

Mosaic Neutrality: Irish Neutrality and the Return of Power Politics

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Executive Summary

This paper explores how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought a new focus on Irish neutrality and what it means in a changed European Security context. Against the backdrop of increased geopolitical tensions, some European neutrals are reconsidering their status as neutral countries, with Sweden and Finland choosing to join NATO.

The changing character of warfare, including the proliferation of hybrid threats such as cyberattacks, disinformation, espionage, sabotage, and the instrumentalisation of energy and migration, coupled with a new reality where war is often undeclared, has put neutrality as a concept under increased strain. This paper explores how Irish neutrality has responded to these circumstances, including the immediate pressures posed by Russia's full-scale invasion. The paper argues that Irish neutrality is fluid and enjoys a 'mosaic quality' whereby it is comprised of many different concepts and subject to multiple, and sometimes competing interpretations, and that it is this fluidity that has enabled Ireland's policy of military neutrality to endure.

Introduction

Ireland is at a crossroads. In its global context, Ireland, a full and enthusiastic member of the European Union, must chart a course in a more dangerous world. Russia's continued war of aggression against Ukraine and threats towards Europe pose direct risks to European citizens, and will have real consequences for Ireland should tensions escalate. With war on the European continent and the Trump administration's stated view that the United States will no longer prioritise European security,¹ the EU will continue to have to recalibrate, and be more proactive to protect its citizens in a more dangerous world.

In this changing environment, Ireland is uniquely exposed. The country has long cherished its economic, cultural, and political ties with the United States, and there had been a tacit expectation that the United States would come to Ireland's assistance in times of crisis.² Present and future governments will have to navigate a geopolitical environment that is more contested, more uncertain, and likely with high levels of risk. As this paper will discuss, Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality is already undergoing strain, and that state of affairs will likely continue. This paper will argue that Ireland should seek to retain, and possibly enhance, its flexible interpretations of its present policy of traditional neutrality. Though how this framework of flexibility may be executed will be discussed later, this paper argues that flexible approaches to neutrality would provide the State with the means to navigate a more chaotic geostrategic environment and be able to calibrate its responses to the requirements of crises as they continue to arise.

Today, traditionally neutral European states are finding their policies of neutrality strained by the challenges of the new geopolitical environment. As geopolitical competition and warfare occurring below the threshold of violence – including cyber and information warfare – become more common, neutral states are finding themselves increasingly exposed in a more dangerous environment. Furthermore, militarily neutral states, in particular Ireland, are having to renegotiate their relationship with neutrality as a concept, and the very meaning of the term itself.

This paper discusses how Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality is often misrecognised as a more all-encompassing state security policy than it was ever intended to be. Without a strict definition of neutrality, Irish neutrality is essentially a mosaic made up of the diverse attitudes and interpretations that exist within Irish public discourse vis-à-vis neutrality. Overall, this paper will argue that the concept of polyvalency, when terms have more than one meaning to differing audiences, is a defining characteristic of Irish neutrality. Ireland's traditional policy of neutrality orients how the State interacts within the international system. Irish neutrality has also increasingly come to be a marker of Irish identity. All this has consequences for how the State can act when it comes to matters of defence. Such polyvalences may produce seeming incongruities such as Ireland being militarily neutral but not politically neutral

1 Bertrand, Sebastian and Britzky 12 February 2025 *Hegseth rules out NATO membership for Ukraine and says Europe must be responsible for country's security*. CNN. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/12/politics/hegseth-ukraine-rules-out-nato-membership/index.html>

2 Moloney 3 March 2022 *'This should be a wake up call' – Varadkar says Ireland can't assume Britain or US 'will come and save us' in event of attack*. Irish Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/this-should-be-a-wake-up-call-varadkar-says-ireland-cant-assume-britain-or-us-will-come-and-save-us-in-event-of-attack/41407467.html>

regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³ However, when understood through the lens of polyvalency, and the conflicting interpretations of neutrality by the Irish public and policymakers, we can begin to understand the logic of Ireland's approach to the international security environment. Where other neutrals with more strictly defined traditions of neutrality have faced challenges in securing their interests and values, Ireland's mosaic neutrality, while remaining undefined, has actually provided the State with the freedom to act that it needs to navigate a more challenging security environment while retaining public support for such.

Ireland in a World Undergoing Epistemic Change

The international security environment, indeed the international system, is undergoing a process of pronounced epistemic change as the international system becomes increasingly contested. In this new episteme, the concepts which states use to understand their immediate environment and to articulate their approaches to this environment, may have to be reflected upon to meet the challenges, threats, and politics of the return to power politics.

Indeed, Ireland may have to ask itself, as this paper seeks to do, what neutrality means in the 21st century. Ostensibly, neutrality was easier to define during the period of the Cold War, when Ireland's non-membership of military alliances in the 20th century made its neutrality comparatively easy to define. Similarly, during the so-called 'Unipolar Moment' which occurred following the collapse of the Soviet Union,⁴ Ireland likewise managed to avoid the requirement to strictly define its policy of neutrality. Instead, Ireland's traditional policy remained for the most part unchanged, while its participation in UN Peacekeeping missions came to increasingly define the State's role in international politics as a neutral state.⁵

Yet, Ireland finds itself in an ever more challenging security environment. Over the past decade, the Russian Federation has sought to challenge the global order and continues to do so with increasing intensity.⁶ Russia's use of force in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, Syria in 2015, as well as the use of cyber-attacks,⁷ disinformation, and influence operations all represent the means and methods which some states are now mobilising to challenge the rules-based international order.⁸ In particular, Russia's launching of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 indicates the beginning of a new epoch, where states are willing to use force to enhance hegemonic power and their own desire to become a pole in a new multipolar international system.⁹ Importantly, this may be less about the *real* structure of the international system itself, than it is about how influential actors in the international system such as China, Russia, and the United States *perceive* the composition of the international system.

In this environment, some European States have reconsidered their approach to neutrality and non-membership of military alliances.¹⁰ Finland and Sweden have decided that the challenges of the present geostrategic environment have made it incumbent upon them to apply to join NATO. Finland and Sweden, both important partners for Ireland in international politics and security, successfully joined the Alliance in April 2023¹¹ and March 2024¹² respectively, signalling a momentous shift in the European security order. It is against this shifting backdrop that Ireland reflected

3 Martin 2022 See Marie O'Halloran 15 November 2022 *Ireland is not neutral about Ukraine, Taoiseach insists in renewed row over constitutional position*. Irish Times. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2022/11/15/ireland-is-not-neutral-about-ukraine-taoiseach-insists-in-renewed-row-over-constitutional-position/>

4 Krauthammer 2002 *The Unipolar Moment Revisited*. The National Interest. Winter 2002/2003. Available at: https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/krauthammer.pdf

5 Keatinge 2019: 6 *The Specific Character of Ireland's Security and Defence Policy: Reflections on Neutrality*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/the-specific-character-of-ireland-s-security-and-defence-policy-reflections-on-neutrality>

6 Fitzgerald 2022 *The Gray Zone: Ireland in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/blog/the-gray-zone-ireland-in-an-era-of-renewed-great-power-competition>

7 Mueller, Hensen, Valeriano, Maness and Macias 2023: 2 *Cyber Operations during the Russo-Ukrainian War*. CSIS. Available at: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/202307/230713_Mueller_CyberOps_RussiaUkraine.pdf?VersionId=tlzslXBig6NG2QKBsqTIOlf0wENNeo87

8 Mazzar 2015: 1 *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. US Army War College Press. Available at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1427&context=monographs>

9 See Mazzar 2015: 22 *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. US Army War College Press. Available at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1427&context=monographs>; and Mazzar 2015: 25 *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. US Army War College Press. Available at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1427&context=monographs>

10 See Keatinge 2022 *European Neutrals Then and Now*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/european-neutrals-then-and-now>

11 NATO 3 April 2023. *Finland to Join NATO as Allied Foreign Ministers Meet*. NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_212288.htm

12 NATO 7 March 2024 *Sweden Officially Joins NATO*. NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_223446.htm

on its policy of neutrality, taking the form of a Consultative Forum on International Security Policy in 2023, which used “aspects of the Citizen’s Assembly model”.¹³ What is important for this paper is that this Forum included the ability for the ‘general public to make submissions’ while also hearing from ‘experts and academics’.¹⁴ The public element of this discussion meant, in many ways, that *popular* conceptions of neutrality, replete with individual interpretations, polyvalency, and relationship with identity, played a role in the discussion. Consequently, as Ireland looks to shape its security policy into the future, it will become necessary to disentangle the web of concepts that are repositioned within the concept of Irish neutrality so that they can become intelligible in this national discussion.

An Evolving Risk Landscape: Hybrid and Greyzone Threats

Ireland finds itself poorly equipped to navigate the changing character of war. Alongside traditional kinetic threats posed by the return of large-scale conflict to the continent of Europe, Ireland will increasingly have to navigate more complex threats and ‘grey zone’ activity. What is important for our new geopolitical context is that we now find ourselves in a world where war is often not declared. Russia only acknowledged that it is at war with Ukraine in March 2024, fully two years following its full-scale invasion of its neighbour.¹⁵ This creates a cascade of challenges for how States respond to aggression, how they support partners, and how they defend themselves.

Grey zone activity refers to the activities of states, who in seeking a hegemonic position, undertake such activities in order to enhance their relative power, while ensuring that such activities do not breach the threshold of major war.¹⁶ Activities employed by hostile states can range from the use of misinformation/disinformation, the weaponisation of trade and economic activities, espionage, intimidation through military posturing and exercises, nuclear ‘sabre-rattling’, sabotage, limited military operations and the use of cyberwarfare.¹⁷ These activities are largely intended to enhance the relative power of states seeking to revise the rules-based international order such as the Russian Federation at the expense of others who seek to maintain and/or protect it. Moreover, since the purpose of these activities is to be both deniable and incremental in nature, grey zone activities make not only attribution a challenge, but also make responding to and deterring such threats increasingly difficult for large powers and small states alike.

The Russian Federation in particular, aware that it does not have the same material and financial resources as EU and NATO Member States, will increasingly seek to leverage these activities where it can as part of an asymmetrical campaign¹⁸ to project its influence and power, to attempt to undermine Western cohesion, and to erode the rules-based multilateral order. Weaknesses in the armour of the multilateral system, and its champions – of which Ireland claims to be one – will be sought out. Through its location as a centre of trade and technology, its commitment to the United Nations, its membership of the EU, its relationship with the United Kingdom and the United States of America, Ireland possesses many assets. Yet, against the backdrop of a hollowed-out security architecture, these assets may in fact be vulnerabilities which could indeed be weaponised not just against Ireland, but against its partners and the rules-based multilateral system itself.¹⁹

As argued in a previous IIEA publication, the historically unprecedented importance of this country in terms of global finance, communications, and technology means that Ireland, the people who live there, and the multinational organisations based there, will likely become an increasingly attractive target for revisionist state actors such as the Russian Federation.²⁰ Political instability, caused perhaps by a far-right movement – a feature of the Russian Federation’s

13 McQuinn 5 April 2023 *Ireland’s policy on neutrality and defence to be reviewed by public forum*. Irish Times. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/04/05/irelands-policy-on-neutrality-and-defence-to-be-reviewed-by-public-forum/>

14 Ibid

15 Al-Jazeera 22 March 2024 *Russia is in a ‘state of war’ in Ukraine, Kremlin says for the first time*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/22/russia-is-in-a-state-of-war-in-ukraine-kremlin-says-for-the-first-time>

16 Mazzar 2015: 4 *Mastering the Grey Zone*. US Army War College Press. Available at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1427&context=monographs>

17 Fitzgerald 2022 *The Gray Zone: Ireland in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/blog/the-gray-zone-ireland-in-an-era-of-renewed-great-power-competition>

18 Mazzar 2015: 57 *Mastering the Grey Zone*. US Army War College Press. Available at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1427&context=monographs>

19 Fitzgerald 2023 *Black Swans in the Grey Zone: Defending Ireland’s Energy System Against Cyber Threats*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/black-swans-in-the-grey-zone-defending-irelands-energy-system-against-cyber-threats>

20 Fitzgerald 2023 *Black Swans in the Grey Zone: Defending Ireland’s Energy System Against Cyber Threats*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/>

playbook²¹ – large-scale cyberattacks such as against energy or telecommunications, or simply repeated instances of corporate or political espionage²² all serve as vectors of disruption. The consequences of these greyzone activities would not be limited solely to Ireland’s economy and society but would likely be felt in Europe and in North America too.²³

Ultimately, the threat landscape is different and in many ways the rules have changed – or at least the rules are harder to enforce. The risks posed by hybrid and greyzone threats are not necessarily discreet. As the 2017 NotPetya cyberattack illustrated, cyberattacks can have a contagion effect,²⁴ causing exponential disruption in countries beyond the targeted state. This is also increasingly translating into the ‘real world’ such as the December 2025 ‘drone incident’ off the coast of Ireland. Several unidentified drones were spotted near an Irish naval vessel during the visit of the President of Ukraine, leading to concern regarding the ability of the State to protect itself against such attacks.²⁵ Against this concerning backdrop, it is now unlikely that Ireland’s neutrality is being respected by revisionist actors.

Polyvalency and the Formation of Mosaic Neutrality

One of the key challenges to understanding Ireland’s neutrality is that there has yet to be an all-encompassing definition of what Ireland’s neutrality is, in fact. It has become a polyvalent, fluid, and, at times, contested term. At the same time, it was noted by Louise Richardson, the Chair of Ireland’s Consultative Forum on International Security Policy, in her report following the exercise that it was “*evident that there is no agreed definition of the term neutrality [in Ireland]... [and] that it clearly means different things to different people.*”²⁶ Importantly, the Chair also noted that there is no “agreed definition in international law either”, and that most turn to the Hague Convention of 1907. However, the 1907 Hague Convention pertained to wartime rather than peacetime behaviour. Importantly, the Chair noted that since neutrality involved declining to provide military, economic, or political assistance to belligerents, or transit across territory, it is difficult to argue that Irish policy has ever been confined to the definitions outlined in the 1907 Hague Convention.²⁷ Though a diachronic historical analysis of the development of Irish neutrality from the inception of Irish nationhood to the modern era is certainly beyond the scope of this paper, Ireland’s traditional policy of neutrality is undoubtedly a product of its history.

Ireland’s neutrality is underpinned by legislation such as the Defence Acts – including the ‘Triple Lock’ - and limited constitutional articles which specifically refer to Irish participation in EU common defence.²⁸ Yet, it is more than this. While Ireland’s traditional policy of neutrality could most simply be defined as non-membership of military alliances, it is composed of many concepts extending beyond the question of alliances. Thus, Irish neutrality could be considered a mosaic of many tesserae, composed of archetypal moments such as Ireland’s neutrality during the Second World War and the State’s unbroken record of participation in UN Peacekeeping since 1958. Traditions of anti-militarism²⁹ likewise play a role in how neutrality is perceived in Ireland. Adding to this increasingly complicated picture is how “*Ireland’s neutrality has come to be as much about perceptions of national identity as it is a response to specific security challenges.*”³⁰ Consequently, the semiotic structure of neutrality, with its lack of definitions and contradictions, either

[black-swans-in-the-grey-zone-defending-irelands-energy-system-against-cyber-threats](#)

21 Pantucci 2023 *Russia’s Far-Right Campaign in Europe*. Lawfare. Available at: <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/russias-far-right-campaign-europe>

22 FitzGerald and Colfer 2025 *Secure Together - Enhancing Ireland’s Security and Resilience in a Time of Heightened Geopolitical Risk* December 2025. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/secure-together-enhancing-irelands-security-and-resilience>

23 See FitzGerald 2023 *Black Swans in the Grey Zone: Defending Ireland’s Energy System Against Cyber Threats*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/black-swans-in-the-grey-zone-defending-irelands-energy-system-against-cyber-threats>

24 CCDCOE (2022) *NotPetya (2017)*. Available at: [https://cyberlaw.ccdcoe.org/wiki/NotPetya_\(2017\)](https://cyberlaw.ccdcoe.org/wiki/NotPetya_(2017))

25 Gallagher 14 December 2025 *Drones over Dublin Bay: What happened during Zelenskyy’s visit to Ireland?* The Irish Times. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2025/12/13/drone-incursions-show-shortcomings-in-irish-security-apparatus/>

26 Richardson 2023: 14 *Consultative Forum on International Security Policy: Report to An Tánaiste*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/36bd1-consultative-forum-chairs-report/>

27 Richardson 2023: 14 *Consultative Forum on International Security Policy: Report to An Tánaiste*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/36bd1-consultative-forum-chairs-report/>

28 Bunreacht na hÉireann 2009 *Twenty-Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act, 2009*. Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2009/ca/28/schedule/enacted/en/html#sched-part1>

29 See Keatinge 2019 *The ‘Specific Character’ of Ireland’s Security and Defence Policy: Reflections on Neutrality*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/the-specific-character-of-irelandas-security-and-defence-policy-reflections-on-neutrality>

30 Keatinge 2019: 8 *The ‘Specific Character’ of Ireland’s Security and Defence Policy: Reflections on Neutrality*. IIEA. Available at: <https://www.iiea.com/publications/the-specific-character-of-irelandas-security-and-defence-policy-reflections-on-neutrality>

see such contradictions and polyvalency as an issue which ought to be addressed through constitutional amendments, legislative changes, or by applying to join NATO, this paper argues that the mosaic-like nature and consequent ambiguity in Ireland's neutrality should be embraced. Embracing mosaic neutrality would provide freedom of action for present and future governments to respond to a changing world, while ensuring that broad national support for Ireland's security policy.

Conclusion

The global security environment has been fundamentally altered by the events of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, especially since 2022. In particular, the security environment in Europe is at its most dangerous since the end of the Cold War. Hybrid threats, ranging from espionage, cyber warfare, sabotage, disinformation, and the instrumentalisation of supply chain dependencies, energy, migration, and international finance pose clear and present dangers to Europe. Moreover, the risk of an expansion of the conflict in Ukraine into an EU Member State presents a real danger to every single citizen of the EU. In this context, Ireland's security policy has come under strain. The country has maintained its position of neutrality, where other European neutrals have moved away from theirs. While to some, Ireland's lack of definition for its neutrality poses a problem to be resolved through either a constitutional amendment or by simply abandoning neutrality altogether, the mosaic nature, and the fluidity of Ireland's neutrality as described in this paper, has actually made the concept durable with real world applications. The mosaic nature of Ireland's neutrality has allowed Ireland to take a modular approach to its support for Ukraine's defence, meaning that Ireland can be an active participant in EU support for Ukraine, while ensuring that the Irish public can continue to support Ireland's response.

In this ever more challenging security environment, Ireland will have to do more to ensure that its interests and its people are protected from the worst effects of this more dangerous world. Importantly, Ireland will need to make significant investments in its defence capabilities to ensure that it can act when it needs to – either through the deployment of forces or by extending military aid through the provision of training and equipment. Policymakers should ensure that Ireland's policy of neutrality, and related legislation and policy, provides the State with the freedom to act in a more challenging security environment

To conclude, Ireland's traditional policy of neutrality has come under increased pressure in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While Ireland does enjoy some protection due to its geography, the changing nature of conflict has radically altered the risk profile which the State has to contend with. Ireland will need the ability to adapt to this changed environment and should develop flexible and agile policies as crises unfold. While Ireland's policy of neutrality does come under criticism for lacking definition, Ireland's current policy, while ultimately marked by non-participation in military alliances, is a mosaic of different concepts, interpretations, and legislation. It is this mosaic quality that has allowed the State to retain its neutrality as long as it has, while enabling Ireland to be a proactive actor on the international stage in supporting Ukraine's self-defence – all while retaining public support.

Ultimately, as one participant in the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy noted "*neutrality is not a religion.*"³⁷ Ireland's approach to its security policy will always need to be flexible and agile, given the very nature of security and defence policy. While binary choices between 'neutral or not-neutral' may seem tempting to some, Ireland may find itself better able to meet the challenges of its changing environment through an understanding that Irish neutrality should not be understood as a monolith, but as a mosaic.

³⁷ Adler 2023 *Lessons from Neighbours: Norway and Switzerland*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/00e68-follow-the-forum-online/#26-june-dublin-castle-afternoon-session>

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