



Irish Neutrality?

By Captain Rory Finnegan

'A Prince is further esteemed when he is a true friend or an enemy, what that is, he declares himself without reserve in favour of someone or another. This policy is always more useful than remaining neutral.'

- Machiavelli, The Prince - 1519

Introduction

The issue of Ireland's neutrality has been at the maelstrom of public debate and media attention in recent years. This came to the fore when in 1994 it was proposed that Ireland would become a member of Partnership for Peace (PfP). Ireland did indeed join PfP on December 1st 1999 with the signing of that organisations framework document. Again in the first Nice Referendum, which was defeated in 2001, the perception in the public psyche that the Treaty could lead to a diminishing of Irish neutrality was seen as one of the key issues in the defeat of that proposal. In the second Nice referendum held on 19th October 2002 the issue of Irish Neutrality was again a core issue. In trying to answer the issues raised one is compelled to ask was Ireland ever truly neutral.

Historical Background

The exposure of Ireland to major European conflicts since statehood has been relatively limited. Historically Irish kingdoms either formed alliances or sought external assistance to assist them in breaking the connection with England. Indeed Irish leaders from Hugh O'Neill, Wolf Tone and the volunteers of 1916 actively sought military assistance from mainland Europe, especially France and Spain. After the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922, which established the then Free State, Ireland was in no position to consider a true defence policy due to British retention of the treaty ports. In the late 1930's with the return of the treaty ports and the promulgation in 1937 of a new Constitution allowed for the first time, the young fledgling state to forge an independent defence policy. Pointedly the word neutrality is never stated

in the Constitution, which declared Ireland to be a sovereign, independent and democratic state. In considering De Valera's 1937 Constitution it is clear that there is no declaration of neutrality within the Constitution itself. However, Article 28 would appear to favour a position of neutrality on Ireland's behalf. The 1996 Report of the Constitution Review Group considered Article 28.3, which prescribes that war shall be declared only by the Dáil and felt that there was a favourable 'preference' for neutrality enshrined in the Constitution. But in response to arguments for amending Article 28 to ensure that Ireland has neutral status, the Review Group concluded; "Neutrality in Ireland has always been a policy as distinct from a fundamental law or principle."

De Valera chose neutrality, because with one eye on our still powerful neighbour and with the scars of the Civil War still so vivid and unhealed it was perhaps the most pragmatic approach. A military alliance with any other power would have been perceived by Britain as a direct threat to her own geopolitical security and conversely an alliance with Britain would have been anathema to many elements within not only Fianna Fail but within irredentist militant republican factions. These factors prompted De Valera to comment, "any other policy would have divided our people, and for a divided people to fling itself into this war would be to commit suicide." ¹ Thus an important qualification appeared in the early days of Irish neutrality, the fact that a policy of neutrality, as espoused by the state, was the sole function of its relationship with Britain and its desire to move out from underneath its imposing shadow. If the policy of neutrality had its ideological basis in a strongly held belief,

surely the next logical step would have been to develop and augment the military forces of the state so as to have the necessary capacity to fend off potential aggressors. This however was not done.²

'The Emergency' 1939 - 1944

The historian F.S.L. Lyons perhaps best summed up the conception of Irish neutrality during the Second World War, or the 'Emergency Period.'

"To be free to choose between peace and war was the mark of independence, to be free to choose between peace and a British war demonstrated to all the world just how complete that independence really was." It is partially because of the enduring, almost mythical legacy of the 'Emergency' stance that neutrality has remained so forcefully entrenched in the national psyche to this day. The very essence of neutrality has its strict legal basis in the Hague Convention concerning the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers (1907). Its three defining pillars were that a neutral state has the duty of prevention that is to be able to protect its territory from violation, secondly the duty of abstention, whereby no aid should be given to the belligerents. Finally the duty of impartiality, in other words equal treatment of each belligerent.

On even a cursory examination Ireland manifestly failed to meet any of these criteria during the Emergency. Despite the Defence Forces swelling to over 100,000 men, any resistance to invasion no matter how gallant or furious would have been ultimately doomed. Allied pilots who crashed in Ireland were handed back while German pilots remained interned. Publicly, Taoiseach De Valera continued to proclaim

that the army and cabinet would fight to the last man resisting a British invasion, in secret the Irish and British Army staffs worked out a plan for repelling a German invasion, code named Plan W. Irish Military Intelligence, G2 liased so closely with Allied Intelligence that the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA asserted that, "the Irish worked so closely with us on intelligence matters almost as if they were allies."³ The historian F.S.L. Lyons famously compared the isolation of the Irish during the Second World War, as a result of our declared neutrality, to the inhabitants of Plato's cave. "Sitting with their backs to the fire of life and deriving their only knowledge of what went on outside from the flickering shadows on the wall before their eyes by the men and women who passed to and from behind them." These latter may have been the nearly 50,000 Southern Irish who fought in the British army during the war. An orthodoxy, if not a dogma had been established.

The Neutrality Myth

But by 1945 the public perception was one

of successful neutrality, which had kept Ireland free from the horrors of total war. Conversely, the actions or policies of successive leaders of the Irish State clearly highlight an attitude to neutrality whereby there was no strict adherence to the concept in the true sense of the word. The neutrality reservation tended to be a matter of means and contingencies for governments, but one of ends and fundamental principles in general

External Affairs, Mr. Sean McBride, stated that the reason for non-membership of NATO was partition and we would join once partition had ended. Our relative international isolation was further compounded by being unable to join the UN until 1955, primarily due to Russian objections.⁴ When Ireland did join the UN in 1955 along with Austria, the Irish Defence Forces quickly established in a very tangible and real way



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public debate. Ultimately neutrality had become a manifestation both of a separate cultural identity and independent statehood that existed in the shadow of a great former colonial power, Great Britain.

Following the war, Ireland declined to join NATO. In 1949 the Minister of

the states material contribution to peace keeping around the world. This has been a strong buttress to the continuing popularity of military neutrality, as it is widely felt that a non-partisan reputation gives Irish soldiers a respect and moral advantage in pursuing the UN mandate. Yet again during this peri-



General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO in Europe and one of its highest profile officers during the Kosovo crisis.

od the twists and turns of Irish political leaders began to manifest themselves. On admission to the UN the then Minister for External Affairs, Liam Cosgrave argued that one of the reasons for joining the UN was to avoid being associated with particular blocks or groups. Yet later was to say that he supported the aim of those powers responsible for the defence and resistance to Communism. Frank Aiken later supported Communist China's membership of the UN. Irish diplomats at the time seem to have genuinely felt that the geopolitical significance of the island of Ireland was such that all they had to do was sit and wait to be approached for membership of NATO on their own terms. It was an attitude that quite simply ignored the ever growing and strengthening 'special' relationship between the USA and Great Britain. It was this wholly misplaced calculation that led to the exploration of the possibility of a bilateral alliance with the United States by Sean McBride in 1951, thereby only reinforcing the suggestion that the government had no principled commitment to neutrality as such. In effect Ireland had driven itself down a cul-de-sac of self-isolation.

The Path to Europe

The years 1956-1973 saw Irish leadership under both Sean Lemass and Jack Lynch putting the nation's material well-being and the need to break the cycle of economic dependence on Britain ahead of any rhetoric about neutrality. But it is from this period in particular that trying to pin down exactly what Ireland's version of neutrality encapsulated, not only led to increasing confusion at home but genuine bewilderment and mystification abroad. Lemass is generally acknowledged as the father of the state's first great economic surge in the 1960s that foreshadowed the later Celtic Tiger of the 1990s. In a famous interview in July of 1962, this veteran of 1916 and the War of Independence told the New York Times: "We recognise that a military commitment will be an inevitable consequence of our joining the Common Market and that ultimately we would be prepared to yield even the technical label of neutrality. We are prepared to go into this integrated Europe without any reservations as to how far this will take us in the field of foreign policy and defence." However back in Ireland he was less forthcoming with such a view in the Dail. In 1964 the then Minister of Finance Mr. Charles Haughey stated that political union without defence was meaningless.

Lemass also said, "Although we are not members of NATO, we are in full agreement with its aims...We think the existence of NATO is necessary for the preservation of peace and the defence of the countries of western Europe, including this country." He also sought to disentangle Irish diplomacy from the knot it had created for itself in relation to partition and possible membership of NATO, by claiming that Irish membership of NATO would not mean formal acceptance of partition just because Britain was also a member. His successor Jack Lynch while clarifying that there were no defence

reach common positions on foreign policy issues, for example at the United Nations particularly in relation to the Middle East. In 1981 a motion was put forward by the Labour Party that the Dáil should reaffirm Irish neutrality on the international stage as the basis of foreign and defence policy. The majority Fianna Fáil administration rejected it. Once again it appeared that Irish neutrality was both conditional and pragmatic. A year later during the Falklands/Malvinas conflict while first backing EC economic sanctions against Argentina, Ireland subsequently withdrew following the controversial

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commitments in the EEC treaties, that Ireland as an EEC member "would naturally be interested in the defence of the territories embraced by the community. There is no question of neutrality there." Tellingly he also pointed out that we had no traditional policy like other European neutrals. The Foreign Policy White Paper of 1972 on EEC membership recognised "that as the Community evolves towards its political objectives, those participating in the new Europe must be prepared to assist, if necessary, in its defence." Nobody in Irish politics during this period seemed to have a definitive answer to the question of military commitments required by EEC membership. Lemass and Lynch seemed to be trying to articulate to their prospective continental partners that Ireland would be ready to play its part in a committed way to European integration.

Within the EEC, Irish governments tended to separate the security, defence and political dimensions of foreign policy in the context of Community membership. As the 1980s approached Irish neutrality had to face challenges emerging from the increasing blurring of the very dividing lines between these dimensions and it is the period of the 1980s that neutrality as an issue begins to make waves among the body politic. Up to then, the EEC foreign ministers held informal discussions on European Political co-operation (EPC) in which they tried to

sinking of the Belgrano, explaining that the sinking was incompatible with the maintenance of Irish neutrality. Ireland also sought to make a diplomatic issue of the situation by calling an immediate meeting of the UN Security Council on which it had a non-permanent seat. Interestingly Gerry Collins, at a subsequent speech to the UN General Assembly some four months later in his capacity as Minister for Foreign Affairs pointedly neglected to mention the word neutral. It appeared that the Lemass position, adopted at a critical point in the Cold War was now being disowned. NATO with its reliance on nuclear weapons also became increasingly anathema to Fianna Fáil. This must be seen in light of developments concurrently taking place on the international stage. These collectively led to what became known as the Second Cold War with increasing tensions between the U.S. and Soviet Russia over a diverse range of issues. These included the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the crackdown on Solidarity in Poland and the ongoing controversy in relation to the stationing of atomic Cruise missiles at Greenham Common in the UK as a counter threat to a new generation of intermediate range Soviet missiles, the SS-20s. This was the period when Ronald Reagan spoke of Russia in terms of an "empire of evil," and Détente had effectively almost being deleted from the lexicon of diplomatic language.

End of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War has changed the new strategic and security environment that existed before the demise of the Warsaw Pact. For most European states defence in this period was physical defence of their territories from the spectre of a Warsaw Pact conventional invasion. Most European neutrals such as Sweden and Switzerland were prepared to defend their neutrality in a real and tangible way through well-equipped Defence Forces backed up by an elaborate and expensive Civil Defence structure. Ireland while ostensibly neutral was not prepared to embark on such a comprehensive defence programme.

European security was of course, underpinned by the United States presence after 1945 and the balance of power principle was arguably displaced to world level by the Cold War, within which the US and USSR became hegemonic powers within their own spheres. Defence and security were seen as synonymous, two sides of the same coin.

The Neutrality Debate

Before this new security landscape can be properly explored it is well to summarise the main strands that run through those who advocate neutrality. The first is the historically rooted sovereignty argument. Here, Ireland is seen to be a symbol of national identity and independence and thus has a value for a small state with a historically aggressive neighbour.

The second is the anti-militarism argument. There is revulsion amongst proponents of this position to the possible eventual formation of a European army, and the chance of Irish men and women being conscripted. This is something that has very negative historical connotations from 1917 when Britain tried to introduce conscription into Ireland.

The third and final major school are those who see neutrality as a positive in itself, and that by remaining neutral, Ireland has a stronger voice in international affairs than it otherwise might have. Proponents of this argument believe that Ireland has the

changing fundamentally in the post Cold War world. Traditional concepts of European security and defence had been replaced with the belief that crisis management, peace-keeping and conflict prevention was central to the future stability and security of the continent. Another aspect of the changing landscape is the evolving nature of peace-keeping itself. Ireland has played a leading role in UN peacekeeping over the last forty years and this collective security commitment undoubtedly forms a central part of the states Foreign policy.

However in recent years there has been a notable trend for the UN to out source its operations to regional organisations including NATO. Irish troops are involved in both SFOR and KFOR in UN mandated missions under the umbrella of NATO. Indeed this has provided something of a model on which to base future co-operation. However many in Irish society do not share this analysis. This participation raises the issue of the compatibility of a policy of military neutrality with such operations. Ireland is almost unique among the European neutrals in that the Defence (Amendment) Act, 1993, permits the participation of Defence Forces personnel in any kind of UN military operation. Many Irish people regard NATO in a negative way and see our participation in such operations as an implied threat to the highly valued tradition of neutrality. They fear that through such operations and our membership of PfP that it will ultimately involve membership of NATO.

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The end of the Cold War completely altered these geopolitical arrangements. A continental EU enlargement had been enabled by that momentous change in 1989, based on norms of peace, market based prosperity and democratic values. Now defence and security are perceived in a much more holistic way, with a very real difference between the two. Today European security is perceived in a much more broader and generic sense. Now security encompasses a broad spectrum of issues including the strengthening of democracy, respect for human rights, socio-economic welfare and environmental protection. Thus European security has lost the principle of East-West ideological antagonism and changed from military confrontation, "hard security," to a vast range of preventive measures including further enlargement of the EU and "soft security" issues, such as the environment, organised crime, and emigration.

distinct advantage of being an honest broker in the pursuit of resolutions to conflicts. These positions are not mutually exclusive and overlap in the minds of those who support neutrality. While neutrality in international law refers to a prescribed set of rights and obligations such as those outlined in the 1907 Hague Convention, for many people in Ireland, neutrality has taken on in many cases a different shade and hue. It stirs within many people general values in international life manifesting itself as a general rejection of the use of force and an empathy with the victims of power politics pursued mainly by the larger states.

Key Developments

The 1996 White Paper on foreign policy restated Ireland's commitment to her military neutrality and assured that this policy would change only following a consultative referendum. It heralded a period in which the security situation in Europe had been

Nice 1 & II

The Irish electorate's rejection of the first Nice Treaty of June 2001 seemed to encapsulate many of these issues. The issues in the campaign were wide ranging and ironically in the subsequent rejection post-mortem that occurred, the issue for which genuine support amongst the public was perhaps strongest was that the union should enlarge. This illustrates the very important position of both neutrality and sovereignty in the Irish context. The government learning from their own admitted lacklustre performance in Nice 1 mounted a vigorous campaign for Nice II. Additionally an amendment to the Constitution has now expressly forbidden Ireland joining a mutual defence pact. Our European partners through the Seville Declaration also guarantee Ireland's policy of military neutrality. Now more than ever a proper debate on this issue is perhaps needed where all sections of Irish society can give their views on this issue. Perhaps such a



Fall Guy: the abysmal public profile of 'No to Nice' campaigner Justin Barrett was an unexpected aid to the 'Yes' lobby.

debate can finally put to rest many of the misconceptions and myths that have evolved around the issue of Irish neutrality. The Republic of Ireland is one of four non-

deadline as outlined in the Helsinki Headline Goal being a Light Infantry Battalion and other minor assets, such as support elements and a Special Forces



A secure, peaceful and prosperous Europe is central to Ireland's strategic and geopolitical interests.



NATO countries, which have promised to participate in the ERRF; the others are Austria, Sweden and Finland. Our commitment to the ERRF as part of the 2003

Platoon.⁵ The Defence Forces Skills Assessments for 2002, which recently concluded, saw a Battalion being exercised from each Brigade, was a significant step towards

fulfilling the Headline Goal. The Battalion will be equipped with the Mowag armoured personnel carriers and may have two troop carrying helicopters. Additionally we have a very similar commitment to the UN under the UNSAS agreements and to PfP. The government holds the view that as any participation of our troops in the ERRF or under the aegis of PFP will be UN mandated and thereby constitute the State's commitment to UN peacekeeping duties. The commitment of such a force as well as involving the dispatch of a Battalion on the ground within 60 days for up to a year, will require another battalion on stand-by to replace them and another in preparation. This must be seen in the light of cuts in the Defence Forces from 13,500 to 10,750 in recent years.

It was ironic that the 1996 White Paper on Foreign Policy which was strong on ideals, but which many saw as being weak in identifying Ireland's interests and the very real practical implications of foreign policy decisions. Similarly the White Paper on Defence (2000) was in essence an instrument designed to 'downsize' the Defence Forces, yet with no real analysis of Ireland's Geopolitical position, either within Europe or on the world stage. There is also general agreement in European capitals that European states will urgently need to consider increased defence spending. Almost every country has used the post Cold War period to rationalise defence structures and cut expenditure, the so-called "peace dividend." This has proved to be illusory in view of the Pandora's box of ethnic tensions held in check during the Cold War. These have been unleashed with such visceral hatred as seen in the ethnic cleansing epitomised by the killing fields of Srebrenica, which have come to symbolise European powerlessness in the face of evil. It was this perceived powerlessness that was the driving force behind the European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF), the military option of the EU's Common European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The ESDP includes 'peacemaking,' military actions in its remit. The ESDP is intended to pool EU resources so as to be better able to respond to various types of crisis. The other options for the ESDP include 'civilian' capabilities such as policemen, administrators and development assistance. Perhaps more importantly, the broad holistic approach of the ESDP compliments traditional Irish international security policy, as it includes civilian as well as military methods. This is not surprising considering the

new strategic and security environment, which has developed since the end of the Cold War. The post-Cold War era has changed the very environment in which Irish neutrality serves a useful and practical purpose. In essence, because of certain changes that have taken place, Ireland is best served if it acknowledges that the neutrality it pursues is more that of non-military alignment.

The changes that have taken place are the emergence of a multipolar world following the collapse of the Soviet Union, increasing interdependence in the form of globalisation as well as enhanced economic and monetary integration and convergence of interests especially in a European context. A secure, peaceful and prosperous Europe is central to Ireland's strategic and geopolitical interests, especially as we have developed so much economically in recent years. It will not be possible to obtain the benefits expect-

side, too. International drug trafficking, which has become a bigger industry than iron and steel or cars; to transnational crime; to climate change and environmental degradation, with its implications for poverty, mass migration and security. Because of this, in the modern world, the concept of 'national' has become harder and harder to define. The internet is only the latest assault on national boundaries and jurisdictions. The face of warfare has itself arguably changed. Warfare today is not necessarily the traditional model of geographical advances. State borders are no defence against cyber war or modern terrorism, which post 911 has shown a new marked degree of lethality with the willingness of the modern "ultra terrorist," to use weapons of mass destruction. Where traditionally for the terrorist the act was the *raison d'être* *per se*, now it is to inflict mass casualties as a means in itself. The new form of warfare

France and Germany, now would never countenance a war of aggression against each other. So in a perverse sense we find ourselves with an organisation which can make a serious contribution to the new global challenges. Ireland is clearly committed to the EU. The issue is to move away from our supposed neutral status to a more pragmatic position of non-alignment. This will enable full participation in all aspects of European security, which is in the best interest of the state. The long established dilemma of neutrality, whereby one juggles potential alienation from key principles with the added risk of being sidelined from the substantive decision making process need no longer apply. Core interests and values are at stake for Ireland's role in international and European affairs and for its ability to survive and prosper in a globalised world of which it is one of the chief exemplars. Nothing is certain only that History as always will be a harsh judge.

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ed from an enlarged EU if south-eastern Europe remains destabilised and incapable of recovering from the traumas caused by the various wars that have so scarred the Balkans, often referred to as the 'powderkeg of Europe,' in the last decade. This is one of the core issues to be addressed in the neutrality debate

Irish Neutrality in the Twenty First Century

It is certainly the case that Ireland's international relations have broadened and deepened greatly over recent decades. The European Union is now, and will remain absolutely essential to Ireland's interests. Today few would argue that membership of the Union permeates and influences every area of national life. Additionally Globalisation is an irresistible force at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It has swept across cultural barriers and utterly transformed trade, manufacturing, news media, travel and communications. Irish society has been recognised as the most receptive to the influences of globalisation in the world. But globalisation has its dark

cares nothing for nationalities or boundaries or conventions. Traditional neutrality in this scenario is a relic of the Cold War. The international context has changed and consequently Irish policy must adapt and change with it. If Ireland is prepared to use military force for crisis management missions, then Ireland is no longer 'militarily neutral.' But if Ireland is no longer 'militarily neutral,' then what are we? Perhaps a more honest interpretation of present Irish policy is one of non-alignment. De facto, this is the present Irish policy in practice.

Conclusion

The nations of Western Europe created the Union with the core ideals of reconciliation and prosperity. Integration has been the principal means by which Western European states, large and small, have managed their post-imperial relations and decolonisation. By building a sovereignty sharing political community, they created the most benign political order seen in modern Europe. It is easy to forget that one of the great enduring legacies of the EEC/EU was the creation of stability in Europe whereby former enemies such as

1. Salmon T "Unneutral Neutral Eire" Foreign Affairs Vol. 24, 1946 P.120
2. Prof. Eunan O'Halpin of TCD notes that both De Valera & Cosgrave shied away from this. Their reluctance to do so was attributed to their awareness as to the perils of militarism as well as their belief in the need to keep soldiers under the thumb of civilian government. O'Halpin further noted that both men "viewed physical force as essentially a political device to be used against an occupying power and not an instrument of deterrence of external aggressors or a way to enhance Irish influence in the outside world."
3. Fodor Denis J. The Neutrals WWII Time Life Books(Chicago, Illinois, 1982) Ch.5 P.185
4. The reason given for vetoing the application was that Ireland did not have any bilateral relations with the Soviet Union. Historically it may have been linked to the fact that Ireland was one of only three countries that opposed Soviet admission to the League of Nations in 1934.
5. Any Defence Forces participation in either a PIP or ERRF operation is contingent on such a mission being UN mandated, based on a Government decision and sanctioned by the Dail. This is often referred to as the "Triple Lock."
6. A possible future course of action for Ireland could be along the lines of that taken by Finland. Finland's development from neutral to non-military aligned has caused few difficulties domestically or internationally and it is quite possible that Ireland could make use of such a model in undertaking a similar transition.