Since the end of the Cold War, and especially after Sweden and Finland applied 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."[1] 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.[2] 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."[3] 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, and to what effect, the Irish government has used strategic ambiguity to sustain military neutrality. It argues that Ireland's military neutrality policy is best understood not as a wholly transparent doctrine with a single stable meaning, but as a strategically ambiguous policy whose durability and power depends on both 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

more 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). Far from reflecting mere inconsistency or drift, ambiguity functions here as a political resource: it preserves policy flexibility, helps the government avoid some of the costs associated with a more explicit security posture, and enables it to satisfice the competing preferences of multiple domestic and international audiences.[4]

The literature on Irish military neutrality falls into two main strands. The first explains why neutrality has endured as a distinctive element of Irish foreign policy. Neal Jesse argues that its persistence is driven less by external threats than by domestic actors, public opinion, and political institutions.[5] Cottey's research complements this work by tracing neutrality to the struggle for independence, its consolidation during the Second World War, and its deep domestic entrenchment.[6] Together, they show Irish neutrality as sustained by a historically rooted domestic political settlement that limits governments' scope for overt alignment, especially with NATO. However, they largely treat 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 government.

A second strand focuses less on persistence than on how neutrality's meaning has been constructed, contested, and defended. Karen Devine argues that public and elite understandings of neutrality diverge, and that elite discourse can enable subtle but important policy shifts.[7] Cornelia-Adriana Baciu, likewise, examines how Irish discourse on

neutrality, security, and EU defence has been contested and adapted, especially post-Brexit.[8] 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 gain benefits from doing so.

Methodologically, the 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 since 2016.[9] 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.[10] 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.[11] This makes Ireland especially well-suited to examining 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.[12]

The next sections of this article define strategic ambiguity, distinguish it from imprecision, and show how it shapes Ireland's military neutrality policy. It then examines why this ambiguity is useful, especially for policy flexibility, cost avoidance, and balancing domestic and international preferences. The conclusion summarizes the argument,

considers the democratic and strategic costs of ambiguity, explores disclosure as an alternative, and suggests future research.

Conceptualising Strategic Ambiguity

Ambiguity denotes the existence of more than one plausible meaning in relation to the same word, phrase, policy, or legal formulation.[13] 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 or action for the purposes of securing practical advantages.[14] In his work on organizational communication and management, Eric Eisenberg defines the concept as "instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals."[15] 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."[16] 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.[17] By contrast, a policy of disclosure attempts to narrow interpretive discretion by using relatively precise, verifiable, and unequivocal language so that audiences are guided towards a single authoritative understanding.[18]

Strategic ambiguity operates through two mutually reinforcing mechanisms.[19] 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 prevent audiences from gaining access to the

information they need to maintain a comprehensive, factually accurate 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.[20] The second mechanism is the use of ambiguous language.[21] Governments may, for instance, employ nebulous terms to describe a policy or action or attach narrow qualifiers that selectively include or exclude certain practices. These two mechanisms work together. Selective opacity denies an audience the information necessary to establish a settled, factually correct understanding of a policy or action, while ambiguous language enables different audiences to maintain different, though still plausible, interpretations of what a policy or action 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 functions most effectively when relevant audiences lack access to information that would allow them to establish the policy's definitive, factually correct meaning. In the Irish case, official declarations of military neutrality have repeatedly coexisted with security practices that could be considered forms of military alignment. The Irish government's ability to successfully use ambiguous language to characterize its military neutrality policy has, therefore, depended, to a considerable extent, on its capacity to withhold, minimize, or refuse clarification of those practices.

Opacity extends to the cornerstone of Ireland's contemporary national defence – the UK-Ireland air defence agreement.[22] 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).[23] 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."[24] Senior Irish policymakers actively avoid public discussions of this agreement. When they do mention it, they tend to downplay its significance.[25] 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."[26] 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."[27] 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."[28]

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.[29] 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.[30]

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."[31] Since 2023, the government has also been fighting a lawsuit launched by Independent Irish 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.[32] Brian Kennedy, legal counsel for the Irish government in this case, told the Irish High Court in 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.[33]

The fact that the terms of this agreement remain secret or only partially acknowledged makes it significantly 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 not merely reflect a generic preference for

opacity in security affairs; they help to prevent the agreement from crystallizing, 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 obvious 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.[34]

The issue here is not secrecy in the strict sense, but interpretive opacity because the Irish government has attempted to obscure 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.[35] 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."[36] 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.[37] These statements are deliberately designed to maintain a degree of opacity regarding one of the core functions of the EU. They demonstrate 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, a critical 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.[38] 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.”[39] 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.”[40] 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.”[41] While serving as tánaiste and minister for foreign affairs, 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.”[42] Simon Coveney stated on March 1, 2022, in his capacity as minister for foreign affairs, that “Ireland is militarily neutral; that is, we are not a member of a military alliance.”[43] 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.”[44]

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.[45] 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.[46]

Official rhetoric further deepens the ambiguity by tacitly equating “military alliance” with NATO.[47] 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.”[48] Tánaiste Martin, for his part, stated on February 23, 2023, that “We are not members of NATO.”[49] McEntee, in her capacity as minister for foreign affairs and defence, told the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs on November 27, 2025, that her government “have no plans to join NATO.”[50] 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 quietly narrows the meaning of the latter term without ever saying so directly. The effect 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."[51] Likewise, while serving as tánaiste and minister for foreign affairs, Harris told the Dáil on March 26, 2025, that "the EU is not a military alliance."[52]

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 highly probable that certain audiences will reasonably interpret these arrangements to be 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.[53] 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.[54] 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."[55] These are precisely 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.[56] This is more than a semantic technicality; 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.[57] Once that distinction is introduced, the ambiguity in the official formulation becomes much easier to see. 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."[58] Likewise, while serving as taoiseach, Varadkar declared on June 20, 2023, that "Ireland will remain militarily neutral. We are not… signed up to any mutual defence pact or clause."[59] Coveney, while serving as minister for foreign affairs, told the Dáil on March 24, 2022, that Ireland "does not participate in… mutual defence arrangements."[60] While serving in the same role, McEntee stated in the Dáil on December 17, 2025, that "Ireland is not party to any mutual defence clause or defence pact, which is in line with our policy of military neutrality."[61] These statements may be technically correct; however, precisely because they focus on reciprocity, they do not allow 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 provides a clear illustration of this. 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.[62] This plainly constitutes 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 remains easier to reconcile with the official formulation precisely because it 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.[63] 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."[64] Whatever else an audience makes of that sentence, it does not amount to a clear disavowal of external military help to Ireland.[65] Rather, a plausible readings 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.[66] 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.[67] 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. It did not, however, reject the possibility that other EU states could help defend them from external threats.[68] 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."[69]

This asymmetry matters because it means that certain audiences could plausibly 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 practical value of the ambiguity surrounding Ireland's military neutrality policy manifests in three related ways: it preserves a government's policy flexibility, helps it avoid some of the material costs that a more explicit policy would entail, and supports 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 preserves flexibility by allowing Irish governments to claim continuity in 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."[70] 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."[71] 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 asymmetric 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 enables the government 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.[72] 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 describe that cooperation as a break with policy.

Avoiding Costs

Strategic ambiguity also enhances the Irish government's ability to avoid paying tangible costs by keeping the parameters of its obligations underspecified.[73] The official formulation of Ireland's military neutrality policy functions by leaving "military alliances" undefined and by excluding "common or mutual defence arrangements," but not every possible form of armed military cooperation. This language allows the Irish government to avoid 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.[74] 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.[75]

Irish governments have consistently maintained much lower defence spending than their closest neighbours or other purportedly neutral or non-aligned European states.[76] In 2024, Ireland spent €1.29 billion or 0.24 percent of its GDP on defence.[77] That figure was far below the UK's 2.3 percent and the EU average of 1.9 percent.[78] 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.[79] 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.[80] 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.[81]

The official policy formulation enables the Irish government to 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.[82] In other words, the ambiguity surrounding "military alliances" helps manage budgetary pressure. If Ireland publicly abandoned the claim that 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.[83] The present policy formulation helps avoid 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, which would already have required a major increase in spending and still not established a fully self-sufficient defence posture.[84] 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 that leaves room for unilateral protection under arrangements such as the UK–Ireland air defence agreement and Article 42.7 of the TEU, therefore, provides a tangible material advantage by externalizing much of Ireland's defence burden.[85]

Satisficing the Preferences of Multiple Audiences

Strategic ambiguity is also politically useful because it helps 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.[86] As Eisenberg points out, "It is a political necessity to engage in strategic ambiguity so that different constituent groups may apply

different interpretations."[87] In this way, strategic ambiguity can bolster support for the policy and also reduce the government's risk of criticism and backlash.[88]

Irish public opinion has long attached symbolic weight to neutrality. Patrick Keatinge rightly claims that, for many Irish citizens, neutrality became more than just a policy, it became a "traditional symbol and national myth."[89] 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."[90] 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.[91] This is exactly the type of political environment in which strategic ambiguity is useful.[92] 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, 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 describe it as merely an agreement, understanding, or arrangement.[93] 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 enables the government to maintain public support for the policy in a context where neutrality retains symbolic importance, but security preferences are heterogeneous.

The same ambiguity also helps satisfice foreign audiences. It signals to the UK and other EU states that Ireland is not rejecting security cooperation as such, but only overtly labelled alliance commitments. That 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. [94] The UK clearly benefits from the agreement without requiring that Ireland engage in an overt alliance.

The second area of ambiguity, non-membership in "common or mutual defence arrangements," is 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.[95] An ambiguous policy formulation is an effective way to try to satisfice this diverse range of expressed preferences.

The ambiguity around this aspect of the policy also helps 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.[96] The official formulation does not fully satisfy either domestic or foreign audiences, but it satisfices each of them enough to preserve the policy's political viability.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Ireland's military neutrality policy is sustained not by doctrinal clarity but 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 or asymmetric 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, it has provided tangible political benefits by preserving flexibility, limiting some of the costs associated with a more explicit defence posture, and helping the government manage the divergent preferences of multiple domestic and international audiences. Future research could build on this analysis by examining whether Ireland is unusual among small purportedly neutral states, and by investigating how Irish neutrality discourse is interpreted by external actors, including partner governments and EU institutions.

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."[97] More fundamentally, ambiguity is 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 EU and the very principle 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.[98] This would not require the Irish government to abandon all secrecy in defence matters, nor to renounce military neutrality immediately. 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. 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.[99]

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