THE "SPECIFIC CHARACTER" OF IRELAND'S SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

REFLECTIONS ON NEUTRALITY

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I. Introduction: the Citizen and the Treaty

In 1992 my aunt, who lived in Dundrum, took the obligations of citizenship seriously and would vote in a few days in the referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht, which established the European Union. She asked me: "What's all this about defence? Isn't Ireland neutral?" She had lived through all of that during the Second World War, though in India where her husband, a civil engineer, helped build airfields in the war against Japan.

I don't recall exactly what I said, but I do remember wondering where to start. It was tempting to start at the beginning, with the historical roots, the familiar icons of Irish nationalism, from Wolfe Tone to the First World War, with the slogan "Neither King nor Kaiser" and the anti-conscription crisis in 1918. However, given the imminence of the vote and not wishing to try my aunt's patience, I started with the obscure wording of the treaty.

Since the Treaty of Maastricht, and in the subsequent treaties of Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon (enforced in 1999, 2003, and 2009 respectively), the member states' obligations regarding security and defence have included a commitment to "the progressive framing of a common Union defence policy". However, this obligation was then qualified by two statements, first that it "shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policies of certain Member States" and also that it did not clash with the role of NATO.

By implication Ireland, then the only EU Member State which had not signed the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949, was alone in the mysterious category of "certain Member States", but some mystery remained in the fact that the "specific character" of its security and defence policy was not spelled out. Attachments to subsequent treaties (Nice, Lisbon) make it clear that the policy of military neutrality was involved, but in 1992 my aunt had to take my word for it. Thus advised, she went to the polls, and the treaty was ratified (eventually, following second thoughts in Denmark).

How is Ireland's policy of military neutrality described? Recent national documents are tight-lipped on this subject, the official review of the government's foreign policy, *Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World (2015)*, referring to it briefly on page 29 as a "core element of Ireland's foreign policy". The White Paper on Defence of 2015 is a little more fulsome, stating on page 24 that the policy is "characterized by non-membership of military alliances and non-participation in common or mutual defence arrangements".

That means a national defence. The Defence White Paper reminds us that "in the event of an attack, Ireland must be prepared to act alone until the United Nations Security Council has taken appropriate measures". The White Paper spares us the observation that, if the Security Council cannot reach a decision following a veto by one or more of the five permanent members, we are truly dependent on the kindness of others.

The following reflections attempt to put some flesh on these bare bones. How has the policy evolved in the different historical contexts since it was first tested in 1939? How is it reflected in the ways in which Ireland responds to the the main security challenges we face today? How is it understood in our public debate on security and defence policy?

II. Historical contexts: a part of what we are?

Before 1939: the pre-history of Irish neutrality

In international relations, neutrality is a means to avoid becoming involved in other states' wars. It is not surprising, therefore, that the early advocates of a separate Irish state often envisaged the adoption of neutrality as their preferred security policy. Their preference was all the more pronounced as their new state would be a small element in a world order dominated by powerful empires.

And so it was in the revolutionary period leading to the establishment of the Irish state in 1922, a revolution marked in so many ways by the broader context of world war. However, the aspiration to neutrality was not resolved in the terms of the settlement. British naval bases were retained in Irish sovereign territory, and the British had not yet accepted that a Dominion (as the Irish Free State then was) would not support them in time of war.

An important compensating factor following independence was Ireland's active participation in the new arrangements for collective security, the League of Nations. But the loss of the League's credibility in 1936, following the Ethiopian crisis, brought national security and defence policy back to the top of the agenda. By then the Dominions' autonomy had been enhanced and the evolution of Ireland's relationship with Great Britain soon resulted in a new constitution and successful negotiations for the return of the ports. Thus in the period immediately preceding the outbreak of war in Europe it became clear that Ireland both could and would adopt a policy of neutrality.

The Second World War, 1939-1945

As a formal policy, neutrality was first put to the test in the second world war. That experience is still widely regarded as an indelible (if rather ambiguous) point of reference in attitudes towards security policy. What might, in retrospect, be termed the legendary aspect of Irish neutrality was confirmed at this point.

At the war's outset, nearly eighty years ago, Ireland was one of a majority of European states to declare neutrality following Germany's invasion of Poland. In international law this status posed two persistent difficulties for the Irish government. The first was the obligation to provide a credible defence against any belligerent, the second the obligation to adopt a position of impartiality between them.

The Irish state was woefully ill-prepared on the first count, particularly as regards aerial bombardment, the great fear of that time. The requirement of impartiality was stretched to the limit by the new state's very close, and from Dublin's point of view, still incomplete constitutional relationship with the United Kingdom. The unresolved question of partition, leaving Northern Ireland "in" the war and the Irish state "outside", was a toxic conundrum throughout. Geography gave the former a significant role in British defence, complicating the state's relations with both belligerents and its domestic critics.

More than five years later, Ireland was one of a mere handful of European states that survived with their neutrality intact. The two most important goals of security policy had been achieved - the survival of the state and, above all, the provision of a safe haven for its citizens. The government had kept its nerve under conditions of extreme stress, especially during the crisis of the summer of 1940. The now considerable body of scholarly historical writing on this period tends to support the view that on the whole, the policy of neutrality was implemented successfully.

Yet this outcome – "neutrality-for-the-duration" – does beg the question whether it was the optimum policy. Usually this is framed in terms of its moral basis. Whatever about being an "imperialist war" in its origins and execution, was not the Second World War a Just War, being ultimately about the defeat of expansionist tyrannies which respected neither moral scruples nor geographical limits?

The question can also be put in terms of Ireland's national interests. By the summer of 1943 the military risk to the "safe haven" was substantially diminished. We were dealt a good hand by geography. Joining the allied bandwagon (a vehicle for sovereign, independent states) could be justified as the act of a sovereign, independent state. This would have given formal participation in planning the post-war order, and membership by right in its international institutions. It would hardly have achieved the holy grail of a united island (still unresolved today), but it could have created a more positive dynamic between nationalists and unionists than the dialogue of the deaf that actually emerged. In short, was it not in our interests to be "on the right side of history?"

Yet it is difficult to imagine a counterfactual history at this point. Neutrality policy was, in a very direct sense, the creature of Eamon de Valera. As head of government and foreign minister, he saw it as a natural expression of his larger design of constitutional development. Barely two decades after a civil war on that issue, neutrality was the necessary demonstration of a hard-won and still incomplete absolute sovereignty. Partition persisted. Also, the failure of the League of Nations had left de Valera sceptical of future collective security. A radical change in direction would have been a very tall order.

And who or what might have persuaded him from this fixed idea? London was too much part of the problem, especially in the light of Redmond's failed gamble in supporting Britain in 1914. The other key diplomatic relationship, with Washington, was dysfunctional; here, both envoys had close access to their home governments, but in different ways failed to engage constructively with their hosts. Dev's small circle of foreign policy advisers was mostly as well informed as could be expected, often in difficult circumstances. However, there is no suggestion in the archives that a radical change of policy was entertained as a serious option before the end of the war. Groupthink seems to have prevailed.

Two other explanations for continuity in neutrality policy in the later years of the war are apparent. By 1943 it was clear that public opinion had reached a modus vivendi, secure in a safe haven while at the same time the considerable number of its citizens who wished to work for the British war effort, or even put their lives on the line, could do so.

And at the hidden level of intelligence cooperation between a very small number of officials from neutral Ireland and belligerent Britain, another modus vivendi had been reached. Here the formal obligation of impartiality was discretely set aside in favour of the immediate contingencies of the military situation. At this level there was "a certain consideration" for the neighbour's interest, and the practical benevolence of Ireland's policy was appreciated. For the British it was not obvious that a formal alliance with Ireland was actually a military necessity in the later stages of the war, and it could even be seen as more disruptive than helpful.

The Cold War, 1945-1991

There was indeed a price to pay for neutrality when the war ended. For the next ten years, Ireland floundered around in a sort of diplomatic purgatory, as neutrality in time of war (with its demanding formal rules) was replaced by more ambiguous circumstances where a new collective security system existed alongside the dangerous confrontation between the emerging cold war blocs. In 1946 the state was exposed to a Soviet veto on its application to join the new United Nations Organisation, an unwitting victim of an early Cold War ploy. This left a succession of Irish governments without the implicit discipline of having to formulate positions on new issues lying beyond their own parochial interests.

Irish diplomats also had to cope with reputational damage arising from the perception of their state as an incorrigible free-rider. This view could be expected in London, but it was, if anything, more pronounced in Washington, the new centre of post-war diplomacy. This had some negative effects on Ireland's participation in the Marshall aid programme, which together with membership of the Council of Europe were examples of the state's tentative incorporation into the new international order.

Ireland's lack of diplomatic weight was demonstrated more clearly in the curious affair of possible participation in the new military alliance, NATO. In 1949 the foreign minister, Sean MacBride, was effusive in his support for the aims of the alliance but made Irish membership conditional on the end of partition. Faced with his argument that in effect NATO would be still-born without Ireland, Washington (with Northern Ireland's geostrategic location in its pocket) said no thank you, and almost by default, Irish neutrality continued to define the state's security and defence policy.

Eventual membership of the UN (from December 1955) saw the beginning of a more coherent and constructive approach. In addition to supporting the UN's Charter, policy was based on a position of independence from the Cold War blocs and a defence of "western" values.

The tension, not to say contradiction, between the latter two principles was resolved during the long tenure of Frank Aiken as foreign minister between 1957 and 1969. On the one hand, independent positions were adopted on proposals concerning military disengagement in Europe and the Middle East, on the question of Chinese representation in the UN, and on decolonization issues; on the other hand, when major Cold War crises occurred (Hungary 1956, Cuba 1962) Ireland was emphatically on the western side.

It is also interesting to note two things which did *not* happen in the later years of Aiken's term of office. In spite of a strong disposition towards sympathy with the many emerging states of "the third world", Ireland stayed aloof from the Non-Aligned Movement (unlike other European neutrals such as Austria and Sweden which attended some meetings as observers). Nor did the Irish government openly criticise American policy in Vietnam, in spite of a growing anti-American opinion at home.

By that time, Irish foreign policy was also in the early stages of its major transformation since 1945, joining the European integration process. Following the application to join the European Economic Community in 1961, there was a widespread assumption that membership of NATO might be regarded as an implicit corollary, since Ireland was the only actual or candidate EEC member state outside the alliance. Hence the Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, let it be known in 1961 that if it was absolutely necessary neutrality would be trumped by the imperative of economic policy. At the same time, other European neutrals (Austria, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland) regarded the EEC commitment as being incompatible with neutrality but, when confronted with this line, in general Irish politicians learned to look the other way.

In any case, President de Gaulle's veto of the enlargement process in 1963 delayed the moment of truth by almost a decade. Neutrality was indeed an issue in Ireland's referendum on EEC membership in 1972, but not a decisive one. The Cold War context now favoured increasing détente rather than confrontation, and the new process of foreign policy cooperation, European Political Cooperation (EPC), stayed well clear of the military aspects of cold war relationships. In fact, the notion that the EEC states should develop a European "defence identity" within or alongside NATO was anathema to most of its members, especially the United Kingdom who saw it in terms of a French plot to undermine an Anglo-Saxon leadership of the broader alliance. In effect, the existence of NATO was – and still is – an unwitting guarantor of Ireland's reluctance to engage in collective defence.

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This situation prevailed even during the reversion to a more confrontational phase of the Cold War from 1979 to 1985, with the "euromissile crisis". The "new cold war" coincided with a critical stage in Anglo-Irish relations when for a very brief moment in 1981, the possibility was raised by the media of neutrality being on the table in the context of a deal on the status of Northern Ireland between the Haughey and Thatcher governments. It wasn't. But the following year neutrality was evoked in Ireland's attitude to British policy in the Falkland Islands crisis, which also saw a rare Irish divergence from the European sanctions against Argentina.

However, in the Cold War context the Falklands war was a case apart. A more significant development at this time was the way in which the heightened fears of nuclear war became associated in the public mind with neutrality. The increased activism of antiwar movements elsewhere in western Europe found an echo in Ireland.

The almost half century of Cold War ended with neutrality still firmly in the repertoire of Ireland's security policy. It also left an important legacy in two other respects. The first, and by some way the most important, was the tradition of military peacekeeping. Neutrality was a factor in the early development of Ireland's role as a UN peacekeeper, and impartiality regarding specific missions would always be important. But in terms of bloc affiliation it was not a generic requirement – witness the role of Canada, both a pioneer of UN peacekeeping and strong supporter of NATO. Over time the continuous participation of the Irish defence forces in UN peacekeeping became the state's most significant contribution to multilateral security.

A further legacy from the Cold War era lay in the field of disarmament. Frank Aiken's dogged promotion of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in the 1960s proved to be the start of a continuing element in the state's security policy. This too would be associated in the public mind with the label of neutrality.

The "peace dividend" in Europe, 1991-2014

The extraordinary revolution in Europe between 1989 and 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, saw the end of large-scale military confrontation; European states cashed in their "peace dividend'. Not that there was universal peace. Wars in the Gulf and the Balkans in the nineties, then 9/11 and the misconceived response in Iraq in 2003 were followed by the false dawn of the "Arab spring" in 2011. At the time these events were treated as limited, regional conflicts rather than harbingers of a new malign world order. On the contrary, the new world order which prevailed seemed to be one in which economic globalisation and multilateral cooperation were the norm.

In this context the transformation of the EEC into the European Union, in the Maastricht treaty, indicated what was to be the main framework for the development of Ireland's security policy. The initial commitment to "defence" was aspirational – enter the caveat of the "specific character" of national security and defence policy outlined above. All other Member States at that point were members of NATO, which in spite of the end of the cold war, remained in existence in the new unipolar system. NATO was no longer the military element in a bipolar world order; it was now the military nucleus of a broader collective security order, linking the United States and Canada with the increased number of democratic European states.

NATO's new association arrangement with states that could not or would not become full members, the Partnership for Peace (PfP), caused controversy in Ireland in the mid-1990s, with the result that the state was one of the last to join the PfP network. This hesitation was more a matter of party politics than grand strategy, but it did show that neutrality, however it might be understood, was still part of the currency of domestic debate.

Prompted by the failure of the EU to prevent the Balkan wars in the 1990's, in the first decade of the new century it became clearer what "security and defence" would actually involve in practice in the EU context. The Common Security and Defence Policy" (CSDP) is not a mutual defence pact, offering deterrence against a potential adversary, and in spite of its title it does not defend its members' territories – that remains the business of NATO. Rather it is concerned with

military and civilian operations and missions to provide "peace support" outside the boundaries of the EU. This is a much looser commitment than NATO's Article 5, and fits more readily into the pattern of UN peacekeeping.

Since 2003 more than thirty civilian and military missions and operations have been carried out in this framework, itself part of the broader foreign and security policy of the EU. The latter attempts, not always successfully, to bring the collective weight of 28 (soon to be 27) quite disparate member states to bear. The stated aim of combining military and civilian policy instruments (policing and legal support) with diplomatic and economic inducement to make the EU a "civilian power", based on voluntary efforts by individual member states, can be a slow and cumbersome process.

Nevertheless, the adaptation of an important part of Ireland's UN profile to the EU context was relatively straightforward. But it was not so easy at the political level. The frequent EU treaty reforms following Maastricht required ratification by referendums, two of which were not carried in the first instance (Nice 2001, Lisbon 2008). To justify "second thought" repeat referendums, it was politically necessary to offer further reassurances to meet concerns expressed in the campaigns. The bogeyman of a European superstate with its own army was one such, and deemed to be a suitable case for treatment. The net effect, through added formal commitments the second time round, has been to protect the policy of military neutrality by ensuring that in the EU context it can only be changed by referendum.

The historical legacy

In the story of Ireland's security and defence policy outlined above, neutrality is a constant theme, but its significance varies as the context changes. So too has the way in which it has been understood, by governmental practitioners of diplomacy and security policy and by politicians and the broader public. This suggests some general reflections.

The first point concerns motivation - the strong emotional reach of the word "neutrality". After nearly eighty years since its first implementation it has reflected fear, national pride, and the passionate pursuit of universal peace and justice. It is understood in the first place as the provision of a safe haven from external threats, and at a more general level as a principled rejection of war. Given the obligation to provide a credible defence in its legal form, this might be more accurately described as pacific intent than pacifism as such.

Neutrality also registers as a fundamental expression of sovereignty; it appears as a form of dissent from an imperial hegemon, whether Britain or the United States. It has served as a more general foreign policy orientation, whether as a potential bargaining chip in the campaign against partition, or as a prerequisite of the campaign against nuclear weapons.

In short, there is bit a of something for everyone in this broad diplomatic tradition. It has come to be as much about perceptions of national identity as it is a response to specific security challenges. As a result, the legendary narrative of "our traditional neutrality" tends to serve as a filter through which those specific challenges are diagnosed. There is perhaps a danger in this, of allowing the prescription to precede the diagnosis rather than the other way round. Has neutrality become an end in itself rather than a means to an end (security)?

A second general reflection concerns the underlying tension in the trade-off between the claims of neutrality and the broad ideological and material interests of the state, particularly evident since membership of the EEC was envisaged. The ways in which we qualify the label "neutrality" are instructive. The governmental usage is "military" neutrality, implying that the policy is restricted to the (undoubtedly important) question of whether to sign the blank cheque of participation in a military alliance. But political solidarity is another matter, and may be in some circumstances a more important one.

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On the other hand, there is also a more expansive terminology – "positive" or "active" neutrality - sometimes with the implication that neutrality is an important, even a necessary, requirement of a foreign policy which is based on universal values such as international development and human rights. Here the multiple motives outlined above stake their claim to ownership of Ireland's perception of neutrality.

At the same time, some form of qualification is required, if only to explain to puzzled European partners long since accustomed to NATO membership what neutrality actually means. And whether the formulation is narrow or broad, there may also be an unspoken concern to counter pejorative connotations of the word, such as indifference or free-riding.

All of this may make neutrality a "core element" in Ireland's foreign policy but it also makes for an ambiguous security and defence policy. This is reflected to some extent in its popular support. On one hand, politicians across the political spectrum repeat the mantra that "neutrality has served us well", and it is often assumed this view is shared by the general public. Yet it is also true that, outside the context of referendums on EU treaties, like most foreign policy questions it has not been a significant electoral issue. Long intervals of parliamentary and media inattention make it difficult to assess public attitudes towards security and defence policy. Infrequent opinion polls show support for both neutrality and EU defence cooperation but rarely investigate the depth of motivation or the trade-offs involved in the real world.

Since 2014 a new and more uncertain security environment has posed more searching questions about how military neutrality relates to our security and defence policy. How does the "specific character" fare in this far-from-brave new world?

III. The security context now: the challenges of where we are

The context changes.

Significant changes to the security environment don't always happen all at once, but there is often a particular change which leads to a general perception that the old order is no more. For governments in the European region, this "Rubicon moment" occurred in the early spring of 2014, with Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Previous shocks (9/11 in 2001 and the misconceived response in the invasion of Iraq in 2003; Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, followed by the peak of the west's financial crisis in 2008; the "Arab spring" of 2011 and its disastrous aftermath) in retrospect add up to a negative pattern, but Russia's response to the crisis of the Ukrainian regime finally crossed the Rubicon by breaking fundamental norms of acceptable behavior which had prevailed in Europe since before the end of the cold war.

In this new context the formal basis of Ireland's security policy remains unchanged, as outlined in the introduction; military neutrality is a "core element".   It is one thing to state policy at this level of abstraction, but in order to see what military neutrality means in practice we need to look more closely at the main challenges which face us now.

Russia

The good news is that Russia's military intervention in eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea is not a replay of the twentieth century Cold War (a global ideological confrontation between two superpowers and their respective "blocs"). Yet there is something of a 19th century sense of imperial entitlement, a domineering view of spheres of influence, and an emphasis on the recovery of status following the humiliation experienced in the early 1990s. Russia objects to the proximity of NATO, but at the same time resents the indifference shown by the west after the cold war. The inducements of globalisation have been overlaid by traditional geopolitics.

Since 2014 the threat posed by Russia has taken the form of so-called "hybrid warfare". Deniable operations through proxies in the Ukrainian theatre and more conventional posturing and coat-trailing in the Baltic region have been topped with occasional reminders that Russia is the world's second nuclear power. What is more novel is a large scale deployment of digital technology, in the form of disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks, with an impact beyond the conventional scope of security policy.

To date the collective response has been threefold. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – the Cinderella of multilateral security in Europe – has held the ring in eastern Ukraine, NATO has provided increased reassurance and deterrence, particularly in the Baltic, and the EU has imposed sanctions on Russia and provided political and economic support to Ukraine. Through the participation of France and Germany in the "Minsk agreement" a high level contact group exists, but as yet, the search for diplomatic solutions has stalled. Mixed messages from Washington confirm the paralysis. In the meantime the risk of escalation (deliberate or unintended) remains.

What is the relevance of Ireland's military neutrality in this situation? Unlike Finland and Sweden (whose governments now describe their status as "military non-alignment" rather than "neutrality" and have close military cooperation with each other and with NATO), our territorial "safe haven" is not threatened by conventional measures, though our limited air defence capabilities imply close cooperation with the United Kingdom. Vulnerability to new developments in the technology of conflict - cyber war and disinformation - may be another matter. But there is no question of impartiality as regards the dispute with Russia. As a Member State of the EU, Ireland is a party to the sanctions policy and whatever diplomatic influence the EU can bring to bear. The claims of solidarity with more exposed EU partners prevail.

Jihadist terrorism

It is commonly argued that the threat posed by terrorist attacks is not existential – the survival of the state is not necessarily at stake, and the loss of life is relatively low. But for any society subjected to repeated terrorist attacks there are serious negative consequences; as well as the immediate physical and psychological effects, restrictions on normal freedoms and the possible erosion of civil liberties can be expected.

In 2014 the pattern of jihadist terrorism (for long an endemic feature in many Islamic countries on a scale well above that in Europe) was intensified by the sudden expansion of the "Islamic State" in Syria and Iraq, and subsequent attacks in European cities. The propensity for a xenophobic reaction was increased by the concurrent massive flows of refugees and illegal migrants into Europe, still one of the most divisive issues in the European Union.

The collective response to the terrorist threat takes two forms. Within the state it is a matter of armed policing, perhaps within a special legal regime, but there is also significant military action against terrorist groups wherever they are based abroad. The key element in both cases is effective international intelligence sharing, generally recognised as a common interest but in practice, owing to the secretive nature of national intelligence agencies, a form of cooperation that may be difficult to achieve.

What is the relevance of military neutrality in the face of this threat? Ireland may not be the most obvious target for an attack, but our stated policy is unlikely to guarantee a safe haven for our citizens. The jihadist does not travel with a copy of the Hague Convention in his back-pack, and recognizes no law but his own. Unlike our home-grown terrorists, he is neither familiar nor trying to achieve an end which is ultimately negotiable. International engagement is vital in dealing with this type of threat, and that includes participation in peacekeeping operations to help stabilise threatened regimes as well as intelligence cooperation.

Nuclear horizons?

One of the defining features of the 45 year Cold War was the fear of nuclear annihilation. Subsequently there was a significant reduction in the major nuclear arsenals, but it was never by any means complete. A year after the annexation of Crimea, the Russian president let it be known that his forces had been put on increased state of alert at the time. The tactic of nuclear threat was back.

The current incoherent non-proliferation policy of the American administration in the cases of North Korea and Iran has only served to raise old issues of arms control with respect to nuclear weapons. Recent US-Russian differences over the Intermediate range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987, a key agreement between Moscow and Washington covering the nuclear weapons most directly relevant to the European region, comes closer to home.

There are also new concerns about the vulnerability of nuclear systems to cyber interference, and the place of low-yield (hence "usable") nuclear weapons in strategic thinking, all arising in a more complex multipolar world. Up to recently the two main nuclear states have generally shown an alarming complacency about nuclear arms control and their leaders have seemed happy to compete for their bragging rights. There are signs of a change in attitude, but do both sides have the neccessary guile and stamina to engage seriously with arms control?

Nuclear issues were closely associated with Ireland's neutral stance during the Cold War; the promotion of non-proliferation in the 1960s was followed by rising public anxiety (including the repudiation of plans to develop nuclear energy). Fast forward to the current government's sponsorship of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017.

To date, 70 states have signed on to repudiate nuclear weapons, 23 of which have ratified the treaty (which comes into force when 50 have ratified). There is a reasonable expectation that up to two thirds of the UN's membership will adopt this position, but nuclear possessors and their allies are, unsurprisingly, absent. Among EU Member States there is a clear division of opinion, six of them not being members of NATO.

However, the outcome of this issue will not depend on a majority vote in the UN. The treaty is essentially a "shaming exercise". Setting international norms may be a necessary condition of change in the long term, but peer pressure is not sufficient to impose change in the short to medium term. Just as the previous nuclear build-down toward the end of the Cold War was decided between Moscow and Washington over the heads of others, any hope of reforming the current nuclear regime will depend on how, or even whether, these two *global* nuclear powers can accommodate a third global power at the top table. And that is but part of the central conundrum of global security at this time – increasing apprehension over the rise of China and the response of the United States.

The return of unrestrained nationalism

A fourth challenge on the agenda of international security is much broader and more diffuse than the first three, but is if anything more serious. It might be termed the problem of the "own goal", and can be seen as an aspect of the phenomenon of populist politics. In the context of international security what is most disturbing about populists is their tendency, whether deliberately or implicitly, to assume a stance of unrestrained nationalism without due regard to the likely consequences.

While sovereign states compose the bed-rock of collective purpose, in the populist view of the world nationalism tends to take a malign form. It is assumed that "the people" (self-defined) can live behind impermeable borders, free from the complexities of globalism, immigration, malevolent foreigners and the diktats of their failed elites, both national and cosmopolitan. This can be seen at first hand in Brexit. There is an alarming amnesia, whether wilful or merely unthinking, about the place of European integration in working towards reconciliation and cooperation after 1945. But this attitude is not confined to the United Kingdom. Several EU Member States have populists in government, and the electoral influence of populist parties is growing more generally. While the main emphasis of their foreign policy is on migration, their default position is instinctively isolationist and their nationalism tends to be unrestrained.

However, it is the United States, creator and leader of the post-1945 international order, which represents the most threatening example of unrestrained nationalism. In eighteen months, the Trump administration has disrupted important global regimes (trade, climate change), and implemented an incoherent nuclear non-proliferation policy (North Korea, Iran). In his dealings with the UN, the G7, NATO and the EU, he has demonstrated his contempt for his allies and the multilateral system through which they attempt to cooperate.

The collective response to this threat reaches far beyond the scope of European or even global security policy as such – the bigger picture encompasses the fate of liberal politics, migration, human rights, the global environment, international trade and economic and social development. The multilateral approach to international security is an integral part of this response. Since the end of the Second World War we have become used to seeking cooperation through a complex array of institutions whether at the global (UN) or regional levels (OSCE, NATO, EU).

The geopolitical leadership which has provided the parameters in which these institutions have developed is largely a facet of American foreign policy. This leadership has not always worked well, either for the US or the rest of the world (for example, Vietnam in the 1960s and Iraq more recently) and the belligerent unilateralism of the Trump administration promises to continue in this vein.

What has military neutrality to do with all of this? In bilateral relations with the United States official Ireland has generally sought to play the role of friendly neutral (with the emphasis on the friendliness). But criticism of US foreign policy has also been an element in public debate, especially since the Iraq invasion in 2003 focused opposition to military flights through Shannon airport. However, Trump's assault on the seventy-year old liberal international order gives the question a much broader dimension.

It is arguable that in pushing back against the erosion of multilateralism the values and material interests of Irish foreign and security policy coincide. The predicament and vulnerabilities of a small state are most readily met within the framework of global and regional institutions and regimes. Differences can be mediated through a predictable rule-based system. A place at the table offers possibilities of building coalitions of like-minded member states, acting as a multiplier of influence.

The defence of the multilateral order nevertheless presents a serious dilemma for any Irish government, given the extent of the state's material and cultural interests and human ties with the United States. There are difficult questions here. Is Trump's destructive foreign policy a temporary blip or does it represent a broader trend? What adaptations must Ireland make in the short to medium term?

Looking at the relevance of military neutrality to Ireland's overall interests in the light of the challenges outlined above leads to a mixed assessment. With regard to Russia, it precludes a role in military deterrence, but not in collective diplomacy. It does not have much to do with the issue of jihadist terrorism. On the other hand, the revival of nuclear questions evokes traditional approaches. Yet if we push the idea of "security" beyond its conventional geographical or military boundaries and see it in terms of a rapidly changing global order the policy of military neutrality offers little in the way of concrete guidance.

IV. Debating neutrality: the range of choice

It is not surprising, therefore, that public debate on security and defence policy is rather confused. At the risk of oversimplification, three broad options are on the table: maintaining the status quo, enhancing the status of neutrality, and contemplating (if not deciding) the abandonment of "the specific character".

The status quo: enhancing EU cooperation?

Ireland's adherence to the EU's common security and defence policy has recently been reformed by a series of measures, including a commitment to a form of enhanced cooperation, "Permanent Structured Cooperation" (generally known as "Pesco"). Pesco does not alter the basic nature of EU military cooperation – preparing for and executing voluntary participation in crisis management/peace support operations outside the Union. In effect, it is a complicated procedure to encourage Member States to "try harder" in implementing what they had already agreed in more general terms more than a decade ago. There is a strong emphasis on capabilities, on rationalising and reducing the wasteful results of national military procurement.

What its critics refer to as the "militarization" of the EU does not, however, include the defence of the territory of the Union itself. That is stilll the business of NATO – and for those Member States like Ireland which are not in NATO it is a question of national defence.

Notwithstanding Pesco, the legal base of EU defence cooperation is still limited by "the specific character". And so far as EU operations are concerned, Ireland's Permanent Defence Forces can only participate outside the state with a formal government decision, parliamentary endorsement and under a UN mandate.

Enhancing the status of neutrality?

Critics of the status quo, whether from a pacifist or sovereigntist viewpoint, focus on what they see as the dark side of American or more generally "western" foreign policy. For nearly two decades the transit of American troops through Shannon airport has been a particular issue, while in recent years they have proposed what is sometimes referred to as "enshrining" neutrality by making it a constitutional principle rather than a mere policy. In effect, it would become not so much *a* core element as *the* core element not just in Ireland's security and defence policy but in its foreign policy as a whole.

This option has not prevailed to date. It would imply a major change in the Constitution by contradicting the executive's explicit power to make foreign policy. Given the legislature's last word in declaring war, the separation of powers in the overall constitutional balance would be out of kilter. In any case, the recent requirement for a referendum on participation in any future EU military alliance gives military neutrality a measure of constitutional protection.

Another objection is that in practice this enhanced neutrality would in effect put key decisions in the hands of lawyers who, faced with the interpretation of such an ambiguous concept, would require a due and lengthy process leading to policy paralysis. And that might impinge on a government's pursuit of interests beyond the field of security and defence policy.

All change? The myth of the "European Army"

The critique of EU "militarisation" is largely driven by the belief that the EU is moving inexorably towards the creation of a malevolent superstate, and that Ireland is being compelled willy-nilly to abdicate its sovereignty.

As part of the broader debate about Ireland's overall interests in the integration process, in this view the implication is that the end of military neutrality is nigh.

What evidence is there to defend this proposition?. A case in point might be the brief declarations of support for the eventual goal of a "European army" by the French president and the German chancellor during the centenary commemorations of the end of the First World War in November 2018. Whether presented as a panacea (as in the Franco-German duet) or as an imperial bogeyman (by Europhobes), the "European army" is a lazy rhetorical slogan, which deserves to be treated with more care than it often gets.

Taken at face value, it would be a single military force with a fully integrated command and a single political authority – in short, a federal EU rather than the unique and unstable political hybrid we see today. If the Member States are not yet agreed on this finality (and for all the rhetoric there is no sign that they are) the next best proposition would be a

military alliance of national armies, perhaps under an integrated military command, and answerable to a multinational political authority derived from a mutual defence pact. This might be closer to what the French and German leaders have in mind, as part of Europe's overall "strategic autonomy" vis-a-vis the United States, China and Russia. In short, it would be the Maastricht Treaty's common defence, but minus the caveats. Exit Ireland's "specific character"?

But might that not imply, too, the exit of NATO as we know it? It was no coincidence that the Franco-German chorus emerged in the immediate context of a rebuttal of the American president's dismissive attitude towards his allies and the multilateral system in general. So far the resilience of NATO in the face of its "leader's" reckless bluster is holding, in terms of operational deployments and support in the US congress. But so too is the president's reckless bluster against a background of broader support for a retrenchment of American military power. It is a reminder that the future of EU security and defence policy, and the possible pressures to alter our existing policy, depend in large part on the fate of the broader alliance.

Meanwhile, in the midst of all that excitement the first ministerial meeting of the European Intervention Initiative was held. This is a self-selected, French-led group of 10 states, institutionally independent of both the EU and NATO. It includes the United Kingdom (thereby maintaining a post-Brexit link), Denmark (which opted out of EU security and defence in the Maastricht Treaty) and militarily non-aligned Finland. Notable among the 18 absentees are Italy and Poland. The group aims to develop a "common strategic culture". That might take some time.

V. Final thoughts, for now.

Reviewing the three broad options sketched in above, a first conclusion is that it is too early to write the obituary of "the specific character" of Ireland's security and defence policy. There is little evidence to suggest that an enhanced status for neutrality would provide the key to the problems that face us, or that there is a consensus among EU states to transform the Union into the preferred vehicle for the territorial defence of its Member States.

That said, an anxious fascination persists with what is going on out there - a fundamental transformation of the international order. As Ireland campaigns for a seat in the UN Security Council, it is not too early to look more closely at our vulnerabilities in this uncertain context. The security and defence aspects of Brexit may soon emerge more clearly, and be an obvious concern for the United Kingdom's nearest neighbour. At stake will be how we provide for the security of our borders, on land and sea, and our airspace. In short, how will we shape our "certain consideration" after Brexit?

More broadly, we will need to review our understanding of the global drivers of insecurity and geopolitical rivalry - poverty, migration, climate change and technological disruption. The future we face includes the repercussions for Europe of the competition between the United States and China, a demographic explosion in Africa and the impact of artificial intelligence on our societies. And as we diagnose our predicament and determine our interests in the light of our values, it will only make sense to keep an open mind as to whether the familiar prescription is still appropriate.

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