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Ireland debates security policy, but NATO membership not on the horizon

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As elsewhere in Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted debate on security and defence in Ireland. In contrast to Finland and Sweden's decisions to end their long-standing policies of neutrality and seek membership of NATO, however, Ireland is unlikely to move towards NATO membership any time soon.

Irish neutrality

Ireland adopted a policy of neutrality at the beginning of the Second World War – although the origins of Irish neutrality lie in the country's earlier struggle for independence from Britain – and has retained that policy ever since. Ireland has also long been a supporter of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, which it joined in 1955. Contributing to peacekeeping, primarily via UN operations, has been a central role for the Irish Defence Forces. Ireland joined the European Union (at that point the European Economic Community) with the United Kingdom and Denmark in 1973. As the EU developed its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the 1990s and 2000s Ireland became part of these frameworks. Some in Ireland, however, viewed involvement in EU defence cooperation as undermining neutrality. Debates on the EU's Nice and Lisbon treaties in the 2000s thus resulted in 'guarantees' by the EU recognizing Ireland's neutrality. Ireland joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1999 and contributed forces to NATO's

peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The Russian question: security challenge or threat?

Even before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia had begun to assume greater prominence in Ireland as a security challenge, perhaps even a threat. In the 2010s Russian nuclear-capable bombers began to appear in airspace close to Ireland and Russian submarines in waters close to Ireland. The Russian embassy in Dublin is large given Ireland's small size and widely viewed as base for espionage activities. In 2021 the Health Services Executive (HSE), the Irish government body responsible for managing the health service, was the target of a major cyber-attack, originating from a criminal group operating from Saint Petersburg. In February 2022, immediately before the invasion of Ukraine, the [Russian navy undertook quite high-profile exercises off the south coast of Ireland](#).

At the same time, a crisis within the Defence Forces—resulting from long-term underfunding, as well as recruitment problems—highlighted the weakness of the Irish military. A government appointed special [Commission on the Defence Forces](#), whose report was published in February 2022, argued for increased defence spending and addressing particular capability shortfalls, steps which are now being undertaken. Nonetheless, Ireland's military is small – less than 10,000 personnel –

and has only very limited combat capabilities. These various developments have highlighted Ireland's vulnerability, especially in terms of naval capabilities, air defence (where Ireland has effectively no combat airforce), undersea infrastructure (such as seabed internet cables) and cyber-attacks.

Ireland's support for Ukraine

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ireland has been strongly supportive of Kyiv. The Irish government has argued that while the country is militarily neutral, it is not politically neutral in the context of Russia's clear act of aggression against Ukraine. The Irish government has condemned Russia's actions, fully supported EU sanctions, taken in large number of Ukrainian refugees (relative to Ireland's small size) and provided financial assistance to Ukraine. The Irish government has, however, argued that the country's policy of military neutrality prevents it from providing arms to Ukraine and has therefore limited military assistance to non-lethal lethal items (such as body armour) and limited its participation in the EU military training mission for Ukraine's armed forces to non-lethal areas (such counter-IED, improved explosive devices, training). Separately, the Irish government has scaled up engagement with EU defence cooperation and NATO, [joining more defence capability projects as part of the EU's Permanent Structured Co-operation \(PESCO\) initiative](#) and [some European Defence Agency \(EDA\) projects](#) (in areas such as cyber security), [the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence](#) and likely also [NATO's new Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell](#).

The domestic political debate

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also triggered wider debate on security policy. Ireland's current government, elected in 2020, is a coalition of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (historically the country's two dominant parties, both broadly of the centre-right), plus the Green Party. The main opposition party is Sinn Féin, a left-wing party with strong Irish Republican roots. In March 2022 Fianna Fáil leader and at that point Prime Minister Micheál Martin [floated the possibility of a](#)

[Citizen's Assembly on neutrality](#) (under the current coalition agreement the post of Prime Minister rotates between the leaders of the two larger parties and is now held by Fine Gael leader Leo Varadkar). The government, however, concluded that a Citizen's Assembly was not the best way to proceed and instead established a [Consultative Forum on International Security Policy](#). The Consultative Forum involved four days of high-profile public discussion of foreign, security and defence policy with expert speakers, held in late June, and a public consultation whereby any member of the public or organisation can make submissions for consideration. The Consultative Forum is chaired by Louise Richardson, a former Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, who will produce a report summarising the Forum. This report, expected to be published this autumn, seems likely to lay out various challenges and policy options, rather than making specific recommendations. Critics of the government argued that the Forum was [a means of weakening Irish neutrality or preparing the country for closer relations with NATO](#) (even NATO membership). (Full disclosure: my university, University College Cork, hosted one of the four days of discussion and I was a speaker at the Forum).

Whatever the outcome of the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy, Ireland seems unlikely to move towards NATO membership, certainly in the short-term. In Finland and Sweden, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some political parties and leaders supported NATO membership and there was public debate on the issue. In Ireland, in contrast, no political party or leader has advocated NATO membership – indeed, there are almost no public voices at all in support of NATO membership. In response to arguments that the Consultative Forum was an exercise in preparing the public to abandon neutrality, further, both the [Prime Minister \(and Fine Gael leader\) Leo Varadkar](#) and the [Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister \(and Fianna Fail leader\) Micheal Martin](#) have stated that there is no intention to seek NATO membership.

Opinion polling

Opinion polls for many years have indicated strong public support for neutrality and little, if any, support for NATO membership. Various opinion polls since February 2022 have generally re-affirmed this. One [June-July 2022 survey, however, suggested 52% public support for joining NATO](#) and 48% opposition, prompting speculation about a significant shift in Irish opinion, but this survey could be considered an outlier, as the methodology to some extent depended on leading questions. Against the background of the Consultative Forum one [recent opinion poll indicated 61% support for retaining the current model of military neutrality](#), 26% in favour of change (although what that change might be was not specified in the question) and 13% 'don't know/no opinion'. A second [recent poll on the specific question of NATO membership indicated 38% opposition, 34% support](#) and 28% 'don't know' – possibly suggesting greater public openness to NATO membership. Experts also point out that public understanding of security and defence issues is low – one opinion poll, for example, indicated both [48% support for NATO membership and 57% support for retaining a policy of neutrality](#). While a shift towards public support for NATO membership cannot be ruled out, a balanced reading of opinion poll evidence suggests that there remains substantial public support for neutrality and certainly no strong demand for NATO membership. Additionally, NATO membership would almost certainly require a referendum, making it unlikely any government would take steps in this direction without clear public support.

Issues arising from the Consultative Forum

Beyond the broad issues of neutrality and hypothetical (if unlikely) NATO membership, the Consultative Forum raised a variety of more specific issues. These included: maritime security, in particular the vulnerability of seabed infrastructure, including internet cables and the electricity interconnector between Ireland and the UK (plus a planned interconnector between France and the UK); air defence, where Ireland relies on [hitherto](#)

[secret agreement with the UK dating from 1952](#); the substance and desirability (or otherwise) of defence cooperation with the EU and NATO; and Ireland's contribution to conflict resolution and peacekeeping.

One particular Irish issue is the so-called [triple lock: the system for the overseas deployment of Irish military forces](#) on peacekeeping or other operations, which requires a decision of the Irish government, approval by the Irish parliament and authorisation by the UN Security Council or General Assembly. Given worsening great power relations, critics argue that the triple-lock gives the permanent members of the Security Council, including Russia and China, an effective veto of the overseas deployment of Irish forces and this third leg of the triple lock should be removed or modified. Supporters of the triple lock argue that UN authorisation provides a key element of legitimacy for peacekeeping operations and should therefore be retained as part of the triple lock.

Two other elements emerged in the debate around the Consultative Forum. One is the call for Citizen's Assembly on neutrality (or perhaps security policy more broadly). As noted above, critics argued that the Consultative Forum was one-sided or designed to weaken neutrality and that a Citizen's Assembly would be more truly representative of public opinion. Another long-standing demand which re-emerged during the Forum was the call to enshrine neutrality in the Irish constitution (which would require a referendum to approve any such constitutional amendment). These arguments are generally made by parties of the left and the peace movement, reflecting an assumption that the Irish public would – whether via a Citizen's Assembly or a referendum on neutrality – endorse their interpretation of what neutrality is or should be. This assumption, of course, remains to be tested. While enshrining it in the constitution might copper-fasten Irish neutrality, it would probably do little to resolve debates on neutrality in practice, since what elements of defence cooperation with the EU or NATO are compatible with neutrality are likely to remain contested, as are the types of

overseas missions on which the Irish Defence Forces should be deployed.

Forthcoming elections

Ireland's next election must be held by March 2025 at the latest, but could come earlier. All political parties are likely to enter the next election committed to maintaining Ireland's neutrality, although there may be differences over their definitions of neutrality and specific issues such as the triple lock, whether neutrality should be enshrined in the constitution and a possible Citizen's Assembly on neutrality/security policy.

Sinn Fein has had a lead in opinion polls for a couple of years, leading many to believe that it will be the largest parliamentary party after the next election and form the core of the country's next government – although Ireland's economy is booming, which may be to the electoral benefit of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Even if Sinn Fein comes to power, it will almost certainly be in a coalition with some combination of Fianna Fáil, smaller parties and/or independent deputies. A Sinn Fein-led government would be the first time the party has held power since the formation of the Irish state in 1921-22, reflecting its transition from the margins to the centre of Irish politics. Historically, Sinn Fein has been opposed to Irish participation in the EU's CSDP and to cooperation with NATO. Recently, however, Sinn Fein [dropped its previous position of withdrawing from existing defence cooperation arrangements with the EU and NATO.](#)

Simplifying somewhat, the debate within Ireland is one between a pragmatic version of neutrality, which sees value – even necessity – in security cooperation with the EU and NATO, and a purist version of neutrality, which rejects all or most security cooperation with the EU and NATO. Although the voices in favour of the purist version of neutrality are sometimes loud, they do not necessarily represent majority opinion. One suspects that, even under a possible Sinn Fein-led government, Ireland will continue the road of combining neutrality with pragmatic engagement with the EU and NATO on security and defence.

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