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# **The Aiken Factor: Ireland and the Invention of Nuclear Non-Proliferation**

January 24, 2024

By Mervyn O'Driscoll |

For many, the former Irish Minister for External Affairs Frank Aiken is synonymous with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.



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Frank Aiken, Ireland's Minister for External Affairs, and Chairman of the Delegation of Ireland to the General Assembly (left), at his country's desk, at a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on September 23, 1957.

UN Photo/Todd Webb, September 23, 1957, Unique Identifier UN7771953.

<https://dam.media.un.org/asset-management/2AM9LO1FJJ00>

For many, the former Irish Minister for External Affairs Frank Aiken is, with good reason, synonymous with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's (NPT) origins.

Aiken's tenacity in securing the "Irish Resolutions" – UN General Assembly Resolution 1380 (XIV) in 1959, Resolution 1576 (XV) in 1960 and Resolution 1665 (XVI) in 1961 – was exceptional. These resolutions classified the spread of nuclear weapons as an urgent international issue possessing the potential to multiply strategic tensions amid the Cold War and decolonization. Acknowledging the impasse on nuclear disarmament, Aiken felt compelled to put forward a realistic first step for global survival.

Aiken was supported by an ambitious and youthful caucus within the United Nations (UN) section of Ireland's Department of External Affairs, led by Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien. On the global level, Aiken, O'Brien, and their subordinates felt emboldened by Sweden's independent, middle-power philosophy, which was supported by the Swedish UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld. The UN General Assembly offered small powers a stage to shape the global dialogue, particularly since the UN Security Council had stalemated due to tensions between two veto-wielding, permanent members: the United States and the Soviet Union.

On his arrival at the United Nations in 1957, Aiken put forward several proposals, such as a military withdrawal from central Europe, to reduce Cold War tensions, incurring US and Western hostility. Undeterred by the ire of traditional friends and neighbors, he next diagnosed that a world with more than

building a consensus behind a resolution that could serve as a credible basis for a bargain between the nuclear and non-nuclear states. He devoted four years of intensive efforts at the United Nations (1958-1961) to secure a resolution garnering universal approval.

In his first outing in 1958, Aiken salvaged a UN General Assembly First Committee roll-call vote acknowledging the menace of nuclear proliferation. He leveraged that to secure the first UN General Assembly Resolution in 1959. The Irish and their supporters engaged in annual campaigns to fortify the Irish Resolution and repeatedly call for a multilateral, negotiated pact. They focused on the United States, recognizing it was indispensable to defeating the reservations of its NATO allies.

Aiken waited (impatiently) until US President Dwight Eisenhower's administration was replaced by John F. Kennedy's in 1961. Only then did the political will emerge in Washington to prevail over several other NATO capitals. This led to the Irish Resolution of 1961, the most ambitious of the three resolutions (1959, 1960 and 1961), as it dispensed with all mention of "temporary" or "voluntary" measures. It requested a pact between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states following an international enquiry into the "specific undertakings" required. The UNGA then referred the matter to the [Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee](#) [↗](#) (ENDC), which the United States and the Soviet Union co-chaired in Geneva, Switzerland.

Until the signing of the NPT in 1968, the unswerving Irish position remained that the 1961 resolution laid down the basic framework for negotiations. Aiken's critical insight was that the central nuclear weapons states possessed the structural power to construct a global agreement and that it was in their mutual interest to do so. Moreover, such a convergence between the two superpowers would lay the basis for further tension reductions.

## Associated Documents

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**Memorandum by Frank Aiken [on an Interview with Scott McCleod and the Taoiseach], 2 October 1957** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/10/2/335, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XI, Document No. 74. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

Aiken made an immediate impression on his arrival in the Twelfth Session of the UN General Assembly in September 1957. He adopted an impartial posture of assessing each issue on its merits and campaigning to remodel international politics around self-determination, humanitarianism, and peace. His exhortation was that only the UN had the moral authority and political legitimacy to put forward global solutions. While he did not propose nuclear disarmament measures specifically, his intent was signalled by his recommendation for a mutual drawback of foreign forces (including their nuclear weapons) in central Europe and his endorsement of a proposal to discuss the representation of China in the United Nations.

The Eisenhower administration was hostile to Aiken's course as outlined in the U.S. ambassador's audience with Taoiseach Eamon de Valera and Aiken in Dublin on 2 October. The record underlines the Irish concerns about accidental nuclear war due to the proximity of opposing U.S. and Soviet forces in central Europe.

**Confidential Report from Thomas J. Kieran (Ottawa) to Con Cremin (Dublin), 'Poland and our Policy at U.N.O', 12 December 1957** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/5/313/3D, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XI, Document No. 96. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

There was value in Aiken's advocacy for Ireland to take an independent position in constructing broad-based international support for change. Aiken acted as a potent bridgebuilder between the Western and Eastern camps and also between the Cold War blocs and nonaligned countries. Ireland's democratic heritage, neutrality and anti-colonial history appealed to many constituencies, not least in Africa and Asia. Even its anti-Communist ideological orientation failed to deter admirers in the Eastern bloc, as they recognized that Aiken was sincere in seeking to propose fresh solutions and reduce international tension. An example of the positive feedback and encouragement that Aiken received is displayed in the attached Irish record of the Polish response.

**Address by Mr. Frank Aiken to the United Nations General Assembly Official, 23th Session, 751st Plenary Meeting, 19 September 1958** [↗](#)

*General Assembly Official Records, 23th Session : 751st Plenary Meeting, Friday 19 September 1958, New York, A/PV.751, United Nations Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/731480>.*

Aiken's landmark address to the plenary of the UN General Assembly on 19 September 1958 launched his non-proliferation campaign. It is the first time he publicly identified stopping the spread of nuclear weapons as a concrete step in the collective interest to unblock the disarmament impasse, preventing a runaway arms race among the powers of the Earth. It was clearly framed as part of his wider campaign for global governance based on the rule of law rather than the threat of force. For Aiken, the challenge was stabilizing the arms race and generating trust to construct a world order based on justice and law – "to preserve a Pax Atomica while we build a Pax Mundi." This speech was a critical departure. The widespread positive reception encouraged Aiken, persuading him to draft a formal resolution.

**Press Release containing a Speech by Minister of External Affairs Frank Aiken and Draft Resolutions on Nuclear Disarmament, 17 October 1958** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/6/440/8/1. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

Aiken's first step was a modest paragraph calling for the formation of a UN commission to recommend measures to the next session. However, global attentions were focused on nuclear tests and their health

effects, so Aiken linked his initiative with the American-led seventeen-power resolution requesting all states to suspend testing voluntarily. Aiken proposed an amendment to that motion that included the notion of brokering an understanding between nuclear weapons powers and non-nuclear powers. He submitted that the former voluntarily desist from supplying nuclear weapons to other countries, while non-nuclear powers reciprocated and volunteered not to develop such weapons during a test suspension. This proposed quid pro quo became a staple in the Irish resolutions subsequently and eventually be inscribed into the NPT.

Aiken's speech invoked recognizable tropes such as a 'geometric' increase in nuclear powers, creating an urgent need to halt the spread. His speech was seminal in identifying themes he and international opinion would rehearse in future years. He conjured up fears about small states and revolutionary groups with a bomb acting as 'the detonator for world-wide thermonuclear war.' Aiken was perceptive – he expected criticisms about institutionalized equality between states (nuclear "haves" and "have nots"), harms to alliances, the sufficiency of test bans, and the absence of monitoring. He sought to disprove the validity of such critiques, and these issues were worked through gradually, eventually leading to the finalization of the NPT ten years later.

**Letter from Frederick H. Boland to Con Cremin (Dublin) (Private and Confidential), New York, 20 November 1958** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/10/4/21, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XI, Document No. 162. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

The report of Ireland's permanent representative to the United Nations to his superior, the secretary of the Department of External Affairs, delivers his account of Aiken's first (failed) attempt to generate support for a resolution in the Thirteenth UN Session. Recognizing the breadth and depth of opposition, he withdrew his draft resolution and instead requested a simple roll call vote in favor of the second paragraph on 31 October – a modest statement acknowledging that an expansion in the number of nuclear weapons states would be harmful to peace and increase obstacles to disarmament. The measure passed with 37 votes and no opposition, although 44 abstentions were recorded. The Soviet bloc supported the maneuver, while Western-aligned countries abstained.

**Letter from Con Cremin to Frederick H. Boland (New York) (Personal and Confidential) (Copy), Dublin [Excerpt], 2 December 1958** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/10/4/21, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XI, Document No. 166. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

Aiken's advocacy of consecutive "non-dissemination" resolutions on an annual basis was inspired by his affinity for the "art of the possible," namely a belief that small, concrete steps would ameliorate international tensions.

## **Letter from Frederick H. Boland to Con Cremin (Dublin), 26 June 1959**

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/5/313/36B, Confidential Report Series, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 1959. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

Boland gauged opinion at the UN and assisted in preparing the ground for Aiken's campaign in the XIVth Session in the fall of 1959. Ireland cultivated the UN Secretariat, notably Dr. Protitch, who evaluated the Irish proposal as helpful. Likewise, intimations from the Eastern bloc were positive. The Irish Permanent Representative consolidated links with the second-in-command of the U.S. mission to the UN, James W. Barco, to enable a constructive dialogue with the Americans to fashion a resolution they could tolerate.

## **Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday 7 July 1959, Committee on Finance — Vote 59—External Affairs**

**[Excerpt]** 

*National Archives of Ireland, TAOIS S 16057 D, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1959-07-07/25/>.*

New Taoiseach Seán Lemass took the unusual step of intervening in a Foreign Affairs debate in July 1959 to defend Frank Aiken's conduct at the United Nations. Trenchant critics on the opposition benches in the Fine Gael party had berated Aiken repeatedly since 1957. Critics inside and outside of the lower house of parliament (Dáil Éireann) asserted that Ireland, "a tiny country" with limited interests, had no right to voice an opinion on global matters which was more appropriately dealt with by the "Great Powers." Worse, Aiken's interventions would create enemies among Irish friends worldwide, most notably in the United States. The tenor of the arguments was that Ireland had no nuclear energy industry and no nuclear weapons aspirations, so such matters should be left to the nuclear powers. It is difficult to avoid the sense that elements in Irish political life appreciated that American and NATO nuclear forces informally protected the anti-communist Republic of Ireland. Lemass ended speculation that he was less of a supporter of Aiken than his predecessor, de Valera. He affirmed that Ireland had a significant contribution to make to the global commons in terms of reinforcing peace and order. Aiken was empowered to continue.

## **Notice from First Secretary Eoin MacWhite To All Irish Diplomatic Missions (Except Washington), 14 July 1959**

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/6/440/8/5 US Agreements with NATO, 1959. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

First Secretary Eoin MacWhite informed all missions of Aiken's concerns that U.S. nuclear information agreements with selected NATO partners could impede efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. He was nonetheless reticent when it came to lodging a formal protest, having been advised by Eoin MacWhite that a strong denunciation would be counterproductive. From MacWhite's reading no actual nuclear information would be transferred to Allied personnel after all. The agreements related specifically

to information necessary for the training of Allied personnel in the employment of U.S. atomic weapons in their hosts' territories, so Aiken recoiled from further diplomatic protests. He appreciated the need to maintain some nuance on nuclear sharing as he pursued an East-West consensus.

The strength of NATO's feelings in favor of enhanced alliance nuclear defense and cooperation in the aftermath of the Sputnik shock was well known. The Irish were aware of the Eastern bloc's objections to NATO nuclear sharing as a dangerous precedent that strengthened NATO's political and security position. Moscow was especially exercised by any prospect of West German access to nuclear weapons as part of the normalization of German rearmament and progress toward reunification. Moscow opposed any semblance of Bonn's finger on the nuclear trigger, or its troops gaining proficiency with nuclear weaponry.

**Seán MacEntee, 'Nuclear Weapons: Proposed Declaration. Statement from the Minister for Health', 5 January 1961** [!\[\]\(55f151b49d1ec9b1c6a56f12d810c2ca\_img.jpg\)](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, TSCH/3/S16057G/61, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XI." Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

Frank Aiken was primarily responsible for originating the non-proliferation concept in 1958. He propelled the campaign with a heavy personal investment of time and energy in it. Although a senior and longstanding member of the Fianna Fáil government, closely aligned with the party's elder statesman Eamon de Valera, his non-proliferation initiative was not immune from senior internal criticism. Seán MacEntee was another Fianna Fáil veteran and occupied the position of Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) from 1959. He formulated a cogent critique of Aiken's non-dissemination designs in January 1961 that foreshadowed later criticisms of the NPT. MacEntee's observations were pertinent to the constitutionalization of nuclear non-proliferation, and posed fundamental questions about national sovereignty, inequality, real politik, and implementation as Aiken entered his fourth year of advocacy for a treaty based on the Irish resolutions. Aiken had encountered such criticisms already and was relatively unperturbed. He overcame this divergent voice in the Cabinet to continue his efforts and persuade the incoming John F Kennedy Administration to support the drive for an NPT later that year.

**Memorandum to All Missions by the Department of External Affairs, 'Arms Control' (Confidential) (408/264B), Dublin, 14 March 1961** [!\[\]\(bad0b78bca05a176505bcd9fc79688ad\_img.jpg\)](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/PMUN 331, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XI, Document No. 375. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

The arrival of the new U.S. president, John F. Kennedy, in office in 1961 encouraged Aiken to redouble his efforts. He searched for signs of change in the Kennedy administration. He was nevertheless guarded, appreciating that the arms control ambitions of the United States did not necessarily or completely align with Ireland's disarmament aspirations. He understood that progress required educating public opinion to recognize that general and complete disarmament could, given the vested interests, take generations. A

step-by-step, gradualist approach therefore had to be adopted. He reiterated his philosophy of expanding areas of law, adopting a regionalist approach, and assuming a preventive orientation in a commentary on Kennedy's article in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in November 1960, which was itself based on Kennedy's campaign speech earlier that year.

**Report from Seán Ronan to Con Cremin (Dublin), 'Irish Resolution on Preventing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons' (Confidential), New York [Excerpt], 5 December 1961** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/6/440/8/10 Pt. 1, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XII, Document No. 69. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

Aiken drafted in additional personnel to the Irish Mission to the UN in the run-in to the XVIth UN Session. Seán Ronan, the head of the political and information divisions at headquarters in Dublin, was sent as a delegate to the First Committee of the UN, involving him intensely in Aiken's non-dissemination efforts. His insider account reveals some of the dynamics and calculations at play in the building, as Ireland managed a balancing act of engineering consensus between East and West. In large part, the Irish Mission crafted the resolution's language to skirt the issue of alliance nuclear sharing in a bid to manufacture unanimity. The Irish had pondered co-sponsoring a Swedish draft resolution but anticipated that it would face resistance from NATO comparable to earlier iterations of the Irish resolution. Similarly, Ireland neglected to mention a proposed new disarmament committee in the draft resolution – there was no guarantee that it would form and report expeditiously. Finally, by drawing on the instrument of acclamation, the Irish sidestepped French objections and gained universal approval for Resolution 1665 (1961), wrapping the resolution in universal legitimacy.

**Extract from Memo. for Govt. dated 13/11/1964, 19th Session of U.N. General Assembly: 'III. Non-Dissemination of Nuclear Weapons'** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/6/440/8/10 II. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

This memorandum for Cabinet succinctly summarizes Aiken's approach after 1961. He supported the negotiations of the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) but recognized and held to the position that Resolution 1665 (XIV) provided the basic roadmap for an eventual agreement of a global non-proliferation treaty. More specifically, he maintained that 1665 provided the basis by which NATO nuclear sharing could be accommodated. Aiken was skeptical of Soviet contentions that a non-proliferation pact would prevent the proposed Multilateral Force (MLF). The Irish position was that it would not engage in the detailed ENDC discussions as it was for that body and the nuclear powers to broker the detailed provisions for an NPT owing to their knowledge of, and interests in, nuclear energy.

**Extracts from a Memorandum for the Information of the Government by the Department of External Affairs, 'The General Assembly of the United Nations (Resumed Twenty-second Session' (417/289), Dublin, 24 April 1968** [↗](#)

*National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs/99/1/26, published in "Documents on Irish Foreign Policy," Volume XIII, Document No. 425. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.*

The view of Frank Aiken throughout the 1960s was that once the United States and the Soviet Union had come to a basic agreement on the treaty, it was in the interests of all states to sign it on the basis of enlightened self-interest. He was not in favor of delay to finalize agreement on finer points as the will of the superpowers was of paramount importance.

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NUCLEAR HISTORY    IRELAND

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