

Unclear by Design: Strategic Ambiguity in Ireland's Military Neutrality Policy

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Introduction

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for being here.

My paper examines Ireland's military neutrality policy, which is officially defined as ***non-membership in military alliances*** and ***non-membership in common or mutual defence arrangements***.

Rather than asking why military neutrality endures, I ask how Irish governments have articulated the policy in ways that preserve ambiguity, and what are the political effects that ambiguity has produced.

My argument is that Irish military neutrality is not a transparent doctrine with a single stable meaning. Rather, the Irish government has articulated this policy through ***carefully qualified language*** and ***selective opacity***. The policy ***sounds*** very restrictive, but it ***leaves considerable room for interpretation***.

In other words, the ambiguity surrounding this policy is not merely ***accidental***. Rather, it functions as a ***political resource*** because it help the Irish government to ***preserve policy flexibility***, avoid some of the ***costs*** associated with a more explicit security posture, and ***manage the competing expectations*** that domestic and international audiences have about this policy.

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Contribution to the Literature

My paper builds on two major strands in the literature on Irish neutrality.

The first explains military neutrality's domestic entrenchment in Irish political culture, public opinion, and post-colonial sovereignty. The second treats neutrality as discursively contested rather than fixed.

I do not reject either approach. Instead, I add a third layer, strategic ambiguity, which helps explain how the Irish government has **used language** that allows different audiences to **hear and believe** different things about the same policy.

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Conceptual Framework: Strategic Ambiguity

Now, when I use the term **strategic ambiguity**, I mean the deliberate or patterned use of language that allows for **more than one** plausible interpretation of a policy in order to secure practical advantages for the communicator, which, in this case, is the Irish government.

It has two key components. The first is **selective opacity**. Although a government does not need to conceal **all** information about a policy, it needs to try to restrict, minimise, or avoid clarifying information that would allow audiences to settle on a single interpretation of a policy.

The second element is the **use of ambiguous language**. This involves the use, by a government, of undefined terms, narrow qualifiers, or formulations that **appear** precise but actually preserve considerable interpretive space about a policy.

These two mechanisms **reinforce** each other. Opacity prevents audiences from gaining the information needed to resolve ambiguity. Ambiguous language then allows multiple interpretations to remain **viable** among these audiences.

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Opacity as a Condition of Strategic Ambiguity

Selective opacity is a principal condition that has sustained the strategic ambiguity surrounding Ireland's military neutrality policy.

In the Irish case, official declarations of military neutrality coexist with security practices that could be considered, at least by certain audiences, to be 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 to clarify information about those practices.

One of these longstanding practices is the **UK-Ireland air defence agreement**, which dates from 1952 and was updated after the September 11th attacks. It allows the UK's Royal Air Force to use its fighter jets to defend Irish airspace against hostile foreign military aircraft or hijacked civilian aircraft.

Successive senior policymakers have either claimed the agreement does not exist, avoided discussing it when directly asked to do so, declined to confirm details about it, described it only obliquely, or insisted that they cannot comment on arrangements concerning national security.

This is important because the agreement appears to sit awkwardly with a military neutrality policy that states, in part, that Ireland **does not participate** in military alliances. Yet, because the terms of the agreement remain **classified** and only partially acknowledged, the agreement has not crystallised into a clear, publicly acknowledged contradiction of this policy.

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The **second** longstanding practice is Ireland's relationship with **Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union**.

This article is the EU's mutual defence clause. It states that, if a member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, other member states have an obligation to aid and assist it by all means in their power.

Unlike the UK-Ireland air defence agreement, Article 42.7 is not secret.

Nevertheless, the Irish government still attempts to maintain ***interpretive*** opacity regarding this aspect of the treaty.

Indeed, Irish governments have often ***downplayed*** the implications for Ireland of Article 42.7, which is that Ireland has agreed to ***accept military assistance***, when needed, from the other EU member states.

Senior Irish politicians have repeatedly and publicly suggested that Ireland is ***not part*** of a European defence pact or ***would not join*** a mutual defence clause, even though Ireland is ***already party*** to the treaty that contains Article 42.7.

This helps ***preserve ambiguity*** about the nature of Ireland's security relationship with the EU.

To be clear, the government is ***not concealing*** the treaty. But it ***IS*** avoiding providing an explicit public account of what the treaty's defence commitments mean for Ireland's defence and security.

So, with both of these practices in mind, selective opacity is not simply a background condition. It is what makes ambiguity about Ireland's military neutrality policy possible.

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

The Ambiguity of “Military Alliances”

The next part of the argument concerns the ***ambiguous language*** used by the Irish government to describe the military neutrality policy itself.

The first ambiguity concerns the concept of “***military alliances.***” The Irish government often defines neutrality as non-membership in military alliances, but they rarely define what counts as an alliance. In practice, official discourse often narrows the term to ***NATO.***

This is rhetorically effective because NATO is the alliance most familiar to Irish audiences. However, NATO is not synonymous with military alliance as such. The Irish government has merely chosen to ***use*** it as a synonym.

This narrowing allows the government to reassure domestic audiences that Ireland does not participate in military alliances because it isn’t a member of NATO, while leaving space for ***other*** security arrangements that may ***share the characteristics of military alliances*** but are not ***labelled*** as such.

For example, as with the provisions of NATO’s North Atlantic Treaty, the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and Article 42.7 involve ***expectations of assistance*** from other states in response to external threats, ***a triggering mechanism*** that can be invoked to ***request*** assistance from other states, and provisions that allow for the ***use of deadly force*** by the participating states.

With these characteristics in mind, some audiences could ***reasonably*** see the UK-Ireland air defence agreement and Article 42.7 as ***alliance-like arrangements.*** But because the Irish government does not ***label*** them “military alliances,” it is able to preserve the official formulation of its military neutrality policy.

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The Ambiguity of “Common or Mutual Defence Arrangements”

A similar degree of ambiguity surrounds the ***other*** main element of Ireland’s military neutrality policy, which is the claim that Ireland is militarily neutral because it does not participate in “common or mutual defence arrangements.”

At first glance, this aspect of the policy would seem to ***strongly imply*** that Ireland does not participate in ***any*** defence pacts. But the qualifiers “***common***” and “***mutual***” matter a great deal in this case. These words point specifically to ***reciprocal*** defence arrangements with other states, where each state has agreed to help each other in the event that they come under attack from an external threat.

By including these words, the official formulation of the policy suggests that Ireland does not enter arrangements in which it is ***formally bound*** to defend ***other states***; however, it does ***NOT*** clearly rule out the possibility that other states can be formally bound to defend ***Ireland***.

Again, the UK–Ireland air defence agreement is an unacknowledged but nonetheless real-world example of this sort of unilateral and asymmetric defence arrangement in which the British government has agreed to use the RAF to defend Irish airspace but Ireland has not agreed to use the Irish Air Corps to defend British airspace in return.

Article 42.7 is a broadly similar arrangement for Ireland. The so-called “Irish clause” in this article states that the terms of the article “shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States.” This clause may protect Ireland from being ***compelled to provide*** military assistance to other EU states. But it does not amount to a clear

rejection of Ireland ***the receipt*** of military assistance from the other EU members.

So, although the language ***appears*** restrictive, it is ***ambiguous*** because it allows certain audiences to interpret it as a comprehensive prohibition against participation ***any*** defence pacts while other audiences will interpret it as allowing for participation in ***unilateral*** security arrangements.

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Why Ambiguity is Strategic: Policy Flexibility

The decision by the Irish government to repeatedly discuss one of its most important foreign policies using ambiguous language is ***strategic*** because it provides ***multiple benefits*** to the government.

The ***first*** benefit is ***policy flexibility***.

Strategic ambiguity allows Irish governments to ***claim*** that Ireland is militarily neutral while preserving room for significant security cooperation with other states.

A more ***precise*** policy formulation would make deviations from strict non-alignment easier to identify and harder for the Irish government to defend.

But, because “military alliance” has been left under-defined, and because “common or mutual defence arrangements” leaves space for unilateral assistance, the Irish government can maintain the policy while benefiting from practical security cooperation.

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Why Ambiguity is Strategic: Cost Avoidance

The ***second*** benefit of strategic ambiguity is ***cost avoidance***.

At just €1.29 billion, or 0.24 percent of its GDP, Ireland spends ***far less*** on defence than many comparable European states, including those, like Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland, that historically pursued forms of armed neutrality.

A more ***explicit*** policy would likely be costly for Ireland in at least two ways.

If Ireland were to ***openly renounce*** all forms of outside military assistance and insisted on taking ***full*** responsibility for the defence of its territory, then it would need to invest ***far*** more heavily in its national defence capabilities.

Alternatively, if Ireland were to ***openly renounce its military neutrality policy***, and join NATO or fully embrace the EU's ***mutual*** defence commitments, then it would face pressure to ***increase defence spending*** in line with alliance expectations.

For example, if it were to meet the current NATO and de facto EU defence spending target of 2 percent of GDP, then it would need to spend approximately €10.7 billion per year or about ***8.3 times*** its 2024 defence budget.

Strategic ambiguity helps Ireland ***avoid*** both outcomes. It allows its government to preserve the appearance of military neutrality while ***externalizing*** a large part of its defence burden to other states.

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Why Ambiguity is Strategic: Satisficing Multiple Audiences

Finally, the ***third*** benefit of strategic ambiguity is that it helps the government ***satisfice multiple audiences*** by allowing ***different*** audiences to interpret the ***same*** policy in ways that make them ***happy enough*** to continue to support it.

Pro-neutrality domestic audiences can believe that Ireland is not militarily aligned or part of any defence pacts with other states.

Security-oriented domestic audiences, on the other hand, can believe that Ireland has preserved room for pragmatic security cooperation, external assistance, and participation in European security frameworks.

The same ambiguous language also helps satisfy ***foreign*** audiences.

For the UK, the unacknowledged air defence arrangement it maintains with Ireland helps protect Britain's western flank from airborne threats while also avoiding placing its ally in the difficult political position of ***openly admitting*** that it is part of a military alliance.

For EU states, Ireland's position allows it to remain within the broader EU security framework without forcing it to overtly abandon its politically popular neutrality policy.

So, ambiguity does not ***eliminate*** disagreement. It ***manages*** disagreement in ways that benefit the Irish government and its allies.

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Conclusion

To conclude, my paper argues that Ireland's military neutrality policy is not simply unclear because governments have failed to define it properly.

It is unclear in a deliberate, patterned, and politically useful way.

The official formulation of the policy says ***just enough*** to reassure audiences that Ireland remains outside military alliances and

mutual defence pacts. But it does not say enough to rule out alliance-like cooperation or participation in unilateral defence arrangements with other states.

This ambiguity has helped preserve policy flexibility, reduce costs, and manage competing audience expectations.

So, the broader contribution of the paper is to show that ambiguity in foreign policy should not always be treated as a defect, inconsistency, or failure of clarity.

Sometimes ambiguity is the policy instrument ***itself***.

Thanks very much for your attention.