Unclear by Design? Strategic Ambiguity and Ireland's Military Neutrality Policy

In the wake of the Swedish and Finnish governments' decision 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 continue to describe themselves as militarily neutral. The Irish government defines its policy of military neutrality as being 'characterised by non-membership in military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements' (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2026). 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% of respondents supported Ireland's current model of military neutrality (Leahy, 2025). Despite the policy's prominence, its formulation conceals an important puzzle. The terms 'military alliances' and 'common or mutual defence arrangements' do not unequivocally establish which forms of international defence cooperation Ireland is and is not permitted to engage in. 'Military alliances' is left under-defined, allowing room for participation in alliance-like defence relationships, while the exclusion of 'common or mutual defence arrangements' appears categorical but leaves space for unilateral forms of defence cooperation.

Why has such an important aspect of Irish foreign policy been formulated in terms that leave its meaning and boundaries open to interpretation, and what political functions might this formulation plausibly serve? This study proposes answers to these questions grounded in the concept of strategic ambiguity: governmental discourse about Ireland's military neutrality policy displays intentional, recurrent, structurally similar patterns of ambiguous language, supported by efforts to maintain selective opacity about some of

Ireland's most significant international defence relationships (Bentley, 2024, pp. 2070-2072, 2079-2081; Eisenberg, 1984, pp. 230-235). Rather than treating the presence of ambiguity as sufficient evidence of deliberate design, this study evaluates whether recurrent patterns in official discourse about the policy are consistent with a strategic ambiguity interpretation, assesses whether strategic ambiguity provides a more plausible explanation than the notion that the ambiguous formulation is primarily due to accidental imprecision, and considers the explanatory contributions of alternative, potentially complementary accounts provided by path-dependent domestic entrenchment and discursive contestation interpretations of Irish neutrality (Cottey, 2013, pp. 465-467; Devine, 2011, pp. 336–338). It also evaluates whether ambiguity about Ireland's military neutrality policy serves useful political functions, including helping the Irish government preserve its policy flexibility, avoid some of the costs associated with a more explicit security posture, and satisfice the competing preferences of multiple audiences.

This study finds substantial, though inferential, support for the claim that governmental discourse about Ireland's military neutrality policy displays intentional, recurrent, structurally similar patterns of ambiguous language and selective opacity (Eisenberg, 1984, pp. 230-231). The 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 alignment status. This ambiguity is reinforced by governmental reluctance to specify the nature and scope of a reported United Kingdom (UK)–Ireland air defence arrangement and the implications of Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) for Irish national

defence (Baciu, 2018; Gallagher, 2023a). It also finds substantial, though inferential, support for ambiguity's expected flexibility-preserving and domestic audience management functions but only partial support for its expected relationship with material cost avoidance. Among the alternative explanations, accidental imprecision receives little support, while path-dependent domestic entrenchment and discursive contestation receive partial support and are found to complement the strategic ambiguity interpretation of Irish military neutrality (Cottey, 2013, pp. 465-467; Devine, 2011, pp. 337–338, 359–360; Jesse, 2006, pp. 21-24).

The literature attempting to explain the nature of contemporary Irish neutrality falls into two main strands. The first, which may be labelled the 'domestic entrenchment' interpretation, explains the persistence of military neutrality through path dependency and domestic political constraints. Neal Jesse emphasises the reinforcing pressures imposed by pro-neutrality domestic political and bureaucratic actors and public opinion (Jesse, 2006, pp. 7-10, 19-23). Andrew Cottey argues that neutrality's deep political entrenchment in Ireland has constrained fundamental policy change even as Irish governments have adapted to greater security cooperation through NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the EU (Cottey, 2013, pp. 465-467). Although these accounts primarily explain policy continuity and adaptation, rather than governmental discourse, they also suggest that governments may reproduce inherited understandings of military neutrality while adapting to evolving international security practices.

A second strand, which may be labelled the 'discursive contestation' interpretation, focuses on political struggles over the meaning of Irish neutrality. Karen Devine

conceptualises Irish neutrality as a ‘floating signifier’ whose content is contested between elite ‘military’ and public ‘active’ conceptions of neutrality that embody competing foreign policy agendas (Devine, 2011, pp. 337-338). Her analysis also examines elite redefinitions of neutrality and discursive strategies, including vague formulations, ‘doublespeak’, and ‘meaningful silences’, through which governments have sought to reconcile European security and defence integration with continuing public attachment to neutrality (Devine, 2011, pp. 338, 349).

These studies demonstrate that neutrality is both institutionally entrenched and discursively contested, and Devine’s analysis recognises communicative practices resembling those examined here. A central contribution of the present study is to identify recurrent patterns in the use of ambiguous language and selective opacity across governments, officials, and documents to help explain the particular structure and potential political functions of Ireland’s military neutrality policy.

Strategic ambiguity has been examined across multiple security contexts. Antoine Rayroux shows how certain EU governments use ambiguous language to present the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as consistent with distinct national foreign policy traditions, such as exceptionalism in France and neutrality in Ireland, thereby building domestic support for it (Rayroux, 2014). Yoel Cohen examines the maintenance of nuclear ambiguity in Israel (Cohen, 2006). Susanne Therese Hansen explores how ambiguity can obscure obligations and distribute costs in the context of a multilateral arms export control regime (Hansen, 2016). Wen-Chin Wu and colleagues examine how ambiguous American military signalling shapes Taiwanese and Chinese perceptions of potential United States

(US) military assistance and support for Taiwan's independence (Wu et al., 2023). Finally, Michelle Bentley demonstrates how governments have employed ambiguity in relation to their chemical weapons policies during the Russo-Ukrainian War (Bentley, 2024).

These studies demonstrate that strategic ambiguity is not peculiar to Irish military neutrality and also reveal that the subject of ambiguity can vary considerably across cases – from uncertainty about capabilities, to uncertainty about future responses, to uncertainty about the meaning of existing commitments. The present study builds on this literature by examining whether observed patterns in Irish governmental discourse are consistent with the strategic use of ambiguous language and selective opacity to support a core aspect of any state's foreign policy – its alignment status.

The present study also intersects with scholarly debates on alliance politics. James Morrow argues that international defence relationships do not always conform to a binary distinction between alliance membership and non-alignment (Morrow, 2000, pp. 64-65). Anna Wieslander, similarly, identifies a 'gray zone' occupied by 'informal allies', meaning states that are not bound by clear treaty-based commitments but are still expected to coordinate the use of their armed forces during a major crisis or war or to confront threats collectively (Wieslander, 2019, pp. 195-196, 219). Sweden exemplified this distinction before joining NATO, combining formal non-alignment with extensive military cooperation and contingency planning (Dalsjö, 2014, pp. 175–176, 180). These studies caution against treating neutrality, alliance membership, and non-alignment as mutually exclusive or entirely fixed categories. They also suggest that the Irish case forms part of a wider phenomenon in which the rhetorical status of a defence relationship may diverge from its

practical content. Another contribution of the present study is to demonstrate how strategic ambiguity can serve as a politically useful communicative mechanism through which such divergence may be sustained.

The present study also speaks to the literature on small-state security shelter theory, which suggests that small states seek support from larger states and institutions to offset security vulnerabilities but may, thereby, incur significant costs (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2024, pp. 29-31, 42-43). As discussed later in the present study, this tension can create incentives for ambiguity about alignment because the governments of small neutral states, like Ireland, Austria, and Switzerland or, formerly, Finland and Sweden, may seek to benefit from external military cooperation while limiting some of the political or material costs that could be incurred by explicitly acknowledging an unequivocal alliance posture.

The present study's focus on the political construction of a policy's meaning and boundaries also connects the Irish case to the wider literature on strategic narratives in international relations. Roselle et al. argue that strategic narratives provide a means of understanding how political actors seek to shape meaning and influence in international politics (Roselle et al., 2014, pp. 74, 77). From this perspective, the Irish government's discourse about 'military neutrality' can be understood as part of a broader effort to sustain a recognisable account of the state's international identity while accommodating practices that complicate that narrative. The present study builds on these insights. It conceptualises ambiguous language and selective opacity specifically as mechanisms of strategic ambiguity and examines the political advantages that governments may derive from preserving multiple plausible interpretations of a core component of their foreign policy.

The next section of this study conceptualises strategic ambiguity and its operating mechanisms before setting out the theoretical expectations, alternative explanations, and methodological approach used to evaluate them. It then examines patterns of selective opacity surrounding some of Ireland's most significant defence relationships and ambiguity in the official formulation of Ireland's military neutrality policy, assessing their consistency with the strategic ambiguity interpretation as well as the alternative explanations. The analysis next considers the potential political utility of ambiguity. A subsequent comparative discussion distinguishes different forms of strategic ambiguity and identifies general scope conditions under which this approach may operate beyond Ireland. The conclusion evaluates the findings, considers the democratic and strategic costs of ambiguity, and assesses greater disclosure as a possible alternative approach.

Theoretical Expectations and Alternative Explanations

Ambiguity denotes the existence of more than one plausible meaning for the same word, phrase, policy, or legal formulation (Hansen, 2016, pp. 194-195; Rayroux, 2014, pp. 387-388). Strategic ambiguity is a more specific phenomenon. It refers to the intentional use of language by political actors to preserve multiple reasonable interpretations of a subject for the purposes of securing practical advantages (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 96-98). In his work on organisational communication and management, Eric Eisenberg defines the concept as 'instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals' (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 230). Strategic ambiguity should, therefore, be distinguished from mere imprecision or careless drafting. The crucial point is not simply that an ambiguous

statement is unclear, but that its lack of clarity is deliberate and useful to the speaker (Bentley, 2024, p. 2070).

Strategic ambiguity operates through two mutually reinforcing mechanisms: selective opacity and ambiguous language. Selective opacity restricts access to information that could resolve uncertainty about a subject (Aronson, 1992, pp. 9, 15; Cohen, 1998, pp. 1-2; Dowty, 2005, p. 12). Ambiguous language, by contrast, is discourse that preserves more than one plausible interpretation of a subject (Bentley, 2024, p. 2070; Hansen, 2016, pp. 194-196). These mechanisms work together. Selective opacity can deny audiences the information needed to arrive at a settled understanding of a subject, while ambiguous language enables multiple audiences to maintain different, though still plausible, interpretations of a subject's meaning and boundaries. Strategic ambiguity does not require outright deception or complete secrecy. Instead, it rests on the preservation of interpretive latitude.

This study distinguishes four observable features through which strategic ambiguity's operating mechanisms may be assessed. The first three concern aspects of ambiguous language (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 98-100; Hansen, 2016, pp. 193-196). First, under-definition is the recurrent use of consequential terms about a subject without an authoritative definition capable of clearly delimiting their scope. Second, rhetorical narrowing occurs when a specific, limited example of a subject is used to characterise and represent the subject as a whole. Third, selective qualification occurs when wording excludes certain aspects of a subject more clearly than others. Finally, the fourth feature, selective opacity, involves non- or qualified acknowledgements of information about a

subject, withholding of substantive information about a subject, or refusals to clarify information about a subject (Aronson, 1992, pp. 9, 15; Cohen, 1998, p. 2; Dowty, 2005, p. 12).

No single feature is treated as evidence of intentional strategic ambiguity. The strategic ambiguity interpretation becomes more plausible when several of these features recur across officials, governments, documents, and political and security contexts; exhibit a similar structure; persist despite opportunities for authoritative clarification; and concern politically consequential subjects in which maintaining interpretive flexibility may offer practical advantages. This methodological approach cannot directly observe policymakers' private intentions. Accordingly, claims about intentionality are inferred rather than demonstrated. In this study, intentionality is inferred from the presence of recurrent, structurally similar patterns of ambiguity and selective opacity across multiple governments, officials, documents, and political and security contexts, rather than from any single statement taken in isolation.

Strategic ambiguity can function as a political resource by supporting the coexistence of multiple interpretations of a subject that would be more difficult to sustain if the subject were discussed using transparent language (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 96-100; Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). It may, for instance, help preserve a government's freedom of action and potentially limit a government's material costs (Bach et al., 2025, p. 99; Bentley, 2024, pp. 2079-2080; Eisenberg, 1984, pp. 232-235; Hansen, 2016, pp. 195-196; Rayroux, 2014, pp. 387, 400–401). It may also help a government reconcile the competing policy preferences held by different audiences by allowing each audience to sustain a different,

plausible, and at least somewhat positive interpretation of the same subject (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Evidence of utility is not treated as definitive evidence of strategic intention. Unclear language, even if useful, could be the product of unintentionally vague wording (Bentley, 2024, p. 2070). Evidence demonstrating both recurrent, structurally similar ambiguity and its potential political utility to the communicators would, however, strengthen the plausibility of a strategic ambiguity interpretation.

The following theoretical expectations identify the observable features and potential political functions of strategic ambiguity and a range of potential alternative interpretations. The first concerns the recurrence and structure of strategic ambiguity. If ambiguous formulations arise mainly from rhetorical error or individual officeholders' idiosyncratic choices, their content should vary across governments, officials, documents, and contexts. In contrast, if ambiguity is intentional and serves practical political purposes, similar patterns should recur despite changes in governments, officeholders, foreign policy documents, and circumstances (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 98-100, 103; Bentley, 2024, pp. 2069-2071, 2073). For the same reasons, structurally similar forms of selective opacity about the subject of ambiguity should, likewise, recur across governments, officials, and documents over time. This leads to the first expectation:

E1: If ambiguity is intentional and performs a political function, official descriptions of military neutrality should display recurrent, structurally similar forms of ambiguous language and selective opacity across governments, officials, documents, and political and security contexts.

Recurrence alone cannot establish that ambiguity is strategically useful. It is also necessary to consider how ambiguity may assist a government and what could be lost if a government adopted a more transparent policy formulation (Hansen, 2016, pp. 195-196). An unequivocal acceptance or rejection of international defence arrangements could constrain governmental discretion by placing clear limits on the forms of international defence cooperation it can choose to engage in. Greater clarification could also generate pressure to accept additional material costs, either through greater investment in autonomous defence capabilities or through adherence to the spending expectations associated with formal membership in a military alliance or mutual defence pact. This gives rise to the second and third expectations:

E2: If ambiguity performs a political function, it should persist around policy boundaries where greater clarification could constrain a government's flexibility.

E3: If ambiguity performs a political function, it should persist around policy boundaries where greater clarification could impose material costs.

A further expectation concerns neutrality's domestic political significance. Polling indicates that, while neutrality is favoured by a majority of Ireland's population, a substantial portion of its residents support the prospect of joining NATO or increasing cooperation in defence matters at the EU level (European Commission, 2024, p. 36; Leahy, 2025;

Pogatchnik, 2022). In a political and security context like contemporary Ireland, ambiguity may allow governments to satisfice the competing preferences of multiple audiences by using language that can be plausibly interpreted as favourable towards neutrality while also preserving interpretive latitude around international defence cooperation. This leads to the fourth expectation:

E4: If ambiguity performs a political function, it should persist around policy boundaries where greater clarification could make it more difficult for a government to satisfice the competing preferences of multiple audiences.

These expectations must be evaluated against alternative explanations. First, accidental imprecision attributes ambiguous official language to loose terminology or inconsistent drafting rather than policymakers' deliberate choices (Bentley, 2024, p. 2070; Eisenberg, 1984, p. 230). This leads to the first alternative expectation:

E5: If ambiguity primarily arises from accidental imprecision, official descriptions of military neutrality should be irregular and idiosyncratic, varying substantially across governments, officials, documents, and political and security contexts.

Path-dependent domestic entrenchment offers another potential alternative. Jesse emphasises the role of domestic political actors, public opinion, and governmental institutions in sustaining Ireland's military neutrality policy, while Cottey demonstrates how

its political entrenchment has constrained fundamental policy change without preventing incremental adaptation to international security cooperation (Cottey, 2013, pp. 465-468; Jesse, 2006, pp. 20-23). Although these accounts primarily explain the persistence and evolution of the policy, rather than the structure of governmental discourse, they also suggest that governments may continue to reproduce inherited language concerning military neutrality while accommodating changes in international security practices. This leads to a second alternative expectation:

E6: If official policy discourse primarily reflects path-dependent domestic entrenchment, it should reproduce inherited formulations of military neutrality, with changes in how the policy is characterised occurring mainly through incremental accommodation to evolving security circumstances.

Discursive contestation offers still another alternative. Devine demonstrates that competing elite and public understandings of neutrality have persisted within Irish politics and that governments have actively participated in this contest over meaning through redefinition, vague formulations, 'doublespeak', and 'meaningful silences' surrounding European security and defence integration (Devine, 2011, pp. 337-338, 349, 359-360). Her analysis suggests that governmental discourse may reflect efforts to promote particular understandings of neutrality, reconcile competing political preferences, and accommodate developments in international security and defence cooperation through changes in how the policy is characterised. This leads to a third alternative expectation:

E7: If official policy discourse primarily reflects discursive contestation over the meaning of neutrality, governmental descriptions of the policy should exhibit redefinitions, vague formulations, doublespeak, and/or meaningful silences associated with efforts to reconcile competing understandings of neutrality and developments in international security and defence cooperation.

To evaluate these expectations, this study undertakes a qualitative, theory-oriented, single-case discursive analysis of Irish foreign-policy documents and the statements of senior Irish foreign policymakers, particularly taoisigh (prime ministers), tánaistí (deputy prime ministers), and ministers for foreign affairs and defence. Unlike Austria and Switzerland, Ireland has not enshrined its neutrality in a constitution or treaty, allowing Irish governments a comparatively high degree of discretion to articulate and interpret it through official discourse. The Irish case is, therefore, selected primarily for analytical leverage, not representativeness. Nevertheless, it holds considerable potential to illuminate strategic ambiguity's general operating mechanisms as well as scope conditions under which using strategic ambiguity should be particularly attractive to other governments.

This study's empirical focus is the language that the Irish government uses to describe the state's military neutrality policy and international defence relationships. By treating official language not as a secondary reflection of policy, but as a site in which a policy's meaning is constructed and disseminated, this study can examine how ambiguity operates in foreign policy discourse (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 98-99, 103). The principal

empirical corpus comprises official policy documents, parliamentary debates and written answers, committee proceedings, official statements, and attributable public comments. The analysis focuses on statements that discuss military neutrality, military alliances, and other international defence arrangements, assess the compatibility of security cooperation with neutrality, or respond to requests for clarification about the reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement and Article 42.7 of the TEU. Published reporting and UK parliamentary statements provide contextual evidence about the UK–Ireland air defence arrangement but are not treated as observations of Irish governmental discourse. The unit of analysis is the pattern of governmental discourse about these subjects. Individual verbal and written statements provide observations through which the recurrence and structure of this pattern can be examined.

The analysis focuses principally on the 2015-2026 period for both substantive and methodological reasons. This period encompasses significant changes in the European security environment, notably Brexit, the expansion of EU security and defence cooperation, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These developments provide a helpful context in which to assess whether governmental discourse about military neutrality has remained consistent despite changing external circumstances. The period also encompasses successive governments and changes in senior officeholders, allowing the analysis to assess whether ambiguous language and rhetorical attempts to maintain selective opacity recur across different political leaderships rather than reflecting the idiosyncratic rhetorical preferences of particular individuals. Earlier material is included where necessary to trace the origins or continuity of relevant formulations and defence

arrangements. 2015 is a boundary for this analysis, not a claim about when ambiguity about Irish military neutrality began. Against this theoretical and methodological background, this study now analyses how selective opacity and ambiguous language may contribute to the preservation of uncertainty about the meaning and boundaries of Ireland's military neutrality policy.

Facilitating Ambiguity through Selective Opacity

Strategic ambiguity's first mechanism, selective opacity, may facilitate ambiguity surrounding Ireland's military neutrality policy by denying audiences the information they may need to arrive at a settled understanding of the policy's meaning and boundaries. Withholding information about matters of national security is not necessarily evidence of deliberate strategy. Operational, diplomatic, and intelligence considerations can also justify non-disclosure. The analytical question most relevant to the assessment of E1 is whether officials' recurrent attempts to maintain selective opacity, alongside their recurrent use of structurally similar ambiguous language, foster uncertainty about which forms of international defence cooperation Ireland is and is not permitted to engage in.

Irish governmental discourse about a reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement, allegedly established in 1952, displays recurrent patterns of selective opacity (Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c). Two UK Secretaries of State for Defence, James Heappey and Al Carns, confirmed to the House of Commons that an arrangement exists in which, upon receiving a request from the Irish government, the UK's Royal Air Force (RAF) can deploy aircraft to defend Irish airspace from suspected airborne threats (Carns, 2026; Heappey, 2022).

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior Irish government official, likewise, 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' (Gallagher, 2023b, p. 179). In contrast, the Irish government has neither formally acknowledged the arrangement's existence nor publicly disclosed its terms.

The issue for the present analysis is not whether this arrangement means Ireland is or is not militarily neutral, but the degree to which Irish government officials have left its nature and scope unclear in their public statements through non- or qualified acknowledgements, the withholding of substantive information, or refusals to clarify information about it. Senior Irish policymakers have repeatedly declined to discuss the arrangement publicly or have provided only limited information when questioned about it (Gallagher, 2023a; Murphy, 2023). When asked about the arrangement in Dáil Éireann (lower house of the Irish parliament) on 16 November 2005, then-Taoiseach Bertie Ahern said it involved 'co-operation and a pre-agreed understanding', but did not explain its content (Ahern, 2005). Likewise, when asked about the arrangement on 9 May 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' (Gallagher & Leahy, 2023; Varadkar, 2023b). When Sinn Féin TD Matt Carthy asked Varadkar to discuss the arrangement, the latter told the Dáil 'I am not proposing to have a debate on the matter' (Varadkar, 2023b). This illustrates selective opacity through qualified acknowledgement, withheld details, and non-clarification because senior policymakers only vaguely acknowledged the possibility that an

arrangement exists and declined to explain its nature and scope – even when prompted to do so.

Micheál Martin's statements, similarly, left the reported arrangement opaque through non- or qualified acknowledgements, withholding of details, and refusals to clarify information about it. While serving as taoiseach, he told the Dáil on 16 February 2022 that he was 'not aware of any agreement' (Martin, 2022). When journalists put to him that UK Secretary of State for Defence Heappey told the House of Commons on 7 November 2022 that 'RAF jets have deployed into Irish airspace on occasion', Martin said on 9 May 2023 that 'there may have been occasions in the past' when RAF aircraft entered Irish airspace 'for different reasons' without elaborating further (Gallagher & Leahy, 2023; Heappey, 2022; Murphy, 2023). Across successive senior officeholders, including taoisigh, tánaistí, and ministers of foreign affairs and defence, Dáil responses have, likewise, repeatedly omitted discussion of the reported arrangement, disclaimed personal knowledge of the arrangement, or claimed that ministers 'cannot comment on reports concerning arrangements for national security' (Coveney, 2021; Harris, 2025a; Martin, 2022). These displays of selective opacity provide substantial, though inferential, support for E1. The selective opacity surrounding this reported arrangement does not, by itself, prove the existence of a hidden security guarantee, establish the arrangement's terms, or illuminate policymakers' possible reasons for obscuring them, but it helps preserve the interpretive conditions in which multiple understandings of Ireland's military neutrality policy remain plausible.

Selective opacity also plays an important role in the Irish government's public discussions of the state's defence relationship with the EU. 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 (European Union, 2009).

Unlike the reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement, Article 42.7 is public and openly acknowledged by the Irish government. However, the government's public discussions of the EU and Article 42.7 obscure the implications of this article for Irish military neutrality through recurrent non- or qualified acknowledgements. Martin, as taoiseach, stated on 8 June 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 (O'Leary, 2022). When asked during a debate in the Dáil on 23 March 2023 whether the TEU constituted a mutual defence pact, Martin claimed 'there is no such pact' (Martin, 2023b). Taoiseach Varadkar conveyed the same message when he claimed on 20 June 2023 that Ireland would not 'sign up to any mutual defence pact or clause', despite already being party to the TEU (Varadkar, 2023a). These statements demonstrate that, even where full secrecy is impossible, maintaining selective opacity about the implications of an important international defence arrangement may preserve a

context in which multiple interpretations of Irish military neutrality remain plausible. This pattern of selective opacity provides further substantial, though inferential, support for E1.

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

Strategic ambiguity's second mechanism, ambiguous language, may facilitate ambiguity surrounding Ireland's military neutrality policy by enabling multiple audiences to maintain different, though still plausible, interpretations of the policy's meaning and boundaries (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 98-99; Eisenberg, 1984, pp. 230-231). This section examines three forms of ambiguous language within the policy, including under-definition, rhetorical narrowing, and selective qualification. These provide another basis for assessing E1 as well as the alternative explanations (E5-E7).

The first source of ambiguity is the term 'military alliances'. Official documents and ministerial statements repeatedly present non-membership in military alliances as a defining feature of Irish military neutrality. The 2015 White Paper on Defence asserts that 'Ireland will continue to maintain a policy of military neutrality which is characterised by non-membership of military alliances' (Department of Defence, 2015, p. 24). While serving as taoiseach, Varadkar stated on 25 October 2017 that 'We have a long-standing policy of military neutrality and of not joining military alliances' (Varadkar, 2017). Then-Tánaiste Martin, similarly, claimed on 2 February 2023 that 'our military neutrality has always been defined based on non-membership of a military alliance' (Martin, 2023a). While serving as tánaiste and minister for foreign affairs and defence, Simon Harris declared on 20 March 2025 that 'Our neutrality means we do not participate in military alliances' (Harris, 2025b).

While serving as minister for foreign affairs and defence, Simon Coveney stated on 1 March 2022 that ‘Ireland is militarily neutral; that is, we are not a member of a military alliance’ (Coveney, 2022b). Finally, while serving in the same role, Helen McEntee affirmed on 27 November 2025 that ‘Ireland’s policy of military neutrality, as practised by successive Governments, means that Ireland does not participate in military alliances’ (McEntee, 2025). These statements illustrate recurrent under-definition; successive senior officials invoke the term ‘military alliances’ without specifying the characteristics that would help audiences determine whether a particular international defence relationship falls inside or outside of that concept.

This omission is important 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 (Fedder, 1968, p. 81; Russert, 1971, pp. 262-263; Wilkins, 2012, pp. 54, 58-60). Once this is recognised, the phrase ‘non-membership in military alliances’ no longer functions as a clear boundary marker.

Official rhetoric further deepens the ambiguity through a recurrent association between ‘military alliance’ and NATO membership. For example, Taoiseach Varadkar stated on 20 September 2023 that ‘Ireland… is militarily neutral. We’re not members of NATO’ (O'Sullivan, 2023). Tánaiste Martin, for his part, stated on 2 February 2023 that ‘We are not members of NATO. That is the definition of Ireland’s military neutrality’ (Martin, 2023a). These statements, which mirror those made by other senior Irish government officials, illustrate rhetorical narrowing, whereby the broader concept of military alliances is

represented through the specific case of NATO. NATO is merely one example of a formal, overt, and treaty-based military alliance, not a synonym for the concept itself. When official discourse repeatedly substitutes 'NATO' for 'military alliance', it has the effect of narrowing the apparent meaning of the latter term without saying so directly. This may 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 significant because the Irish government does not apply the term 'military alliance' to either of the subjects of selective opacity discussed earlier. Ahern, instead, called the reported UK-Ireland air defence arrangement 'a pre-agreed understanding'; Varadkar and Coveney labelled it an 'arrangement'; Martin, for his part, characterised it as an 'agreement' (Ahern, 2005; Coveney, 2021; Martin, 2022; Varadkar, 2023b). Likewise, when Labour TD Duncan Smith suggested to Harris on 8 May 2025 that Ireland is 'moving towards military alliances, be it NATO or through the European Union', the latter responded 'there is no proposal to join NATO or anything like it' (Harris, 2025c). This comment strongly implies that Harris and his government do not consider the EU to be a military alliance. Minister of State for Defence Thomas Byrne was even more direct when he told the Dáil on 26 March 2025 that 'The EU is not a military alliance' (Byrne, 2025). These distinctions reinforce rhetorical narrowing while leaving the broader concept of military alliances under-defined. As a result, potentially important international defence

arrangements have been excluded from the concept without an authoritative explanation of the criteria governing that exclusion.

It is plausible that some audiences will consider these arrangements military alliances that fall outside the Irish government's under-defined, rhetorically narrow, NATO-based characterisation of the concept. Of perhaps greatest importance, both arrangements include contingencies where other states may provide military assistance to Ireland. The UK–Ireland air defence arrangement reportedly permits RAF intervention in response to unidentified, hostile, or hijacked aircraft in Irish airspace, though only at Ireland's request (Gallagher, 2023a, 2023c; Murphy, 2023). UK Secretary of State for Defence Heappey noted in a statement in the House of Commons on 7 November 2022 that 'UK Military aircraft do not enter the sovereign airspace of Ireland for operational purposes, without the express prior agreement of the Irish government' (Heappey, 2022). In a written answer to a parliamentary question on 19 January 2026, UK Secretary of State for Defence Carns, likewise, stated that the RAF's 'Access to Irish airspace is managed through extant diplomatic channels as per international norms with clearance being requested and granted for state aircraft under set conditions' (Carns, 2026). Article 42.7, for its part, establishes a treaty-based obligation for EU states to provide 'aid and assistance by all the means in their power' when another member state suffers 'armed aggression on its territory' (European Union, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether either relationship constitutes a military alliance. The salient point is that the Irish government's under-defined and rhetorically narrowed policy formulation provides sufficient latitude for certain

audiences to conclude that they could be military alliances and also that Ireland's participation in them is not an unequivocal violation of the policy.

The claim that Ireland is militarily neutral because it does not participate in 'common or mutual defence arrangements' deepens the policy's ambiguity. Some audiences could interpret this component of the policy as a blanket rejection of defence pacts. However, the use of the words 'common' and 'mutual' as selective 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 of the North Atlantic Treaty, but not a definitive rejection of Irish participation in all forms of international defence arrangements (Fedder, 1968, pp. 77, 81; Russert, 1971, pp. 263-266; Wilkins, 2012, pp. 56, 59-60). This distinction is not merely semantic; an international defence relationship does not need to be a mutual pact in which each state is formally bound to defend other states. It can also take the form of a unilateral, asymmetric arrangement in which a smaller state accepts military assistance from a stronger partner without pledging an equivalent security guarantee in return (Russert, 1971, pp. 263-265; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2024, pp. 29-32; Wilkins, 2012, p. 60). Once that distinction is introduced, the ambiguity in the official formulation becomes easier to identify. By limiting the exclusion to 'common or mutual defence arrangements', its wording leaves the status of unilateral arrangements unclear.

Official rhetoric reinforces this selective qualification. Martin, while serving as tánaiste, stated on 31 May 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' (O'Keeffe, 2023). Likewise, while serving as taoiseach, Varadkar declared on 20 June 2023

that ‘Ireland will remain militarily neutral. We are not going to… sign up to any mutual defence pact or clause’ (Varadkar, 2023a). Coveney, while serving as minister for foreign affairs and defence, told the Dáil on 24 March 2022 that Ireland ‘does not participate in… mutual defence arrangements’ (Coveney, 2022c). While serving in the same role, McEntee stated on 26 March 2026 that ‘our policy of military neutrality… means that Ireland does not participate in… common or mutual defence arrangements’ (McEntee, 2026). These statements may be technically correct; however, precisely because they focus on reciprocity, they make it harder for audiences to reach unequivocal conclusions about whether Ireland could accept military assistance from other states as long as it does not offer a symmetrical pledge to assist them in return.

The reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement illustrates this dynamic. It purportedly allows the RAF to conduct armed interceptions of suspected airborne threats in Irish airspace (Carns, 2026; Gallagher, 2023c; Heappey, 2022; Murphy, 2023). Some audiences could reasonably understand this to be a pledge by one state to provide military assistance to another state when the latter requests it. However, the arrangement is not mutual. Neither reportage on the arrangement nor UK politicians’ statements about it suggest that Ireland has pledged to provide aircraft to defend British airspace. The arrangement, therefore, sits awkwardly with any reading of Irish military neutrality as a comprehensive rejection of all defence pacts. It is, nonetheless, easier to reconcile with the official formulation because the policy excludes only ‘common or mutual defence arrangements’. This illustrates selective qualification in practice.

Article 42.7 of the TEU presents a related but distinct interpretive problem. It contains a pledge by EU member states to provide 'aid and assistance by all the means in their power' to a member state that is the victim of armed aggression on its territory (European Union, 2009). 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' (European Union, 2009). Whatever else an audience makes of that sentence, it does not amount to a comprehensive disavowal of external military help to Ireland (Fazio, 2025, pp. 15-16). Rather, an audience could plausibly interpret the clause as protecting Ireland from being compelled to provide security guarantees to other EU member states, without precluding those states from providing military assistance to Ireland (Fazio, 2025, pp. 4-6, 15-16). Ireland's then-minister for foreign affairs, Brian Cowen, implicitly conveyed this point in a 4 December 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 (Cowen, 2003). It did not, however, reject the possibility that other EU states could help defend them from external threats. Reflecting on this, Cornelia 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' (Baciu, 2018, p. 116). Some audiences could, therefore, reasonably conclude that Article 42.7 may embed Ireland in a unilateral, asymmetric defence arrangement even while Irish officials continue to insist that Ireland is militarily neutral because it is not part of a 'common or mutual' defence pact. This is further evidence of selective qualification.

Official discourse about both components of Ireland's military neutrality policy displays recurrent ambiguity. Although individual statements vary slightly in their wording, their structure remains notably consistent during the period under study. 'Military alliances' is under-defined and rhetorically narrowed to an association with NATO, while selective qualification of 'common or mutual defence arrangements' leaves Ireland's defence relationship with other European states unclear. The recurrence of this structurally similar pattern across different governments, documents, officials, and political and security contexts, especially when combined with the observed pattern of selective opacity concerning some of Ireland's most important international defence relationships, provides substantial support for E1. The available evidence does not permit policymakers' intentions to be established conclusively; instead, these intentions are inferred from the repeated use of structurally similar ambiguous language in multiple policy documents and in statements by different officeholders over an extended period. E5, conversely, receives little support because the observed pattern of discourse does not reflect E5's expectation of irregular, idiosyncratic imprecision.

E6 receives partial support from this evidence insofar as the observed continuity in the terminology employed by governments, officials, and policy documents to characterise military neutrality is consistent with the reproduction of inherited policy formulations anticipated by the path-dependent domestic entrenchment interpretation (Cottey, 2013, pp. 448, 465-466; Jesse, 2006, pp. 11-12, 19, 22). The persistence of these formulations despite significant developments in the European security environment since 2015, including Brexit, the deepening of EU security and defence cooperation, and Russia's full-

scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, does not contradict this explanation. Politically and institutionally entrenched policy commitments may continue to be expressed through established terminology even as security practices adapt to changing circumstances. However, the evidence does not independently establish that these formulations have persisted primarily because of institutional or political entrenchment, nor does it identify a clear pattern of incremental adjustments in official language attributable to changing security circumstances.

E7 also receives partial support insofar as the observed patterns of governmental discourse are consistent with the definition and selective representation of neutrality expected by the discursive contestation interpretation (Devine, 2011, pp. 337–338, 349). In particular, the recurrent under-definition of military alliances and association of the concept with NATO membership, together with the selective qualification of common or mutual defence arrangements, resemble E7's expected vague formulations through which governmental understandings of neutrality have been reconciled with international defence cooperation. However, the analysis identifies relatively little variation in the underlying structure of these formulations across governments, officials, and documents during a period in which the Irish and European security context changed significantly. This finding does not contradict E7, since discursive contestation need not produce irregular governmental language or continuous redefinition in response to changing circumstances. Rather, it suggests that the Irish government's conception of neutrality has been relatively stable in the period since 2015, even while political and security circumstances evolved and competing understandings of the policy persisted in Irish politics and society. Nevertheless,

the evidence does not independently establish that the observed formulation was maintained primarily in response to continuing discursive contestation.

The Potential Political Utility of Ambiguity in Ireland's Military Neutrality Policy

The preceding analysis provides substantial support for E1's expectation of recurrent and structurally similar ambiguity and selective opacity, but cannot, by itself, demonstrate that the official formulation of Ireland's military neutrality policy may confer practical advantages to the Irish government. The following sub-sections, therefore, examine whether the observed ambiguity corresponds to three practical advantages anticipated by E2, E3, and E4 concerning, respectively, policy flexibility, cost avoidance, and audience management. Evidence that ambiguity is compatible with these advantages strengthens the strategic ambiguity interpretation but does not prove that the observed formulations were deliberately designed to achieve them.

Preserving Policy Flexibility

The first potential political advantage of Ireland's ambiguous military neutrality policy concerns policy flexibility, as anticipated by E2, which expects ambiguity to persist around boundaries where authoritative clarification could constrain a government's discretion over its foreign policy. Although formal, explicit security guarantees can enhance the credibility of interstate commitments, such commitments frequently involve a trade-off between security and autonomy (Morrow, 2000, pp. 65, 72-73; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2024, pp. 31-32, 42). Ambiguity may, consequently, help preserve policy flexibility by allowing the Irish

government to avoid firm defence obligations to other states while also retaining room for significant international defence cooperation.

This mechanism is consistent with a wider understanding within the Irish government that its military neutrality policy may help preserve its flexibility in the area of foreign policy rather than imposing a rigid prohibition on all forms of defence cooperation. Coveney, as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence, told the Oireachtas (Irish parliament) Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on 10 March 2022 that Irish military neutrality means 'that we decide when we get involved in a conflict or not and when we take sides or not, and our positions are not required of us by an alliance to which we have signed up that can suck us into a conflict and so on' (Coveney, 2022a). The 2015 White Paper on Defence, likewise, envisaged a 'flexible and adaptive response to any adverse changes in a dynamic security environment' (Department of Defence, 2015, p. 5). In this context, a potential utility of ambiguity lies in preserving a wider range of policy choices than a more precisely delimited conception of military neutrality would permit. Greater precision would not necessarily prevent defence cooperation, but it would make the boundaries between conduct that is consistent and inconsistent with the stated policy easier for domestic audiences to identify and challenge.

The official policy formulation may help sustain that flexibility in two ways. Under-definition of 'military alliances', coupled with recurrent references that rhetorically narrow the concept to 'NATO', leaves the classification of other international defence relationships unsettled. In addition, the selective qualifications of 'common or mutual' defence arrangements more clearly exclude shared or reciprocal international defence cooperation

than one-way assistance. This may leave the Irish government better placed to benefit from the reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement and the protections associated with Article 42.7 of the TEU while it can continue to present Ireland as a militarily neutral state (Baciu, 2018, p. 116; Gallagher, 2023c). Ambiguity permits the practical content of defence cooperation to extend beyond what some audiences might associate with strict non-alignment without requiring the government to publicly settle whether that cooperation constitutes a different alignment status.

The Irish case illustrates a broader distinction in alliance theory between the formal classification of interstate defence relationships and their substantive content. As Morrow notes, states may maintain shared security interests and provide military assistance without formalising these relationships through alliance treaties (Morrow, 2000, pp. 64, 76). Wieslander, similarly, recognises a 'gray zone' between formal alliance membership and other forms of defence partnership, showing how Sweden and Finland developed sufficiently extensive cooperation with NATO before accession to be conceptualised as 'informal allies' (Wieslander, 2019, pp. 195, 218-219). The Irish case concerns different defence relationships with other European states, but similarly illustrates why formal, unambiguous alignment categories may not capture the full range of advantageous forms of international defence cooperation.

These findings provide substantial, though inferential, support for E2. As expected, ambiguity recurs at boundaries relevant to a government's freedom of action. Although the evidence cannot establish how government policy might differ under a more explicit

formulation, it supports the expectation that ambiguity may help preserve the Irish government's discretion to engage in international defence relationships.

Avoiding Costs

A second potential advantage concerns material cost avoidance, as anticipated by E3, which expects ambiguity to persist where greater transparency about a state's alignment status could expose a government to additional material burdens. Hansen observes that 'ambiguity can be used strategically to obscure obligation' (Hansen, 2016, p. 196). By keeping the parameters of permissible international defence relationships underspecified, an ambiguously formulated alignment policy may help the government of a small state such as Ireland avoid both some of the costs it would incur if it had to defend itself without outside assistance and some of the costs associated with overt membership in a military alliance or mutual defence pact (Jesse, 2006, pp. 11, 14-17, 23). This mechanism is consistent with the expectations of small-state security shelter theory because it may help the Irish government obtain a degree of security shelter from more powerful states without incurring the full material costs that could accompany an explicit alignment posture (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2024, pp. 32, 42-43).

Irish governments have consistently maintained much lower levels of defence spending than those of their closest neighbours and other purportedly neutral or non-aligned European states. In 2024, Ireland spent €1.29 billion, equivalent to 0.24% of GDP, compared with 2.3% in the UK and an EU average of 1.9% (Stevenson, 2025, p. 209; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). The corresponding figures for

Austria and Switzerland in 2024 were 1.0% and 0.7%; Finland and Sweden spent 1.6% and 1.3% respectively in 2022, the year they renounced neutrality and declared their intention to join NATO (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). If Ireland publicly abandoned the claim that military neutrality precludes membership in military alliances and chose to join NATO, its government would be strongly encouraged to meet the 5% of GDP spending target set for NATO members in 2025 (NATO Heads of State and Government, 2025). The ambiguous policy formulation may help avoid some of these costs while still allowing Ireland to obtain security shelter from alliance-like defence relationships, like the reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement, 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 reject unilateral assistance. If the Irish government stopped claiming that military neutrality is incompatible with membership in 'common or mutual defence arrangements' and chose to renounce the 'Irish clause' of Article 42.7, it would likely come under pressure from other EU states to shoulder more of the organisation's defence burden. If, however, the current formulation of the policy allows Ireland to receive EU military assistance without reciprocating, its government could rationally invest less in its own national defence than if it knew it would have to address 'armed aggression on its territory' by itself (European Union, 2009).

This logic is visible in the government's rejection, in 2022, of the Commission on the Defence Forces' Level of Ambition 3 proposal. This would have required spending €3 billion

per year on defence, more than twice the 2024 level, and would merely have established a stronger but far from self-sufficient defence posture (Commission on the Defence Forces, 2022, pp. v-vi; Stevenson, 2025, p. 209). If Ireland explicitly rejected all forms of external military assistance and sought to defend itself independently against significant external threats, it might face greater pressure to replace capabilities that may be presently supplied or supplemented through international defence cooperation. This study does not attempt to quantify that counterfactual cost. Nevertheless, a policy formulation which leaves the status of external protection under arrangements like the reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement and Article 42.7 of the TEU ambiguous may allow the government to avoid publicly choosing between greater acknowledged dependence and greater autonomous defence. In the language of small-state security shelter theory, ambiguity may, therefore, help Ireland obtain a degree of security shelter at a relatively low material cost (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2024, pp. 32, 42–43).

The evidence provides partial support for E3. Ambiguity persists around policy boundaries where explicit clarification could entail material costs. Ireland's current combination of relatively low defence expenditure and selectively opaque participation in international defence relationships makes these potential costs politically consequential. However, the analysis does not establish what additional material costs clarification would impose or demonstrate that maintaining ambiguity has directly reduced defence expenditure.

Satisficing the Preferences of Multiple Audiences

A third potential advantage concerns the management of policy preferences, as anticipated by E4, which expects ambiguity to persist around policy boundaries where greater clarification could make it more difficult for a government to satisfice the competing preferences of multiple audiences. As Eisenberg argues, strategic ambiguity can serve a political function by allowing different constituent groups to maintain distinct interpretations of the same communication (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). The Irish government's recurrent use of ambiguous language about military neutrality may help bolster political support for its policy and also reduce its risk of criticism and backlash by making it easier for domestic audiences to interpret the policy in a way that meets at least some of their preferences (Bentley, 2024, pp. 2071–2072, 2081; Hansen, 2016, pp. 196, 206–207, 210). This mechanism connects the Irish case to wider debates on strategic narratives, which emphasise the importance of policymakers' efforts to construct and sustain shared understandings of international affairs and of a state's place within them for possible political gain (Roselle et al., 2014, pp. 74-76).

Neutrality has considerable symbolic weight in Irish political life. Patrick Keatinge rightly characterises it as a 'traditional symbol and national myth' (Keatinge, 1984, p. 100). At the same time, academics have argued that Irish attitudes towards military alignment are 'ambivalent' and 'divided' (Jesse, 2006, pp. 9, 12, 20-23; Stevenson, 2025, pp. 208-209). A March 2022 poll found 48% support for joining NATO alongside 57% support for retaining military neutrality (Pogatchnik, 2022). In this political environment, ambiguity may be useful because substantial constituencies exist for both non-alignment and forms of closer defence cooperation with other states.

The official formulation of the policy may help accommodate these contrasting preferences. Audiences prioritising neutrality may understand the exclusion of 'military alliances', reinforced by references to NATO, as a firm commitment to non-alignment. More security-oriented audiences may take solace in the possibility that Ireland may engage in defence cooperation that is not explicitly classified as alliance membership. The reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement illustrates this possibility. Irish officials have referred to it as an 'understanding', 'agreement', or 'arrangement' while declining to clarify its terms (Ahern, 2005; Coveney, 2021; Martin, 2022; Varadkar, 2023b). This language could reassure some audiences that Ireland is not in a military alliance with the UK while allowing others to interpret this arrangement as a useful source of external protection. A potential political effect of ambiguity, therefore, lies not in eliminating disagreement but in preserving a discursive space within which divergent interpretations can remain plausible and sufficiently acceptable to different audiences.

The selective qualifiers 'common or mutual' may also help accommodate differing preferences about receiving external security assistance. The formulation explicitly rejects reciprocal security guarantees while leaving the status of unilateral defence arrangements less clearly settled. This may be politically useful because it allows the Irish government to claim that Ireland is militarily neutral even though it participates in arrangements that may provide it with real, if asymmetric, security benefits (Baciu, 2018, p. 116). 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 defence assistance. An October

2024 poll reported 76% support in Ireland for increasing cooperation in defence matters at the EU level while an April 2025 poll found 63% support for Ireland's existing model of military neutrality (European Commission, 2024, p. 36; Leahy, 2025). An ambiguous policy formulation can be an effective way to satisfice this diverse range of expressed preferences and, consequently, serve as a means to both preserve a domestic strategic narrative of military neutrality and enable practical external defence cooperation (Roselle et al., 2014, pp. 76-77, 80).

Overall, these findings provide substantial, though inferential, support for E4. Although the analysis does not directly establish how different audiences interpret the government's official policy formulation, the observed patterns are consistent with the expectation that ambiguity should persist around policy boundaries where greater clarification could make it more difficult for a government to satisfice the competing preferences of multiple audiences. Successive Irish governments have used language that provides symbolic commitments to military neutrality while also preserving interpretive latitude around participation in international defence cooperation.

Strategic Ambiguity Beyond Ireland: Comparative Implications and Scope Conditions

The use of strategic ambiguity is not confined to the foreign policies of neutral states or to the subject of alignment. It is better understood as a family of strategies that share a common mechanism – the intentional preservation of more than one plausible interpretation of a subject – but differ according to which subject is left uncertain (Bach et al., 2025, pp. 98-99, 103). At least three analytically distinct forms can be identified.

Contingent-response ambiguity concerns how a state would react to a future crisis. US policy towards Taiwan illustrates this form since uncertainty about whether the US would intervene in a China-Taiwan conflict may help deter a Chinese invasion and discourage unilateral escalation by Taipei (Wu et al., 2023, pp. 1086-1087). Capability ambiguity, in contrast, concerns a state's military capacity. The Israeli government's discourse about its nuclear weapons policy, for example, maintains uncertainty about the state's nuclear arsenal in an attempt to simultaneously preserve its deterrent value and avoid political, diplomatic, or legal consequences that could follow explicit acknowledgement of its existence (Cohen, 2006, pp. 529-530).

Finally, alignment status ambiguity concerns the extent and form of a state's international defence and security relationships. For Ireland, this type concerns what forms of international defence cooperation are compatible with its declared policy of military neutrality. Sweden, prior to joining NATO, offers a bounded historical comparison since its governments expressed public support for its neutrality policy while simultaneously maintaining opaque plans for defence cooperation with NATO if Sweden were ever attacked by another state (Wieslander, 2019, pp. 196-197). The Swedish case differs from Ireland in important respects, including its substantially greater investment in autonomous defence and the geopolitical conditions under which its neutrality policy operated. Nevertheless, both illustrate how governments may use ambiguous language about their alignment status to facilitate potentially beneficial defence relationships with other states.

These comparisons identify avenues for testing E1–E4 beyond Ireland. Sweden and Finland's pre-accession discourse on neutrality and their defence cooperation with NATO,

together with official discussions of the implications of Article 42.7 in other neutral EU states, like Austria and Malta, provide possible comparison points for E1 and E2. Relevant questions include whether structurally similar forms of ambiguity, along with selective opacity, recur across different states' governments, officials, documents, and political and security contexts (E1), and whether they persist around policy boundaries where greater clarification would constrain governmental flexibility (E2). E3 could be examined by investigating whether ambiguity persists around security commitments whose clarification could impose material costs. The historically greater defence investments of Sweden, Finland, Austria, and Switzerland, relative to Ireland, suggest possible variation in the material circumstances within which alignment status ambiguity, if present, might operate. E4 could be explored by examining whether and how other European governments use language that may satisfice the competing policy preferences of multiple audiences. Austria offers a possible comparative case since Austrian Foreign Policy Panel Project data indicate that approximately 85% of respondents expect EU states to assist Austria militarily if attacked, but only 20% support sending Austrian soldiers to defend another EU member (Senn & Eder, 2025). This divergence suggests that competing audience preferences about international defence cooperation may be present in other neutral European states, potentially creating conditions in which ambiguity may be politically useful.

These comparisons help identify general scope conditions under which utilising strategic ambiguity should be particularly attractive to a government. First, a government should face domestic or external constituencies whose policy preferences cannot easily be reconciled through an unequivocal position. Ireland's military neutrality policy may, for

example, help satisfice different domestic constituencies that support neutrality or NATO membership; US ambiguity about whether and how it might defend Taiwan, for its part, may help the US address the security preferences of Beijing and Taipei without fully satisfying either government (Pogatchnik, 2022; Wu et al., 2023, pp. 1086-1087). Second, a government should gain policy, material, or security benefits through ambiguity that it would plausibly lose or greatly undermine by adopting transparent language. 'Militarily neutral' Ireland can reportedly request RAF assistance to defend its airspace, while pre-accession Sweden maintained contingency links with NATO forces in the event of an attack on its territory (Carns, 2026; Dalsjö, 2014, p. 180; Gallagher, 2023a; Heappey, 2022).

Third, a government should have discretion over how the subject of ambiguity is defined and publicly discussed, including some capacity to control information about it. Irish ministers have successfully resisted numerous demands by journalists and opposition politicians for details on the reported UK–Ireland air defence arrangement; Israel uses strict national security laws to maintain a high degree of opacity and ambiguity about its nuclear capabilities by controlling when and how this subject is discussed within Israeli society (Cohen, 2006, pp. 531, 536–537; Martin, 2022; Varadkar, 2023b). Finally, when the subject of ambiguity involves other states, it is easier to sustain if their governments are willing to cooperate, either by reinforcing the originating government's ambiguous claims and attempts at selective opacity or by refraining from issuing authoritative statements that might contradict them. Although UK Secretaries of State for Defence have publicly confirmed that RAF aircraft can defend Irish airspace, the UK government has not claimed that this arrangement constitutes a UK-Irish military alliance (Carns, 2026; Heappey, 2022).

Likewise, despite extensive covert defence planning with Sweden, particularly during the Cold War, NATO governments largely eschewed public claims that they were in a military alliance with a purportedly neutral state (Dalsjö, 2014, p. 180; Wieslander, 2019, pp. 196-197, 214-215, 219). These are merely proposed scope conditions, not findings systematically tested across multiple cases. Taken together, they offer a provisional framework for explaining why strategic ambiguity may be more attractive and sustainable in some political and security contexts than in others.

Conclusion

This study identifies recurrent, structurally similar ambiguity and selective opacity in the official articulation of Ireland's military neutrality policy. This finding is consistent with the strategic ambiguity interpretation and provides substantial support for E1. Policymakers' intentions cannot be definitively established with the available evidence; they are inferred from the observed recurrence of similar ambiguous formulations communicated by multiple policy documents and officeholders over an extended period. E2 and E4 receive substantial, though inferential, support. Ambiguity persists around policy boundaries where greater clarification could constrain the Irish government's freedom of action in international defence cooperation. In addition, official discourse about the policy combines symbolic commitments to neutrality with interpretive latitude around participation in international defence cooperation, which should help the Irish government satisfice the competing policy preferences of multiple domestic audiences. E3 receives partial support because, although ambiguity persists around policy boundaries where clarification could

entail material costs, the observed evidence does not establish those costs directly or demonstrate that ambiguity has reduced Ireland's defence expenditure. These findings strengthen the plausibility of the strategic ambiguity interpretation without conclusively demonstrating that the observed formulations were deliberately designed or maintained to achieve these advantages.

Of the alternative expectations, E5 receives little support because the ambiguity surrounding Ireland's military neutrality policy was observed to be recurrent and structurally similar across different governments, officials, documents, and political and security contexts rather than irregular and idiosyncratic. E6 receives partial support insofar as the persistence of inherited terminology across governments, officials, and documents is consistent with path-dependent domestic entrenchment (Cottey, 2013, pp. 448, 465-466; Jesse, 2006, pp. 11–12, 19, 22). The stability of official formulations despite significant developments in the European security environment since 2015 does not undermine this interpretation. However, the analysis does not independently establish that these formulations have persisted primarily because of institutional or political entrenchment, nor does it identify a clear pattern of incremental adjustments in official language attributable to changing security circumstances.

E7 also receives partial support insofar as the observed recurrent rhetorical narrowing and selective qualification are consistent with Devine's account of governmental redefinition and vague formulations of neutrality amid competing political understandings and evolving international defence cooperation (Devine, 2011, pp. 349, 359–360). The relative stability of the official formulation across the period under study does not contradict

this interpretation, since discursive contestation need not produce irregular governmental language. Nevertheless, the analysis does not independently establish that the observed formulation was maintained primarily in response to continuing discursive contestation.

The latter two alternative explanations, therefore, remain plausible accounts of official discourse about Ireland's military neutrality policy that may complement the strategic ambiguity interpretation. Path-dependent domestic entrenchment helps explain why inherited formulations of military neutrality may persist across successive governments and changing security circumstances, while discursive contestation illuminates how competing understandings of neutrality have shaped governmental efforts to define and defend the policy. The strategic ambiguity interpretation complements these explanations by systematically identifying recurrent patterns of under-definition, rhetorical narrowing, selective qualification, and selective opacity across governments, officials, documents, and political and security contexts. Its distinctive contribution lies not simply in identifying the persistence of these practices but in explaining their particular structure and potential political functions.

Although this study found that the observed patterns of ambiguity and selective opacity may confer practical advantages to a government, they may also carry significant democratic and strategic costs. If a military neutrality policy has unclear boundaries, it will be harder for citizens and legislators to judge which forms of international defence cooperation the policy permits, excludes, or requires, potentially impeding informed scrutiny. Ambiguity is also a fragile basis on which to manage a central pillar of Irish 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 may rely for aspects of its defence.

In light of these concerns, disclosure deserves serious consideration as an alternative to the strategically ambiguous formulation of Ireland's military neutrality policy. This would not require the Irish government to abandon all secrecy in defence matters or to renounce military neutrality. It would, however, require more candid and precise official explanations of the nature of Ireland's reported air defence cooperation with the UK and of how such cooperation may be reconciled with the current formulation of the policy. It would also require a more precise official explanation of how Article 42.7's provisions concerning aid and assistance may be squared with the Irish government's rejection of alliance membership and participation in common or mutual defence arrangements. Greater disclosure about Ireland's international defence relationships would better support democratic debate, parliamentary scrutiny, and public accountability than the persistence of selective opacity and ambiguity in the official formulation of the policy. It would also provide Ireland's security partners with public confirmation that the Irish government recognises and values their contributions to these arrangements. With this said, however, disclosure could place the possible benefits of strategic ambiguity at risk. The Irish government, consequently, faces a difficult choice between preserving the practical advantages that strategic ambiguity may provide and achieving the political and strategic benefits of greater transparency.

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