

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.<sup>97</sup> An ambiguous policy formulation can be an effective way to try to satisfy this diverse range of expressed preferences.

The ambiguity around this aspect of the policy may also help satisfy 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.<sup>98</sup> The official formulation may not fully satisfy either domestic or foreign audiences, but it may satisfy 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 minimize the defence implications of Article 42.7 of the TEU. In turn, 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 see whether and to what extent Irish signals are interpreted as intended. Together, these approaches 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-persistence 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.<sup>99</sup> Read in this way, official rhetoric

on military neutrality may reflect the constraints imposed by a historically rooted domestic settlement that limits the 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.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup> 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-persistence 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 arrangement and the implications of Article 42.7 TEU. 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 high degree of domestic support for 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 patterns of security cooperation that are not 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."<sup>102</sup> More fundamentally, 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 become harder to sustain.

For these reasons, disclosure deserves serious consideration as an alternative approach.<sup>103</sup> 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. Cottey is likely correct, however, 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.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ger Hynes, "Neutral, Neutered or Pacifist?: Can Ireland's Model of Neutrality Remain Aligned With its Foreign Policy Ambitions Amidst the Re-Emergence of Conflict in Europe," *The Journal of Military History and Defence Studies* 5, no. 1 (2024): 179–80; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Ireland's Policy of Military