support the Defence Forces' transition into a modern military force that is agile, with the appropriate capability, culture and values that reflect the modern workplace and Irish society.

There is an urgent need for cultural transformation in the Defences Forces and this is being prioritised.

A Strategic Governance Framework is being established to drive the Commission's recommendations. Working with the new independent External Oversight Body that I have established, it will also be an important enabling mechanism for delivery of the Independent Review Group's actions and recommendations, comprehensively dealing with the insidious issue of bullying and abuse within the Defence Forces.

In short, my priority is to ensure that there is one Strategic Plan for the transformation of the Defence Forces, fully understood by everyone, that has the appropriate governance and reporting mechanisms and is properly resourced.

In convening this national discussion, I wanted to ensure that our conversations about our security policy choices were well-informed and based on fact and on evidence.

Over the course of the four days we will hear from close to 80 different panellists and moderators.

These have been selected based on their practical experience, or academic expertise, working in a wide variety of issues and areas.

They include many Irish people who have on-the-ground experience of peacekeeping, conflict prevention and resolution, and peacebuilding in UN, EU, OSCE and NATO led missions in Chad, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Georgia, Kosovo, Bosnia, Lebanon and beyond.

They include academics from all over the island of Ireland, as well as from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Poland, Denmark and the UK; senior Irish officials and civil society representatives.

These individuals bring different perspectives, different lived experiences, different policy approaches.

I thank them wholeheartedly for being a part of this process.

For all of you attending here in Cork, and those planning to be in Galway and Dublin - your voice is important.

But I don't just want the people in this room to consider these questions, or indeed for them to be limited to Cork, Galway or Dublin, I want these conversations to take place in kitchens and classrooms across the country – indeed, given the weather today, in parks and beaches too.

We have already received hundreds of responses through the online consultation process and I look forward to receiving many more.

Before concluding, I would like to welcome to Cork and thank the Chair of the Consultative Forum, Professor Louise Richardson.

Professor Richardson is an extraordinarily accomplished individual. She is President of Carnegie Corporation of New York and the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford and former Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of St Andrews.

She is no stranger to today's university setting, having previously earned a PhD in international relations at Harvard University where she spent 20 years on the faculty of the Department of Government teaching courses on international security and foreign policy.

A native of Waterford, she is also familiar with the foreign and security policy challenges facing Ireland. She is an eminent and distinguished academic, her expertise and experience will add significant value to this endeavour. I am very grateful to her for taking on this task as independent Chair.

Louise, I wish you well in your role and in your work to capture the range of issues discussed and the key findings from the consultation process in your report.

If we end these four days with more people in Ireland who are more informed and more confident that they have the factual information that they need to make up their own minds about an issue that affects all of us, the Forum will have done its job well.

Before handing over to our Chair, I want to leave you with a few final thoughts.

We all come here today with different views, shaped by our own experience of the world.

And if I could conclude, I think of my family's own history, my father grew up in a working class district near Collins Barracks. His two brothers joined the British Army and his younger brother followed after the war. My own father joined the Irish Army during what was termed here the Emergency, he became a member of the Fianna Fáil party.

Of the brothers who went to the British Army, one was imprisoned during World War Two, became a supporter of the British Conservative Party; the other brother who was in the British Army during the war, became a self-declared communist another a lifelong

supporter of the Labour party. My point being, life is complex. Suffice to say when the family gathered, we had many complex conversations.

This personal context has, I think always helped me to ground policy discussions and decisions in the human reality.

Discussions on Ireland's international security policy may sometimes seem theoretical, but the implications of our choices are important – important for the State and for the lived reality of each and every one of us that share this precious island.

All of us need together to be the architects of our international security policy.

I look forward to honest, respectful and informed conversations over the next four days. I know that I will learn a lot. I hope that all of you here, and those following our discussion online, will too.

Louise, may I invite you to take the floor.

Go raibh míle, míle maith agaibh go léir.

Notes

Tánaiste made additional remarks, addressing protestors in the room.

“Could I just say first of all that I grew up in this city and I learned about freedom of speech and democracy in this University, you had your platform, you have said what you have to say. Could I also say, that the most undemocratic thing you can do is to shut down debate and that is what you are doing here this morning. You are behaving in a manner that is intolerant of freedom of speech, that is not what we are going to do today. I want to thank those people who are here today, those who are watching online and those who have made and will make written submissions. This is the first time that our country has embarked on a national conversation of this nature.”

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