Barry O'Halloran
Irish 'neutrality' is nothing more than freeloading on the taxpayers of other nations

Ireland's 'long and cherished' tradition of relying on the Royal Navy to defend it may ultimately be untenable

Irish Naval Service vessel L E Niamh. Like the other seven Irish Naval Service vessels the Niamh is a constabulary gunboat without any missile or torpedo armament, or any anti-air or anti-submarine sensor capability Credit: EPA

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Irish neutrality is a legacy of Éamon de Valera's considerable antipathy to all things British, and has been the lodestar of Irish foreign policy since the state was founded a century ago. In her inaugural address last month, the newly elected far-left peace activist, President Catherine Connolly, extolled Ireland's "long and cherished tradition of neutrality."

But, as the spectre of large-scale military conflict has returned to haunt 21st-century Europe, this carryover from a former era appears to some to have gone past its sell-by-date. Recent events seem to point in that direction.

Last week, five unidentified military-style drones approached a no-fly zone in the flight path of Ukrainian President Zelensky's plane over the Irish Sea. It sparked a major security alert. As with similar recent drone incursions across Europe, Russia is deemed to be the malevolent actor. Recent satellite imagery indicates that the drones may have been launched from a nearby so-called "dark vessel".

Until now, Ireland has felt itself untouched by any serious security impact from the on-going war in Ukraine. The assumption has been that the safeguards offered by geography and its much-vaunted policy of neutrality were deemed sufficient in themselves to protect Ireland. However, last week's drones were a sharp reminder that in an era of hybrid warfare such thinking is naïve and dangerous.

The severe risks posed by Ireland's apparent indifference to national defence, with its attendant dangers for critical undersea data cables and energy interconnectors are well-known but have failed to prompt any serious policy response. It seems that the comfort blanket of neutrality has blinded Ireland's political establishment to the real and present dangers posed by modern

hybrid warfare. In this regard, last week's Russian military drones over Dublin Bay were the proverbial chickens coming home to roost.

The problem with Ireland's "long and cherished tradition of neutrality" is that it has metastasised into unarmed neutrality. Over the decades, Irish government spending on defence has been pitiful, with just 0.23 per cent of GDP currently allocated annually.

This abysmal level of defence spending places Ireland 143rd out of 145 countries in the global ranking on this important metric, just ahead of Mauritius and Haiti. For a wealthy European country, that is an extraordinary statistic – especially when one considers that Ireland has one of the largest maritime domains in Europe.

Having failed to provide for its own military protection, Ireland is wholly reliant on the RAF and the Royal Navy for its extra-territorial security. Economists call this type of behaviour the "free-rider problem"; something that non-economists refer to more bluntly as freeloading.

Across the Irish political spectrum, neutrality has become a political sacred cow that is immune to challenge. For the left, it has become the ideological hill to die on. For the centre-right, neutrality offers the cover to direct these defence "savings" to social programmes. In Ireland's guns v butter debate, butter always wins out.

In recent years, the woke agenda has been given the full legislative treatment in Ireland – with everything from hate speech and trans-rights to Palestine and gender pronouns being protected by law. Yet because of its fixation with neutrality, the Irish state has been grossly derelict in the one duty that is the raison d'être for any state; the protection of its citizens from external attack.

Although promised by numerous governments over the past five years, Ireland still has no National Security strategy. As a consequence, there was confusion within Irish security agencies as to how and who should respond to this Russian hybrid-warfare incident. Many other neutrality-inspired security problems will come to a head next year when Ireland takes over the presidency of the EU.

Ireland has, for example, no military radar capabilities that can monitor the enormous maritime area under its control. Last week's Russian drones loitered for up to 45 minutes over the one Irish Navy ship stationed in the Irish Sea for

the protection of Zelensky. In other words, Russia wanted to ensure that its drones were seen. But, of course, this could also have been a stealthy attack. Currently, Ireland is defensively blind to such aerial threats.

In the wake of the drone incident, French, Portuguese, and PSNI officers with drone capabilities and expertise came hot-foot to Dublin to assist. However, the gaping gap in Ireland's radar defences cannot be filled so easily, even on a temporary basis. While foreign police officers can legally operate in Ireland, foreign military personnel are prohibited from doing so under the Irish Constitution. Since radar equipment and the expertise to operate it is the preserve of the military, it is unclear how the Irish government intends to square this particular defence circle in a matter of months.

Next July the leaders of 27 European countries and their extensive entourages will descend on Ireland during its six-month rotating presidency of the EU at which point the chronic defence problem of the past will become acute.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sparked a complete reappraisal of European defence priorities. Two of the EU's long-standing neutral member states, Finland and Sweden, have responded to the radically changed defence environment by joining Nato. In these transformed circumstances, Ireland's military neutrality looks increasingly anachronistic and may ultimately be untenable.