

Ireland's Foreign Relations in 2020

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ABSTRACT

This review examines Ireland's foreign relations in 2020. It sets out the particular challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and outlines the evolving domestic political landscape, including the election in February 2020 that led to the historic first coalition involving both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The review then gives an account of Ireland's relations with the EU, the UK and the USA, with Brexit representing a recurrent theme across all three relationships. Ireland's engagement beyond Europe and North America is addressed, including its successful election to the UN Security Council and its foreign military deployments. Finally, the deaths of a number of significant figures in Irish and international politics are noted.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will be synonymous with the outbreak of a virus, COVID-19, that brought a sudden closing of borders and for many a sharp and sudden reduction in the boundaries of their lived experience. It was a year that saw the curtailment of Ireland's traditional showcase of soft diplomacy on St Patrick's Day and a shift to new ways of working for diplomacy and statecraft. It's hard to think of a more momentous announcement made by a taoiseach than the lockdown in March 2020. Like his Fine Gael (FG) predecessor John A. Costello, Leo Varadkar found himself in North America while making an announcement that would change the state forever.


However, although COVID-19 is a dominant theme of 2020, it is not the only one. In the domestic context, Ireland emerged from an election in February 2020 with no clear picture of what a government would look like. There was no viable

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path to power that didn't involve two of FG, Fianna Fáil (FF) and Sinn Féin (SF), and even though the two former parties had made clear their objections to sharing power with the latter, it would take four months of negotiations before the new government received their seals of office.

Irish foreign policy for the past 50 years has been about triangulating our position relative to the three main relationships the state needs to manage—with London, Brussels and Washington. The electoral earthquakes in two of those in 2016—heralding Trump and Brexit—had made this task of triangulation more difficult than ever before. With an election looming in the US and Brexit very much unfinished, these challenges continued to demand attention in 2020 and interacted with the COVID-19 crisis in unpredictable ways. In addition, 2020 was the culmination of a campaign to be elected to the UN Security Council (UNSC). Ireland's relations beyond the West demanded attention to ensure success in this area but also to reflect the shift in geopolitics towards the Asia-Pacific region.

This review will begin with a brief overview of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected Ireland and the world. It will move from there to look at the changed domestic political context that saw an election and the emergence of the first coalition government to contain the two traditionally largest parties in the country—FF and FG. Although they have largely shared a foreign policy outlook, the emergence of SF as a government in waiting may signal more turbulence in Irish foreign-policy-making in the future.

The review then looks at Ireland's relations with the EU, the US and the UK, with Brexit being a recurrent theme across all three, along with tensions on economic issues and potential future pitfalls in these key relationships. In the next section, the review looks briefly at the broader engagement of Ireland in the world: at the UN, and continued involvement in peacekeeping in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans. Finally, the review reflects on those we lost in 2020.

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Reports of a novel coronavirus detected in China began to circulate in late December 2019 and early January 2020:¹ the first report on RTÉ covering the outbreak was on 16 January.² At that point the expectation was that, like SARS and MERS, the outbreak would be localised and contained within China: there was no sign that Ireland and the world would spend much of the next two years and beyond dealing with the consequences of the virus' spread. Even as the first

¹World Health Organization, 'Novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) situation report-1', 21 January 2020, available at: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200121-sitrep-1-2019-ncov.pdf> (9 November 2021).

²RTÉ, 'China believes new virus behind mystery pneumonia outbreak', 16 January 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2020/0116/1107784-china-flu/> (9 November 2021).

case was reported in Ireland on 29 February, the message from government was that with appropriate surveillance of incoming travellers and other protective measures there was no reason to expect a radical or overly disruptive response.³

Cancellation of mass events including the St Patrick's Day festival, the suspension of flights from Italy and the cancellation of the Ireland–Italy rugby match all signalled an evolving response in March. Events progressed rapidly from that point, against a backdrop of television imagery of army trucks being used as temporary morgues as the situation worsened in Italy.⁴ Ireland experienced its first death on 11 March.⁵

The taoiseach, speaking from Washington, announced a temporary closure of schools and other public workplaces: the beginning of the great shift to home schooling and working that would define the crisis for many. Pubs and other venues were asked to close until 29 March. On 27 March, the government announced the most far-reaching restrictions on life in Ireland in the state's history. People were required to remain at home, with limited exceptions for essential work, food shopping and exercise within 2 km of their home address. The restrictions were given force of law, although the initial approach by Gardaí was encouragement rather than enforcement.⁶ In the months that followed, restrictions would wax and wane as case numbers rose and fell. Ireland found itself in competition with other states for essential medical supplies⁷ and took drastic steps, including the temporary nationalisation of private hospitals, to prepare for a sharp rise in severe illness and death.⁸

By the end of March, it was clear that a return to normality would be some way off. Indeed, it was May before the first significant relaxation of restrictions came. Pubs and nightclubs remained closed but a domestic tourist season was envisaged, with recommendations against non-essential international travel in place. Case numbers dropped to single digits in the summer but began to rise in August, with localised lockdowns in response.⁹

³RTÉ, 'First case of Covid-19 diagnosed in the east of Ireland', 1 March 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0229/1119357-coronavirus-ireland/> (9 November 2021).

⁴Elvira Pollina and Agnieszka Flak, 'Italian army moves coronavirus dead from overwhelmed town', *Reuters*, 19 March 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-italy-idINKBN2161FL> (9 November 2021).

⁵Fergal Bowers, 'First death of a patient in Ireland with Covid-19', *RTÉ*, 11 March 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0311/1121526-harris-covid-19/> (9 November 2021).

⁶'Coronavirus in Ireland – a timeline', *RTÉ*, 21 April 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0320/1124382-covid-19-ireland-timeline/> (9 November 2021).

⁷Martin Wall, 'Frantic PPE procurement at height of Covid crisis to be reviewed', *Irish Times*, 4 September 2021, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/frantic-ppe-procurement-at-height-of-covid-crisis-to-be-reviewed-1.4664375> (9 November 2021).

⁸Julien Mercille, Brian Turner and Donnacha Seán Lucey, 'Ireland's takeover of private hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Health, Economics, Policy and Law*, online, 18 May 2021, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744133121000189> (9 November 2021).

⁹Jennifer Bray, Harry McGee and Seán McCárthaigh, 'Midlands lockdown: movement restrictions in place for residents of Kildare, Laois and Offaly', *Irish Times*, 7 August 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/midlands-lockdown-movement-restrictions-in-place-for-residents-of-kildare-laois-and-offaly-1.4324593> (9 November 2021).

In September the government announced its ‘Living with COVID’ plan as winter approached. Immediately afterwards the entire cabinet and the chief medical officer had to enter isolation pending the result of a COVID-19 test for the health minister, Stephen Donnelly.¹⁰ Although schools reopened in September, the planned return to campus for the third-level sector was placed on hiatus against a backdrop of rising case numbers as government sought to manage a second wave and allow for a ‘meaningful Christmas’.¹¹ Restrictions were eased in December, only for a nationwide lockdown to be reimposed on 26 December.¹²

While Ireland managed to avoid the worst scenes experienced in Italy, New York and elsewhere of temporary morgues and mass graves, it was clear that the country struggled with managing the balance of allowing economic, educational and socio-cultural activity to resume while maintaining capacity in the health system to manage infections and illness. Over 2,300 Irish citizens died with COVID-19 in 2020, a rate of roughly 450 deaths per million of population, placing Ireland at the low end of rankings of European states in terms of death rate from the disease.¹³

The long-term political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic remain unclear. The source and trajectory of the virus have been a source of tension between the US and China, the inequality of the vaccine roll-out has raised tensions between wealthy and poorer countries, and the politicisation of the science of public health across the globe raises the prospect of new fault-lines emerging in global politics that will shape our future.

THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTEXT

The minority government led by FG entered 2020 in a precarious position, increasingly dogged by controversy—the latest involving a poorly thought through planned commemoration for the Royal Irish Constabulary.¹⁴ The government looked vulnerable, with just 58 votes in the Dáil and relying on a confidence and supply agreement with FF to continue the business of

¹⁰Elaine Loughlin and Aoife Moore, ‘Cabinet no longer restricting movements as Health Minister tests negative for COVID-19’, *Irish Examiner*, 15 September 2020, available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40049429.html> (9 November 2021).

¹¹Pat Leahy, Jack Horgan-Jones, Jennifer Bray and Shauna Bowers, ‘Covid-19: state moves to Level 5 for six weeks with hopes of “meaningful” Christmas celebrations’, *Irish Times*, 19 October 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/covid-19-state-moves-to-level-5-for-six-weeks-with-hopes-of-meaningful-christmas-celebrations-1.4384986> (9 November 2021).

¹²Department of An Taoiseach, ‘Ireland placed on Level 5 restrictions of the Plan for Living with Covid-19 – with a number of specific adjustments’, 23 December 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a1f21-ireland-placed-on-level-5-restrictions-of-the-plan-for-living-with-covid-19-with-a-number-of-specific-adjustments/> (9 November 2021).

¹³Hannah Ritchie, Edouard Mathieu, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, Cameron Appel, Charlie Giattino, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, Diana Beltekian and Max Roser (2020) ‘Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19)’, *Our World in Data*, available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus> (9 November 2021).

¹⁴Jennifer Bray and Fiach Kelly, ‘RIC controversy: Minister for Justice defers commemoration event’, *Irish Times*, 7 January 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/ric-controversy-minister-for-justice-defers-commemoration-event-1.4133184> (9 November 2021).

government. In January 2020, FG (23%) trailed FF (26%) in opinion polls, with SF emerging as the most significant third force in Irish politics on 19%.¹⁵ Following discussions between an taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, and Micheál Martin, the FF leader, an election was called on 14 January with the poll to take place on 8 February. As the campaign evolved it became clear that this election was about change.

After a decade in power, FG ran on a platform of competent management of Brexit, and returning the country to solvency and economic growth after the financial crisis. FF embraced the message of change, with Micheál Martin arguing it was 'time for change' in government when the election was called.¹⁶ As the campaign progressed, however, polling indicated that the message of change was leading to an increase in support for SF rather than FF, FG or any of the other parties. This pattern was borne out in the election, with SF winning a plurality of first preference votes for the first time in the history of the state. However, in part due to SF's failure to run second candidates in a number of constituencies, FF with 38 seats (including Seán O'Fearghail, returned automatically as ceann comhairle) had a claim to have won the election, with SF returning 37 seats. FG finished third with 35 seats, followed by the Green Party on 12, Labour and the Social Democrats on 6 each, Solidarity/People Before Profit on 5, Aontú managing a single seat for former SF TD Peadar Tóibín, and 19 independent members representing a broad ideological mix.¹⁷

International issues had little impact in a campaign dominated by the housing crisis and concerns about the capacity of the public health system. Brexit remained largely a non-partisan issue despite its significance for the Irish economy. That said, the emergence of SF and, to a lesser extent, the Green Party as significant electoral forces could signal a longer term shift in Ireland's attitudes to defence and security cooperation in Europe and beyond. Both parties had campaigned against Ireland's involvement in Permanent Structured Cooperation in Security and Defence (PESCO) and had been critical of Ireland's role in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions. SF more than the GP had also adopted 'Euro-critical' if not outright Eurosceptic positions on EU treaties in the past. In government the GP has reconciled this critical position with supporting Irish engagement overseas—they were in government for the EUFOR-Chad mission. It remains to be seen whether SF's path to power will similarly moderate its position on these issues.

Despite an election campaign dominated by calls for change, the electoral arithmetic meant that any new government would have to involve two of the

¹⁵Alan Duggan, 'Republic of Ireland 2020', *Irish Political Studies* 36 (3) (2021), 327–443: 354.

¹⁶Juno McEnroe, 'Martin to fight election on health, housing and education as Fianna Fáil launch 2020 bid', *Irish Examiner*, 14 January 2020, available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30975411.html> (9 November 2021).

¹⁷Duggan, 'Republic of Ireland 2020', 343.

now big three parties—FF, FG and SF. As both FF and FG had effectively ruled out coalition with SF, it fell to the erstwhile political foes to put the final nail in the coffin of civil war politics. It took until late June 2020 for a programme of government to be agreed, with the Green Party joining FF and FG in coalition. The coalition agreement involved the unprecedented condition of a ‘rotating taoiseach’ between the two larger parties. This saw Micheál Martin elected taoiseach on 27 June with the agreement he would step down and his now tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, would take his place. Simon Coveney would remain in place as minister of foreign affairs and would take over the defence portfolio as well, while trade was moved to a restructured department headed by Leo Varadkar.¹⁸

Since the election, FG had seen its opinion poll ratings improve significantly throughout the spring and summer of 2020, reflecting approval of its handling of COVID-19 as the caretaker government. FF had seen the opposite trajectory, from leading opinion polls in January to being a distant third by summer polling, in the mid-teens.¹⁹

The government didn’t experience much of a honeymoon, with the minister for agriculture, Barry Cowen, sacked by the taoiseach following his failure to disclose a 2016 driving ban for drink-driving.²⁰ His successor, Dara Calleary, lasted a mere 27 days as his involvement in the organisation of a social event for the Oireachtas golf society that violated COVID-19 regulations was revealed.²¹ The ‘Golfgate’ episode revealed the precarity of the government’s position on COVID-19 regulations. The high levels of compliance by the Irish people were clearly conditional on a sense of solidarity; the idea that while families couldn’t attend the funerals of loved ones, members of the Oireachtas and others would socialise freely caused a furore that ended the ministerial career of Calleary and led to the resignation of Ireland’s EU commissioner, Phil Hogan.

The idea of one rule for the elite and another for the common people was also exploited by organisers of anti-COVID-19 demonstrations that began to increase in number and participation as the year progressed. The overlap between these groups and the organised far right could signal a further shift in the underlying political landscape in Ireland. Whether this far-right ripple has electoral implications remains to be seen.²²

¹⁸Merrion Street, ‘Statement by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin T.D., Announcement of Government 27 June 2020’, available at: https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/news/statement_by_the_taoiseach_micheal_martin_t_d_announcement_of_government_27_june_2020.html (9 November 2021).

¹⁹Duggan, ‘Republic of Ireland 2020’, 354.

²⁰Harry McGee, Jack Horgan-Jones and Marie O’Halloran, ‘Taoiseach sacks Barry Cowen after he refuses to resign’, *Irish Times*, 15 July 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/taoiseach-sacks-barry-cowen-after-he-refuses-to-resign-1.4304650> (9 November 2021).

²¹Digital Desk, ‘Dara Calleary resigns after breaching Covid-19 regulations at Galway golf event’, *Irish Examiner*, 21 August 2020, available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40035605.html> (9 November 2021).

²²Aoife Gallagher and Ciarán O’Connor, *Layers of lies: a first look at Irish far-right activity on Telegram*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 12 April 2021, available at: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Layers-of-Lies.pdf> (9 November 2021).

Although the new government has a comfortable majority in the Dáil and Seanad, there remain some questions about the impact of domestic politics on areas of foreign policy. Ireland's involvement in PESCO is a case in point. Ireland has chosen not to participate in any new PESCO initiatives since joining two initial projects in 2019. Even when joining PESCO an attempt was made to avoid parliamentary scrutiny of Irish participation, with a debate forced on government through the cooperation of opposition parties.²³ In 2020, with a junior coalition party that opposed this involvement, it seemed unlikely that Ireland would seek to extend or deepen its involvement in these areas.

Similarly, the new make-up of the party system raises questions on the viability of future Irish participation in CSDP missions, even with the 'triple lock' of a UN Security Council resolution. We have already seen criticism of Ireland's involvement in Chad and Mali as signals of future developments in this area should SF become the main party in a coalition government.

In the area of trade, 2020 saw the unusual case of a member of a government party taking a case for judicial review on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). Even though Eamon Ryan took the position that the commitment to support trade deals in the programme for government implied support for the ratification of CETA,²⁴ Green Party concerns about elements of the treaty and in particular their implications for environmental standards are likely to create a challenging environment for ratification and may even threaten the stability of the government.

Despite the caveats above, there remains a high degree of consensus at the domestic level in terms of Ireland's engagement beyond its borders—there is no significant Eurosceptic voice in Irish politics, and although parties on the left are critical of the EU, only the Worker's Party, with no Oireachtas representation, advocates a 'Lexit'. The lack of an electorally significant far right limits the impact of right-wing Euroscepticism. Similarly, political attitudes to the US across the major parties shared an affinity with the Democratic party and a pragmatic attitude to cooperation with the Trump administration. While the rise of SF—who have been more critical than the other two large parties of US foreign policy in the Middle East and Latin America in particular—may raise some uncertainty, it doesn't seem likely that the possibility of a SF government would cause too much friction in the transatlantic relationship.

On Brexit, the position marked out by the then minority FG government maintains cross-party support—avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland and any barrier to trade with the rest of the EU remains a broadly supported

²³Marie O'Halloran, 'Dáil approves Ireland joining EU's PESCO military framework', *Irish Times*, 7 December 2017, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/d%C3%A1il-approves-ireland-joining-eu-s-pesco-military-framework-1.3319228> (9 November 2021).

²⁴Rónán Duffy, 'Green Party Dáil split vote on CETA avoided (for now at least)', *thejournal.ie*, 10 February 2021, available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/ceta-greens-5350774-Feb2021/> (9 November 2021).

position in Irish politics. Despite the transformed electoral landscape after the 2020 general election, it seems that politics will continue to end at the water's edge for the time being at least.

IRELAND AND THE EU

Following the 2019 European elections, the new EU Commission took office in December 2019. Ireland had been successful in gaining a prominent portfolio for its reappointed commissioner, Phil Hogan, who, having established his reputation with the agriculture brief in the Juncker Commission, gained the influential trade portfolio. This was viewed as particularly critical given that 2020 would see negotiations on the future trade relationship with the United Kingdom gathering pace as the Brexit transition period came to an end.

Brexit will be dealt with in a separate section, but it is worth commenting that although a new Commission had taken office, the EU's approach to Brexit remained focused on protecting the single market, maintaining peace on the island of Ireland and negotiating a positive future relationship with the UK. The von der Leyen commission focused on a number of key themes in her political programme—a European Green new deal, a Europe fit for the digital age, an economy that works for people, a stronger Europe in the world, promoting our European way of life (with a focus on rule of law) and a new push for European democracy.²⁵

For Ireland there were some challenges on the European agenda in addition to Brexit. Ireland remained opposed to harmonisation of corporate tax rates, and was sensitive to changes to the Common Agricultural Policy and moves towards a common European defence, all of which were likely to face significant opposition domestically. That said, at the start of the year Ireland was very much in harmony with the Commission's goals on rule of law and European democracy. At the annual Holocaust memorial day event in January, President Higgins warned that 'As anti-Semitism, xenophobia, racism and intolerance are once again on the rise across Europe and many parts of the world, we must remember the Holocaust collectively and work together to ensure that hatred and inhumanity is not allowed to spread its dark shadow across Europe and the world.'²⁶

However, as with Ireland's domestic politics, EU politics was soon to be overtaken by the COVID-19 pandemic as the virus spread first in Italy and

²⁵Ursula von der Leyen, 'A Union that strives for more: my agenda for Europe', 16 July 2019, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf (9 November 2021).

²⁶President Michael D. Higgins, 'President attends the Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration 2020', 26 January 2020, available at: <https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/president-attends-the-holocaust-memorial-day-commemoration-2020> (9 November 2021).

from there to every corner of the continent. The early part of the pandemic appeared to reveal fracture lines within the EU as Italy felt abandoned.²⁷ This was followed by an unseemly scramble across the continent and the world for vital medical supplies, from basic personal protective equipment (PPE) to lab supplies to maintain effective testing and surveillance of the disease. With images of military trucks being used to store bodies in Italy and stories of bidding wars for PPE on the tarmac of Chinese airports, there was some commentary placing this failure at the EU level.²⁸ However, given the lack of direct EU competency for health emergencies and of a standing capacity to fight such an emergency, this criticism was largely unfounded. The EU did learn key lessons from the early stages of the pandemic—one was that competition for essential supplies could lead to fracturing within the EU, and therefore the EU would seek to coordinate vaccine development and procurement to avoid this type of tension re-emerging in the event that a vaccine became available.

The EU agreement on common vaccine procurement was announced in June.²⁹ Although the early roll-out of the vaccine through the common EU mechanism was slower than early efforts in the US and UK, it's hard to envisage how the roll-out would have been quicker if the 27 member states had sought separate supply deals. Ireland committed to the common European procurement policy. The second lesson learned by the EU was the need to have greater capacity to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in the aftermath. Eurobonds had been raised as a possible solution during the financial crisis a decade earlier but had failed due to northern European countries' resistance. The idea of a Eurobond to respond to COVID-19 surfaced in 2020, and, as it had been during the financial crisis, Ireland was supportive of the proposal.³⁰ In July, the EU announced as part of the new multiannual financial framework that, for the first time, the Commission would raise money on the bond market to help finance member states' recovery from the economic devastation wrought by COVID-19.³¹

²⁷Daniel Boffey, 'Italy criticises EU for being slow to help over coronavirus epidemic', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/italy-criticises-eu-being-slow-help-coronavirus-epidemic> (9 November 2021).

²⁸Michael Peel, Ryan McMorrough, Nian Liu, Guy Chazan, Victor Mallet, Andres Schipani and James Politi, 'EU warns of global bidding war for medical equipment', *Financial Times*, 7 April 2020, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/a94aa917-f5a0-4980-a51a-28576f09410a> (9 November 2021).

²⁹European Commission, 'Commission decision of 18.6.2020 approving the agreement with member states on procuring Covid-19 vaccines on behalf of the member states and related procedures', 18 June 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/decision_approving_the_agreement_with_member_states_on_procuring_covid-19_vaccines_on_behalf_of_the_member_states_and_related_procedures.pdf (9 November 2021).

³⁰Richard Kelly, 'European Union: Covid 19 – what are corona bonds?', *Mondaq*, 25 May 2020, available at: <https://www.mondaq.com/ireland/financing/940100/covid-19--what-are-corona-bonds> (9 November 2021).

³¹European Council, 'Special meeting of the European Council (17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 July 2020) – conclusions', 21 June 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf> (9 November 2021).

The final aspect of COVID-19's impact on EU politics related to free movement. While many countries had imposed national restrictions on movement, the move by some to block international travel between EU member states proved controversial. The Commission urged against blanket bans and pushed for restrictions to be temporary, targeted and proportional to the risk posed by travellers to the host country. The result of this policy was the return of international leisure travel from mid to late summer 2020. Arguably this travel would prove crucial in reseeding the virus and leading to the second wave that struck across Europe in the autumn and winter of 2020.³²

Over the ten years since the bailout in 2011, Ireland had worked hard to regain its reputation as a fiscally reliable member state. The election of Ireland's minister for finance, Paschal Donohoe, to chair the Euro group of ministers (a semi-formal group representing the EU member states that have adopted the euro) arguably marked a line drawn under Ireland's financial crisis.³³ However, tensions remained around tax issues and the perception that Ireland used tax policy unfairly to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), including allowing companies to avoid tax that should be paid in other jurisdictions. This issue had been brought to a head when the Commission took a case against Apple arguing it had underpaid tax in Ireland of roughly €14 billion. In 2020, Apple and Ireland appealed the decision successfully, but the European Commission appealed this decision and the matter remains unresolved.³⁴

The Apple case is a good example of the fine line Ireland walks in relation to its relationship with the EU: while Ireland tends to be a constructive member state, taxation policy has been a key plank of its FDI strategy since the early 1960s and is seen as a core national interest. The Apple case found Ireland in the odd position of arguing against the receipt of several billion in additional tax (although not all of the moneys concerned would end up in the Irish exchequer), but it was felt that the principle of having an independent taxation policy was worth the reputational risk even at a time when Ireland depended on the support of other member states to defend its interests in the Brexit negotiations.

A further point of tension between the Irish government and the Commission came in August 2020. As discussed above, 'Golfgate' had rocked the domestic political establishment. When it transpired that Ireland's Commissioner, Phil Hogan, had also attended the event, pressure began to grow for him to resign.

³²Marita Moloney, 'Travel was a "key factor" in causing the second wave of COVID-19 across Europe', *Newstalk*, 10 December 2020, available at: <https://www.newstalk.com/news/travel-was-a-key-factor-in-causing-the-second-wave-of-covid-19-across-europe-1120083> (9 November 2021).

³³Blake Smith-Meyer, 'Ireland's Paschal Donohoe wins Eurogroup presidency', *Politico*, 9 July 2020, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/irelands-paschal-donohoe-wins-eurogroup-presidency/> (9 November 2021).

³⁴Naomi O'Leary, 'European Commission to appeal against €14.3 billion Apple tax ruling', *Irish Times*, 25 September 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/technology/european-commission-to-appeal-against-14-3bn-apple-tax-ruling-1.4364385> (9 November 2021).

This pressure was met with some bemusement at the EU level. It was difficult for those on the outside looking in to match the transgression with the magnitude of the consequence; indeed there was speculation externally that the pressure on Hogan was unfair and risked politicising the role of Commissioners. Such a move would be strongly resisted in Brussels as the Commission is seen as apolitical, and allowing Commissioners to be pushed out following national elections out of sync with the EU political calendar would be a recipe for chaos.³⁵ However, the pressure on Hogan reflected the significant costs of Ireland's long and severe lockdown. It was politically untenable for Hogan to remain without severe consequences for the government's COVID-19 mitigation policies. The taoiseach called for Commissioner Hogan to consider his position, and on 26 August he resigned his post. Arguably the pill was less bitter for the Commission than it might have been, as Hogan's dalliance with the WTO directorship in June 2020 had undermined his standing in Brussels.³⁶

On 4 September, Ireland put forward two nominees for the vacant commission post—Maireád McGuinness, a popular and credible member of the European Parliament, and Andrew McDowell, a less well-known figure but with a credible CV, including a stint as vice-president of the European Investment Bank. Von der Leyen announced McGuinness as the new Commissioner with a portfolio covering financial services. This was less prestigious than the trade position held by Hogan but was still a significant post, suggesting that what political capital had been spent on removing Hogan was not to be damaging in the long term.³⁷

IRELAND AND THE UNITED STATES

In 2016, the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th US president was a second earthquake that shook the political complacency of the Anglophone world. Trump's 'America First' rhetoric, echoing the slogans of the hard right, was a far cry from the internationalist and outward-looking US that much of the world had appeared to take for granted since the Second World War.

However, although Trump's rhetoric set him apart from his predecessors, his policies were more a change in degree than in kind. His oft-cited misunderstanding of NATO funding is a good example of this. While it's true that NATO spending commitments are about building national capabilities, rather than

³⁵John Bruton, 'Was a fair and independent process followed in the Phil Hogan case?', *CEPS*, 7 September 2020, available at: <https://www.ceps.eu/was-a-fair-and-independent-process-followed-in-the-phil-hogan-case/> (9 November 2021).

³⁶Eddy Wax, 'EU trade chief Hogan clings on in "golfgate" scandal over coronavirus rules', *Politico*, 21 August 2020, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-trade-chief-hogan-clings-on-amid-scandal-over-galway-golf-dinner/> (9 November 2021).

³⁷Naomi O'Leary, 'McGuinness appointment: Ireland now key player in shaping Europe's financial future', *Irish Times*, 8 September 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/mcguinness-appointment-ireland-now-key-player-in-shaping-europe-s-financial-future-1.4349611> (9 November 2021).

payments to the US as Trump's framing seemed to suggest, his criticism of European free-riding on US power echoed each of his predecessors since the end of the Cold War.³⁸

Two things changed with the Trump presidency. One was the emergence of a much more transactional approach to international politics, whereby US cooperation was contingent on concrete pay-offs, preferably measured in dollars and cents. The other was the sheer incompetence of the new administration. Even before taking office it was running into trouble by taking calls from foreign leaders and making promises and demands it had no authority to make.³⁹ The resignation of Michael J. Flynn as national security adviser in the first weeks of the administration was a harbinger of the chaos of the Trump White House, where overall turnover and cabinet turnover were higher than any of the preceding five presidencies.⁴⁰

Europe and the world had to reconcile themselves to a more unpredictable transatlantic partner. From an Irish perspective, three key points of tension were to emerge. First, although Ireland was never central to the administration's foreign policy, it was frequently mentioned as an example of the type of tax jurisdiction that American corporations were using to avoid paying their fair share at home.⁴¹ Second, the hostility of the Trump administration to immigration meant that Ireland's long-standing pursuit of a pathway to citizenship for undocumented Irish citizens in the US was unlikely to make much progress.⁴² Finally, President Trump was a vocal supporter of Brexit and saw in Boris Johnson a kindred spirit or, as the president referred to him, 'Britain Trump'.⁴³

Despite this, both Ireland and the Trump administration maintained the tradition of the St Patrick's Day visit to the White House throughout the presidency. And although the UK placed much faith in a trade deal with the US to offset the costs of Brexit, it seems unlikely that the Trump administration felt any obligation to make an especially favourable deal with the UK: if anything it

³⁸Michael Cresswell and Victor Gavin, 'A history of vexation: Trump's bashing of NATO is nothing new', *War on the Rocks*, 22 August 2017, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/a-history-of-vexation-trumps-bashing-of-nato-is-nothing-new/> (9 November 2021).

³⁹Adam Taylor, 'What we know so far about Trump's phone calls with foreign leaders', *Washington Post*, 8 February 2017, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/02/what-we-know-so-far-about-trumps-phone-calls-with-foreign-leaders/> (9 November 2021).

⁴⁰Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, 'Tracking turnover in the Trump administration', *Brookings Institute*, January 2021, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/> (9 November 2021).

⁴¹Suzanne Lynch, 'Donald Trump singles out Ireland in tax speech', *Irish Times*, 29 November 2017, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/donald-trump-singles-out-ireland-in-tax-speech-1.3310149>; Brian O'Donovan, 'Trump adviser brands Ireland a tax haven', *RTE News*, 6 August 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0806/1157756-trump-advisor-ireland-tax-haven/> (9 November 2021).

⁴²Jack Beresford, 'Undocumented Irish woman with six-year-old autistic son in US living in fear under Trump administration', *Irish Post*, 16 July 2019, available at: <https://www.irishpost.com/news/undocumented-irish-woman-in-us-168976> (9 November 2021).

⁴³Hayley Halpin, '"They call him Britain Trump": US President elect congratulates Boris Johnson on being elected', *thejournal.ie*, 23 July 2019, available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/donald-trump-britain-boris-johnson-4736990-Jul2019/> (9 November 2021).

would be more consistent with the Trump administration's foreign policy approach to take advantage of Britain's relative weakness and seek a deal on harsh terms.

A mark of the seriousness with which the Trump administration took Brexit, Northern Ireland and Ireland issues is the failure to appoint a special envoy to Northern Ireland until March 2020, when he appointed his former White House press secretary Mick Mulvaney to the role.⁴⁴ It's hard to read the timing of this appointment without seeing a link to the US presidential election, where Joseph R. Biden was likely to be the Democratic nominee.⁴⁵ Irish-Americans formed a key part of the constituency of white voters that Trump needed to win by a large margin to have a chance of re-election. While Trump was unlikely to win the electoral college votes in the Irish-American heartlands in the north-east of the country, in states like Georgia the small but significant Irish-American community could be crucial.

Also in March, then taoiseach Leo Varadkar found himself in Washington for St Patrick's Day events when he announced the closure of schools, universities and childcare facilities in Ireland and placed restrictions on other events. It's ironic that the announcements were made in the US, where the Trump administration steadfastly refused to enforce similar restrictions at a federal level and placed its focus and resources on developing treatments and a vaccine. Where the administration was consistent was in using the COVID-19 crisis to ban travel from a swathe of countries, including Ireland from 14 March, and later to withdraw funding from the WHO, which the administration accused of aiding China in covering up the true source of the infection in April 2020.⁴⁶ The minister for foreign affairs described the move as 'indefensible'.⁴⁷

Ireland, as an instinctively multilateral country, was never likely to have much common ground with the Trump administration, and the nomination of Joe Biden by the Democrats clearly presented the opportunity for a warmer welcome for Irish concerns in Washington. In September 2020, Biden warned that the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) could not become a 'casualty of Brexit', echoing warnings from Nancy Pelosi and other members of Congress that no US–UK trade deal would be ratified if it imperilled peace in Ireland.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁴Cate McCurry, 'Mick Mulvaney named US special envoy to Northern Ireland', *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 March 2020, available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/mick-mulvaney-named-us-special-envoy-to-northern-ireland-39023364.html> (9 November 2021).

⁴⁵BBC, 'Super Tuesday results in full: Biden and Sanders out in front', 6 March 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51733002> (9 November 2021).

⁴⁶Brianna Ehley and Alice Miranda Ollstein, 'Trump announces U.S. withdrawal from the World Health Organisation', *Politico*, 29 May 2020, available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/29/us-withdrawal-from-who-289799> (9 November 2021).

⁴⁷RTE, 'Trump move to halt WHO funding "indefensible" – Coveney', 15 April 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0415/1130536-coronavirus-us/> (9 November 2021).

⁴⁸Patrick Wintour, 'Biden and Pelosi warn UK over risking Good Friday Agreement', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/16/us-uk-trade-deal-in-danger-if-good-friday-agreement-jeopardised-democrats-warn> (9 November 2021).

importance of Biden's success to Irish interests in relation to Brexit can be overstated, though. As discussed above, it was unlikely that a second-term Trump presidency would give the UK a special deal in trade negotiations. Secondly, Biden's comments were more or less echoed immediately by Mick Mulvaney: a reminder that the Irish issue is one of the few policy areas that can still garner broad bipartisan consensus in US politics.⁴⁹ Maintaining this bipartisan support is the most challenging aspect for the future of Ireland's relations with the US.

Over the past 50 years, as partisanship has increased in the US and, particularly, the Republican party has shifted to a more nationalist platform, Irish public opinion has drifted to a much more benign view of Democratic presidents and a harsher view of Republicans. Contrast the thousands that greeted Presidents Clinton and Obama on state visits with the thousands that marched against the Iraq war in 2003 or in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020. While the motivations of those who marched were rooted in genuine and valid concerns about the policies of the Bush and Trump administrations respectively, it will be challenging to avoid appearing to be picking sides in an increasingly polarised US domestic political system. Undoubtedly, Biden's election win in November 2020 was warmly welcomed in the Irish government, but how future governments navigate that political dilemma in the context of a Republican president may determine the success of our management of a privileged position relative to the most powerful country in the world.

NORTHERN IRELAND

January 2020 saw a combined effort by the British and Irish governments to finalise efforts to restore the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland, which had been in hiatus following the resignation of Martin McGuinness in 2017. Critically, this had meant that a cross-community representation of Northern Ireland's voice was largely absent from the table in negotiations on Brexit. The DUP briefly held the balance of power during Theresa May's period in power and blocked attempts to square the circle of maintaining both no hard border on the island of Ireland and Northern Ireland's constitutional status in the UK. They also voted against the withdrawal agreement that contained the Northern Ireland protocol. The DUP's Sammy Wilson was quoted by the BBC as saying the party would not vote for May's deal if she brought it to the Commons a 'thousand times',⁵⁰ signalling the strength of opposition to the deal from the largest Unionist party.

⁴⁹Caitríona Perry, 'Mulvaney says US here to "protect and defend" Good Friday Agreement', *RTE*, 28 September 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/politics/2020/0928/1167863-us-special-envoy/> (9 November 2021).

⁵⁰*BBC*, 'Julian Smith: chief whip attacks cabinet's post-election Brexit strategy', 1 April 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-47768884> (9 November 2021).

The main sticking points on the return of the Assembly were Unionist objections to an Irish Language Act and SF's insistence on accountability for the Renewable Heat Incentive or 'cash for ash' controversy. On 8 January, the two governments represented by Simon Coveney as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Julian Smith, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland published the New Decade, New Approach deal, which created a path to restoration of the assembly. The deal reflected months of negotiation between the parties. The negotiations had been helped by the engagement and capability of Smith.⁵¹ However, within a month of the restoration of the assembly institutions, Smith was sacked by Boris Johnson and replaced with Brandon Lewis. This was widely criticised.⁵²

At the end of January, when the UK formally left the EU, its seats in the European Parliament were redistributed. Ireland gained two seats, for Deirdre Clune (FG) and Barry Andrews (FF), who had been elected in 2019 but couldn't take up their positions until Brexit had taken place. Both pledged to represent the interests of the people of Northern Ireland in addition to their constituents as they took their seats.⁵³

On 27 February, Northern Ireland announced its first case of coronavirus. That the woman had arrived on the island of Ireland in Dublin underlined the need for some level of cross-border cooperation to manage infection rates. However, despite an early memorandum of understanding between the health ministers and chief medical officers of Ireland and Northern Ireland on 7 April,⁵⁴ the approach to the virus north and south of the border varied considerably, reflecting the different approaches taken by London and Dublin. Case rates and deaths were similar in the two jurisdictions, albeit somewhat higher in Northern Ireland.⁵⁵

In late June, a number of senior members of SF attended the funeral of Bobby Storey in West Belfast. Storey had been chairman of SF and was widely

⁵¹Rory Carroll, 'From bitter stalemate to smiles at Stormont: how the deal was done', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/13/from-bitter-stalemate-to-smiles-at-stormont-how-the-deal-was-done> (9 November 2021).

⁵²Peter Walker and Lisa O'Carroll, 'Irish PM calls sacked minister Julian Smith "one of Britain's finest"', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/13/irish-pm-says-sacked-northern-ireland-secretary-julian-smith-one-of-britains-finest> (9 November 2021).

⁵³Aine Fox, 'Irish MEPs pledge to represent Northern Ireland's interests after Brexit', *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 January 2020, available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/brexit/irish-meps-pledge-to-represent-northern-irelands-interests-after-brexit-38912881.html> (9 November 2021).

⁵⁴'Northern Ireland and Republic sign agreement on coronavirus co-operation', *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 April 2020, available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus/northern-ireland-and-republic-sign-agreement-on-coronavirus-co-operation-39110233.html> (9 November 2021).

⁵⁵NISRA, 'Covid-19 related deaths in Northern Ireland: deaths occurring during March 2020 to January 2021', 25 February 2021, available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/COVID-19%20deaths%20-%20March%202020%20-%20January%202021%20-%20Bulletin.pdf> (9 November 2021). This bulletin placed the death toll in Northern Ireland at 2,546: higher than the number for Ireland (approximately 2,300).

believed to have been head of IRA intelligence in the 1990s.⁵⁶ The funeral was attended by large crowds with little evidence of social distancing, in apparent violation of the coronavirus regulations in place at the time. Although calls were made for the resignation of Michelle O'Neill as deputy first minister, no resignations occurred: O'Neill apologised for any additional hurt caused to grieving families by her attendance.⁵⁷ The contrast with 'Golfgate' south of the border reveals very different standards in accountability, but also reflects the different levels of restrictions imposed and the more complex relationship between citizens and the state in Northern Ireland.

In November, Secretary of State Brandon Lewis announced that the British government would not hold a public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the murder of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane by loyalist paramilitaries in 1989. The Finucane family had campaigned for an inquiry as there was evidence of state collusion with paramilitaries. The Irish government condemned the decision, with Micheál Martin describing it as 'arrogant and cruel'.⁵⁸ It reflected a clear direction of travel by the British government in relation to Northern Ireland. Particularly since the removal of Smith, the Johnson government was moving against historical investigations and appeared less interested in engaging with nationalist communities and concerns. That this public statement came after the taoiseach called for an inquiry was an additional diplomatic insult. The slapdash approach to Northern Ireland is perhaps best captured by Boris Johnson announcing a potential bridge between Britain and Northern Ireland.⁵⁹ The challenge for the Irish government is that such an approach undermines the GFA institutions and will make both north–south and east–west relations on these islands more difficult to manage in the context of Brexit and beyond.

IRELAND, THE UK AND BREXIT

The UK left the EU on 31 January 2020. A transition period lasting until the end of the year ensured that the cliff-edge of a no-deal Brexit was postponed. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, few believed a comprehensive trade deal could

⁵⁶Gerry Moriarty, 'Bobby Storey: the IRA's planner and enforcer who stayed in the shadows', *Irish Times*, 30 June 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/bobby-storey-the-ira-s-planner-and-enforcer-who-stayed-in-the-shadows-1.4292981> (9 November 2021).

⁵⁷Digital Staff, 'Michelle O'Neill and Mary Lou McDonald apologise for any hurt caused over Bobby Storey funeral', *Irish News*, 3 July 2020, available at: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernireland-news/2020/07/03/news/mary-lou-mcdonald-apologises-for-any-hurt-caused-over-crowds-at-bobby-storey-funeral-1994480/> (9 November 2021).

⁵⁸Paul Hosford, 'Micheál Martin: UK decision not to hold inquiry into Pat Finucane murder "arrogant"', *Irish Examiner*, 1 December 2020, available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40120313.html> (9 November 2021).

⁵⁹Peter Walker, 'Government "actively looking into" Scotland–Northern Ireland bridge', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/10/boris-johnson-northern-ireland-scotland-bridge-plan-being-actively-looked-into-no-10> (9 November 2021).

be negotiated in that period, and there were calls for the British government to request an extension.⁶⁰ However, having staked his political future and fought an election on his 'oven-ready' deal, the Johnson government was consistent in refusing to consider an extension.

In his speech on 31 January, Johnson highlighted the opportunities that Brexit presented to restore British sovereignty and freedom of action in trade, fisheries, migration and other policy areas: to 'unleash the full potential of this brilliant country and to make better the lives of everyone in every corner of our United Kingdom'.⁶¹ In terms of the future relationship, Johnson spoke of a Canada-type deal in January, mirroring the recently concluded but not yet ratified CETA deal. In February this had morphed into an 'Australia-style deal', which, given the fact that no trade agreement exists between the EU and Australia, meant essentially trading on WTO terms.⁶²

A key sticking point was the issue of customs checks on goods travelling between Britain and Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland protocol agreed as part of the withdrawal agreement, and ratified in Westminster on 23 January 2020, contained assurances about no hard border in the Irish Sea or on the island of Ireland. A series of measures including customs checks at Northern Irish ports and data sharing between the UK and the EU were outlined in the agreement. There was, however, a divergence of interpretation, with the Johnson government claiming that there would be no need for checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea destined for Northern Ireland. In early February, the president of the Commission highlighted the need for such checks. This placed Ireland in an invidious position. Our goal was for the EU and UK to reach an agreement that satisfied the terms of the protocol while maintaining the integrity of the single market and no hard border in Ireland. The tensions between these goals required careful management. Ireland had to thread the needle of defending its own interests in relation to Northern Ireland while also not appearing to be an advocate for the UK position in the negotiations.

The negotiations made little progress for much of the first half of the year. In May Ireland announced it was resuming its active planning for a no-deal Brexit.⁶³ In July these sentiments were echoed by Angela Merkel, who argued

⁶⁰Sarah Wheaton, 'EU trade chief: Boris Johnson will back down on Brexit timeline', *Politico*, 30 December 2019, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-trade-chief-boris-johnson-will-back-down-on-brexit-timeline/> (9 November 2021).

⁶¹Boris Johnson, 'Address to the nation', 31 January 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-31-january-2020> (9 November 2021).

⁶²Von der Leyen "surprised" at UK suggestion of Australia-style EU relationship', *Irish Times*, 11 February 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/von-der-leyen-surprised-at-uk-suggestion-of-australia-style-eu-relationship-1.4170298> (9 November 2021).

⁶³Juno McEnroe, 'Tánaiste Simon Coveney seeking approval for Brexit Omnibus Bill and warns of no-deal', *Irish Examiner*, 29 May 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/arid-31002325.html> (9 November 2021).

that the EU must prepare for a no-deal Brexit.⁶⁴ This public acknowledgement of a possible no-deal outcome could be seen as brinksmanship, i.e. a willingness to accept a no-deal was signalled by both sides in order to force concessions on key issues.

When coupled with the compressed timeline created by Britain's unwillingness to extend the transition period and governments' bandwidth across Europe being absorbed by the COVID-19 crisis, it seemed by autumn 2020 that a no-deal was the most likely outcome. This brought into focus the implications for the Northern Ireland protocol. As mentioned above, unionists had opposed the withdrawal agreement on the basis that the protocol could lead to the economic segregation of Northern Ireland from the remainder of the UK. A no-deal Brexit would ensure that this was the case, as it would leave Northern Ireland within the EU customs union.

Although Northern Irish businesses could see the advantage of maintaining access to both EU and UK markets, the British government took steps to address unionist concerns by passing legislation in Westminster that would give the UK the power to unilaterally override the Irish protocol. This move was condemned by the EU and the Irish government.⁶⁵ Although the British government acknowledged that the Internal Market Bill would break international law in 'a limited and specific way', as stated by Brandon Lewis,⁶⁶ it kept the measure in the legislation until December 2020 following negotiations at the EU–UK joint committee.⁶⁷ Whether the willingness by the UK to override aspects of the withdrawal agreement unilaterally was a further example of brinksmanship remains in question. Certainly the UK has seen the protocol as an area of contention but also of opportunity in its negotiations with the EU. The Internal Market Bill was one of a series of instances where the UK brought negotiations to the brink of collapse in order to seek concessions or at least manage domestic expectations of the post-Brexit relationship with the EU.

Through October and November, progress appeared painfully slow and the risk of a no-deal Brexit grew substantially. However, although talks broke down on several occasions, negotiations continued throughout the last quarter of 2020, eventually resulting in a trade deal announced on Christmas Eve, leaving

⁶⁴Hans von der Burchard, 'Angela Merkel says EU "must prepare" for no-deal Brexit', *Politico*, 1 July 2020, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-says-eu-must-prepare-for-no-deal-brexit/> (9 November 2021).

⁶⁵Elaine Loughlin, 'European Commission accuses UK of undermining Good Friday Agreement', *Irish Examiner*, 10 September 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/arid-40046627.html> (9 November 2021).

⁶⁶'Brexit: Britain says it may break international law in "limited way"', *Irish Times*, 8 September 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/brexit-britain-says-it-may-break-international-law-in-limited-way-1.4349653> (9 November 2021).

⁶⁷Emer O'Toole, 'Brexit: Tories remove law-breaking clauses from Internal Market bill in U-turn', *The National*, 8 December 2020, available at: <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18929161.brexit-tories-remove-law-breaking-clauses-internal-market-bill-u-turn/> (9 November 2021).

little time for ratification ahead of the 31 December deadline. The deal included provisions on tariff-free trade subject to safeguards on the level playing field, a transitional period for fisheries, which had been a major bone of contention, and the creation of an independent arbitration tribunal modelled on the WTO dispute settlement system.⁶⁸ The deal was ratified by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) on 28 December and would be ratified by the European Parliament within two months of it entering into force.

The deal ended the free movement of services and people, albeit with a commitment to notify each party should there be changes to short-term visa requirements, and ended UK participation in the Erasmus educational exchange programmes though maintaining, subject to a financial contribution, UK participation in Horizon Europe, the research funding mechanism managed by the European Commission. The agreement is probably best understood as a framework for managing the future relationship between the UK and the EU rather than as a complete and final settlement of the terms of that relationship. With that in mind, careful stewardship of the deal will be needed in areas where Ireland's national interests are at stake.

Relations with the UK have undoubtedly suffered since the Brexit vote. The Northern Ireland protocol and the Johnson government's opposition to historical inquiries have added to tensions. It's not surprising that although early in the pandemic, then taoiseach Leo Varadkar and prime minister Boris Johnson agreed to align the COVID-19 response of the two countries 'as much as possible',⁶⁹ these approaches have diverged significantly in terms of both public health measures in response to the pandemic and vaccine procurement and roll-out. The types of tensions that became evident in the Brexit negotiations are best captured by the announcement of a UK plan to use Royal Navy patrol boats to police fisheries in the Irish Sea in the event of a no-deal Brexit.⁷⁰

Anglo-Irish relations are arguably at their lowest ebb since the early 1990s. Furthermore, the delays in finalising the EU–UK trade and cooperation agreement (TCA) meant that Ireland made significant progress in operationalising its no-deal contingency plan. The growth in direct ferry crossings to Europe is a practical indicator of the extent to which Ireland's economy has decoupled from dependency on access to and through UK markets.

⁶⁸Federico Fabbrini, 'From the Withdrawal Agreement to the Trade & Cooperation Agreement: reshaping EU–UK relations', Brexit Institute Working Paper 10/2020, available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3756331 (9 November 2021).

⁶⁹Digital Desk, 'Taoiseach discusses Covid-19 pandemic in 20 minute phone call with Boris Johnson', *Irish Examiner*, 19 March 2020, available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30989029.html> (9 November 2021).

⁷⁰Dan Sabbath, 'Four navy ships to help protect fishing waters in case of no-deal Brexit', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/11/four-navy-ships-to-help-protect-uk-waters-in-case-of-no-deal-brexit> (9 November 2021).

That said, it remains in Ireland's interests to have a close and stable relationship with London. Peace and prosperity on this island depend on it, but the ongoing tensions between the UK and the EU will place pressure on Ireland's ability to manage this relationship into the future.

IRELAND AND THE WIDER WORLD

Ireland had set out the ambition to achieve re-election to the UNSC as a non-permanent member, a position it had last held in 2001–2002, in its foreign policy review published in January 2015, *The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World*. 2020 would see the culmination of that campaign, with Ireland elected to the UNSC in June. This achievement marked the success of a multi-year campaign but also represented the renewed ambition of Ireland's diplomatic efforts.

In 2018, Ireland embarked on a plan to expand its global diplomatic footprint, particularly beyond the traditional focus in Europe, North America and other parts of the English-speaking world. Although the COVID-19 crisis curtailed some of the in-person aspects of this plan, it also highlighted the increased interconnectivity that the Global Island review was pointing towards. In response to the pandemic, Ireland strongly supported the WHO in the face of criticism from the US in particular, and committed its support to COVAX, the UN initiative to secure vaccine supply to the low- and middle-income countries.⁷¹

A further example of the more global orientation of Ireland's foreign policy was the launch in January 2020 of an Asia-Pacific strategy. The strategy sets out the ambition to increase Ireland's footprint and to establish and consolidate bilateral partnerships across the region, and to increase Ireland's visibility in the region—politically, economically and culturally—with a view to continuing the trajectory of growth in economic partnerships while recognising the need to engage with Asia-Pacific partners on issues such as climate change, security and development.⁷² The ambition and scale of the strategy reflects growing recognition that the transatlantic focus of much of the twentieth century is giving way to a Pacific order. This geopolitical shift demands a recalibration of Ireland's traditional foreign policy focus, which the new Asia-Pacific strategy signals. That's not to say that older relationships should be neglected, but rather that a more active engagement beyond the Western hemisphere is required in the twenty-first century.

⁷¹'WHO programme seeks fair distribution of future vaccine', *RTÉ*, 22 September 2020, available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0922/1166671-coronavirus-vaccine/> (9 November 2021).

⁷²Department of Foreign Affairs, 'Launch of the Asia-Pacific Strategy: "Global Ireland: delivering in the Asia-Pacific region to 2025"', 9 January 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/speech/fl601-launch-of-the-asia-pacific-strategy-global-ireland-delivering-in-the-asia-pacific-region-to-2025/#> (9 November 2021).

2020 marked the 50th anniversary of the entry into force of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in which Ireland had a significant role relative to its size in negotiating through the UN system. The 'Irish resolution' that started the process created some momentum towards the creation of the NPT, with Frank Aiken, then minister for external affairs, recognised as a key player.⁷³ Since the 1950s Ireland has remained committed to disarmament and non-proliferation, also supporting the later Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which acquired its 50th signature in 2020 and would therefore enter into force in January 2021. Ireland's engagement on the nuclear question has been one of the most consistent pillars of foreign policy at the global level in conjunction with our commitment to peacekeeping.

2020 was also the 60th anniversary of Ireland's deployment to the Congo as part of a UN mission in July 1960. The four-year mission played a part in Ireland's continuous deployment on UN peacekeeping missions from 1958 onwards. The Congo mission resulted in the largest loss of life experienced by the Irish defence forces, as nine soldiers were killed in Niemba in November 1960, although more recently attention has shifted to Irish involvement in the 'Siege of Jadotville', which took place the following year.⁷⁴ In an echo of the Congo attacks, three members of the Irish defence forces were injured in an attack while on deployment with the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali.⁷⁵ While no fatalities occurred, it served as a reminder of the danger Irish soldiers face on UN missions.

In December, the government announced the establishment of an Independent Commission on the Defence Forces, which had been agreed as part of the programme for government. The commission was not asked to look at Ireland's strategic orientation but rather to focus on retention, equipment and adequate force levels. It is due to report its findings in early 2022. The defence forces are currently deployed in Mali as part of the MINUSMA force (106) and, separately, the EU Training Mission (20). Three members are deployed as part of the UN observer mission in Congo (MONUSCO); there are 20 in Kosovo and five in Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of KFOR and EUFOR-Althea respectively, 336 in Lebanon as part of UNIFIL and 130 on the Golan Heights in UNDOF.⁷⁶ As the chief of staff, Vice Admiral Mark Mellett noted that Ireland's commitment to peacekeeping began in 1958 and is the longest unbroken period of service in the world.⁷⁷

⁷³Richard Sinnott, 'Ireland and the diplomacy of nuclear non-proliferation: the politics of incrementalism', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 6 (1995), 59–78.

⁷⁴Richard E.M. Heaslip, 'Ireland's first engagement in United Nations peacekeeping operations: an assessment', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 17 (2006), 31–42.

⁷⁵Fergus Kelly, 'Three Irish soldiers in IED blast east of Gao in Mali', *Defense Post*, 25 February 2020, available at: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/02/25/mali-3-irish-soldiers-injured-ied-gao-minusma/> (9 November 2021).

⁷⁶See <https://www.military.ie/en/overseas-deployments/about-overseas-deployments/> for details.

⁷⁷Órla Ryan, 'Pride and sacrifice: marking 60 years of Irish participation in peacekeeping missions', *thejournal.ie*, 24 June 2018, available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/defence-forces-un-peacekeeping-4085507-Jun2018/> (9 November 2021).

Whether the ambition of this commitment can continue to be met is a key question for the future.

PROMINENT DEATHS

It is difficult in the context of a pandemic to single out or highlight a particular individual. Each of the close to two million confirmed COVID-19-related deaths in 2020⁷⁸ represented a loved one, a friend, a whole and valuable human being in their own right. In Ireland, the death toll had climbed to over 2,300 by the end of the year,⁷⁹ and was particularly high in nursing homes in the first weeks and months of the pandemic.⁸⁰

2020 also saw the passing of Seamus Mallon (in January) and John Hume (in August), who as leaders of the SDLP and the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland had played a critical role in bringing about the GFA. John Hume was recognised with a Nobel Peace Prize in 1998 along with Sir David Trimble for their work on the GFA. On his passing, Bill Clinton captured the essence of the man, saying he ‘fought his long war for peace in Northern Ireland ... His chosen weapons: an unshakeable commitment to nonviolence, persistence, kindness and love.’⁸¹

Northern Ireland lost another Nobel laureate with the passing of Betty Williams in March. She had been recognised with Mairead Corrigan Maguire for their work in the early days of the Peace People.⁸² Marion Finucane, trail-blazing journalist and broadcaster, passed away in January. Her groundbreaking radio show *Women Today* centred ordinary women’s voices to speak about hitherto taboo subjects, from sex education to menstruation.⁸³

Outside of Ireland, the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May sparked global protests under the #Blacklivesmatter slogan.⁸⁴ In July, the passing of legendary footballer and manager Sir Jack Charlton was mourned on both sides of the Irish Sea. Charlton had been a part

⁷⁸‘The number of people who have died from Covid-19 is likely to be close to 17m’, *The Economist*, 2 November 2021, available at: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/11/02/the-number-of-people-who-have-died-from-covid-19-is-likely-to-be-close-to-17m> (9 November 2021).

⁷⁹Central Statistics Office, ‘Covid-19 deaths and cases, series 19’, 15 January 2021, available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/br/b-cdc/covid-19deathsandcasesseries19/> (9 November 2021).

⁸⁰Neil Michael, ‘Ireland “failed as a nation” to protect elderly, Dáil hears’, *Irish Examiner*, 13 July 2021, available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/politics/arid-40336454.html> (9 November 2021).

⁸¹Bill Clinton as quoted in ‘John Hume: Nobel Peace Prize winner dies age 83’, *BBC*, 3 August 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-44753271> (9 November 2021).

⁸²Gerry Moriarty, ‘Death of peace campaigner and Nobel laureate Betty Williams’, *Irish Times*, 18 March 2020, available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/death-of-peace-campaigner-and-nobel-laureate-betty-williams-1.4206225> (9 November 2021).

⁸³Michele Hennessey, ‘Marian Finucane: a broadcaster who changed who we heard from – and what we were hearing’, *thejournal.ie*, 2 January 2020, available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/marian-finu-cane-2-4952041-Jan2020/> (9 November 2021).

⁸⁴Oliver Holmes, ‘George Floyd killing sparks protests across US: at a glance guide’, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/30/george-floyd-protests-latest-at-a-glance-white-house> (9 November 2021).

of the England team that won the 1966 World Cup before making further history as manager of the Ireland football team, leading them to their first European Championships and first two World Cup qualifications.

CONCLUSION

The world was in some ways turned on its head by the COVID-19 pandemic. The year ended, as described above, with a return to lockdowns and a rising case rate. Despite the hopeful signs of the COVID-19 vaccine plan, announced on 15 December, the approval of the Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine on 24 December and the first vaccinations being given on 29 December, it was clear the pandemic was far from over and daily life would continue to be disrupted into 2021.

In terms of foreign policy, in many ways Ireland ended 2020 with the same challenges with which it had entered the year. The election of Joe Biden was reassuring to Irish concerns about the role of international organisations and the status of our undocumented in the US, but for taxation and economic relations the signs were less promising. It meant a strengthening of US support on issues related to Brexit and Northern Ireland, but his campaign also had suggested that the new president took a dim view of the global tax regime and his election slogan of ‘foreign policy for the middle class’ could signal a coolness towards free trade that didn’t address falling living standards and incomes for American workers. For Ireland, this could mean that US investment will be encouraged to stay at home though tax incentives and other mechanisms, putting pressure on our ability to attract companies to Ireland, particularly around corporate tax.

Similarly, the ratification of the TCA in late December avoided the cliff-edge of a hard Brexit. However, as discussed above, the TCA is best seen as a framework for the management of the EU–UK relationship rather than a fixed agreement. Ireland will need to remain vigilant and actively manage its relationship with Brussels and London, with the Northern Ireland protocol likely to remain a key point of contestation and negotiation.

At the start of the year, Ireland faced a complex set of problems in our three main foreign policy relationships. The challenges were managed admirably well against the backdrop of the global pandemic. It’s difficult to anticipate the pandemic’s impact on the shape of global politics, but for Ireland it helped to clarify the benefits and challenges of being a small country that operates as part of the EU, and it revealed a deep well of resilience in Irish society, which pulled together to meet the worst the disease could bring.

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