WGA

An EU Survey on Whole-of-Goverment Approaches to External Conflict and Crisis

Ireland Report
Isaac Bennett and Ben Tonra

1 | Introduction

There are several likely explanations for why whole-of-government approaches (WGAs) to external security crises are underdeveloped in Ireland compared to other EU countries. The majority of these are practical and related to the nation's small geographical size and relatively small population. Both of these factors allow for the centralisation of government departments and agencies, and therefore make it possible to have all stakeholders in a particular external security crisis in the same room at the same time. Indeed, because of the 'everyone knows everyone else' factor that is unique to countries with smaller populations, the need for formal WGA structures has not been a priority. That is not to say that the WGA structures and protocols are nonexistent or that those that do exist are wholly deficient, but rather that they exist in a more ad hoc and informal manner without any strictly defined overarching policy or government documentation setting out how these structures may be operationalised.

The historical context is important for understanding why this informal WGA has been taken and is reflective of Ireland's long-established and active engagement in international security – most notably, an unbroken record of 60 years' service with UN peacekeeping missions. As a result of this historical context, Ireland has developed many informal and rapid-response mechanisms to gather key actors together in one room and to develop an effective plan for responding to external crises. Over time, this has evolved into what can be called a WGA to dealing with external security crises without being bogged down by unnecessary red tape and administrative logjamming. Particularly in the field of responses to external security crises, our

WGA may be ad hoc and informal on paper. But, in practice, the relevant agencies and departments are able to organise, mobilise and deploy in a rapid and orderly manner.

There are mechanisms and processes that go into effect without the need for formal recognition of their existence and function, which in turn enables the relevant actors and agencies to cooperate and coordinate without the restrictions that formalisation brings. Of course, such a setup creates significant trade-offs. In the first place, there is little to no parliamentary interactions or cross-party consultation on responses to external crises. Information requests for briefings and updates can be made and are dealt with through the relevant constitutional channels, but this is considered to be the exception rather than the norm. The second considerable trade-off is that without any formal documentation of how WGAs are dealt with and the ways and means to carry out a WGA to external security crises, there is a risk of knowledge loss over time.

2 | What policies have been developed to further policy coherence?

There are no formal WGA policies or strategies that explicitly state how Ireland is to come together to respond to an external security crisis. Instead, as noted above, there is a standing inter-departmental committee that deals with such crises on a case-by-case basis. This committee draws on participants from all sectors of government and ministerial departments as well as associated agencies, as needed. Consultations with civilian actors or NGOs that might have a stake in the region or crisis itself are also facilitated. Military commanders are key stakeholders and ones who have a role in this committee, whether they are reporting in person or via secure teleconference from the region experiencing the crisis. Various members of the myriad sections within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Justice and Equality, the Taoiseach (i.e. the prime minister's office), and the Department of Defence are gathered together in order to establish the exact context of the crisis and the best way to respond to it. Of course, these decisions are not made in a vacuum. Instead, consultation with EU member states and institutions is an important aspect of the committee's work, as it ensures that there is no duplication of efforts among these various bodies.

There are other reasons for this coordination and cooperation that are practical in nature. While Ireland is often willing to deploy its armed forces as part of international security operations, the fact that it does not have a full-spectrum military capacity means that it must rely on collective infrastructures provided by multilateral actors (e.g. the EU, the UN and NATO). In addition to coordinating with the EU, it may be necessary at times to contact and arrange cooperation with other external actors, such as those just cited or the African Union (AU). This may be for several reasons, such as: to facilitate passage across other nations' sovereign territory en route to the crisis region; to ensure that the mission does not conflict with any existing mission in the region; to facilitate a transfer of intelligence and information in a more efficient manner; or to establish basic protocols for troop interaction, the provision of support, and deconflicting the airspace over the crisis theatre.

The WGA mechanism that Ireland employs during responses to external crises is not a formalised structure with directly supporting human resources (HR) and administration assets to call upon. However, this does not limit its effectiveness in achieving efficient mission deployment and successful outcomes in responses to external crises. In fact, the argument can

be made that this model of WGA is ideal for geographically small nations with smaller populations and centralised governments. Sources within the ministries that were interviewed for this analysis discussed the utility of having all main stakeholders in the same room in person for ensuring clarification of roles and responsibilities as well as for dealing with any disputes or conflicts that might arise due to having so many different actors involved in an operation. This conflict resolution and clarity generation does not merely come from formal 'roundtable' discussions, but also from informal conversations – or so-called 'water-cooler' moments – which allow for issues to be discussed and resolved on an inter-personal basis. Government documents analysed for this report refer to the importance of WGAs for future interaction within both the national and international security realms.

As has been noted throughout, Ireland uses an inter-departmental committee to coordinate within the administration and to respond to external crises and conflicts, but the documentation and strategies make no reference to this committee other than acknowledging the "current arrangements". It is possible, however, to identify a renewed commitment to a more robust defensive military posture in the most recent White Paper on Defence (Department of Defence 2015). Indeed, there are explicit commitments made regarding continued participation in the CSDP and a recognition of the importance of having national militaries possess "expeditionary potential" so they can better intervene and assist in conflicts and crises outside the borders of the EU (ibid.: 27). Rather than making any direct references to a WGA, these documents assume that the response mechanism (i.e. the Interdepartmental Committee for Peacekeeping) is the only vector through which developments or issues in the military sphere will be pursued. It is evidence nonetheless that the bureaucratic and military leadership is aware of the concept of a whole-of-government approach to military affairs.

3 | Who are the main actors involved in cooperating in a WGA?

The main departments and agencies involved in the whole-of-government approach to responding to external crises are primarily: Defence, Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Taoiseach, the Defence Forces, the Gardai (i.e. the police force) and Justice as well as any elements of these various sub-departments that might be needed (e.g. international security policy experts, members of the Conflict Resolution Unit, human rights experts, etc). While the overall scope of the WGA is broad – in the sense that it encompasses many different fields of expertise and gathers actors from politics, policy, economics, security, development and crisis response – the structure and form of Ireland's government and WGA allow for many, if not all, of these actors to be a direct part of the response under the auspices of the committee formed to respond to external security crises and conflicts.

Cooperation and coordination is visible across many levels of the WGA response mechanism, which leads to better communication not merely vertically, but also horizontally as facilitated by the Interdepartmental Committee on Peacekeeping. Indeed, one of the most important elements highlighted by interviewees was the ability to communicate and coordinate with colleagues on the same level as oneself across a variety of government agencies and organisations. This was said to improve efficiency, to lead to better relationships among all actors, and to be critical when it comes to making important decisions that impact both civilians in the crisis area and the security forces being deployed to assist them.

4 | How does your country operationalise a WGA?

As already noted, the key structure underpinning Ireland's WGA to international security crises is the sub-cabinet-level Interdepartmental Committee for Peacekeeping. Originally designed to manage Irish contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, the committee's remit has effectively been expanded in recent years to encompass all Irish multilateral engagement with international security operations across EU, UN and NATO platforms. This is supplemented by formal structures within particular government departments, such as the Conflict Resolution Unit (CRU) within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, whose remit is to assess and direct policy towards areas of conflict management and to promote reconciliation strategies more broadly based on Ireland's national experience and its own peace process.

On the face of it, without a large, all-encompassing policy doctrine to support them, these limited structures lack institutional depth. Indeed, while Ireland's WGA to external crises and conflicts is not formalised into any strict legal mechanism or organisational response, its informal nature has served well to direct Ireland's engagement in international security operations. The character of that engagement has been praised for its high degree of communication and efficiency, and it has improved the ability of the state and its defence forces to react quickly to crises in regions external to the EU. Operationalisation of a WGA towards international security crises is therefore effectively directed by key policy players operating in concert within a clear national context developed over 60 years of continuous UN engagement. While 'success' in this context is difficult to determine, there is no doubt but that Irish engagement in peace-support operations has consistently enjoyed strong public support across all demographics and political parties, is deemed central and critical to the mission of the Defence Forces of Ireland, and is regularly showcased within Irish foreign policy as a key feature of the country's global engagement. Its relevance may further be judged by the fact that this is a key highlighted policy within Ireland's 2021 campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council.

'Success' in terms of policy outcomes in third countries, of course, is more difficult to assess. Ireland's engagement in international security operations have ranged from the traditional 'blue hat' UN ceasefire-monitoring efforts to the most robust UN interventions using military forces. With the end of the Cold War, Ireland extended that UN engagement to wider international peace-support operations. First by joining NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1999 and then later through the EU's development of its Common Security and Defence Policy, Ireland adapted itself to much greater interoperability and engagement in a variety of command structures, such as the UN, NATO and the EU. Over the last 20 years, hundreds of Irish troops have served across thousands of individual deployments in international security operations in Europe (Kosovo), the Middle East (Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Syria), Africa (Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Somalia and Uganda), and the Asia-Pacific region (Afghanistan and East Timor). While calculating the 'success' of Irish contributions to each of these operations is a complex undertaking, the fact that Ireland is subject to repeated and ongoing requests to contribute to such operations is at least some testament to its success as a small security provider.

In terms of management, the efficacy of Ireland's WGA is less a function of its institutional design than of the country's political commitment, bureaucratic culture and public administration. This is marked by a high level of informal communication, a lack of bureaucratic hierarchy, permeable institutional and agency borders, and the limited number of policy players. Together, this gives rise to a structure that is nimble, flexible and potentially creative in response to policy challenges. Policy disablers are largely the obverse of its enablers. The small size of the Irish policy network also means that it will have few resources, limited policy specialisation and a somewhat generalist approach to crises. Furthermore, the lack of institutionalisation and the small size of the supporting infrastructure can also give rise to policy capture by special interests and a disproportionate degree of influence from personalities and individual entrepreneurship. While these risks do exist, to date they have not given rise to significant policy failures or weaknesses.

5 | Conclusions

As noted, the success factors in Ireland's WGA are rooted in the nature, size and adaptability of its public administration, whose very light but well-focused institutional structure has been consistently engaged in peace-support and crisis management operations since the late 1950s. It admittedly does suffer from the absence of an overall policy concept and the lack of administrative resources and policy specialisation. Nevertheless, Irish policymakers are also eager for the European Union to develop a stronger WGA infrastructure and policy orientation to which they can contribute their added value. To that end, they have championed improved EU-UN-AU coordination on both the policy and operational levels in addition to enthusiastically promoting the Civilian CSDP Compact as a means by which a broader 'security' remit can be brought to bear to prevent, manage and resolve international security crises. Due to a comparatively benign national security threat assessment, Irish policymakers can also prioritise international security engagement without also having to triangulate between national security or defence interests. This allows for a WGA that is rooted in addressing the centrality of third-country security needs rather than only seeing such needs through the prism of national security priorities. Indeed, Ireland's overall approach to WGAs may be of interest as an adaptable model for countries with similar geographic sizes and populations given its flexibility and ability to enable effective communication and problem-solving.

6 | Reference list

Department of Defence (2015). White Paper on Defence. Dublin. www.defence.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-06/wp2015eng_1.pdf.

Interviews with sources within the government.