

Political Division

Introduction: The role of the Division

Political Division is responsible for the overall management of the political aspects of Irish foreign policy. It has line responsibility for human rights, disarmament and non-proliferation, international security policy, drugs and terrorism, coordination of Ireland's approach to the United Nations and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe.

The Political Director has a cross-cutting role in ensuring coherence of political foreign policy. The Middle East and North Africa Unit, where political issues predominate, operates under his oversight; and he inputs as appropriate on political aspects of relations with other countries on which the respective geographic units lead.

Key dates

Foreign Affairs Council

The regular, formal meetings of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers - the Foreign Affairs Council or FAC - take place on a monthly basis. 'Extraordinary' Council meetings may be convened at anytime in response to international events: indeed since the beginning of 2013, extraordinary FACs have been called to address developments in Mali (January 2013), Egypt (August 2013) and Ukraine (February, March 2014).

The next regular meeting of the FAC will be on the 22 July in Brussels. As with recent FAC meetings, the expectation is that there will be a continued focus on Ukraine and Eastern Partnership issues, with perhaps renewed attention on the Southern Neighbourhood (especially the Middle East Peace Process).

UN General Assembly

The annual meeting of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) takes place in New York every autumn. In 2014, the Ministerial week will take place from 24-28 September, preceded by a Climate Summit to which Heads of State and Government have been invited on 23 September. The ministerial address at UNGA is an important platform for statement of policy priorities and concerns on major topical international issues. In addition it provides an invaluable networking opportunity with foreign ministers from non-EU countries, both through bilateral meetings and participation in EU Ministerial meetings with leading international interlocutors, including US Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister.

DFAT NGO Forum on Human Rights

The annual Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade NGO Forum on Human Rights is an opportunity for civil society actors committed to promoting and protecting human rights in Ireland and internationally, to engage with the Department and exchange information and views on human rights issues. The audience usually consists of 250-300 invitees, mostly NGOs and civil society representatives from the island of Ireland. It is an important networking context where international human rights activists meet and engage with their

Irish counterparts. In 2014, the Forum will take place in Dublin Castle on 7 November; a submission proposing that the Minister address the Forum will be made in due course.

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood

UN Coordination/ OSCE/ Council of Europe

As a small state, Ireland is profoundly attached to multilateral diplomacy, as evidenced by our active membership of the United Nations, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe.

United Nations

Our commitment in particular to the United Nations remains a cornerstone of our foreign policy, and this is reflected in strong engagement across a range of UN activities. Peacekeeping is an integral part of our foreign policy – please see Security Policy section below for further detail - and underpins Ireland’s strong commitment to multilateralism and the UN.

OSCE and Council of Europe

In recent months, much of Ireland’s engagement with the OSCE and to a lesser extent the Council of Europe has been in the context of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and relations with Russia. Comprising 57 participating states and a geographical area that stretches “from Vancouver to Vladivostok”, the OSCE operates by consensus and as such has a key role to play in dialogue with states west of Vienna.

Building on our very successful Chairmanship in Office of the OSCE in 2012, Ireland continues to play its full part in the OSCE’s activities, including in Ukraine. 16 Irish members of the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission oversaw the Presidential elections at the end of May. There are currently five Irish members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, which is engaged in a close assessment of the security situation on the ground.

As a founder member of the Council of Europe, Ireland continues to be a strong supporter of its role in promoting the improvement of and monitoring the state of human rights, democracy and rule of law in Europe.

Conflict Resolution Unit (CRU)

Ireland's work with the international community to promote conflict resolution around the world is advanced through the Conflict Resolution Unit.

Our efforts focus on peacemaking, peace-building and sharing the lessons we learned notably from the Northern Ireland peace process, as well as from our experience on UN peacekeeping missions.

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 which emphasises the distinct adverse effect of conflict on women and girls, as well as their critical importance of their inclusion on decision-making processes is a critical dimension of this work. Ireland published its first National Action Plan on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in 2011, adopting an innovative approach by combining interdepartmental and civil society consultation with an international cross-learning initiative. The current Plan runs until the end of 2014. A process of consultation has begun regarding the next Plan, which builds on the extensive inter-departmental collaboration and consultation with civil society organisations which has taken place.

The CRU also funds, through the Department's Stability Fund, a number of international NGOs who work in areas of peace-building, mediation, security sector reform, and related areas that are aligned with Ireland's foreign policy priorities.

Human Rights

Ireland's Membership of the UN Human Rights Council 2013-2015

Ireland is mid-way through a 3-year term on the Human Rights Council, the United Nations' principal human rights body which is based in Geneva, to which we were elected in a very challenging electoral contest. The HRC meets three times a year in March, June and September. The session in March has a high-level segment with Ministerial participation. We are prioritising initiatives on protecting the operating environment for civil society, which is coming under increasing pressure in many countries, and preventable mortality and morbidity of children under five.

Business and Human Rights

The Government has tasked the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to lead on the preparation of a National Plan on the implementation of the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

It is intended that the 2014 DFAT NGO Forum on human rights, scheduled for 7th November, would form part of the national consultation process by bringing together experts,

stakeholders and members of the wider public with an interest in business and human rights to examine the challenges for promoting and protecting human rights while doing business and to exchange experiences and best practices on the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles, including the development of national plans.

Disarmament & Non-Proliferation

Ireland has a long-standing commitment to the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda.

Of major political significance in recent years was the conclusion of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). This marked the culmination of concerted efforts by countries and civil society over a decade to agree a treaty representing the first legally binding instrument to regulate the global trade in conventional arms. Ireland ratified the Treaty in April of this year, along with 15 other EU countries. At the time of writing, the ATT has been ratified by 41 of the 181 signatories and will enter into force 90 days after the fiftieth ratification, expected in the autumn of 2014.

The 2015 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, will take place in New York next year. Ireland is closely associated by name with the process of initiating the NPT, beginning in the late 1950s, and has been a consistent supporter of the Treaty.

Security Policy

Security and defence issues remain high on the international and domestic agenda.

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)

Work will continue over the next year on implementing the December 2013 European Council conclusions which are aimed at improving the capacity of the EU to contribute to international peace support operations under the over-arching authority of the United Nations. To this end, the Conclusions are focused on ensuring the Union has the necessary civilian and military capabilities to launch peace support missions when and where needed, and a European defence market that can deliver these capabilities. The European Council is set to review progress towards a range of deliverables set out in the Conclusions in June 2015.

We fully support this approach. The focus of the CSDP remains on external peace support action outside the EU and the question of a collective European Defence does not arise at this stage. Ireland's participation in a European Common Defence is prohibited by article 29.4.9 of the Constitution and reinforced by the Irish Protocol to the Lisbon Treaty. Any change in that position could take place only with the approval of the people in a referendum to amend the constitution.

UN Peacekeeping

Our commitment to support the UN on international peace and security issues has been demonstrated through continuous participation in UN peacekeeping missions for over five decades. Relative to our size and our available resources, Ireland is a significant and highly regarded peacekeeping contributor. We currently provide 366 peacekeepers to seven UN peacekeeping missions (details attached). The majority of our troops are deployed to the three UN missions in the Middle East region where 199 troops serve at UNIFIL in South Lebanon, 133 serve at UNDOF along the Golan Heights and 13 serve at UNTSO which provides observers at a number of locations in the region. A member of the Defence Force, Major General Michael Finn, is Head of Mission and Chief of Staff at UNTSO.

Our most recent and challenging deployment was in September 2013 and followed a direct appeal from the UNSG to the former Tánaiste to provide Irish peacekeepers to reinforce the capacity and credibility of UNDOF.

Given that the vast majority of Irish troops on peacekeeping duties overseas are deployed with UN missions, it is important for Ireland to match our profile in the field with an active engagement in peacekeeping policy debate at the UN. We have contributed actively to efforts to strengthen the UN's capacity to deliver its peace and security mandate by engaging in initiatives to enhance peacekeeping and peace-building policies and practices at UN Headquarters and in UN field missions. We are currently participating in initiatives to improve common standards for training of UN peacekeepers, discussions on UN reform in relation to the area of peacekeeping and a series of events aimed at enhancing the EU's support for UN peacekeeping operations. Ireland is also the tenth largest donor to the UN Peacebuilding Fund.

With regard to high-level engagement on peacekeeping in the short-term, it can be expected that discussions and meetings on peacekeeping will be a prominent part of the Ministerial week at the United Nations General Assembly in September next. Both the former Tánaiste and Minister of State delivered speeches on peacekeeping and peacebuilding at Ministerial events last year. The issue was also a common theme of bilateral consultations, including with UNSG Ban Ki-Moon.

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