# Unclear by Design:

# The Strategic Ambiguity of Ireland's Military Neutrality Policy

Scott Fitzsimmons

University of Limerick

In the wake of the Swedish and Finnish governments' decision to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2022, Ireland has attracted renewed attention as one of the few European Union (EU) member states that continues to describe itself as militarily neutral. Officially, this policy is defined as being "characterized by non-membership in military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements," (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2026; Hynes, 2024, pp. 179-180). It has been a central feature of Irish foreign policy since the Second World War and remains politically popular. An April 2025 poll found that 63 percent of respondents supported Ireland's current model of military neutrality (Leahy, 2025). Andrew Cottey rightly notes that "at no point since the end of the Cold War has any political party or significant political figure made the case for ending the policy of neutrality," (Cottey, 2017, p. 160). However, despite the policy's prominence, the language successive Irish governments have used to define and defend it has received limited sustained analytical attention.

This article addresses that gap by asking how Irish governments have articulated military neutrality in ways that preserve ambiguity, and with what political effects. It argues that Ireland's military neutrality policy is not a wholly transparent doctrine with a single stable meaning, but a policy articulated in ways that preserve ambiguity through selective

opacity and carefully qualified language. The policy's official formulation frames its two core components – non-membership in military alliances and non-membership in common or mutual defence arrangements – in ways that preserve more than one plausible interpretation of Ireland's security position. "Military alliances" is left undefined, allowing room for participation in alliance-like security relationships, while the exclusion of "common or mutual defence arrangements" appears categorical but leaves space for unilateral forms of security cooperation. This ambiguity is reinforced by governmental reluctance to clarify the terms of arrangements like the United Kingdom (UK)–Ireland air defence agreement and by efforts to minimize the implications of Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Rather than treating ambiguity simply as inconsistency or drift, this article examines how it can function as a political resource: it may preserve the Irish government's policy flexibility, help it avoid some of the costs associated with a more explicit security posture, and enable it to satisfice the competing preferences of multiple domestic and international audiences (Bentley, 2024, p. 2071; Cohen, 2006, p. 530; Eisenberg, 1984, p. 233).

The literature on Irish neutrality falls into two main strands. The first, which may be labelled the "domestic entrenchment" perspective, explains why neutrality has endured as a distinctive element of Irish foreign policy. Neal Jesse characterizes Irish military neutrality as a "path-dependent institution" driven primarily by domestic political actors, public opinion, and a post-colonial desire within Irish society for sovereignty from Britain rather than a realist assessment of external threats (Jesse, 2006, p. 7). Cottey, similarly, frames neutrality as a path dependent "national myth" and "traditional symbol" that is deeply embedded in the Irish body politic (Cottey, 2017, pp. 152-154). Together, they

demonstrate that Irish military neutrality has been sustained by a historically rooted domestic political settlement that limits governments' scope for overt alignment, especially with NATO. However, they largely treat military neutrality's meaning as settled and, unlike the present study, give less attention to how ambiguous official discourse has helped preserve the policy and generate practical benefits for the government.

A second strand, which could be labelled the "discursive contestation" approach, focuses less on entrenchment than on how neutrality's meaning has been constructed, contested, and defended. Karen Devine argues that neutrality is a "floating signifier" subject to an ongoing struggle between elite "military" definitions and public "active" definitions of neutrality, which embody competing foreign policy agendas (Devine, 2011, p. 334). Cornelia-Adriana Baciu contends that Irish discourse on "neutrality," "security," and "EU defence" has changed over time to adapt to Ireland's political ambitions, particularly post-Brexit (Baciu, 2018, p. 97). This literature is valuable in showing that military neutrality is not fixed but politically contested and shaped by discourse. However, its main concern is whether Irish neutrality has been misdescribed or misunderstood, rather than, as in the present study, how the Irish government may have deliberately used ambiguous language to sustain multiple plausible interpretations and benefit from doing so.

Few studies of Irish foreign policy have examined the potential role played by ambiguity. Antoine Rayroux identifies constructive ambiguity as a defining feature of how certain member states have attempted to market the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to their own citizens (Rayroux, 2014, pp. 386-405). She argues that the use of "semantic subterfuges" and "hazy expressions" allow heterogeneous states, like

France and Ireland, to present CSDP at home as a continuation of their own national traditions – exceptionalism for France and neutrality for Ireland – for the purposes of bolstering domestic political support for the policy. The present study builds on this article, along with other works in the strategic ambiguity literature like Susanne Therese Hansen's research on the influence of strategic ambiguity on the EU's conventional arms export control regime and Parker Bach et al.'s study of strategic ambiguity in populist domestic political communication, by demonstrating how strategic ambiguity interacts with selective opacity within a government's attempts to develop and promote a particular public policy to domestic and foreign audiences (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 96-106; Hansen, 2016, pp. 192-216).

Methodologically, this article uses a qualitative single-case study and discursive analysis of Irish foreign policy documents and public statements by senior decision-makers, especially taoisigh, tánaistí, and ministers for foreign affairs and defence who have held these offices since 2016 (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 4-5; Bentley, 2024, pp. 273-274; Rayroux, 2014, pp. 391-393). By treating official language not as a secondary reflection of policy, but as a site in which strategic meaning is constructed and disseminated, this article demonstrates how textual analysis can illuminate the political uses of ambiguity in foreign policy (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 4-5). This methodological approach cannot directly observe policymakers' private intentions. Accordingly, claims about intentionality are made inferentially rather than demonstratively. In this article, intentionality is inferred from recurrent patterns of ambiguity, narrowing, and selective non-clarification across multiple offices, officeholders, and episodes, rather than from any single statement taken in isolation. The argument, therefore, is not that deliberate intent

can be proven in a definitive sense from public discourse alone, but that the repeated and patterned character of these formulations makes an interpretation in terms of strategic ambiguity more persuasive than explanations based on isolated imprecision, ad hoc inconsistency, or rhetorical accident. Ireland is a particularly useful case for this purpose because, unlike states such as Switzerland and Austria, its military neutrality is not fixed by treaty or constitutional entrenchment, giving the government greater control over how the policy is articulated and defended (Dorosh & Dverii, 2022, p. 33). This makes Ireland especially well-suited to a study of how strategic ambiguity is constructed and used in practice. A single-case study allows for an in-depth examination of the complex dynamics underlying strategic ambiguity and the ways it operates in practice (Bentley, 2024, pp. 273-274).

The next sections of this article define strategic ambiguity, demonstrate how it operates on a foundation of selective opacity, and examine how it shapes Ireland's military neutrality policy. The article then demonstrates how this ambiguity may be useful to the Irish government, especially for policy flexibility, cost avoidance, and balancing domestic and international preferences. Its conclusion summarizes the argument, suggests avenues for future research, assesses alternative explanations, considers the democratic and strategic costs of ambiguity, and explores whether disclosure could serve as a viable alternative approach.

## Conceptualising Strategic Ambiguity

Ambiguity denotes the existence of more than one plausible meaning in relation to the same word, phrase, policy, or legal formulation (Hansen, 2016, p. 194). Strategic

ambiguity, sometimes described as deliberate or constructive ambiguity, is a more specific phenomenon. It refers to the intentional use of language by political actors to preserve multiple reasonable interpretations of a policy for the purposes of securing practical advantages (Bach et al., 2025, p. 98; Wang et al., 2024). In his work on organizational communication and management, Eric Eisenberg defines the concept as "instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals," (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 230). Although he labelled the concept "constructive ambiguity," Henry Kissinger similarly characterizes it as "The deliberate use of ambiguous language on a sensitive issue in order to advance some political purpose," (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012, p. 51; Rayroux, 2014, p. 387). Strategic ambiguity should, therefore, be distinguished from mere imprecision or careless drafting. The crucial point is not simply that a strategically ambiguous statement is unclear, but that its lack of clarity is deliberate and useful to the speaker (Bentley, 2024, p. 2070; Best, 2008, p. 363). In the present case, however, such deliberateness is not treated as directly observable; it is inferred from the recurrence of similar ambiguous formulations communicated by multiple policy documents and officeholders. A policy of disclosure, in contrast, attempts to narrow interpretive discretion by using relatively precise, verifiable, and unequivocal language so that audiences are guided towards a single authoritative understanding (Beres, 1990, p. 43; Dowty, 2005, p. 10).

Strategic ambiguity operates through two mutually reinforcing mechanisms. The first is selective opacity. A government need not conceal every relevant fact about a topic in order to benefit from ambiguity, but it must try to prevent audiences from gaining access to the information they need to maintain a comprehensive understanding of a topic.

Selective opacity may, therefore, involve attempts to classify information about a topic or attempts to avoid discussing or even acknowledging a topic in public (Karpin, 2009, p. 38; Maoz, 2003, p. 47). The second mechanism is the use of ambiguous language (Aronson, 1992, p. 15). Governments may, for instance, employ nebulous terms to describe a policy or attach narrow qualifiers that selectively include or exclude certain practices. These two mechanisms work together. Selective opacity can deny audiences the information needed to arrive at a settled understanding of a policy, while ambiguous language enables different audiences to maintain different, though still plausible, interpretations of what a policy means. Defined in this way, strategic ambiguity does not require outright deception or complete secrecy. Instead, it rests on the intentional preservation of interpretive space.

**Opacity as a Condition of Strategic Ambiguity**

Opacity is a principal condition that has sustained the strategic ambiguity surrounding Ireland's military neutrality policy. Strategic ambiguity is likely to function most effectively when relevant audiences lack access to information that would narrow the range of plausible interpretations of a policy. In the Irish case, official declarations of military neutrality coexist with security practices that could be considered, at least by certain audiences, forms of military alignment. The Irish government's capacity to characterize its military neutrality policy in ambiguous terms has, therefore, depended, to a considerable extent, on its capacity to withhold, minimize, or refuse clarification of those practices.

Opacity surrounds a central element of Ireland's contemporary national defence posture – the UK-Ireland air defence agreement (Hynes, 2024, pp. 180-181; O'Riordan,

2015). Established in 1952 and updated following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States (US), the classified memorandum of understanding containing the terms of this agreement grants responsibility for defending Irish airspace, as well as the land and ocean territory below it, to the UK's Royal Air Force (RAF) (Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c). Speaking on the condition of anonymity, a senior Irish government official told journalist Conor Gallagher in June 2022 that "There is a commitment on their [the UK's] part to come to our assistance. It's an agreement. It happens when we request it," (Gallagher, 2023b, p. 179). Senior Irish policymakers actively avoid public discussions of this agreement. When they do mention it, they tend to downplay its significance (Gallagher, 2023a; Murphy, 2023). Bertie Ahern was the first taoiseach to acknowledge it, however obliquely, in response to a question posed to him in the Dáil on November 16, 2005. Providing no detail on the terms of the agreement, he merely stated that "there is co-operation and a pre-agreed understanding on those matters," (Dáil Éireann, 2005, p. 500). When asked about the agreement on May 9, 2023, then-taoiseach Leo Varadkar stated that "The security of our skies is a national security question and, therefore, I am limited in what I can say about it. What I can say is that any arrangements we have in place are consistent with our foreign defence and security policy," (Dáil Éireann, 2023e; Gallagher & Leahy, 2023). As with Ahern, he declined to provide any details about the terms of the agreement. On the contrary, when Sinn Féin TD Matt Carthy asked Varadkar to discuss the agreement, the latter told the Dáil "I am not proposing to have a debate on the matter," (Dáil Éireann, 2023e).

Micheál Martin's comments about the agreement are even more circumspect. While serving as taoiseach, he stated in the Dáil on February 16, 2022, that he is "not

aware of any agreement," and also claimed that Ireland does not rely on the RAF for air defence (Dáil Éireann, 2022c). When it was put to him that British Secretary of State for Defence James Heappey admitted in November 2022 that RAF jets had operated in Irish airspace on several occasions, Martin said on May 9, 2023, that "there may have been occasions in the past" when RAF aircraft entered Irish airspace "for different reasons" without elaborating further (Dáil Éireann, 2023e; Murphy, 2023).

More generally, the most common written and verbal responses to questions posed about the agreement in the Dáil from taoisigh, tánaistí, and ministers of foreign affairs and defence were to ignore any mention of the agreement, claim they are not personally aware of the agreement's existence, or issue a nearly uniform stock response in which they state they "cannot comment on reports concerning arrangements for national security," (Dáil Éireann, 2017b, pp. 133-134; 2020, p. 64; 2021, p. 98; 2022c, p. 203; 2025b, pp. 778-779; 2025c, pp. 992-993). Since 2023, the government has also been fighting a lawsuit launched by Independent Senator Gerald Craughwell to try to force the agreement's release on the grounds that, as an international agreement, it should have been reviewed and approved by the Dáil under the terms of Article 29.5.1 of the Irish constitution before coming into force (F. Gallagher, 2025; O'Carroll, 2025). Brian Kennedy, legal counsel for the Irish government in this case, told the Irish High Court on February 14, 2025, that he was "unashamedly trying to stop the complainant in their tracks at an early stage" before the matter came to a full hearing, which risked exposing the terms of the agreement to the public (C. Gallagher, 2025).

The fact that the terms of this agreement remain secret or only partially acknowledged makes it easier for the Irish government to influence how audiences

interpret its military neutrality policy. Repeated refusals by senior policymakers to confirm, explain, or debate the agreement do more than reflect a broader preference for opacity in security affairs; they also make it harder for the agreement to crystallize, in the minds of the Irish public, into an unambiguous acknowledgement of Ireland's dependence on another state for its national defence that is inconsistent with the official formulation of the policy. In this instance, opacity is not supplementary to strategic ambiguity; it is what makes that ambiguity possible.

Opacity also plays an important role in the Irish government's public discussions of Ireland's security relationship with the EU. An important difference between the UK-Ireland air defence agreement and the TEU is that the Irish government acknowledges the latter exists. However, the government's public discussions of the EU still reflect a degree of opacity regarding the nature of its role in defence and security. The current version of the TEU, in force since 2009, contains a mutual defence clause, Article 42.7, which states:

> If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States (European Union, 2009).

The issue here is not secrecy in the strict sense, but interpretive opacity, insofar as Irish governments have downplayed the military significance of the defence commitment established in Article 42.7 without concealing the commitment's formal existence. Martin,

as taoiseach, stated on June 8, 2022, that Ireland would need to hold a referendum if it were “to join a European Union defence pact, if one was formally developed and declared,” which strongly implies that such a pact does not already exist (O'Leary, 2022). When asked during a debate in the Dáil on March 23, 2023, whether the EU constituted a mutual defence agreement, Martin claimed “there is no such pact,” (Dáil Éireann, 2023b). Taoiseach Varadkar conveyed the same message when he claimed on June 20, 2023, that Ireland would not “sign up to any mutual defence pact or clause,” despite already being party to the TEU (Dáil Éireann, 2023d). These statements help maintain a degree of opacity regarding one of the core functions of the EU. They suggest that, even where full secrecy is impossible, the Irish government can still seek to maintain a context in which it can employ strategically ambiguous language by declining to acknowledge the implications of Ireland’s existing external partnerships. Taken together, the selective opacity surrounding both of these security arrangements suggests Ireland’s military neutrality policy has been sustained, in part, by the management of information about what the state is actually prepared to do, accept, or rely upon in security matters. Opacity is, consequently, an important facilitating condition for the strategic ambiguity surrounding Ireland’s military neutrality policy.

**Strategic Ambiguity in the Official Formulation of Ireland’s Military Neutrality Policy**

The official formulation of Ireland’s military neutrality policy is strategically ambiguous because it states only what Ireland allegedly does not do while leaving unclear what forms of international military cooperation remain compatible with military neutrality. Strategic ambiguity exists where language sustains more than one plausible interpretation and,

thereby, allows different audiences to infer different meanings from the same words (Bach et al., 2025, p. 98; Eisenberg, 1984, p. 230). This section shows how both components of the formulation sustain more than one plausible interpretation.

The first source of ambiguity lies in the term “military alliances.” Official documents and ministerial statements repeatedly present non-membership in military alliances as a defining feature of Irish military neutrality. For example, the 2015 White Paper on Defence asserts that “Ireland will continue to maintain a policy of military neutrality which is characterized by non-membership of military alliances,” (Department of Defence, 2015, p. 24). While serving as taoiseach, Varadkar stated on October 25, 2017, that “We have a long-standing policy of military neutrality and of not joining military alliances,” (Dáil Éireann, 2017a). Tánaiste Martin, similarly, claimed on February 2, 2023, that “our military neutrality has always been defined based on non-membership of a military alliance. We are not members of a military alliance,” (Dáil Éireann, 2023f). While serving as tánaiste and minister for foreign affairs and defence, Simon Harris declared on March 20, 2025, that “Our neutrality means we do not participate in military alliances… That is what it means, and no more,” (Dáil Éireann, 2025d). Simon Coveney stated on March 1, 2022, in his capacity as minister for foreign affairs and defence, that “Ireland is militarily neutral; that is, we are not a member of a military alliance,” (Dáil Éireann, 2022b). While serving in the same role, Helen McEntee affirmed on November 27, 2025, that “Ireland’s policy of military neutrality, as practiced by successive Governments, means that Ireland does not participate in military alliances,” (Dáil Éireann, 2025e).

Although “military alliance” is critical to the official formulation of Ireland’s military neutrality policy, the concept is not defined in the official formulation itself, in the policy

documents that repeat it, or in the ministerial statements that invoke and endorse it. This omission matters because the concept is broader and less self-evident than official discourse implies. Military alliances may be formal, overt, and treaty-based, but they may also be informal and based on a verbal agreement between national leaders or a classified document (Fedder, 1968, p. 81; Russert, 1971, p. 263; Wilkins, 2012, pp. 54, 58, and 60). Once this is recognized, the phrase “non-membership in military alliances” no longer functions as a clear boundary marker. Instead, it leaves domestic and foreign audiences to decide for themselves whether Ireland’s existing security relationships fall inside or outside the parameters of the concept (Agius & Devine, 2011, p. 268; Baciu, 2018, p. 101; Salmon, 1984, p. 212; Zayats & Marusynets, 2025, p. 188).

Official rhetoric further deepens the ambiguity by tacitly equating “military alliance” with NATO (Salmon, 1984, p. 212; Sweeney, 2025, pp. 16-17).[1] Senior officials have repeatedly claimed that Ireland is militarily neutral because it is not a member of the Atlantic Alliance. For example, Taoiseach Varadkar stated on September 20, 2023, that “Ireland… is militarily neutral. We’re not members of NATO,” (O'Sullivan, 2023). Tánaiste Martin, for his part, stated on February 23, 2023, that “We are not members of NATO,” (Dáil Éireann, 2023c). This move is rhetorically effective because NATO is the most familiar military alliance to Irish audiences. However, NATO is merely one example of a formal, overt, treaty-based military alliance, not a synonym for the concept itself. When official discourse repeatedly substitutes “NATO” for “military alliance,” it has the effect of narrowing the apparent meaning of the latter term without saying so directly. The effect

[1] To be certain, participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace initiative or the European Union’s PESCO programme do not constitute being part of an alliance because neither involve commitments to defend any of the member states against external threats. Both are merely capacity building initiatives.

is to suggest to some audiences that Ireland is militarily neutral because it is outside NATO, while leaving open the possibility that other forms of defence cooperation, including arrangements that involve expectations of military assistance, remain compatible with military neutrality so long as they are not publicly labelled “NATO” or “alliance membership.”

This narrowed usage is important because the Irish government does not apply the term “military alliance” to either the UK-Ireland air defence agreement or Ireland’s security relationship with the EU. Instead, Ahern called the air defence agreement “a pre-arranged understanding”; Varadkar and Coveney labelled it an “arrangement”; Martin, for his part, characterized it as an “agreement,” (Dáil Éireann, 2005, p. 500; 2017b, pp. 133-134; 2020, p. 64; 2021, p. 98; 2022c, p. 203; 2023e; 2025b, pp. 778-779; 2025c, pp. 992-993; Gallagher & Leahy, 2023). When, on May 8, 2025, Labour TD Duncan suggested to Harris, the tánaiste and minister for foreign affairs and defence, that Ireland is “moving towards military alliances, be it NATO or through the European Union,” the latter told the Dáil “there is no proposal to join NATO or anything like it,” (Dáil Éireann, 2025b). This comment strongly implies that Harris and his government does not consider the EU to be a military alliance. Minister of State for Defence, Thomas Byrne, was even more direct when he told Seanad Éireann on March 26, 2026, that “The EU is not a military alliance,” (Dáil Éireann, 2025a).

At issue is not whether the government calls these arrangements “military alliances” but whether audiences can reasonably regard them as falling within the parameters of the concept. It is plausible that certain audiences will interpret these arrangements as military alliances that fall outside the Irish government’s narrow NATO-

based characterization of the concept. Both the UK-Ireland air defence agreement and Article 42.7 of the TEU establish arrangements in which Ireland may receive military assistance in response to external threats. Both, for instance, identify a triggering contingency for security cooperation. Rather than “an armed attack against one or more of them [the member states] in Europe or North America,” as in Article V of NATO’s North Atlantic Treaty, the trigger contained in the UK-Ireland air defence agreement is more specific to Ireland’s security requirements: the presence of unidentified/hostile aircraft, or hijacked civilian aircraft, in or close to Irish airspace (Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c; Murphy, 2023; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1949; O'Riordan, 2015). Article 42.7, for its part, may be triggered when “a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory,” (European Union, 2009). In addition, both envisage the possible use of armed force. The air defence agreement authorizes RAF fighter jets based at Lossiemouth in Scotland to carry out armed interception operations within Irish airspace in response to aircraft that could pose a threat to Ireland (Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c; Murphy, 2023; O'Riordan, 2015). Article 42.7 functions similarly to Article V, but contains stronger language since it obliges each EU state to assist their allies with “all means” in their power, not just, as per Article V, “such action as it deems necessary,” (Clapp & Verhelst, 2022, pp. 1-2; European Union, 2009; Fazio, 2025, pp. 14-15). These are the kinds of features that could lead some audiences to classify these international arrangements as military alliances. Once those features are present, the official claim that Ireland is militarily neutral because it is not a member of a “military alliance” can no longer be considered unequivocal. Strategic ambiguity, therefore, operates here through under-definition and rhetorical narrowing at the same time. Audiences who favour a strict understanding of military neutrality can hear

a reassurance that Ireland avoids membership in any military alliance, while audiences more comfortable with pragmatic security cooperation can read the same formula as leaving room for substantial military alignment that falls outside the bounds of NATO membership.

The second source of ambiguity lies in the claim that Ireland is militarily neutral because it does not participate in “common or mutual defence arrangements.” This could be interpreted by some audiences as a blanket rejection of defence pacts. However, the use of the words “common” and “mutual” as qualifiers allows the formulation to be interpreted as a firm disavowal of reciprocal defence commitments of the sort found in collective-defence clauses, like Article V, but not a definitive rejection of Irish participation in all forms of international defence arrangements (Fedder, 1968, p. 81; Russert, 1971, p. 264; Wilkins, 2012, p. 60). This distinction is not merely semantic; a defence relationship need not take the form of a fully mutual pact in which each state is formally bound to defend the other states. It can also take the form of a unilateral, asymmetric arrangement in which a smaller state accepts protection or military assistance from a stronger partner without undertaking an equivalent obligation in return (Russert, 1971, p. 263; Wilkins, 2012, p. 60). Once that distinction is introduced, the ambiguity in the official formulation becomes easier to identify. If the official formulation had intended to exclude Ireland from participating in every form of defence pact, it could have said so explicitly. By limiting the exclusion to “common or mutual defence arrangements,” it leaves open the possibility that unilateral defence arrangements remain compatible with the policy.

Official rhetoric reinforces this ambiguity. Martin, while serving as tánaiste, stated on May 31, 2023, that “the Government have no plans to change our policy of military

neutrality, which essentially is we are… not members of a mutual defence pact," (O'Keeffe, 2023). Likewise, while serving as taoiseach, Varadkar declared on June 20, 2023, that "Ireland will remain militarily neutral. We are not going to… sign up to any mutual defence pact or clause," (Dáil Éireann, 2023d). Coveney, while serving as minister for foreign affairs and defence, told the Dáil on March 24, 2022, that Ireland "does not participate in… mutual defence arrangements," (Dáil Éireann, 2022d). While serving in the same role, McEntee stated in on March 26, 2026, that "our policy of military neutrality, which, as practiced by successive Governments, means that Ireland does not participate in… common or mutual defence arrangements," (Dáil Éireann, 2026). These statements may be technically correct; however, precisely because they focus on reciprocity, they make it harder for audiences to reach unequivocal conclusions about whether Ireland could accept military assistance from other states as long as it does not incur a symmetrical obligation to assist them in return.

The UK-Ireland air defence agreement illustrates this dynamic. The arrangement allows the RAF to monitor Irish-controlled airspace and conduct armed interceptions in response to a suspected or confirmed airborne threat to Ireland (Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c; Murphy, 2023; O'Riordan, 2015). This can reasonably be understood as a commitment by one state to provide military assistance to another state. However, the arrangement is not mutual. Ireland has not agreed to an equivalent obligation to defend British airspace. The agreement, therefore, sits awkwardly with any reading of Irish military neutrality as a comprehensive rejection of all defence pacts, but it is easier to reconcile with the official formulation because that formulation excludes only "common or mutual defence arrangements."

Article 42.7 of the TEU points in the same direction. It obliges EU member states to provide aid and assistance by all means in their power to a member state that is the victim of armed aggression on its territory (Baciu, 2018, p. 116). At the same time, the so-called “Irish clause” in this article preserves “the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States,” (European Union, 2009). Whatever else an audience makes of that sentence, it does not amount to an unambiguous disavowal of external military help to Ireland (Fazio, 2025, pp. 15-16). Rather, a plausible reading of its purpose is to protect Ireland from being compelled to provide security guarantees to other EU states on the same terms as the non-neutral member states (Fazio, 2025, pp. 4-6). Trevor Salmon rightly argues that “There has been no explicit, consistent Irish disavowal of external help” during any period of Ireland’s modern history as an independent sovereign state (Salmon, 1989, pp. 307-308). Ireland’s then-minister for foreign affairs, Brian Cowen, implicitly conveyed this point in a December 4, 2003, memo jointly issued with the then-neutral states of Sweden, Finland, and Austria, which stated that their governments objected to wording in the TEU that would require them to provide “formal binding security guarantees” to other EU states (Devine, 2011, pp. 353-354). It did not, however, reject the possibility that other EU states could help defend them from external threats. Reflecting on this, Baciu concludes that, “in case of an aggression or crisis, Ireland would be entitled to the benefit of defence assistance from other member states under Article 42.7,” (Baciu, 2018, p. 116).

This asymmetry matters because it makes it plausible that some audiences could believe that Ireland retains access to the benefits of the EU defence framework without accepting an equivalent obligation to furnish military assistance in return. In other words,

Article 42.7 can reasonably be interpreted by some audiences as embedding Ireland in a unilateral, asymmetric defence arrangement even while Irish officials continue to insist that Ireland is not part of a “common or mutual” one. This makes the official formulation of the policy technically defensible while also potentially misleading.

Taken together, the two components of the official formulation of Ireland’s military neutrality policy operate in the same way. In both cases, the chosen language appears more determinate than it really is. Its value to the Irish government lies in saying just enough to sustain more than one plausible interpretation of what Ireland’s military neutrality policy actually permits.

## The Utility of Strategic Ambiguity in Ireland’s Military Neutrality Policy

The ambiguity surrounding Ireland’s military neutrality policy may offer three related political advantages: it may preserve the Irish government’s policy flexibility, help it avoid some of the material costs that a more explicit policy would entail, and support its attempts to satisfice the competing preferences of domestic and international audiences. The following subsections examine each of these advantages in turn.

### *Preserving Policy Flexibility*

Strategic ambiguity may preserve policy flexibility by allowing Irish governments to claim adherence to military neutrality while retaining room for significant security cooperation. The official formulation of the policy reassures domestic audiences that Ireland remains outside “military alliances” and “common or mutual defence arrangements,” but it does so in language that leaves important room for maneuver. This is consistent with a wider

official understanding of neutrality as preserving national discretion rather than imposing a rigid prohibition on security alignment. For example, Coveney told the Oireachtas committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on March 10, 2022, that “Irish neutrality is… that we decide when we get involved in a conflict or not and when we take sides or not,” (Dáil Éireann, 2022a). This is also reflected in the 2015 White Paper on Defence, which declares that Ireland’s defence policy seeks to “enable a flexible and adaptive response to any adverse changes in a dynamic security environment,” (Department of Defence, 2015, p. 5). In this context, ambiguity is useful because a more precise formulation of the policy would make departures from strict non-alignment easier to identify and more politically costly.

In practice, this flexibility rests on the government’s ability to deny that alliance-like relationships are “military alliances” and to deny that unilateral assistance amounts to a “common or mutual defence arrangement.” Since official rhetoric often narrows “military alliance” to something closer to NATO membership, the government can maintain that military neutrality remains intact even while benefiting from security arrangements that involve expectations of military assistance. Likewise, by more clearly rejecting reciprocal defence commitments than unilateral ones, the policy leaves room for Ireland to receive external protection without openly acknowledging a broader departure from military neutrality. This leaves the government better placed to benefit from arrangements such as the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and from the protections associated with Article 42.7 of the TEU while continuing to present Irish military neutrality as unchanged (Baciu, 2018, p. 116; Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c; Gallagher & Leahy, 2023; Hynes, 2024, p. 183; Murphy, 2023; Salmon, 1989, pp. 307-308). Strategic ambiguity, therefore, preserves

flexibility not by saying nothing, but by defining neutrality narrowly enough to accommodate substantial security cooperation without requiring the government to acknowledge that cooperation as a break with policy.

*Avoiding Costs*

Strategic ambiguity may also help the Irish government avoid some tangible costs by keeping the parameters of its obligations underspecified (Jesse, 2006, pp. 16-17; Salmon, 1989, pp. 259-260). The language used in the official policy formulation may help the Irish government avoid some of the costs that would follow if it had to defend Ireland without outside help and the costs associated with overt membership in a military alliance or mutual defence pact (Jesse, 2006, p. 11). Hansen expects that states will be tempted to use strategically ambiguous language in situations where they seek to free-ride off the efforts of other states. As she puts it, “ambiguity can be used strategically to obscure obligation,” such as the costs associated with national defence (Hansen, 2016, p. 196).

Irish governments have consistently maintained much lower defence spending than their closest neighbours or other purportedly neutral or non-aligned European states (Cottey, 2022, p. 6; Hynes, 2024, p. 175). In 2024, Ireland spent €1.29 billion or 0.24 percent of its GDP on defence (Mulqueen, 2023; Stevenson, 2025, p. 209). That figure was far below the UK’s 2.3 percent and the EU average of 1.9 percent (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2026). It was also well below the level of spending on defence by permanently neutral Switzerland (0.7 percent) and Austria (1.0 percent) in 2024 and that of Finland (1.6 percent) and Sweden (1.3 percent) in 2022, the year they renounced neutrality and declared their intention to join NATO (Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2026). These four states historically pursued versions of “armed neutrality” that required substantial investments in air, naval, and land capabilities to try to deter external threats without outside help (Cottey, 2013, pp. 461-463; Hopmann, 2020, pp. 49-50; Jesse, 2006, pp. 16-17; Salmon, 1989, pp. 259-260). Ireland’s strategically ambiguous approach to military neutrality has, in contrast, allowed it to practice “unarmed neutrality,” a posture that preserves the outward appearance of military neutrality, at least to certain audiences, without funding the capabilities necessary for autonomous territorial defence (Jesse, 2006, pp. 16-17).

The official policy formulation may help the Irish government avoid the financial cost that could follow from overt membership in a military alliance. At the same time, the formulation preserves access to forms of defence cooperation, like the UK-Ireland air defence agreement and Ireland’s security relationship with the EU, that reduce the need to fund an autonomous capacity to defend Irish territory (Dáil Éireann, 2022c, 2023a, 2023e, 2025a; Gallagher & Leahy, 2023; Murphy, 2023). In other words, the ambiguity surrounding “military alliances” may help ease budgetary pressure. If Ireland publicly abandoned the claim that military neutrality is compatible with non-membership in alliances and chose to either formally join NATO or disavow the “Irish clause” in Article 42.7, its government would be encouraged to meet the 2.0 percent of GDP spending target set for NATO members, which, given the large overlap in member states, also serves as the de facto EU spending target. This would amount to approximately 10.7 billion Euro per year or about 8.3 times its 2024 defence budget (Gallagher, 2023b, p. 145). The present policy formulation may help avoid some of these costs while still

allowing Ireland to benefit from alliance-like security arrangements that lack commensurate spending obligations.

The second component of the official policy formulation is equally important. The phrase “common or mutual defence arrangements” excludes reciprocal obligations, but it does not clearly exclude unilateral assistance. This has implications for Ireland’s defence spending because a state that expects to receive external military assistance can rationally invest less in its own national defence than a state that assumes it must fight alone. This logic is visible in the government’s rejection, in 2022, of the Commission on the Defence Forces’ Level of Ambition 3 proposal. It would have required spending 3 billion Euro per year on defence, or about 2.5 times more than 2024 levels, and would merely have established a stronger, but far from self-sufficient, defence posture (Commission on the Defence Forces, 2022, pp. v-vi; Stevenson, 2025, p. 209). If Ireland were instead to unambiguously renounce outside military help and seek to defend itself independently against significant external threats, the required expenditure would be far higher still. Framing the policy in an ambiguous way that leaves room for unilateral protection under arrangements such as the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and Article 42.7 of the TEU, therefore, may provide a tangible material advantage by externalizing much of Ireland’s defence burden (Hansen, 2016, p. 195).

*Satisficing the Preferences of Multiple Audiences*

Strategic ambiguity may also be politically useful because it may help the Irish government simultaneously satisfice multiple audiences by allowing each to interpret the policy in a way that meets at least some of their preferences (Schwartz et al., 2002, p.

1179).[2] As Eisenberg points out, “It is a political necessity to engage in strategic ambiguity so that different constituent groups may apply different interpretations,” (Eisenberg, 1984, pp. 7-8). In this way, strategic ambiguity can bolster support for the policy and also reduce the government’s risk of criticism and backlash (Bentley, 2024, p. 2081; Hansen, 2016, p. 21).

Irish public opinion has long attached symbolic weight to neutrality. Patrick Keatinge rightly claims that, for many Irish citizens, neutrality is more than just a policy, it is a “traditional symbol and national myth,” (Keatinge, 1984, p. 100). At the same time, academics and senior Irish officials have argued that Irish attitudes toward military alignment are “ambivalent,” “divided,” “extraordinarily ill-defined,” and “confused,” (Devine, 2009, pp. 369-370; Gilland, 2001, p. 151; Jesse, 2006, pp. 20-23; Stevenson, 2025, pp. 208-209). For example, a poll taken in March 2022 indicated that 48 percent of Ireland’s population believed the country should join NATO but also that 57 percent of respondents wanted Ireland to retain its policy of military neutrality (Pogatchnik, 2022). This is exactly the type of political environment in which strategic ambiguity is useful (Cottey, 2017; Jesse, 2006). A sharply defined doctrine would satisfy some constituencies while alienating others. By contrast, a formula built around non-membership in “military alliances” and “common or mutual defence arrangements” allows different audiences to see their preferred understanding of the policy reflected in the same language.

Domestic audiences attached to a strong conception of neutrality can interpret the official formulation as a reaffirmation that Ireland stands outside alliance politics,

[2] Satisficing is an approach whereby an actor attempts to meet at least some of the preferences of one or more audiences – allowing them to deem it “good enough” – rather than providing an optimal solution that may meet all of the preferences or one audience but few or none of the preferences of other audiences.

particularly when official rhetoric tacitly equates “military alliance” with NATO membership. At the same time, more security-oriented audiences can read the same formulation as leaving room for meaningful cooperation and external assistance, including alliance-like or unilateral arrangements that are not publicly labelled alliances or mutual-defence pacts. The UK–Ireland air defence agreement illustrates how this works in practice. The government can appeal to a pro-neutrality domestic audience by avoiding the language of alliances altogether and describing it as merely an agreement, understanding, or arrangement (Dáil Éireann, 2005, p. 500; 2017b, pp. 133-134; 2020, p. 64; 2021, p. 98; 2022c, p. 203; 2023e; 2025b, pp. 778-779; 2025c, pp. 992-993; Gallagher & Leahy, 2023). However, security-minded domestic audiences could see the agreement as a useful alliance-like arrangement that substantially bolsters Ireland’s security. The value of ambiguity, therefore, lies not in eliminating disagreement but in managing it; it may help the government maintain public support for the policy in a context where neutrality retains symbolic importance, but security preferences are heterogeneous.

The same ambiguity may also help satisfice foreign audiences. It may signal to the UK and other EU states that Ireland is not rejecting security cooperation as such, but only overtly labelled alliance commitments. This matters because Ireland’s existing security relationships also serve the interests of its partners. The UK–Ireland air defence agreement gives Ireland protection it cannot provide for itself while also benefiting the UK by extending warning time, increasing operational depth, and reducing the risk that Irish airspace becomes a vulnerability on Britain’s western flank (Gallagher, 2023d). The UK can, therefore, benefit from the agreement without requiring Ireland to participate in an overt alliance.

The second area of ambiguity, non-membership in “common or mutual defence arrangements,” may be equally useful, but in a different way. The phrase sounds sweeping, yet its qualifying words, “common” and “mutual,” do not clearly preclude unilateral defence arrangements. This qualification matters domestically because it lets the Irish government claim that Ireland is militarily neutral even though it participates in arrangements that provide it with real, if asymmetric, security benefits. Pro-neutrality domestic audiences can be satisficed by the visible red lines of non-membership in common or mutual defence pacts. More security-oriented domestic audiences can appreciate the latitude the formula leaves for unilateral external assistance. Polling illustrates the presence of different domestic audiences with distinct preferences in this policy area. For example, an October 2024 poll reported that 64 percent of respondents in Ireland supported a common EU defence and security policy while an April 2025 poll found that 63 percent supported Ireland’s current model of military neutrality (European Commission, 2024, p. 49; Leahy, 2025). An ambiguous policy formulation can be an effective way to try to satisfice this diverse range of expressed preferences.

The ambiguity around this aspect of the policy may also help satisfice important foreign audiences. From the standpoint of other EU governments, the ambiguity in Irish rhetoric surrounding the unilateral defensive benefits Ireland may receive under the terms of Article 42.7 is useful because it keeps Ireland within the EU’s wider security framework. It helps avoid a strategic gap on the EU’s northwest regional border, supports the credibility of collective EU territorial solidarity, and protects infrastructure in and around Ireland, like undersea communications cables, that matters to the EU as a whole (McCabe & Flynn, 2024). The official formulation may not fully satisfy either domestic or

foreign audiences, but it may satisfice each of them enough to preserve the policy's political viability.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that Ireland's military neutrality policy is sustained by strategic ambiguity. The official formulation of the policy does not establish an unequivocal boundary around permissible and impermissible forms of security cooperation. Instead, "military alliances" is left undefined, while reciprocal defence commitments are excluded more clearly than unilateral ones. This ambiguity has been reinforced by governmental reluctance to clarify the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and by efforts to obscure the defence implications of Article 42.7 of the TEU. Ambiguity may have provided tangible benefits to the Irish government by preserving its policy flexibility, limiting some of the costs associated with a more explicit defence posture, and helping it manage the divergent preferences of multiple domestic and international audiences. Future research could build on this argument in at least two ways. Comparative studies could test whether Ireland is unusual, or whether strategic ambiguity is common among small states that attempt to reconcile neutrality or non-alignment with armed international security cooperation, such as Austria, Switzerland, Malta, and historically Finland and Sweden. A second avenue would examine, in greater depth than is possible in the present study, how Ireland's neutrality discourse is understood by external actors, including partner governments and EU institutions, to assess whether and to what extent Irish signals are interpreted as intended. Together, these studies would clarify the political uses of ambiguity in foreign policy and the link between discourse and security practice.

A test of the strategic ambiguity argument requires engagement with alternative explanations that may account for the persistence and presentation of Ireland's military neutrality policy. The first is the domestic entrenchment explanation put forward by Jesse and Cottey. According to this perspective, the policy endures primarily because it is embedded in domestic politics rather than because governments actively preserve interpretive space around it. Jesse's work emphasizes the role of domestic actors, public opinion, and political institutions in encouraging the government to maintain military neutrality; Cottey, similarly, emphasizes the policy's deep domestic entrenchment (Cottey, 2017, pp. 151-179; Jesse, 2006, pp. 7-28). Read in this way, official rhetoric on military neutrality may reflect the constraints imposed by a historically rooted domestic settlement that limits room for overt alignment, especially with NATO, rather than a deliberate effort to sustain multiple interpretations of the policy.

A second alternative explanation emphasizes discursive contestation. Devine argues that elite and public understandings of Irish neutrality diverge, including in the context of EU security and defence integration (Devine, 2011, pp. 334–369). Baciu, likewise, contends that Irish discourse on "neutrality," "security," and "EU defence" changed over time in order to adapt to Ireland's political ambitions post-Brexit (Baciu, 2018, pp. 97–117). From this perspective, the indeterminacy surrounding the policy may be less the product of strategic ambiguity than the result of an ongoing struggle over the meaning of neutrality itself. Governments may, therefore, be merely responding to, and participating in, a contested discursive environment rather than deliberately pursuing an ambiguous policy formulation.

Neither of these alternative explanations, by themselves, account for the particular form and pattern in which Ireland's military neutrality policy has been repeatedly articulated and defended. The domestic entrenchment perspective helps explain why Irish governments face political constraints against overt alignment, especially with NATO. For its part, the discursive contestation approach demonstrates that neutrality is politically disputed and that its meaning is neither fixed nor universally shared. However, neither approach adequately explains why successive officeholders have under-defined terms such as "military alliances," qualified the policy formulation with words like "common" and "mutual," and repeatedly refused to clarify the status of arrangements such as the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and the implications of Article 42.7. These recurring patterns matter because they help the Irish government maintain the language of military neutrality while avoiding transparency about forms of security cooperation that might otherwise appear inconsistent with it. Domestic entrenchment, discursive contestation, and strategic ambiguity are better understood as complementary rather than competing explanations: the first helps account for why military neutrality remains politically durable; the second describes the contested discursive environment in which neutrality is debated; finally, strategic ambiguity helps explain how governments have operated within that discursive environment to maintain a policy formulation that balances the domestic attachment to neutrality with the government's longstanding participation in armed security cooperation with other states.

The long-term use of strategic ambiguity has not been entirely without cost. It weakens democratic accountability by making it harder for citizens, legislators, and outside observers to determine what Ireland's military neutrality policy actually permits,

excludes, and requires in practice. It also contributes to public confusion by allowing the symbolic language of neutrality to coexist with forms of armed security cooperation that have not been clearly articulated. Multiple scholars and commentators on Irish foreign policy agree that, to quote Cottey, “Opinion polls over a long period of time indicate strong public support for neutrality but also a degree of confusion and contradiction in public thinking,” (Cottey, 2017, pp. 169-170). Ambiguity is also a fragile basis on which to manage a central pillar of foreign policy. Its effectiveness depends on the continued cooperation, discretion, and restraint of other states, leaving Ireland vulnerable to changes in the preferences of those on whom it covertly relies for aspects of its defence. The growing popularity of far-right parties in the UK, France, and numerous other European states that openly criticize the value of maintaining security obligations to other states in their region means that Ireland should not presume it can continue to benefit from covert, unilateral defence arrangements indefinitely. In a shifting European security environment, a policy that depends on ambiguity may, therefore, become harder to sustain.

For these reasons, disclosure deserves serious consideration as an alternative approach (Hynes, 2024, p. 183). This would not require the Irish government to abandon all secrecy in defence matters, nor to renounce military neutrality. It would, however, require a more candid and precise official discourse about the policy’s content and limits, including open acknowledgement of the forms of security cooperation on which the state already depends and clearer explanation of whether arrangements such as the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and Article 42.7 are compatible with military neutrality, and on what grounds. Greater disclosure about the existence, nature, and rationale of

Ireland's cooperative security arrangements would better support democratic debate, parliamentary scrutiny, and public accountability than the continued preservation of strategic ambiguity. It would also provide Ireland's security partners with public confirmation that the Irish government recognizes and values their contributions to these arrangements. Disclosure could, of course, place the policy, financial, and political benefits of strategic ambiguity at risk. Cottey is, consequently, likely correct in his prediction that, in the absence of a critical juncture of sufficient magnitude to force a fundamental change, the Irish government is unlikely to adopt a fundamentally different approach to its military neutrality policy (Cottey, 2013, pp. 466-467).

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