

**Irish foreign policy in the United Nations and European Union:  
influence and participation**

**John Doyle and Eileen Connolly**

**Centre for International Studies, School of Law and Government  
Dublin City University**

Published as John Doyle and Eileen Connolly. 2010. "La política exterior irlandesa a l'ONU i a la UE: Influència i participació" (in Catalan, translation by publishers), DCIDOB (Barcelona), 2010, 111, pp11-27.

<http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/journals/dcidob>

The United Nations has had a central place in Irish foreign policy from the state's accession in 1955. Both political discourse and public opinion polls indicate widespread support for the organisation as a source of international legitimacy and as the appropriate forum to make major decisions regarding peace and security; international human rights; and development. The EU has an equally central role in Ireland's economic and social development in the last three decades, and while there is no significant opposition to EU membership, recent referenda on the EU Treaties of Nice and Lisbon were defeated on the first attempts, highlighting opposition to some aspects of recent EU integration processes.

This chapter begins with a brief examination of the first White Paper on foreign policy in the history of the state, published in 1996, as a means of looking at some of the long running context for Irish Foreign policy priorities.<sup>1</sup> It then explores Ireland's recent relationship with the EU focusing on the referenda on the Lisbon Treaty and

---

<sup>1</sup> Government of Ireland. White Paper on Foreign Policy: Challenges And Opportunities Abroad. Dublin: Government Publications, 1996.

<http://www.dfa.ie/information/publications/whitepaper/default.asp> , para 5.8.

The continued relevance of these four areas is indicated by a speech by the Taoiseach [prime minister] , 14 Sept 2005. <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?locID=200&docID=2157>.

finishes with an analysis of Ireland's engagement with the United Nations, including its last period on the security council in 2001-2.

### **Tensions in Irish Foreign policy**

In the 1996 Irish Government White Paper on Foreign Policy the UN is described as 'a cornerstone of Irish foreign policy' and support for the UN and its goals is expressed in the context of the values that underlie Ireland's foreign policy. The White Paper argued that these goals are not merely ethical aspirations but are essential to the self interest of small states, asserting that:

It is precisely because Ireland is small and hugely dependent on external trade for its well-being that we need an active foreign policy. ... We depend for our survival on a regulated international environment in which the rights and interests of even the smallest are guaranteed and protected.

Recent debates on Irish Foreign Policy have highlighted the potential between these aspirations and Irish economic interests, which are based on a dependence on US based foreign direct investment and EU economic integration. Former Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Cowen argued against an analysis of foreign policy on the basis of values versus interests, arguing that 'a multilateral rules-based international order *is* in our national interest.'; it is clear that the day to day elaboration of these interests has involved tensions, generating public discourse about the direction of Irish policy in both the UN and the EU.

### **Ireland and the European Union**

The European Union is popular in Ireland and opinion polls consistently show that a clear majority of the public believe that EU membership has been a positive experience for the country. For some Irish nationalists European integration has been a liberating process, ending the post colonial economic and political dependence on Britain. For others – on the more radical left wing of Irish politics, the nature of EU integration (but no longer the EU itself) has been criticised for being over centralised, dominated by neo-liberal economics and focused on building a European superpower.

The defeat of the first Nice referendum in 2001, was a shock to the political establishment, but following the success of a second Nice referendum the following year, the significance of initial defeat was to some extent minimised – and explained as being the result of a poor government information campaign (and the Government campaign was undoubtedly poor). The defeat of the subsequent Treaty of Lisbon, by a 'no' vote of 53.4%, on a relatively high turnout for a referendum, of 53.1%, was more of a shock to the political system and led to a more systematic and detailed analysis of voter concerns.

Analyses of public opinion carried out on behalf of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs after the first (defeated) Lisbon Treaty referendum, in an effort to clarify voter concerns, highlighted a number of significant facts.<sup>2</sup> Opposition to the Treaty was strongest amongst 25-34 year olds (59%), lower income groups (66%) and women

---

<sup>2</sup> All following references to See Millward Brown / IMC, *Post Lisbon Treaty Referendum Research Findings* (2008).

<http://www.dfa.ie/uploads/documents/Publications/Post%20Lisbon%20Treaty%20Referendum%20Research%20Findings/final%20-%20post%20lisbon%20treaty%20referendum%20research%20findings.pdf>

and Richard Sinnott, Johan A. Elkink, Kevin O'Rourke and James McBride *Attitudes and Behaviour in the Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon*, 2009.

<http://www.dfa.ie/uploads/documents/ucd%20geary%20institute%20report.pdf>

(56%). Amongst the two dominant conservative parties, 63% of the supporters of the governing Fianna Fáil party supporters voted yes but only 52% of the traditionally more pro-EU Fine Gael (opposition) party. 61% of Labour Party supporters and 53% of Green Party supporters voted no – despite the fact that their party leaderships campaigned for a yes vote.

Not understanding the Treaty was by far the most common spontaneous reason given for voting 'no'. In fact 23% of yes voters and 53% of no voters either said that they 'did not know' or were only 'vaguely aware' of what the Treaty was about, and over 40% of no voters spontaneously mentioned this when asked why they voted no. Other more substantive reasons for voting no included loss of independence (18%) and loss of neutrality / military issues (8%) and loss of an automatic Commissioner (4%). Supporters of the Treaty tended to mention the importance of the EU in quite a general way as the main reason for voting yes. When voters were directly asked about specific issues, which had featured strongly in the referendum, 82% of no voters (compared to 71% of yes voters) said military neutrality was important / very important in determining how they voted; 71% of No voters said the loss of a commissioner was important and 86% of no voters cited 'workers rights'. Though of less concern that these issues, voters with a conservative religious position on abortion expressed concerns, that the EU Court of Justice could interpret abortion as a fundamental right – over-riding Ireland's defacto legal prohibition on abortion and one conservative pro-business group *Libertas*, argued that Lisbon gave the EU the potential authority to require Ireland to raise its low level of corporation tax. The issue of conscription, though hardly featuring during the campaign itself, apart from on the websites and leaflets of groups quite marginal to the campaign, was highlighted in the research report, as 48% of no voters and remarkably 26% of yes voters said the 'introduction of conscription to a European army' was 'included' in the treaty.

After the referendum the Irish government opened negotiations with other member states and reached agreement that if the Lisbon Treaty was ratified they would alter their previous position on the Commission and each member state would retain the right to nominate a member of the Commission. By contrast if Lisbon was not ratified, the previous position adopted in the Treaty of Nice, whereby membership would be rotated would remain. Secondly, the European Council agreed a number of 'legal declarations' which stated that nothing in the Treaty would affect the Irish legal and constitution restrictions on abortion, and affirmed Ireland's right to maintain its policy of military neutrality. Economic concerns raised during the campaign were addressed in two ways. Responding to conservative pro-business groups the legal declarations stated that nothing in the treaty altered EU competency on taxation matters while in response to separate concerns raised by the trade union movement and left wing parties about the dominant neo-liberal ethos in EU economic policies, a separate solemn declaration on workers rights and social policy asserted that the EU was committed to public services and workers rights and also affirmed member state competency for the delivery of health and education services.

The longer pre-publicity for the second referendum, the legal changes and the 'restoration' of each state's right to nominate a Commission seemed to deal with many of the issues at the heart of the first referendum campaign. In addition of course, Ireland entered a severe economic recession leading to a severe deficit in public finances. In combination these events were sufficient to decisively swing the result. In the second referenda, the 'yes' vote of 67% was the highest in any EU related referenda since the Maastricht Treaty. There remains however a resilient 33% of the population who continue to oppose recent developments in EU integration. These voters have diverse and in many cases conflicting concerns. They include a left-wing critique from Sinn Féin and the Socialist Party and from some supporters of the Irish Labour Party, (though not any of the Labour Party

leadership) which opposes the neo-liberal focus of EU economic policy and the development of European Security and Defence Policy; there is a nationalist discourse from Sinn Féin, but also parts of the governing Fianna Fáil party expressing concern at loss of sovereignty and political control; there is finally a conservative Catholic position which opposes the EU focus on fundamental rights and expresses a fear that an EU wide rights regime would be utilised to advance a secular and liberal agenda on issues such as abortion rights. None of these groups however are likely to have a significant influence on Irish foreign policy, which remains strongly committed to EU integration, while defending member state competency on issues such as corporate taxes.

## **Ireland and the United Nations**

The 1996 Irish White Paper on Foreign policy sets out four priority areas of interest for Irish foreign policy within the United Nations – peacekeeping, disarmament, human rights and development.<sup>3</sup> Each of these issues is discussed in turn, followed by a short discussion of Ireland's role of the Security Council, during its most recent term in 2001 and 2002.

### ***Peacekeeping***

Ireland has been a very significant contributor to UN peace support operations – in particular peacekeeping. Indeed given the comparatively small size of the Irish army that contribution has been remarkable. Recent international commitments have typically seen almost 800 Irish troops abroad at any one time, out of an army of 8500. That is a high proportion by current international standards – where having less than

---

<sup>3</sup> For up to date official positions see policies link on Dept of Foreign Affairs website [www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie)

5% of the military on active international duty is more typical. Ireland has in recent years deployed significant numbers on UN missions in Africa, including UN missions in Ethiopia / Eritrea, Liberia and Chad –where the UN has had great difficulty getting commitments from developed states to provide troops, despite clear needs.<sup>4</sup>

Irish opponents of ESDP have argued that pressure from EU partners to build effective EU military capacity will lead inevitably to a reduced availability of Irish soldiers for UN duty. Given the reluctance of most EU states to serve under UN command or to serve in Africa this might lead to a significant change in Irish practice. On the other hand it is possible that if the EU were to develop a military capacity of its own to carry out significant peace support operations then states not currently participating at significant levels in UN peacekeeping might then feel more pressure to participate (and pay for) an EU led operation in response to a UN request.

Ireland wishes to be active in ESDP and played an important role in the EUFOR mission military in Chad/CAR, providing the mission commander (General Pat Nash) and 400 troops. The EU does not possess the UN's legitimacy and Irish law requires a UN mandate to allow deployment of troops. Even so, it is recognised that it is a real challenge for the EU to build the level of acceptability that the UN possesses. The state remains committed to providing peacekeepers for UN missions and stayed in Chad when the UN took over the EU mission.

### ***Disarmament***

Since joining the United Nations Ireland has engaged in regular diplomatic initiatives on disarmament, was a leading promoter of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), and continues to be active in initiatives to revive its influence. However, this is clearly

---

<sup>4</sup> For details on Irish deployments see defence forces website [www.military.ie](http://www.military.ie)

an area where international progress has been very limited and where a small non-nuclear state has little leverage. On wider disarmament issues, Ireland was an early supporter of the anti-landmines campaign and signed and ratified the convention on the first day. Ireland also hosted the summit in May 2008 which adopted the convention on Cluster Munitions and was among its strong supporters.

### ***Development and the role of the UN in generating consensus***

The UN plays a key role in building an international consensus on development and utilises its position to seek to secure stronger commitments from the developed world on aid, trade and debt relief. Both in terms of its aid spending and the wider context of its overall policy on aid, Ireland has been closely tied to the UN system. While the bulk of Irish development aid goes to its priority programme countries, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, and to supporting the work of Irish development NGOs, in recent years the size of the contributions to the UN agencies has grown and is now larger than the contribution to the EU development programme, with UNDP, UNICEF and UNHCR being the largest recipients.

In addition to increasing its development aid budget, Ireland has been a strong supporter of the UN's single most important initiative in the development arena - the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000. While the Goals have been criticised for their limited vision, the initial success of the MDGs was their capacity to re-engage the governments of the Global North on issues of development. In this regard the strength of the United Nations is clear, as even though there was nothing new in policy terms in the MDGs they could be presented as a legitimate, universal set of principles around which pressure for reform could be build. While ultimately even the limited goals of the MDGs will not be met, it was a serious attempt by the UN at mobilisation and was not surpassed by any other initiative. The MDGs and



their call for increased development aid was supported by the Irish Government at the UN Summit in 2000. The Taoiseach made Ireland's first public commitment to reach the UN target for development aid, of 0.7% of GNP, by 2007. Ireland has subsequently altered its position and while still committed in policy terms to reaching the 0.7% target by 2012, recent cuts of over 22% in the aid budget means that this target is unlikely to be met.

### ***Human Rights and the weakness of the UN system***

Irish foreign policy regularly asserts a commitment to human rights as one of its key priorities for working within the UN system. However, there are well documented weaknesses in the UN Commission for Human Rights and one of Kofi Annan's harshest criticisms of any UN body was reserved for the Commission in his 2005 report *In Larger Freedom*. In this regard Ireland welcomed the creation of a separate Human Rights Council to replace the Commission at the 2005 Summit, although the degree of change hoped for has yet to materialise.

Ireland sought to mobilise its own efforts on human rights by the creation of a Human Rights Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1996. Ireland's profile was heightened the following year when President of Ireland Mary Robinson became UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (stepping down early to take the post). Ireland's activism was also indicated by the state's election to the UN Commission on Human Rights for the period 1997-99 and 2003-5, and its election to chair the Commission session in Geneva in 1999. In 2003 Irish Judge Maureen Harding Clark was elected as a judge of the International Criminal Court (ICC), securing 65 out of 83 votes and jointly topping the poll.

Ireland also used its term on the security council in 2001-2 to promote human rights when diplomats made a number of interventions, and while the current international climate with its focus on countering international terrorism has narrowed the focus for human rights work, Ireland continues to see the UN as the primary forum for promoting human rights.

### ***Ireland's record on the UN Security Council***

Ireland's election to the UN Security Council for the 2001-2 term, was itself a strong vindication of Ireland's profile within the UN – as states are elected by the entire UN membership. Ireland was not initially regarded as a strong candidate, lacking the diplomatic and economic strengths of its electoral rivals - Norway and Italy. The relative ease of the victory – 130 votes on the first round - was a result of Ireland's support for the UN and its positive image on issues such as development and peacekeeping. The term would however test Irish positions in many areas, most notably on Iraq, Palestine and the ICC, where Ireland's traditional foreign policy values would place the state in direct opposition to the USA and raise again the tensions between values and economic interests.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of Iraq dominated the council during Ireland's term. Initially the focus was on the impact of the sanctions regime, which had been in place since the 1991 Gulf War, and Ireland, in opposition to the US and UK, supported reform of the system to ensure a better flow of civilian goods into Iraq. After mid-2002, as the US moved towards invasion, debates focused on Iraq's alleged programme of weapons of mass destruction. In its contribution on the unanimous adoption of resolution 1441 in November 2002, Ireland explicitly stated that it was for the Security Council to decide

---

<sup>5</sup> For a full analysis with references to sources see Doyle, John. "Irish diplomacy on the UN Security Council 2001-2: foreign policy-making in the light of day". *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 15: 73-102 (2004).

if Iraq committed a 'material breach' of its obligations, and that only the Council could then decide what action should ensue. Until the end of its term Ireland continued to support the weapons inspection regime and opposed a unilateral attack on Iraq. After leaving the Security Council, however the Irish government, unlike France and Germany, took a muted and more neutral stance on the war, avoiding clear public positions. US planes transporting troops to Iraq were allowed to refuel in Ireland but the government did not actively support the war and continued to express a preference for a UN mandated solution.

Irish foreign policy has traditionally supported the creation of a Palestinian state, and this was reflected on the Security Council, in the face of US opposition. In December 2001 Ireland supported a draft resolution on Palestine, vetoed by the USA, which was promoted by the Arab states. Again in late 2002, following the killing of UN employees by Israeli forces, the US vetoed a draft resolution condemning the killing, which had been supported by Ireland.

The establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) generated a real crisis on the Council, as the US planned to veto the annual renewals of UN peace-keeping operations in order to pressurise the Council to agree to an exemption for US citizens from the ICC's mandate. At the open meeting of the Council on 10 July, Ireland had said that the US position was 'not well founded', that Ireland could not agree to the mechanism that the US sought. Ireland and Mexico were the last two countries to agree to support the resolution, and did so only after it became clear it would pass in any case.

Irish diplomats displayed a consistent support for multilateralism, for the UN system and for a humanitarian and human-rights based approach to international relations on the UNSC. Votes on Palestine and the ICC and other issues such as Western

Sahara were cast in the face of strong US pressure. However, Ireland's term ended just before the US decision to invade Iraq became irreversible. If Ireland had been on the Council at the time of the invasion, it would have found itself under much more pressure to conform to the US position on that decision than on any other issue with which the Council had dealt over the previous two years.

## **Conclusion**

Following two decades of referenda on EU reform treaties, Irish policy (like the EU itself) is probably entering a period of stability. While there remains a significant minority with varied critiques of the nature of EU integration the size of the majority in the second Lisbon referendum means there is limited pressure on the Irish government to take any further initiatives on the issues raised by Lisbon's opponents. Within the UN, Irish support for UN peacekeeping is likely to continue given its popularity domestically and its high profile. Activity on human rights, disarmament, UN reform will continue as they have high level institutional support and involve limited political or financial costs. Development policy on the other hand – both UN based and bilateral – might have been assumed to enjoy a similar political support but the failure of development support groups to prevent cuts of over 22% in the budget and the effective abandonment of the 0.7% goal have seriously damaged Ireland's reputation in this area.

## **Bibliography**

Connolly, Eileen and Doyle, John. "The place of the United Nations in contemporary Irish foreign policy. Kennedy, Michael and McMahon, Deirdre, eds. *Obligations and Responsibilities: Ireland and the United Nations, 1955-2005*. Dublin: IPA, 2005.

Devine, Karen. "Stretching the IR theoretical spectrum on Irish neutrality: a critical social constructivist framework". *International Political Science Review*, 29(4): 461-91, 2008.

Doyle, John. "Irish diplomacy on the UN Security Council 2001-2: foreign policy-making in the light of day". *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 15: 73-102 (2004).

Doyle, John and Connolly, Eileen. "Foreign policy and domestic politics: a study of the 2002 election in the Republic of Ireland". *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 13 : 151-166 (2002).

Kennedy, Michael and McMahon, Deirdre, eds. *Obligations and Responsibilities: Ireland and the United Nations, 1955-2005*. Dublin: IPA, 2005.

Millward Brown / IMC, *Post Lisbon Treaty Referendum Research Findings*. Dublin Millward Brown / IMC, 2008.