

IRELAND IS SNEAKING AWAY FROM NEUTRALITY

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These are tense times. There is an impulsive egotist in the White House, who thinks that foreign policy can be sketched out in tweets. Tensions are high between Iran and Israel. Nor have proxy wars gone away, you know. Meanwhile, just before last Christmas, the Irish government rushed into a commitment to Pesco, a European Union body that aims to boost military co-operation.

George Orwell, in his 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*, talks about the words people use when they want “to name things without calling up mental pictures of them”.

Orwell would have probably included Pesco in a list of such words, as it sounds like some kind of supermarket chain designed for fish-eaters. Instead, Pesco stands for the Permanent Structured Co-operation on security and defence, which the Dáil voted to join last December.

Recently, I have been conducting an unrepresentative and unscientific experiment by asking people what they know about Pesco. Generally, among those who are not glued to media coverage of current affairs, the answer is: “Nothing.”

Disturbingly, the answer from some committed current affairs nerds has also been: “Nothing.”

Treaty-based framework

This is the EU's description of it: “Pesco is a treaty-based framework and process to deepen defence co-operation amongst EU member states who are capable and willing to do so.

“The aim is to jointly develop defence capabilities and make them available for EU military operations. This will thus enhance the EU's capacity as an international security partner, contribute to the protection of EU citizens and maximise the effectiveness of defence spending.

“The difference between Pesco and other forms of co-operation is the binding nature of the commitments undertaken by participating member states. However, participation remains voluntary, decision-making will remain in the hands of participating member states and the specific character of the security and defence policy of all member states is taken into account.”

It fits perfectly with Orwell's description of political language as having "to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness". No one could object to the "protection of EU citizens" or "voluntary participation". But it involves the EU spending €1.5 billion a year on PESCO projects by 2020, which include a pan-European military training centre, common standards for military radio communication, the creation of a German-led European medical unit and logistics hub, an initiative to build up faster crisis response forces, intelligence exchanges on cyber threats, commitment to battle groups and submarine drones.

And Ireland has voted to participate. Denmark has a permanent opt-out from such ventures, and one would have thought that Ireland would follow the Danish example, given that we are supposedly neutral.

But, no. Brexit means we need all the friends that we can get and core values get abandoned.

Triple lock

Four Fine Gael MEPs, Mairéad McGuinness, Brian Hayes, Deirdre Clune and Seán Kelly, have proposed revisiting neutrality and removing the so-called triple lock which means that Ireland cannot partake in military missions without United Nations sanction. They want to replace it by a Dáil majority.

Strange things are happening in Germany, too. The far from sensationalist Financial Times and Foreign Policy magazine have both noted Germany's increased commitment to militarisation.

Russia's incursion into Ukraine, and perhaps Donald Trump's bluster about "America first", has led to a massive change in German military policy. The grim shadow of Germany's past meant that the Bundeswehr (army) constituted in 1955 was restricted solely to defence purposes. However, Germany has abolished conscription, invested heavily in upgrading the army, and now is engaged in more than a dozen foreign missions.

These include, the Financial Times notes, "parts of eastern Europe that once seemed off-limits for any army bearing the traditional black cross of the German military".

The Bundeswehr has also been plagued by scandals involving evidence of neo-Nazi sympathies among a tiny minority of soldiers.

Last May, writing in Foreign Policy, Elizabeth Braw highlighted that under the bland title of the Framework Nations Concept (euphemism again), Germany was side-stepping the messy politics of a European army, and instead was bulking up its capabilities by absorbing parts of other European armies.

The Czech Republic and Romania have each integrated one brigade into the German armed forces, along with two out of three of the Dutch brigades. The German sea battalion has come under the control of the Dutch navy.

All of this should be cause for great worry. What is needed now in the world is more diplomacy, more soft power. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J Stephan's ground-breaking book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: the Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, demonstrated that of 323 historical examples of civil resistance campaigns, 53 per cent had been successful, as opposed to 26 per cent where violence was involved.

Like all ground-breaking work, it could not cover everything. For example, it did not adequately address the rise of Islamist ideology or adequately address that the path to democracy is by no means automatic.

But it is a profoundly hopeful book, nonetheless. If we wish to strengthen European security, peace-making and civil society movements are an area where Ireland has made and could continue to make a valuable contribution. Tragically, we have instead taken another step away from neutrality.