

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Futility of Neutrality in the Modern World: Ireland's Security Dilemma and the Case for NATO Membership

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## Abstract

This paper examines Ireland's military neutrality policy in the context of 21st-century security challenges and analyses the political and social implications of potential NATO membership. Through comprehensive analysis of recent security incidents, public opinion data, political party positions, and comparative case studies, this study argues that Ireland's continued adherence to military neutrality has become both a historical anachronism and a critical vulnerability in the modern security environment. The research demonstrates that modern hybrid warfare tactics, exemplified by systematic Russian activities in Irish waters, cyber attacks on critical infrastructure, and the September 2025 drone incursions into NATO territory, render traditional neutrality obsolete as a security strategy. Using a mixed-methods analysis that combines quantitative polling data with a qualitative examination of security incidents, the study reveals a fundamental security divide between alliance members and neutral states. The research examines the experiences of Finland and Sweden's rapid NATO accession, the evolution of political parties in Ireland, and the complex cultural factors rooted in Ireland's colonial history that influence contemporary security debates. While acknowledging significant domestic political and cultural challenges, including deep-seated anti-imperialist traditions and constitutional requirements for referendum, the paper concludes that NATO membership represents the most viable solution to Ireland's security dilemma, providing collective defence capabilities that Ireland cannot achieve independently. The analysis reveals growing public ambivalence toward neutrality, with 52% supporting NATO membership, despite 63% favouring current neutrality policies, suggesting a potential for a successful political transition given appropriate public debate, political leadership, and strategic communication about security imperatives.

**Keywords:** Ireland, NATO, Neutrality, Security Policy, European Union, Hybrid Warfare, Collective Defence, Russian Threats.

**JEL Classification:** F51, F52, H56, Z18

## 1. Introduction

The concept of military neutrality, once a cornerstone of the Westphalian international order, has undergone profound transformation in the 21st century. Ireland's position as a militarily non-aligned member of an increasingly security-conscious European Union, where 23 of 27 member states are NATO members, has become a source of growing strategic vulnerability and international anomaly. The Russian invasion of

Ukraine in February 2022 marked a definitive end to the post-Cold War era in Europe, forcing fundamental reassessment of security policies across the continent and exposing the inadequacy of traditional neutrality concepts in addressing modern security challenges (Wallander, 2025).

This paper argues that Ireland's continued adherence to military neutrality is not only a historical anachronism rooted in 20th-century geopolitical circumstances but

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also a critical vulnerability that must be addressed through NATO membership to ensure national security in an increasingly dangerous world. The research examines the obsolescence of traditional neutrality concepts in the face of hybrid warfare, analyses specific security threats facing Ireland from state and non-state actors, evaluates the political and social implications of potential NATO accession, and provides a comparative analysis of other neutral states' experiences with alliance membership.

The study's novelty lies in its comprehensive integration of security analysis with domestic political considerations, providing a holistic assessment of Ireland's strategic options that combines international relations theory with empirical analysis of contemporary security challenges. The September 2025 Russian drone incursions into Polish and Romanian airspace, which marked "the first time that NATO engaged enemies in allied territory" (Anghel & Radchenko, 2025), starkly illustrate the security divide between NATO members and neutral states like Ireland. When Russian drones violated Polish airspace, NATO's response was immediate and decisive, involving coordinated military action and Article 4 consultations, while Ireland's response to similar Russian provocations has been limited to diplomatic protests and expressions of concern.

The research addresses a critical gap in the literature on small state security policies and the evolution of neutrality in the post-Cold War era, with a particular focus on the unique challenges faced by EU member states that remain outside NATO's collective defence framework. The study contributes to understanding how historical neutrality policies interact with contemporary security challenges and the domestic political dynamics that influence security policy change in democratic societies.

The research goal is to demonstrate that while NATO membership would present significant political challenges rooted in Ireland's historical experience and cultural identity, it represents the most viable solution to Ireland's security dilemma in the 21st century. The methodology combines quantitative analysis of public opinion polling data with qualitative examination of security incidents, political party positions, and comparative case studies of Finland and Sweden's NATO accession processes.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Evolution of Neutrality in International Relations Theory

The concept of neutrality has undergone significant

theoretical and practical transformation since its classical formulation in the Westphalian system of international relations. Traditional neutrality theory, as developed by scholars such as Karsh (1988) and Agius (2006), assumed clear distinctions between war and peace, with neutral states able to remain outside conflicts through legal frameworks, diplomatic arrangements, and geographic advantages. This classical understanding of neutrality was predicated on the ability of states to maintain equidistance from conflicting parties and avoid entanglement in great power competitions.

FitzGerald (1998) provides a seminal analysis of Irish neutrality's origins and development of Irish neutrality, arguing that it represented an assertion of sovereignty by a new state seeking to differentiate itself from British imperial foreign policy. This historical foundation created what Devine (2008) describes as a "comparative critique" of Irish neutrality practice, highlighting contradictions between stated policy and actual behaviour in international affairs. The literature reveals that Irish neutrality was never absolute but rather a pragmatic policy adapted to changing circumstances while maintaining symbolic importance for national identity.

Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the viability of traditional neutrality in the contemporary security environment. Beyer and Hofmann (2011) argue that the rise of transnational threats, cyber warfare, and hybrid conflict has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape in ways that make classical neutrality concepts obsolete. The literature on "active neutrality" and "military neutrality" reflects attempts to adapt neutrality concepts to modern realities, but critics argue these adaptations reveal the fundamental inadequacy of neutrality as a security strategy.

### 2.2 Small State Security and Alliance Theory

The literature on small state security emphasises the particular challenges faced by countries with limited defence capabilities in an anarchic international system. Keohane (1969) and Vital (1967) established the foundational understanding that small states face unique vulnerabilities, which require different strategic approaches than those of great powers. More recent scholarship by Archer and Nugent (2002) and Thorhallsson (2018) has examined how small European states have adapted to changing security environments through various alliance and partnership arrangements.

Alliance theory, as developed by Walt (1987) and Snyder (1997), provides the theoretical framework for understanding why states choose collective security arrangements over individual defence strategies. The literature demonstrates that alliance formation is driven by threat perception, capability aggregation, and the desire to influence larger powers' behaviour. For small states, alliance membership often represents the most cost-effective means of ensuring security while maintaining political autonomy in non-security areas.

Wallander (2025) provides a crucial contemporary analysis, arguing that the war in Ukraine has been a major catalyst for increased European defence spending, with NATO members recognising that individual security is increasingly dependent on collective arrangements. This represents a fundamental shift from the post-Cold War assumption that military threats to European democracies had largely disappeared. The literature increasingly supports the argument that small European states can no longer rely on geographic isolation or diplomatic neutrality to ensure security.

### **2.3 Hybrid Warfare and Neutral State Vulnerability**

The emergence of hybrid warfare as a dominant form of contemporary conflict has fundamentally challenged traditional security paradigms and neutrality concepts. Hoffman (2007) and Gerasimov (2013) provided early theoretical frameworks for understanding hybrid warfare, which deliberately blurs the lines between war and peace by integrating conventional military tactics with cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and proxy forces.

Recent scholarship by Anghel and Radchenko (2025) demonstrates how hybrid warfare tactics are particularly effective against neutral states, which lack the collective defence mechanisms and deterrent capabilities available to alliance members. Their analysis of Russian strategy reveals a deliberate targeting of neutral states as "soft underbellies" of Western security architecture, where sub-threshold aggression can be conducted with minimal risk of escalation or collective response.

The literature on cyber warfare and critical infrastructure protection, including works by Rid (2013) and Valeriano and Maness (2015), emphasises the particular vulnerability of small states to cyber attacks and the importance of collective cyber defence capabilities. Ireland's experience with the HSE

ransomware attack exemplifies these vulnerabilities, as documented by the National Cyber Security Centre (2024), which describes systematic targeting by state-sponsored actors who view neutral countries as attractive targets for testing Western defences.

### **2.4 Comparative Analysis of Neutral State Transitions**

The experiences of Finland and Sweden provide particularly relevant case studies for understanding how deeply embedded neutrality traditions can be overcome when security imperatives become sufficiently compelling. Petersson and Saxi (2013) and Doerer (2014) provide comprehensive analyses of Nordic neutrality policies during the Cold War, demonstrating how both countries successfully maintained non-alignment while building strong defence capabilities and Western partnerships.

The literature on Finland and Sweden's NATO accession processes, including recent works by Haugevik and Sending (2022) and Bergman and Julkunen (2022), reveals key factors that enabled rapid policy change despite long-standing neutrality traditions. These include strong political leadership, clear communication about security threats, extensive public debate, and emphasis on collective defence benefits rather than military adventurism.

A comparative analysis of the experiences of other neutral states' experiences, including Austria's gradual integration into EU security structures and Switzerland's evolving relationship with NATO, provides additional insights into the challenges and opportunities facing neutral states in the contemporary security environment. The literature suggests that absolute neutrality is increasingly difficult to maintain in an interconnected world where security challenges transcend national boundaries.

## **3. Methodology**

This research employs a comprehensive mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of public opinion data with qualitative examination of security incidents, political developments, and comparative case studies. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive assessment of Ireland's security challenges and policy options, addressing both empirical evidence and normative considerations.

### **3.1 Data Collection and Sources**

The study analyses polling data from multiple reputable sources between 2022-2025 to track

changes in Irish public attitudes toward neutrality and NATO membership. Primary sources include polls conducted by Behaviour Wise, Business Post/Red C, Irish Times/Ipsos, and Eurobarometer surveys. The research examines polling methodology, sample sizes, question wording, and temporal variations to ensure robust analysis of public opinion trends.

Security incident analysis draws on official government documents, parliamentary records, naval service reports, and cyber security assessments. The research examines documented incidents involving Russian activities in Irish waters and airspace, cyber attacks on Irish infrastructure, and comparative responses to similar incidents in NATO member states. Sources include Irish Naval Service operational reports, National Cyber Security Centre threat assessments, and international intelligence analyses.

Political party position analysis utilises official party statements, policy documents, parliamentary debates, and leadership speeches to track evolving positions on neutrality and security cooperation. The research examines internal party dynamics, generational differences, and the influence of external events on policy positions. Sources include party manifestos, conference resolutions, and media interviews with key political figures.

### 3.2 Comparative Case Study Analysis

The methodology includes a detailed comparative analysis of Finland and Sweden's NATO accession processes, examining factors that enabled rapid policy change despite long-standing neutrality traditions. This analysis draws on government documents, parliamentary debates, public opinion surveys, and academic analyses from both countries. The research examines timeline factors, political leadership roles, public communication strategies, and institutional mechanisms that facilitated policy transitions.

Additional comparative analysis examines the experiences of other EU member states that remain outside NATO (Austria, Cyprus, Malta) to understand different approaches to balancing EU membership with military non-alignment. This provides context for understanding Ireland's unique position and the various policy options available to neutral EU members.

### 3.3 Analytical Framework

The research employs a multi-level analytical framework examining international systemic factors,

regional security dynamics, domestic political considerations, and individual-level attitudes. This approach enables a comprehensive evaluation of the various factors influencing Ireland's security policy options and the likelihood of policy change.

International level analysis examines changing threat environments, alliance dynamics, and great power competition. Regional analysis focuses on European security architecture, EU defence integration, and NATO expansion. Domestic analysis examines political party positions, public opinion, constitutional requirements, and cultural factors. Individual analysis considers demographic variations in security attitudes and the role of political leadership in shaping public opinion.

### 3.4 Limitations and Methodological Considerations

The research acknowledges several methodological limitations. Public opinion polling on complex security issues may not fully capture the nuanced views of citizens or their potential for opinion change given new information or changed circumstances. Political party positions may evolve rapidly in response to external events, making static analysis potentially outdated.

Security incident analysis relies on publicly available information, which may not capture the full scope of intelligence activities or government responses. Comparative analysis must account for significant differences in historical experience, geographic position, and political culture between Ireland and other neutral states.

The research addresses these limitations through triangulation of multiple data sources, temporal analysis of trends rather than static snapshots, and explicit acknowledgement of uncertainty in projecting future developments.

## 4. Empirical Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Security Threat Analysis and Documentation

The empirical evidence demonstrates a clear and escalating pattern of Russian sub-threshold aggression against Ireland, revealing systematic targeting of critical infrastructure and deliberate testing of response capabilities. Table 1 provides comprehensive documentation of incidents between 2022-2025, revealing the scope and sophistication of threats facing Ireland as a neutral state.

**Table 1.** Russian Activities in Irish Waters and Airspace (2022-2025)

Date	Incident Type	Russian Asset	Location	Irish Response	International Response	Outcome
Jan 2022	Naval Exercise Threat	Russian Fleet	Irish EEZ	Diplomatic Protest	EU Support	Exercises Relocated
May 2021	Cyber Attack	Conti Ransomware	National Healthcare	Emergency Response	Technical Assistance	System Restored
Nov 2024	Cable Surveillance	Spy Ship Yantar	Irish Sea	Naval Escort	UK Coordination	Ship Departed
Apr 2025	Intelligence Gathering	Ship Viktor Leonov	Irish Waters	Communication Attempts	Limited Response	No Compliance
Sep 2025	Airspace Violation	Military Aircraft	Western Approaches	RAF Intercept	NATO Coordination	Aircraft Diverted

Source: Irish Naval Service Reports, National Cyber Security Centre, Department of Defence

The pattern reveals escalating Russian activities designed to probe Irish defences, map critical infrastructure, and demonstrate the vulnerability of neutral states. The contrast with NATO member responses is particularly stark. When Russian drones violated Polish airspace in September 2025, the alliance response included immediate military action under “Operation Eastern Sentry,” Article 4 consultations, and coordinated deterrent measures. Ireland lacks such collective response mechanisms, making it an attractive target for continued aggression.

**Table 2.** Cyber Security Incidents and Infrastructure Threats (2021-2025)

Year	Target Sector	Attack Type	Attribution	Impact Scale	Recovery Time	Economic Cost
2021	Healthcare (HSE)	Ransomware	Russian-linked	National	6 months	€100+ million
2022	Energy Grid	Reconnaissance	State-sponsored	Regional	Ongoing	Classified
2023	Financial Services	DDoS/Infiltration	Multiple actors	Sectoral	2 weeks	€50 million
2024	Government Systems	Advanced Persistent Threat	Russian GRU	National	3 months	€75 million
2025	Telecommunications	Infrastructure Mapping	Unknown	National	Ongoing	Under assessment

Source: National Cyber Security Centre, Garda Síochána Cyber Crime Unit, Industry Reports

The HSE ransomware attack of May 2021 represents the most significant cyber attack on Irish state infrastructure, demonstrating the real-world consequences of inadequate cyber defence capabilities. The attack, attributed to the Conti ransomware gang with documented links to Russian intelligence services, resulted in widespread healthcare disruption, cancelled appointments, compromised patient data, and estimated costs exceeding €100 million.

Recent threat statistics paint an increasingly concerning picture of Ireland’s cyber vulnerability. Microsoft (2023) reports that 70% of large Irish companies experienced cyber attacks, while Hiscox (2023) documents a 22% increase in attack frequency.

### 4.2 Cyber Security Vulnerabilities and Infrastructure Threats

Ireland’s cyber security vulnerabilities represent a critical dimension of its security challenges, with documented attacks revealing systematic targeting by state-sponsored actors. Table 2 provides a detailed analysis of cyber incidents and their impacts on Irish society and economy.

The National Cyber Security Centre (2024) warns that Ireland is viewed as a “playground for Russian intelligence” due to its neutral status and limited collective defence capabilities.

### 4.3 Public Opinion Dynamics and Polling Analysis

Analysis of polling data reveals complex and evolving public attitudes toward neutrality and NATO membership, with significant variations based on demographic factors, temporal context, and the framing of the question. Table 3 presents comprehensive analysis of major polls conducted since the Ukraine invasion.

**Table 3.** Irish Public Opinion on Neutrality and NATO (2022-2025)

Poll Date	Organisation	Sample Size	Support Neutrality	Support NATO	Undecided	Margin of Error
Mar 2022	Business Post/Red C	1,000	57%	48%	15%	±3.1%
Aug 2022	Behaviour Wise	1,200	48%	52%	12%	±2.8%
Dec 2022	Sunday Times/B&A	1,500	61%	39%	18%	±2.5%
Jun 2023	Irish Times/Ipsos	1,200	59%	41%	16%	±2.8%
Apr 2025	Irish Times/Ipsos	1,500	63%	37%	14%	±2.5%

*Source:* Various polling organisations, author’s analysis

The data reveal significant ambivalence in public opinion, with many respondents simultaneously expressing support for both neutrality retention and NATO membership. This apparent contradiction suggests deep uncertainty about security policy options and indicates potential for substantial opinion

change given compelling arguments and changed circumstances.

Demographic analysis reveals important variations in attitudes. Table 4 provides breakdown of opinion by key demographic categories based on the most recent comprehensive polling.

**Table 4.** Demographic Variations in Security Policy Attitudes (April 2025)

Demographic Category	Support Neutrality	Support NATO	Key Factors
Age 18-34	45%	55%	European identification, security concerns
Age 35-54	58%	42%	Economic priorities, pragmatic approach
Age 55+	78%	22%	Historical attachment, anti-war sentiment
Urban	52%	48%	Cosmopolitan outlook, EU integration
Rural	71%	29%	Traditional values, sovereignty concerns
Third-level education	49%	51%	International awareness, threat perception
Secondary or less	69%	31%	Cultural attachment, economic concerns
High income	47%	53%	Security investment, international business
Low income	72%	28%	Social spending priorities, anti-elite sentiment

*Source:* Irish Times/Ipsos Poll April 2025, author’s analysis

The demographic analysis reveals that younger, more educated, urban, and higher-income respondents are significantly more likely to support NATO membership, whereas older, rural, and lower-income respondents exhibit a stronger attachment to neutrality. These patterns suggest that generational change and continued European integration may gradually shift public opinion toward greater openness to alliance membership.

#### 4.4 Political Party Evolution and Elite Opinion

An analysis of political party statements and positions reveals a growing divergence on security policy, with the traditional consensus on neutrality increasingly challenged by external events and internal party dynamics. Table 5 provides comprehensive analysis of party positions and their evolution over time.

**Table 5.** Irish Political Party Positions on Neutrality and NATO (2022-2025)

Party	2022 Position	2025 Position	Key Changes	Internal Dynamics
Fianna Fáil	Military neutrality	Reform the triple lock	Pragmatic shift	Leadership consensus
Fine Gael	Military neutrality	Enhanced cooperation	Pro-NATO wing growth	Youth organisation support
Sinn Féin	Strong neutrality	Constitutional protection	Hardened position	Anti-imperialist emphasis
Green Party	Active neutrality	Soft power focus	Environmental security	Limited engagement
Labour	Military neutrality	Triple lock support	Cautious evolution	Social democratic values
People Before Profit	Anti-NATO	Complete withdrawal	Radical opposition	Anti-imperialist ideology
Social Democrats	EU cooperation	Diplomatic solutions	Moderate position	Limited policy development

*Source:* Party statements, parliamentary debates, policy documents

The governing parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) show increasing openness to security cooperation while maintaining official neutrality commitments. Fianna Fáil’s emphasis on reforming the “triple lock” mechanism reflects growing frustration with UN Security Council paralysis, while Fine Gael’s youth wing has explicitly called for NATO membership, suggesting generational change within the party.

Opposition parties remain more divided, with Sinn Féin strongly defending neutrality and calling for constitutional protection, while smaller left-wing parties advocate complete withdrawal from

EU defence structures. This polarisation reflects broader ideological divisions about Ireland’s role in international affairs and its relationship with Western security architecture.

#### 4.5 Comparative Analysis: Nordic NATO Accession

The experiences of Finland and Sweden provide valuable empirical insights for understanding how deeply embedded neutrality traditions can be overcome through focused political leadership and public debate. Table 6 provides a comparative analysis of their accession processes and lessons for Ireland.

**Table 6.** Finland and Sweden NATO Accession Process Comparison

Factor	Finland	Sweden	Implications for Ireland
Pre-invasion NATO support	25%	35%	Similar low baseline
Post-invasion peak support	75%	55%	Rapid opinion change possible
Political consensus	Strong cross-party	More divided	Leadership importance
Public debate duration	3 months	6 months	Intensive engagement needed
Constitutional requirements	Parliamentary vote	Parliamentary vote	Referendum likely required
Opposition arguments	Russian retaliation	Loss of neutrality	Similar cultural concerns
Success factors	Clear threat perception	Elite consensus	Applicable to Ireland

*Source: Nordic government documents, polling data, academic analyses*

Key factors enabling successful transitions included strong political leadership, clear communication about security threats, extensive public debate, and emphasis on collective defence benefits rather than military adventurism. Finland’s support for NATO membership jumped from 25% to over 75% within months of the Ukraine invasion, demonstrating that rapid opinion change is possible when faced with clear and present threats.

The Nordic experience suggests that Ireland could successfully navigate a similar transition given appropriate political leadership, strategic communication, and compelling security arguments. However, Ireland’s unique constitutional requirements for a referendum add complexity not faced by the Nordic countries.

**Table 7.** Economic Implications of NATO Membership for Ireland

Economic Factor	Current Status	NATO Requirement	Annual Cost	10-Year Total
Defence Spending (% GDP)	0.2%	2.0%	€7.2 billion	€72 billion
Personnel Costs	€800 million	€2.4 billion	€1.6 billion	€16 billion
Equipment Procurement	€200 million	€1.8 billion	€1.6 billion	€16 billion
Infrastructure Development	€100 million	€800 million	€700 million	€7 billion
NATO Contributions	€0	€150 million	€150 million	€1.5 billion
<b>Total Annual Increase</b>	-	-	<b>€6.0 billion</b>	<b>€60 billion</b>

*Source: Department of Defence, NATO financial reports, author’s calculations*

## 5. Economic and Strategic Implications

### 5.1 Defence Spending and Economic Considerations

Ireland’s current defence spending of approximately 0.2% of GDP represents one of the lowest levels in Europe and reflects decades of systematic underinvestment in national security capabilities. NATO membership would require significant increases in defence expenditure to meet the alliance’s 2% GDP target, representing a substantial economic commitment but one that must be evaluated against the costs of inadequate security.

Table 7 provides an analysis of the economic implications of NATO membership, including required spending increases, potential economic benefits, and comparative analysis with other small NATO members.

While these figures represent substantial increases, they must be evaluated in light of several mitigating factors. Much of this spending would remain within the Irish economy, supporting domestic industries and creating high-skilled employment opportunities. The economic benefits of enhanced security, including protection of Ireland's position as a hub for international business and technology companies, could offset significant portions of the costs.

The cyber attacks on Irish infrastructure, particularly the HSE ransomware incident, demonstrate the enormous economic costs of inadequate security. The HSE attack alone cost over €100 million in direct expenses and immeasurable indirect costs through healthcare disruption. Enhanced cyber defence capabilities through NATO membership could prevent far more costly future attacks.

## 5.2 Strategic Geographic Considerations

Ireland's geographic position on Europe's western flank provides significant strategic value to NATO while creating unique vulnerabilities that require collective defence solutions. The country's location astride major transatlantic shipping and communication routes makes it critical to Western security architecture, while its extensive maritime domain exceeds its individual defence capabilities.

The Irish Exclusive Economic Zone covers over 400,000 square kilometres, making it one of Europe's largest maritime domains. This vast area contains critical undersea infrastructure, including transatlantic telecommunications cables that carry approximately 97% of global internet traffic, and energy pipelines connecting Europe with North American resources. Protecting this infrastructure is beyond Ireland's current capabilities but represents a vital strategic interest for the entire Western alliance.

NATO membership would provide Ireland with access to alliance maritime patrol capabilities, integrated air defence systems, and collective intelligence resources necessary to monitor and protect this critical infrastructure. In return, Ireland would provide strategic access to the North Atlantic and contribute to the alliance's ability to project power and maintain sea lanes of communication.

## 6. Constitutional and Legal Framework Analysis

### 6.1 Constitutional Requirements and Referendum Considerations

While the Irish Constitution contains no explicit

prohibition on joining military alliances, the deep-seated tradition of neutrality and the significance of such a policy change would almost certainly require a constitutional referendum to provide democratic legitimacy. The referendum process would involve complex legal, political, and social considerations that must be carefully managed to ensure successful outcomes.

Article 29 of the Constitution grants the government authority to conduct foreign relations and enter international agreements, but the scale and significance of NATO membership would likely require explicit constitutional authorisation. The precedent of EU treaty referendums suggests that major changes to Ireland's international commitments require direct popular approval.

The referendum campaign would need to address fundamental questions about Irish sovereignty, democratic control over military commitments, and the relationship between EU membership and NATO alliance obligations. Legal experts would need to clarify how NATO's Article 5 collective defence commitments would interact with Ireland's constitutional requirements for parliamentary approval of military actions.

### 6.2 Triple Lock Reform and Legislative Changes

The "triple lock" mechanism requiring UN mandate, government approval, and parliamentary approval for overseas troop deployments represents a significant legal obstacle to NATO membership. Reform of this mechanism would be necessary to enable Ireland to participate fully in alliance operations and collective defence arrangements.

Current legislative frameworks assume that Irish military deployments will be limited to UN-mandated peacekeeping operations, but NATO membership would require the ability to participate in alliance missions that may not have explicit UN authorisation. This would necessitate comprehensive review of defence legislation and parliamentary procedures for authorising military commitments.

The reform process would need to strike a balance between legitimate concerns about democratic oversight of military commitments and the operational requirements of alliance membership. This could involve creating new categories of military deployment with different authorisation requirements, or establishing expedited procedures for responding to alliance requests for assistance.

## 7. Social and Cultural Implications

### 7.1 National Identity and Historical Memory

Ireland's attachment to neutrality extends far beyond strategic calculations to encompass fundamental questions of national identity and historical memory. For many Irish citizens, neutrality represents not merely a foreign policy choice but a core component of what it means to be Irish—a symbol of independence, sovereignty, and moral authority derived from the struggle against British colonial rule.

The Second World War neutrality policy, known in Ireland as "The Emergency," occupies a particularly powerful place in national memory as a moment when Ireland asserted its independence on the world stage and refused to be drawn into what was perceived as a "British war." This historical narrative has been reinforced through decades of political rhetoric, educational curricula, and cultural representations that present neutrality as a defining characteristic of Irish identity.

Any successful campaign for NATO membership would need to address these deep cultural attachments while providing compelling alternative narratives about Irish identity and international role. This might involve emphasising Ireland's contributions to international peacekeeping, its commitment to human rights and international law, and its potential to influence alliance policies in positive directions.

### 7.2 Anti-Imperialist Traditions and Contemporary Relevance

Ireland's anti-imperialist political tradition, rooted in the experience of British colonial rule and reinforced by solidarity with other post-colonial societies, creates significant cultural resistance to joining what is often perceived as a US-dominated military alliance. This tradition manifests in suspicion of great power politics, scepticism about military interventions, and preference for diplomatic solutions to international conflicts.

Contemporary manifestations of this tradition include opposition to US military use of Shannon Airport, criticism of Western military interventions in the Middle East, and support for Palestinian rights and other anti-colonial movements. These attitudes create cultural barriers to NATO membership that extend beyond rational security calculations to encompass fundamental worldview differences.

However, the anti-imperialist tradition could potentially be reconciled with NATO membership

through emphasis on the alliance's defensive nature, its role in protecting small democracies from authoritarian aggression, and Ireland's potential to influence alliance policies toward greater restraint and respect for international law.

### 7.3 Generational and Demographic Divisions

Analysis of public opinion data reveals significant generational and demographic divisions in attitudes toward neutrality and NATO membership, suggesting that social change may gradually shift the political landscape in favour of alliance membership. Younger Irish citizens, who have grown up in an era of European integration and global interconnectedness, show significantly less attachment to traditional neutrality concepts.

The demographic analysis presented earlier reveals that citizens under 35 are more likely to support NATO membership (55%) than neutrality (45%), while those over 55 show the reverse pattern (78% neutrality, 22% NATO). This generational divide suggests that time may favour proponents of alliance membership, but it also indicates potential for significant social division during any referendum campaign.

Educational attainment, urbanisation, and income levels also correlate with attitudes toward security policy, with more educated, urban, and affluent citizens showing greater support for NATO membership. These patterns reflect broader social divisions in Irish society, suggesting that security policy debates may become entangled with other social and economic issues.

## 8. Policy Recommendations and Implementation Pathways

### 8.1 Phased Approach to NATO Integration

Given the complexity of Ireland's domestic political situation and the depth of cultural attachment to neutrality, any successful path to NATO membership would require a carefully planned, phased approach that builds public support while addressing legitimate concerns about sovereignty and democratic control.

Phase One would involve enhanced cooperation with NATO through existing Partnership for Peace mechanisms, increased participation in alliance exercises, and gradual integration of Irish defence capabilities with NATO standards. This would demonstrate the practical benefits of alliance cooperation while maintaining official neutrality status.

Phase Two would involve comprehensive public debate through establishment of a citizens' assembly or similar deliberative forum, extensive parliamentary hearings, and broad social dialogue about Ireland's security challenges and policy options. This phase would need to last at least 12-18 months to ensure thorough consideration of all relevant factors.

Phase Three would involve a constitutional referendum following the successful completion of public debate and the achievement of a broad political consensus. The referendum campaign would need to emphasise security imperatives, collective defence benefits, and Ireland's continued ability to influence alliance policies in positive directions.

## 8.2 Strategic Communication and Public Engagement

Successful transition to NATO membership would require sophisticated strategic communication that addresses cultural concerns while building support for alliance membership. This would involve several key elements:

First, emphasise NATO's defensive nature and collective security benefits rather than its military power projection capabilities. The communication strategy would need to demonstrate how alliance membership enhances rather than diminishes Irish sovereignty by providing security capabilities that Ireland cannot achieve independently.

Second, highlighting Ireland's potential to influence alliance policies toward greater restraint, respect for international law, and emphasis on diplomatic solutions to international conflicts. This would address concerns about being drawn into unwanted military adventures while emphasising Ireland's positive contributions to alliance decision-making.

Third, demonstrating the economic and technological benefits of alliance membership, including access to advanced defence technologies, industrial cooperation opportunities, and enhanced security for Ireland's position as a hub for international business and technology companies.

## 8.3 Constitutional and Legal Framework Development

The legal framework for NATO membership would require comprehensive review and potential amendment of existing legislation governing defence policy, parliamentary oversight, and international commitments. This would involve several key areas

Constitutional amendment to explicitly authorise

NATO membership and collective defence commitments, while maintaining parliamentary oversight of military deployments and ensuring democratic control over defence policy decisions.

Defence legislation reform to enable participation in alliance operations while maintaining appropriate democratic safeguards and ensuring compatibility with Irish legal traditions and constitutional requirements.

Parliamentary procedure development to create efficient mechanisms for authorising alliance commitments while ensuring adequate debate and oversight of military and security policy decisions.

## 9. Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis demonstrates that Ireland's continued adherence to military neutrality represents not a principled policy choice adapted to contemporary realities, but rather a dangerous anachronism that leaves the country increasingly vulnerable to modern security threats while undermining broader European security architecture. The empirical evidence presented throughout this study reveals systematic targeting of Irish infrastructure by hostile actors, inadequate national defence capabilities, and growing isolation from collective security arrangements that provide meaningful protection to Ireland's European partners.

The September 2025 Russian drone incidents provide a stark illustration of the fundamental difference between NATO members' coordinated responses and neutral states' isolated diplomatic protests. When Russian drones violated Polish airspace, the alliance response was immediate, decisive, and effective, involving coordinated military action, Article 4 consultations, and clear deterrent messaging. In contrast, Ireland's response to similar Russian provocations—from spy ships mapping undersea cables to cyber attacks crippling healthcare systems—has been limited to diplomatic protests that carry no meaningful consequences for the perpetrators.

The research reveals that Ireland's geographic position on Europe's western flank, combined with its critical undersea infrastructure carrying the majority of global internet traffic, makes it an attractive target for hybrid warfare tactics that exploit the vulnerabilities of non-aligned states. The systematic nature of Russian activities in Irish waters, the sophistication of cyber attacks on Irish infrastructure, and the inadequacy of national response capabilities demonstrate that Ireland faces real and growing threats that its current security posture is wholly inadequate to address.

While acknowledging the significant domestic political and cultural challenges rooted in Ireland's colonial history and anti-imperialist traditions, the analysis demonstrates that these obstacles are not insurmountable. The experiences of Finland and Sweden provide compelling evidence that even deeply embedded neutrality traditions can be overcome when security imperatives become sufficiently compelling and political leadership provides clear direction. The rapid shift in Finnish public opinion from 25% to 75% support for NATO membership within months of the Ukraine invasion demonstrates that public attitudes can change dramatically when faced with clear threats.

The public opinion analysis reveals growing ambivalence toward neutrality among Irish citizens, with significant demographic variations suggesting that generational change and continued European integration may gradually shift the political landscape in favour of alliance membership. The apparent contradiction between simultaneous support for neutrality retention and NATO membership indicates deep uncertainty about security policy options and potential for substantial opinion change given compelling arguments and changed circumstances.

The economic analysis demonstrates that while NATO membership would require significant increases in defence spending, these costs must be evaluated against the enormous expenses of inadequate security, as demonstrated by cyberattacks like the HSE ransomware incident, which cost over €100 million. Enhanced security would protect Ireland's position as a hub for international business and technology, potentially offsetting much of the increased defence expenditure through economic growth and stability.

The path forward requires extensive public debate, constitutional referendum, and careful political management of cultural sensitivities. However, the alternative—continued vulnerability to hybrid aggression without collective defence mechanisms—poses unacceptable risks to Irish sovereignty, security, and prosperity. The choice facing Ireland is not between war and peace, but between security and vulnerability, between collective strength and dangerous isolation, between active participation in shaping European security architecture and passive acceptance of decisions made by others.

The research concludes that NATO membership represents the most viable solution to Ireland's security dilemma in the 21st century, providing collective defence capabilities, intelligence sharing,

and deterrent effects that Ireland cannot achieve independently. While the transition would be complex and contentious, requiring sophisticated political management and strategic communication, the security imperatives are compelling, and the domestic political obstacles, while significant, are not insurmountable.

The time for comfortable illusions about Ireland's ability to remain a peaceful island in an increasingly turbulent world has passed. The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that neutrality in the modern security environment is not a shield but a target, marking Ireland as a vulnerable point in European security architecture where adversaries can probe for weaknesses with minimal risk of meaningful retaliation. Ireland's continued neutrality not only endangers its own security but also undermines the collective security of its European partners and democratic allies.

The choice must be made with clear understanding of both the challenges and opportunities involved, but it must be made while there is still time to influence outcomes rather than merely react to them. Ireland's security, prosperity, and democratic values depend on making the right choices for the 21st century, rather than clinging to 20th-century policies that no longer serve national interests or contribute to international peace and stability.

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