



**Reserve Defence Forces Representative Association**  
*Comhlachas Ionadaitheach na nÓglach Cúltaca*

**RDFRA Submission to the  
National Security Strategy Consultation**

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## Introduction

This submission is a response to the call from the Department of An Taoiseach for submissions from interested parties to invite them to comment on four key questions.

One would have expected that in light of the gravity and seriousness of the topic, and in order to ensure a robust process with submissions from as many interest groups as possible, the public consultation process would have operated for a number of months.

We note that the 2015 White Paper on Defence states that:

*“...the security of the State and its citizens is a primary responsibility of Government... Providing for the military defence of the State’s territory is a fundamental security requirement and responsibility for this is vested specifically in the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces. Defence underpins Ireland’s security as well as the promotion of the State’s strategic interests in the international environment.”*

An array of domestic and international defence and security challenges remain a significant concern for Ireland. Such threats pertain to conventional and non-conventional threats. Ireland’s geographical and political context places notable military priorities upon the State. These are related to our engagement and support for the EU, UN, NATO-PfP, PESCO, CSDP, etc; along with the plethora of major multinational corporations, organisations, and embassies within the State, many of whom originate from countries which attract hostile threats from across the globe.

The Irish State is also unique, due to its duties towards defence and security relating to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The consequences of Brexit will require specific attention towards dissident paramilitary threats across the island of Ireland. Furthermore, our land border with Northern Ireland necessitates the deployment of military assets to address potential threats traversing through the State to the UK. Various emerging non-conventional threats also include attacks via cyber, climate, social order, information systems, democratic processes, national resources, etc.

The State’s national and international defence commitments will only grow in the years ahead. This will be associated with the changing jurisdictional, legal, political and security landscape arising from Brexit; along with our evolving collective-responsibilities within the EU, and the commitment Ireland retains to supporting international security and humanitarian missions. Such duties and priorities reflect not only the State’s values and ethics, but also our responsibilities towards financial, economic and social protection, investment and growth. The actions of adversaries to the State and its interests require that the military attend to the ongoing development and modernisation of new military capabilities and strategies, which address such factors across sea, land, air, cyber-security and space. Despite the above challenges and realities, Ireland has chosen to retain the lowest spending on military resources within the EU, as measured by percentage of GDP. To respond to these matters, there is a clear requirement to confront the systemic processes that have contributed to the current military capability concerns in Ireland over recent years. There is an additional need to assure that the military achieves recruitment and retention objectives in order to return it to its established strength. Furthermore, capability gaps will involve significant investment across sea, land, air, and cyber-security resources. The strategic planning, operating and management of the military should involve clear yet dynamic financial processes, which are adaptable and appreciative of the importance of the military to Ireland’s national and international posture.

Many of the defence and security challenges and priorities for Ireland will involve a shift in military culture within the State and across State bodies. While priority should remain on urgently addressing and enhancing the deficits within the Permanent Defence Force, there is significant scope to maximise the utilisation of the military reserve (i.e. Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve). Unlike the reserve components within other nations, the size and usage of Ireland’s Reserve Defence Force (RDF) is minimal. The DF’s single force structure and the current White Paper on Defence call for the increased development and deployment of reservists, including specialists in healthcare, cyber-security etc. There is a low carrying cost for the contingent capability provided by reservists. As a result, a concerted effort should begin forthwith on growing and developing the RDF, with associated improvements to the supports provided for reservists. This would involve matters pertaining to the reserve career structure for training, operational service, and advancement for such service personnel. This process should also focus on addressing critical shortages in

specialist areas within the DF as a whole, whilst assuring that appreciation is attained across the defence community in developing certain assets that are best retained in the reserve (e.g. select medical specialities, along with certain legal, IT, cyber, research and language personnel, etc.)

A reserve is never a substitute for a properly resourced professional force. The primary goal of the RDF should be to provide a well-trained surge capability to the PDF in times of crisis or increased operational tempo. An example of this is where well-trained reservists undertake garrison duties during a crisis period, thereby releasing their highly-trained PDF colleagues to be deployed to front-line tasks. A secondary capability would be to temporarily augment the PDF during periods when it is understrength, either across its establishment or in discrete specialist functions.

**Question 1 – In a rapidly changing world what in your view will be the principal threats to Ireland’s national security from 2020 – 2025?**

In our view, the principal threats to Ireland’s national security in the relevant time period are;

- (i) Cyber-security;
- (ii) Climate Change;
- (iii) Terrorism; and
- (iv) Migration.

This question indicates what the government already recognises that the protection of national security is a difficult challenge to meet effectively. The threat landscape has over recent years changed at an accelerated and alarming rate. Conventional approaches to defence are unlikely to provide any effective remediation of the risk from hitherto unknown threat actors. An appropriate approach would likely involve two key elements; flexibility and adaptability. In considering the former, the ability of the Defence Forces to rapidly expand in response to the emerging threat landscape would require an effective plan, as well as a well-rehearsed mobilisation of state assets and personnel as it military commanders would see fit. In the latter case, the ability to re-task existing assets to address enemy responses and counter responses is key.

Both approaches are complementary and the adoption of both may be an appropriate response to the globally acknowledged shift from conventional to hybrid warfare prosecuted both openly and covertly.

The ability to define and then detect an attack, and how to gauge an appropriate response lies within the purview of military commanders and well-informed political leaders who have the competence and capability of making complex decisions in difficult circumstances. Being able to gauge whether an event can be classified as an attack on our western and Irish values, as well as initiating an appropriate response, will most certainly be a key competence that will be required.

Other nations have seen how subtle and probing attacks on their state, whether it is on their values or national institutions, are seldom without intent. There are a number of actors who operate on the international stage whose interests would be served by destabilising the apparatus of our state and who continuously seek effective means to promote their own interests at the expense of ours.

It probably goes without saying that the protection of our way of life cannot be undertaken without the corresponding protection of our economy, our state institutions and our critical infrastructure. The common denominator among all is the ‘interconnectedness’ of each and the vulnerabilities that this exposes to a threat actor. Sectors such as power generation and distribution, telecommunications, and fin-tech are all examples where enterprises can provide some protection for themselves, but without an overarching defensive framework, they remain woefully exposed.

National institutions such as banking, law enforcement, the Justice system as well as the Civil and Public Service, all expose a different vulnerability and one with which must be addressed by the state itself, as opposed to contracting out to private or commercial entities.

The threats to such critical infrastructure are both physical and non-physical. Physical threats are those with a potential to cause damage to the infrastructure itself; for example, terrorist attacks against data centres; theft of metal and materials from communications lines. Non-physical threats are those which may or may not manifest themselves in physical damage but can undermine the essential management, control and

operating systems on which key infrastructure relies. A cyber-attack is a form of non-physical threat which, if not countered effectively, can lead to drastic consequences. For example, the ‘WannaCry’ ransomware attack on the NHS in the UK in 2018, which was countered within four days, is reported to have cost the NHS £92 million (Without considering the cost of harm to and deaths of health service users).

Traditionally, Ireland’s primary focus for national security has been on physical threats. Unfortunately, it appears that the low volume of spending on defence in Ireland means that its ability to mobilise sufficient, adequate and appropriate resources to counter such threats has been hampered.

Separately, it has become increasingly apparent, both on the international and national stage, that non-physical threats have the potential to cause a disproportionate level of damage in terms of the resources required to launch them. The Government has recognised this point:

*“Recent years have seen the development and regular use of very advanced tools for cyber enabled attacks and espionage, and, likely for the first time, the physical destruction of Critical National Infrastructure by cyber enabled means. As such, the field of cyber security is characterised by ongoing and high stakes technological arms race, between attack and defence.”<sup>1</sup>*

It is critical, therefore, that Ireland increases its commitment to defending from such threats and the State’s ability to respond to both physical and non-physical results. This requires a co-ordinated approach amongst State agencies and the Defence Forces, particularly in response to hybrid attacks.

The above is a consideration of the country’s disposition in relation to attacks from a hostile agent or agents. However, as is now widely known, climate change poses a risk to the state and its citizens. Risks caused by it are no longer the “once in a century” events, as the Department of Defence has referred to them, perhaps as a comfort to their apparent lack of preparedness.

As has already been seen, flooding and the effects on agriculture and food production through climate change will have potentially disastrous effects on the economy. Here a responsive approach is best considered as proactive measures lie largely within the political domain and many commentators have already claimed that political leadership has failed in addressing that in a timely way. This means that the front line agencies of the State need to be trained and equipped for this particular form of threat. The Defence Forces is a key actor in terms of responding to such threats, with the RDF representing a significant force enabler and multiplier in respect of responding to crises. Time and time again, the Defence Forces has mobilised to provide relief from flooding, snow and ice storms and water shortages and, whilst having successfully discharged their tasks, each event has demonstrated the low levels of resources available to counter such threats and the fact that we would not be in a position, as a State, to respond to such events for a prolonged period of time.

As an island nation, soon to be blocked from easy access to mainland EU by the UK, the preservation of our transport and telecommunication links are enormously important. The development of our maritime capabilities to further expand to protect the national interest on the high seas is a message that our colleagues in the Naval Service have been advocating for many years. The crisis that has been allowed to develop there needs to be effectively addressed as a matter of priority.

The likelihood of a migration crisis or a blockade, while remote, is no excuse for failing to develop the capability of responding to such difficulties should they materialise.

In the two decades since the relative peace in the North since the Good Friday Agreement, many observers have commented that the national awareness of just how easily civil unrest could re-ignite has been lost. The ability to maintain the rule of law in the face of significant civil unrest, be it from republican paramilitaries or other new agents such as right wing extremists or Islamic fundamentalists, must be retained. The ability to provide effective aid to the civil power has been put under undue stress due to prevailing government policy on defence. Clearly, this needs to be properly addressed.

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<sup>1</sup>National Cyber Security Strategy 2019 – 2024, Government of Ireland, p. 13

In doing so, the ability of the Defence Forces to provide support to the state in a flexible way, as was demonstrated in recent years with events as diverse as the hunger strike protests to movement control during the Foot and Mouth pandemic, will need to be provided for.

## **Question 2 – In your opinion, what strategic goals should Ireland adopt for national security?**

This question is best addressed by examining what our neighbours and peers are doing to address their own security requirements. However, there are four main goals which could serve as ideal high-level objectives:

1. **Interoperability with other European military and state security organisations**  
The ability to work alongside other armies will provide opportunities for shared learning, enhanced capability and economies of scale.
2. **Alignment with other European military and state security organisations**  
So that Ireland does not become an outlier in international defence policy issues, and therefore a conspicuous target.
3. **Development of our own native defence capabilities**  
For the RDFRA, this is the single most important goal. Previous detailed presentations to the Joint Committee on Defence, and to the Minister with responsibility for Defence, have all covered what is required here. For the purpose of this submission, we are confining our comments on development of native defence capabilities to the RDF. In summary, the following policies should be formulated without any further delay in terms of the ensuring a viable and effective Reserve:
  - (a) Government policy which supports Defence, including the use of the RDF in a real and meaningful manner;
  - (b) A meaningful operational use of reserve forces by military commanders facilitated by legislative changes to the relevant statutes (Defence Acts) (including the utilisation of select RDF personnel on certain overseas operations);
  - (c) The provision of employment protection for reservists through amending existing employment law so that reservists may do their duty without negative consequence; and
  - (d) Employer engagement to support the use of Reservists which could include the establishment of incentives for employers to employ reservists.
4. **Severing the reliance on other states for help**  
The unstated policy of reliance of our large neighbours to protect us in the event of a national crisis, without having made adequate preparations ourselves, is and should be a source of national embarrassment. As a sovereign state, we should be able to reasonably meet the challenges of providing adequate protection for the state and its citizens.

## **Question 3 – In your view, will the traditional national security policies and approaches remain relevant for Ireland over the coming decade?**

As was previously detailed, the RDFRA firmly believes that those ‘traditional national security policies’ have been developed more in line with political expediency and the economics of austerity rather than in response to expert advice available from senior military leadership. In short, the answer is clearly ‘no’. It is only through good fortune that the enormous gaps in policy have not exposed the State to catastrophic failures and/or tragedies.

The dynamic threat landscape makes accurate prediction of security requirements difficult, therefore, the reduction of capabilities to only that adequate to ‘keep the lights on’ exposes the state to a failure of the Defence Forces to properly respond to any threat to national security. This is both a false economy and, some would argue, a betrayal of trust the citizens have placed in their political leadership.

A proactive approach to defence is required and the natural lead organisation here is the Defence Forces, with the appropriate support of the Department of Defence.

The over-reliance upon an Garda Síochána for a disproportionate responsibility of state security places an undue burden upon law enforcement for threats that fall outside their competences. This is not a criticism of the Gardaí, but rather an observation that recent government policy has failed to properly classify defence and threats appropriately.

**Question 4 – *What strategic capabilities will the State need to develop in order to enhance its capacity to protect the State and the people from current and emerging threats?***

Fortunately, the capabilities likely to be required by the State for the most part exist within her borders. The challenge for the Government is in taking advice from stakeholders and forming an effective canon of policy and law to respond to the demand to establish the required capacity.

At a high level, there are at least 8 areas which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency;

1. Technological

Every stakeholder is acutely aware of the expanding requirement to equip the state with an appropriate Cyber-Security capability. The establishment of the National Cyber Security Centre, at the beginning of the last decade, was a welcome development. Unfortunately, the C&AG identified that its overall strategic plan was not clear.<sup>2</sup> It also identified that the Department of Communication's funding for cyber security in the period 2012 – 2015 was a third of that for 2011.<sup>3</sup>

In such circumstances, it is our submission that there already exists a structure within the Defence Forces (the CIS Corps) for developing this defensive capacity. There are obvious efficiencies in siting the development within Defence as it already can utilise civilian skills through the employment of reservists where necessary.

2. Medical

The ability to react to mass civilian emergencies, either in a major accident or epidemic context is a required capability. This is especially so when the existing capacity of the HSE is as stretched as it currently is.

3. Logistics

Floods in the mid-west and elsewhere have demonstrated the requirement of the State to move citizens, aid and supplies in the event of major disruptive events. Global climate change is likely to make this requirement more acute in coming years.

4. Maritime

The defence of our maritime borders, undersea communications cables, narcotics interdiction and fisheries protection are all well-known requirements for our Naval Service. Studies have shown that a 12-Ship Fleet is the minimum capable of adequately projecting Ireland's sovereignty out into its expanded Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

With regards to interoperability with our Defence Partners in Security and Humanitarian missions, the Naval Service requires at least one Multi-Role Vessel (MRV) as outlined in the White paper on Defence. Any Naval Service vessels operating with an international force must, as a minimum, be equipped to detect and defend itself from all modern anti-ship weapons. Reservists could be used in a cost-effective way to expand the ship's company of a MRV when it pivots from a domestic, EEZ-policing role to a humanitarian or security mission.

The provision of replacement vessels to the Naval Service Reserve is urgently required to provide a suitable training platform for reservists. In addition, suitably designed craft could allow the NSR to undertake limited operational taskings in inshore waters and harbours. The only vessel currently capable of these tasks may be an Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) which could be released for other duties where such an expensive asset would provide more value to the state.

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<sup>2</sup>C&AG Annual Report 2017, Chapter 8, paragraph 8.40

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid* paragraph 8.12

## 5. Aviation

Again as an island nation, we have a heavy reliance on the aviation so the protection of our airspace as well as the ability to patrol our seas from the air is highly important. An expansion of SAR and the location of Coast Guard air operations should be within the remit of the Air Corps. As a minimum first step to providing for the defence of Ireland's Airspace the defence Forces must be provided with an Active Radar system capable of detecting military aircraft which are operating without transponders. Ireland is currently without the capability to construct the intelligence picture which would allow for the development of an appropriate Air Defence capability in the future.

## 6. Engineering

Recent emergency works in the north-west has demonstrated the need to retain a military engineering capability.

## 7. CIMIC

The Defence Forces has an established function for the liaison with civilians in a crisis. This capability would be invaluable in the event of a major defence issue or attack. Government policy ought to develop this capacity to a level beyond its current establishment. Reservists represent a significant asset in CIMIC operations as they can easily straddle the relationship between military and civilians.

## 8. Reserve forces

The ability of the state to call upon an effective reserve is a highly valuable 'insurance policy' to have. A Reserve Defence Force that can be called upon to support the Permanent Defence Forces was envisioned by those who drafted the original Defence Act but, unfortunately, that ideal has been diluted so much in recent years that the capability of the RDF is now minimal. Immediate action to reinvigorate the RDF is required to save the Defence Forces and the State from a costly and time consuming exercise in its re-establishment. Such a move is consistent with recent strategic re-organisations in the UK. The current establishment of the RDF should be examined and consideration given to re-balancing the force in favour Combat Service Support (CSS) functions.

## Conclusion

It is lamentably clear that there is no real commitment to defending the nation by this or recent governments. One could be forgiven for taking a jaundiced view that this exercise is one of simply 'ticking the box'. There is no real evidence that the Government has any intention of committing to a minimum level of investment in defence or providing any effective political leadership in this area.

A grotesque imbalance of authority between civil servants and senior military leadership has developed over the years, which has manifested in a near toxic working relationship. If this is what passes in the relative peace of our current threat environment, one would wonder how this could effectively operate in extremis. The appointment of the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces as Accounting Officer with regards to the Defence Budget is a necessity in redressing this imbalance.

It has been observed that the State's refusal to support the members of the Defence Forces, along with its blinkered and short term view of defence policy, is a measure of its failure to understand the importance of capable defence in a prosperous economy. This is only surpassed by its blind ignorance of Reserve matters and its refusal to utilise the vast capabilities which exist within the State, the likes of which so many other countries can only utilise through enforced conscription, but which in Ireland are available from willing volunteering citizens.

Should this country's run of good luck come to an abrupt end, history will judge this and previous governments, and their advisors in the Department of Defence, harshly for their failure to take even the simplest steps to address the myriad of easily fixed problems in defence.

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