

Too many speakers at the NSSI Conference pushed expensive weapons of war

Always good to have some F-15s around?'

Ireland starts to get a military-industrial complex

By J Vivian Cooke

The guests and speakers who attended the National Security Summit Ireland (NSSI) 2022 on 1 June at Dublin's Westin Hotel included: public representatives; senior serving and retired officers of the Irish, US, UK, European, Canadian and New Zealand military; university lecturers; arms manufacturers; and private security and defence consultants.

The trigonometry of this is the same as the US's famous 'Iron Triangle': policy-making captured by a narrow set of interests, represented by individuals at the intersection of officialdom, academia and business.

The purpose of Sláindáil CLG, the not-for-profit company which organised the event is "to promote education, debate and discussion of national security issues in Ireland". It is run by Gerry Waldron who served for 16 years in the Irish Defence Forces but currently works as a non-consultant hospital doctor in Emergency Medicine and sits on the Advisory Council of the MacGill Summer School. He was also a member of the Commission on the Defence Forces.

So was Caitriona Heint, current Executive Director of the thinktank, Azure Forum, which was established by former Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Mark Mellett, also a speaker at the event, to "fill the current gap in the national

ecosystem whereby no research entity or university centre is devoted solely to national security".

Azure Forum research fellow Ben Tonra was another panellist. He is also a professor of politics at UCD – where Heint is a researcher – and a director of the Irish Defence and Security Association which registered as a lobbyist in 2021 to represent the financial interests of "Irish or Irish-based SMEs, Research Organisations and Multinational Corporations" in the defence industry – and recently paid Tonra/Heint/Mellett's Azure Forum to produce a report on the Irish defence industry.

The non-diversity of the group was precisely reflected in the non-diversity of opinions aired and the message in panel discussions and presentations that Ireland needs to spend billions every year on weapons of war.

In his talk, Major General Meelis Kiili, the Estonian military representative at NATO, noted Estonia's defence budget which is 2.7%, in pointed comparison to Ireland's 0.2%, of GDP. The pointedness was made more explicit in his scorching comments that: "They need to learn you need to pay for that. You need to increase your defence budget to fund it...Neutrality is a luxury only rich countries like Switzerland can afford".

The presentation by JR Wildbridge, Head of Business Development for Lockheed Martin, NSSI's key sponsor, entitled 'Achieving Air

Sovereignty', suggested that the Irish Airforce should spend billions acquiring jet fighters. In 2021 Lockheed sold \$26.7bn worth of "Aeronautics" (as well as \$11.7 bn of "missiles and fire control". The US government was responsible for 71% of the company's revenue.

Wildbridge outlined three options: the first being the purchase of Lockheed Martin's F-16 fighters (each costing \$64m); the second, availing of the cheaper jet trainer FA-50 (a joint venture with South Korea's AIK and Lockheed Martin); the third, picking up some second-hand Lockheed Martin aircraft from the various air forces that are now moving on to the more modern F-35.

In effect Lockheed Martin was able to pitch for a procurement contract worth, at the cheaper end of the scale, €750 million to an audience containing many whose opinions will be most influential in awarding this contract. Competitors SAAB and Dassault were not afforded an opportunity to make a rival presentation, but then again they weren't key sponsors of the event.

The problem here is not so much the policy preferences advanced but that the consensus among this specific interest group has come to dominate public discussion. The interest groups represented at NSSI have succeeded in directing the terms of the public debate on the presumption that Russian (but not NATO) military presence in Irish-policed international waters and airspace constitutes a threat to our territorial integrity – one that can only be addressed by an immediate and massive increase in our military budget.

While many would contest these assumptions, they have not been questioned by the Irish media. Certainly not by Newstalk's Kieran Cuddihy, who was hired by NSSI to emcee the event. And certainly not the 10 June 'Prime Time' report on the future of the defence forces which manufactured consent around increased military spending with almost Chomskian precision, uncritically regurgitating both the conference's speaking points and its speakers. Its only Irish contributors were Gerry Waldron, Ben Tonra, Erika O'Leary and Conor King: all of whom were speakers on 1 June. By leaving their militarist presumptions unchallenged, RTE allowed the range of public policy options debated to be limited to which weapons platforms should be bought first.

The future of Irish defence and foreign policy is too important and the expenditure too great to allow this matter to be settled in advance by vested interests. The NSSI speakers were a disappointment since its inaugural 2019 event was more diverse, with talks by John Murray, former Chief Justice of Ireland; Deputy Eamon Ryan Leader of the Green Party; and Dr Jane Suiter, head of the DCU Institute for Future Media and Journalism.

Ireland's military-industrial future isn't yet too complex for everyone's concerns to be heard. **L**

“The presentation by the head of Business Development for Lockheed Martin, NSSI's "key sponsor", offered three choices but all involved buying its weapons.