The relationship between the Defence Forces and Ireland Inc.

On the 26th of February 2019, IBEC hosted a Business Leaders Conference titled 'A Sustainable Future: Real and Virtual'. Over 300 leaders of Irish industry gathered to explore critical topics for the Irish economy. The conference brought together a range of interesting speakers but one stood out as a potential anomaly in the business world, Vice Admiral Mark Mellett, Chief of Staff of the Irish Defence Forces. That said, the Vice Admiral's input into to the session on 'Safeguarding Intangible Assets' clearly illustrated the growing recognition that security and defence related activities require greater collaboration with business, and as importantly, academia. During the event, Vice Admiral Mellett was interviewed for IBEC's podcast, where he provided further insights into how this collaboration could work.

The Chief of Staff provided a unique perspective into the similarities between business and defence, noting the need for greater collaboration between academia, the business community and defence – 'the triple helix' as he referred to it as, whether it be in relation to tangible or intangible assets. He explained the benefits of the triple helix, stating that the marriage between end users with real world challenges, together with smart researchers who get a really challenging problem to solve, coupled with enterprise business who can very quickly go to market in terms of development when a solution or new technology is developed, not only has the potential to create new jobs, but will also provide the Defence Forces with solutions that give them new capabilities. This results in a win, win for all concerned, as a well-resourced Defence Forces can better orientate itself to protect Ireland Inc. from hybrid threats emanating from new technologies.

While the Chief of Staff did not explicitly mention hybrid attacks, they are a real threat that Ireland needs to prepare against. Whether we like to consider it or not, there are state and non-state actors that are prepared to take on a state if they see that state as a threat or competitor to their interests. Ireland is particularly exposed to hybrid threats as it is one of the most open, most connected, and most digital societies in the world. While these are undoubtedly strengths for our economy, they need to be complemented by an appropriate defence posture. Furthermore, the range of national and international business interests here makes us a viable target in our own right. Ireland needs to be able to identify, mitigate, and respond to these threats and as they are primarily military level threats it is essential that the Defence Forces is reorganised and resourced accordingly to protect Irish interests. Such attacks not only have the potential to impact our nation, but also those who live and do business here, and our current defence disposition makes it unlikely that we would be able to repel a determined hybrid attacker.

As the Chief of Staff rightly acknowledges, this cannot be done alone. To rationalise the need for greater collaboration, he highlighted the shared aspects of business and defence. He stated that the business of defence was securing assets, including intangible assets, giving the examples of sovereignty and reputation. He acknowledged that while these may differ from the business world,

the principles are the same. However, he noted that the rate of change within the technology sector is so fast that the answers to the Defence Forces increasing challenges are often outside the organisational boundaries, and therefore argued that external networks were a necessity. While highlighting the potential challenges such new and emerging technologies can bring, he also emphasised the exciting opportunities they can also present for the Defence Forces, referencing areas like AI, automation and robotics and noted the need to leverage them more effectively. The Chief of Staff also mentioned the explosion of data, noting that if the Defence Forces don't embrace that data, they will have a challenge on their hands, stating that data and information is now a force protection issue. He purported that the enemy leverages the data, and therefore, the Defence Forces need to become a formidable opponent. In short, he stated that the Defence Forces needs to leverage technology to ensure the force is better placed to prepare for and respond to future threats.

In my view, this is an essential point, as referenced above, the speed of technological change requires Ireland Inc. to be resourced to mitigate against such technology being utilised against our economic interests and the Defence Forces is the logical home of such resourcing. This requires a mind-set change for many, a shift from seeing a military's role in the traditional sense, often viewed in relation to defence of national territory, to a recognition that information and technology are now at the core of modern warfare, placing technology as integral to its core.

Within this context, the recent reports from the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers (RACO) about the number of personnel leaving the Defence Forces are worrying. This loss is impacting the organisation considerably, given the context in which the Irish Defence Forces is currently employed, such as being an aid to the civil power and its UN commitments, as these activities require significant resources, but this also impacts the Chief of Staff's proposals. Could this be an opportunity to assess whether Ireland would be better off served from the perspective of defence and security by a technology advanced, future facing military, one that is better integrated into all aspects of government, Ireland Inc. and academia? If so, is there the willingness to fund this, which undoubtedly it will require?

Emerging technology is reshaping business, the future economy, and the future battlefield. As a result, greater collaboration between enterprise, academia and the military will be vital to ensuring a competitive advantage in respect to Irish business, as it becomes more dependent on security and defence and they in turn on it. The Chief of Staff's perspective clearly articulates the benefit the Irish Defence Forces could provide to Ireland Inc. and R&D in Ireland, and as a result to the Irish economy, making Ireland better placed to manage threats head on, whilst also making it a good place to invest in. However, this cannot be achieved without a properly resourced Defence Force, acceptance of the need for developing the 'triple helix' and directly supporting the development of same. Not doing so will have a significant impact, not only on the force's capacity to secure and defend, but it could also damage Ireland's reputation as a good place to do business. But this should not be viewed in isolation, the Defence Forces need to be an asset fit for purpose, structured to respond to future challenges, so it is capable of preparing and responding to those challenges, whatever they may be.