

# Saving the Triple Lock

## *The Neutrality Hawks v. The Government of Ireland*

### Introduction

Ireland is a neutral country. A central component of our neutrality is the Triple Lock. It means that Irish Defence forces can only be deployed on overseas missions that have been approved by:

- 1 the government,
- 2 Dáil Éireann,
- 3 have a UN mandate.

A three-tiered approval mechanism to authorise the deployment of troops to highly complex and volatile environments, including conflict zones, makes good sense. Yet the government is planning to dismantle it with no meaningful public debate. This is a fundamental policy shift that will seriously weaken Irish neutrality. It could see Irish troops being deployed, not to keep the peace within a UN mandated mission, but to wage war as part of a military alliance. What is so intolerable about the Triple Lock that the government wishes to abandon it? And why? This piece challenges the government's rationale for dismantling the Triple Lock and calls instead for it to be protected as a core part of Irish neutrality.



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This text has been adapted from an oral presentation by Niamh Ní Bhriain at an event hosted by TD Catherine Connolly in Leinster House in April 2024.

# Government Arguments for dismantling the Triple Lock

Dismantling the Triple Lock is a matter of national interest. It will permit the government to depart from Ireland's policy of neutrality, which has shaped the character of the republic since the foundation of the state. The government, well aware of the popular support for neutrality, has decided to downplay the significance of the legislative amendment, even claiming that neutrality and the Triple Lock are unrelated. It has deployed an alarmist tone designed to create fear and confusion, leaving people feeling overwhelmed or ill-equipped to engage with the topic. This is intentional. There has been no honest or genuine effort to consult the people in a meaningful way. Instead, the government has muddled the matter with disingenuous, unsubstantiated and baseless arguments. This text examines these arguments, unpicking them one by one.

1. The UN undermines Irish Sovereignty
2. Don't conflate Irish neutrality with the Triple Lock!
3. The Triple Lock is not fit for purpose
4. We must deal with the world as it is now!

## Government Argument No. 1: The UN undermines Irish Sovereignty

'The 'Triple Lock' ... allows the five permanent members of the Security Council, like Russia, to bind Ireland's hands in our international engagement ... there's something morally wrong in giving an authoritarian and aggressive imperialist power like Putin's Russia a de facto veto on how we, as an independent republic, deploy our troops.'<sup>1</sup>

Opinion piece by Tánaiste Micheál Martin published in the Business Post in November 2023.

Much of the government's rationale for abandoning the Triple Lock is centred on the premise that the United Nations encroaches on Irish sovereignty.

### United Nations resolutions

UN resolutions are either issued by the UN Security Council, which has five permanent members (P5) with veto powers and 10 non-permanent members, or by the UN General Assembly where the UN's 193 members are represented. The Security Council's composition and the veto powers of P5 members (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States) reflect post-World War II politics in 1945 when the UN was founded.

Is the UN system perfect? No, far from it.

Are P5 veto powers problematic? Yes, they certainly are.

But despite its flaws, the UN remains the most important international organisation responsible for global peace and security.

# Ireland and the United Nations

Tánaiste and Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin has frequently affirmed the government's support for the United Nations and multilateralism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed in its 2020 election manifesto, Fianna Fáil pledged to 'fully maintain neutrality and the Triple Lock' writing that 'Ireland has correctly conferred primacy to the UN since joining in 1955'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet since entering into government, the party has developed a deeply misleading and disingenuous narrative that reduces the Triple Lock to giving 'an authoritarian and aggressive imperialist power ... a de facto veto on how we ... deploy our troops'. Regardless of one's opinion of Russia, or any of the other P5 members for that matter, this is a serious misrepresentation of how the UN system operates. It fails to recognise the politics involved in approving peace-keeping resolutions, either at Security Council or General Assembly level, and it ignores the UN's capacity over decades to authorise and deploy peace-keeping missions - a testament to multilateralism in action.<sup>4</sup> Ireland takes part in these multilateral spaces and the Department of Foreign Affairs celebrates its 'proud tradition of participation' in UN Peace Support Operations since 1958.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, P5 members can veto UN resolutions, and should they choose to do so Irish troops would be precluded from participating in related missions. But Security Council voting procedures, though deeply problematic and in need of reform, have been enshrined in the UN Charter since 1945.<sup>6</sup> Ireland, as a UN member, signed up to these norms and procedures. They are part of how the UN works. **It's quite a stretch to frame UN procedures as a threat to Irish sovereignty. It's also very dangerous to discredit and disregard the international structures that have governed global peace and security for decades, and conclude that Ireland should suddenly abandon legislative commitments to them. This is particularly irresponsible considering that it comes at a time when the UN system faces unprecedented challenges in the context of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, with international law hanging by a thread.** Ireland should be redoubling efforts to strengthen its engagement with the UN and reinforcing its commitment to the structures that underpin international law.

**Abandoning the Triple Lock is not just about making domestic legislative amendments therefore. It also signifies a serious diminution of our commitment to the UN system, to UN peace-keeping efforts, and to multilateralism.** This was borne out in the government's March 2023 decision to withdraw approximately 130 defence personnel from the Golan Heights to 'ensure that the Defence Forces have the capacity to fulfil their commitment to the EU Battlegroup 2024/2025'.<sup>7</sup> EU battlegroups are military units of 1500 personnel each, which form 'an integral part of the European Union's military rapid reaction capacity to respond to emerging crises and conflicts around the world'.<sup>8</sup> EU battlegroups won't necessarily operate under a UN mandate, so the Triple Lock would preclude a contingent of more than 12 defence personnel (the number set out in Triple Lock legislation) from participating. **The fact that Ireland is prioritising the deployment of Irish defence personnel to EU battlegroups, rather than on UN peace-keeping missions, sets Ireland on a vastly different foreign policy trajectory to that which has shaped Irish external affairs since the foundation of the State.**

In arguing for the dissolution of the Triple Lock, the government usually references hypothetical scenarios where Russia might exercise its veto powers to obstruct a peace-keeping mission. In reality though, such a scenario has only ever arisen once when China vetoed a peace-keeping operation in 1999 (before the Triple Lock existed), regarding the extension of a UN preventive deployment force to the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia.<sup>9</sup>

The government's insistence on removing the Triple Lock ignores the fact that UN peace and security resolutions may be approved, not only by the Security Council, but also at the General Assembly where states don't have veto powers.<sup>10</sup> Though such resolutions are not legally binding, they carry significant political weight because they are approved by a two-thirds majority of the world's nations. Dismantling the Triple Lock would also erase legislative commitments to General Assembly resolutions on peace-keeping missions because the Triple Lock refers to both UN organs.

The government regularly points to the fact that the UN has not authorised any new peace-keeping missions since 2014 to argue that UN peace-keeping is defunct.<sup>11</sup> This observation omits the fact that there are currently 11 peace support operations on-going around the world and Irish troops continue to contribute to them. It also fails to look behind the inaction on authorising new missions and consider that perhaps it is precisely because states are shirking their multilateral obligations that this is the case. By freeing up Irish troops to participate in EU battlegroups and by dismantling the Triple Lock Ireland would, in effect, be doing exactly the same thing. UN Peace Support Operations are not without their challenges, but surely **Ireland's role as a neutral state with a long history of peace-keeping should be to table proposals to revive and strengthen UN missions and multilateralism rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater and abandoning these efforts altogether.**

Former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar claimed that 'removing the Triple Lock would be a vindication of Irish sovereignty'.<sup>12</sup> It's worth discussing briefly how the Triple Lock came about and where sovereignty is underpinned in Irish law.

In June 2001, the Nice Treaty was rejected by the Irish electorate largely because of concerns that its approval would drag Ireland into a European security structure that would threaten Irish neutrality. This was not an unreasonable concern, particularly because two years earlier, in 1999, Ireland had officially become a NATO partner, though not a full member.<sup>13</sup> A year after Nice I was rejected, the European Council met in Seville where a Fianna Fáil led Government, in an attempt to get Nice II over the line, made a National Declaration that stated:

'the participation of ... the Irish Defence Forces in overseas operations, including those carried out under the European security and defence policy, requires

- a the authorisation of the operation by the Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations,
- b the agreement of the Irish Government and
- c the approval of Dáil Éireann, in accordance with Irish law.'<sup>14</sup>

The government gave a commitment that 'in the event of Ireland's ratification of the Treaty of Nice, this Declaration will be associated with Ireland's instrument of ratification'.<sup>15</sup> On that basis, in October 2002, the Irish electorate voted in favour of Nice II and the Triple Lock was subsequently written into Irish law.

Article five of Bunreacht na hÉireann establishes that 'Ireland is a sovereign, independent, democratic state', while article six sets out that 'all powers of government, legislative, executive and judicial, derive, under God, from the people'.<sup>16</sup> Under our constitution, sovereignty therefore

is vested in the people, and holding referendums, such as that of Nice, is an essential part of the democratic process. It was in this context that we, the people, demanded of our government that legislative safeguards be put in place to protect Irish neutrality before we approved the Nice Treaty.

Two decades later the government now plans to renege on its legal and political commitment to the people without consulting us. This is not a vindication of our sovereignty, as Leo Varadkar suggested, but an affront to it, and to the democratic process. **That the government is seeking to amend legislation put in place on foot of a commitment to the people within the context of a referendum sets a dangerous precedent for our democracy, particularly when that amendment seeks to permit precisely what the electorate would not tolerate – Irish participation in security structures that would endanger our neutrality.**

Significantly, in an April 2022 Irish Times/Ipsos opinion poll on the matter, **an overwhelming majority (over two-thirds) of Irish people said they did not want to see any change to Irish neutrality.**<sup>17</sup> Note that this poll was taken two months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when war hysteria had taken hold across Europe. Aware of the popular support for peace and neutrality, the government decided not to consult us on the matter, playing down the significance of the upcoming amendment, and, adding insult to injury, told us that we shouldn't conflate Irish neutrality with the Triple Lock.

## **Government Argument No. 2: Don't conflate Irish neutrality with the Triple Lock!**

**'Our neutrality will not be affected by triple-lock change'**

Opinion piece by Fianna Fáil MEP Billie Kelleher  
published in the Irish Examiner in November 2023.<sup>18</sup>

Political leaders argue that Irish neutrality should not be conflated with the Triple Lock. In the very recent past these same political leaders argued the exact opposite.

In a December 2013 Dáil debate Micheál Martin described the Triple Lock as being 'at the core of our neutrality', acknowledging that although 'the United Nations is not working as it should' ... 'we must not abandon it as an essential part of the international system'.<sup>19</sup>

For argument's sake, let's take Fianna Fáil at its word, (that being its word in 2024) and test the hypothesis that removing the Triple Lock would have no effect on Irish neutrality.

Imagine that a peace-keeping resolution were to come before the Security Council and that it were vetoed by a P5 member. Imagine that a regional organisation, like the EU, were to deploy a mission regardless of the veto. And imagine that Ireland were to participate in that mission. That deployment would essentially amount to Ireland flouting the outcome of Security Council proceedings and taking sides in an international dispute or conflict where there was a clear disagreement between global powers. What legitimacy would Ireland, as a neutral country, have to participate in such a mission? Moreover, what are the chances that such a mission would actually be able to keep the peace if it were opposed by a powerful P5 member? Consider the following scenario:

Hypothetical resolutions to deploy peace-keeping missions to Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine or to Israeli occupied territory in Palestine are vetoed by Russia and the US respectively, but the EU deploys a battlegroup regardless. This would bring the EU into direct conflict with the opposing P5 member, increasing geopolitical tension that could spill over into direct confrontation or war. Surely this would fuel rather than curb instability? And surely it would violate the principle of neutrality if Ireland were to participate in such a battlegroup?

The UN is inherently a highly political space and the decisions taken there are often deeply contentious and divisive. **Ireland deploying its defence forces to a mission that has not garnered UN approval in the General Assembly or the Security Council would amount to Ireland taking sides. That would be a flagrant breach of our neutrality.**

**No matter how the government spins it, Irish neutrality and the Triple Lock are intrinsically linked. Removing the latter automatically weakens the former. There are no two ways about this. Even the government seemed to think so until recently.**

The article by MEP Kelleher is **exemplary of the government's obnoxious tone and the contempt it holds for 'the usual gang of neutrality hawks'** who challenge its view on the matter. It is not possible to quote it in full here but the following lines are included to give the reader a flavour:

'I can already imagine the same old arguments from the Irish left, claiming that this is a first step on a slippery slope to joining NATO, and to ending Ireland's long-standing policy of military neutrality.'

'Reactionary, left-wing politicians should desist from conflating the two issues. It is insulting to the intelligence of our people.'

'what really galls me about the criticism of this policy change is the idea that certain left-wing politicians, as members of Dáil Éireann, don't trust themselves and their colleagues to make a decision in the best interests of Ireland and its Defence Forces.'

'Sadly, I believe every utterance by the usual gang of neutrality hawks comes from a very simple place: they intensely dislike the US and the West, and view every issue as binary. If the US is possibly involved, then we must be on the opposite side, is their logic.'

'We are a sovereign, democratic state, with a strong separation of powers. I do not believe we have anything to fear from making the decision ourselves and taking back the power from authoritarian states like Russia and China.'

# Government Argument No. 3: The Triple Lock is not fit for purpose

“The Triple Lock system is no longer fit for purpose. ... Of the three ‘locks’ of the system, it is really only the final lock, an endorsement by the United Nations, that is problematic.”

Renew Europe policy brief prepared by Fianna Fáil MEP Barry Andrews <sup>20</sup>

The purpose not served by the Triple Lock is the overseas deployment of Irish troops on missions that do not have UN authorisation.

An example of a mission that did not garner UN approval was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. US Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared before the UN Security Council in February 2003 laying out the case for a military intervention in Iraq based on false allegations that Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, was harbouring weapons of mass destruction.<sup>21</sup> He wasn't. The Security Council did not act and there was no UN authorisation. Nevertheless, the US, together with Australia, Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Poland launched Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' on 19 March 2003. Browne University estimates that up to 315,190 Iraqi civilians were killed by direct violence following the invasion but the number killed by indirect violence is likely much higher.<sup>22</sup> If the Irish government revokes the Triple Lock there would effectively be no legislative impediment to stop a future government from deploying Irish troops to similar operations.

The Triple Lock safeguards against governments making rash or reckless decisions that could see Irish troops deployed to missions that may compromise Irish neutrality, or to wage war. In recent years, the EU has shamelessly supported war and genocide as a matter of policy and it is not difficult to imagine a scenario where an EU battlegroup would deploy to a war zone. This is particularly so considering that the EU supports Ukrainian troops under the Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine. Although the mission's activities currently take place in the EU, were it to be deployed to Ukraine following a request from President Zelenskyy, the Triple Lock would preclude Irish troops from being sent to the front lines. **Ireland's Triple Lock essentially stands as a bulwark against deploying Irish troops to war and conflict zones. Far from it not being fit for purpose, it is, in fact, serving precisely the purpose it was created for – keeping Ireland out of wars and protecting Irish neutrality.**

The government often draws on the following to substantiate the argument that the Triple Lock is not fit for purpose:

- Undersea infrastructure
- Evacuating Irish citizens from abroad
- Protection against cyber attacks

## • Undersea infrastructure

‘Our status as an island nation also brings its own specific risks and threats, not least the particular vulnerabilities posed to our national and European energy and communications infrastructure in the waters of the North Atlantic, close to our shores, and within our national territory’. <sup>23</sup>

Opinion piece by Tánaiste Micheál Martin published in the Irish Examiner in June 2023

This is an extensive topic. It intersects with EU and NATO ambitions to expand territorial dominance and control, with both entities naming undersea infrastructure as a priority area for them. Ireland, as an EU member state and as an island nation in the north Atlantic, finds itself at the centre of these aspirations.

### Ireland's Naval Service

Ireland's naval service is a contingent of Oglagh na hÉireann. It is mandated predominantly to patrol Irish territorial waters. A UN mandate is not required for this task and the Triple Lock is not engaged. If the naval service is deployed as part of an international mission, for example to the Mediterranean Sea, the Triple Lock may be engaged and a UN mandate would be required.

### Irish and international waters

Three-quarters of all undersea cables in the northern hemisphere pass through or near Irish territorial waters, mostly off the southwest coast.<sup>24</sup> There is a tendency to treat undersea infrastructure in the north Atlantic as though it were in an extra-jurisdictional space devoid of legal norms and that the EU or NATO had reasonable cause to intervene to protect it. In fact, such infrastructure is subject to a vast body of customary international law and international maritime law developed over centuries to deal with the conduct of states at sea. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea states that ‘the high seas shall be reserved for peaceful purposes’ and that ‘no state may validly purport to subject any part of the high seas to its sovereignty’. The Convention also includes provisions on undersea infrastructure.<sup>25</sup> **Any dispute stemming from undersea infrastructure in international waters off the coast of Ireland must be dealt with multilaterally at the United Nations, and not by regional military alliances attempting to capitalise on the presence of undersea cables to exert territorial dominance and control.**

Regarding Irish territorial waters, Ireland is a small nation. Our military could never match the might of global powers or defend the country in the face of an attack. **Neutrality and diplomacy are our best and only defence.** This applies equally to protecting the island of Ireland, as well as in the waters surrounding it. Our diplomatic efforts and our neutrality are significantly weakened by participating in divisive military structures, such as NATO or EU battlegroups. Rather than getting closer to these structures, we should be pulling away from them.



## Diplomacy v. Militarism and undersea infrastructure

In January 2022, Russia intended to conduct naval exercises in international waters off the coast of Ireland but inside Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone. Concern was expressed about potential damage to undersea infrastructure, as well as the impact on fishing. The Irish government requested that Russia relocate to waters outside those patrolled by Ireland and it did so.<sup>26</sup> This is an example of successful diplomacy involving a small neutral nation with an insignificant army and a global military and nuclear power. Yet it is frequently used to advocate for Ireland to adopt a militarised defence strategy, but to what end? Ireland could never match the military might of a global power, such as Russia, nor should it ever try. The consequences of such a military confrontation would be catastrophic. **Diplomacy and neutrality have served Ireland well since the foundation of the state and they continue to do so today. They are our only defence.**

On 26 September 2022, several blasts occurred over a 17 hour period that completely destroyed the Nord Stream pipeline, Europe's most important undersea infrastructure.<sup>27</sup> The pipeline transported Russian gas to a European market and much of Europe depended on it. The attack took place in waters surrounded by NATO members Denmark, Germany, Norway, Poland and Sweden (now a full member but at the time was in the process of joining). National investigations have not yielded results, in some cases they've already been shelved, and no-one has been held to account. An attempt by Russia to get the UN Security Council to call for an independent inquiry did not garner support with only Brazil, China, and Russia voting in favour and the other twelve members abstaining.<sup>28</sup> Award-winning investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, concluded that the US had taken out the pipeline.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of who was responsible, in the aforementioned example, **Europe's most important piece of undersea infrastructure was blown up in the heart of 'NATO territory'.** It would follow that forming alliances with NATO won't necessarily provide an ironclad guarantee against such attacks. To the contrary, partnerships involving global powers and alliances are much more likely to increase the likelihood that undersea infrastructure would become a target because of the geopolitical interests at stake.

## Ireland's embrace of NATO and the EU's military structures

In February 2024 Ireland signed the Individual Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) with NATO, which will 'see enhanced cooperation aimed at protecting against potential threats to undersea infrastructure and cybersecurity'.<sup>30</sup> This was framed as a benign agreement involving information exchanges and former Green Party leader Eamon Ryan dismissed the idea that there was any infringement of Irish neutrality. In reality, **it is hard to see how an agreement between Ireland and NATO could be anything but a breach of our neutrality.** If the ITPP expands to include the deployment of a patrol mission then the Triple Lock would preclude Ireland from participating unless it had a UN mandate. Irish troops have participated in NATO exercises in the past,<sup>31</sup> so it is foreseeable that they would conduct joint patrol missions with the war alliance if the Triple Lock were removed.

As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in February 2022, the EU and NATO are 'one Union, one Alliance, united in purpose'<sup>32</sup> so it is unsurprising that the EU has also set its sights on undersea infrastructure and is using it as a pretext to expand militarily. Many of these initiatives are being rolled out by PESCO, the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation, which 'deepens defence cooperation between EU member states'.<sup>33</sup>

The Dáil recently approved Irish participation in PESCO initiatives specifically related to undersea infrastructure. It is beyond the scope of this text to examine PESCO's ten maritime projects,<sup>34</sup> but suffice to say that the Irish government's ambition to dismantle the Triple Lock is driven by a desire to drag Ireland into the EU's military structures, something which the Irish public has opposed in two consecutive referendums.

It is virtually impossible to militarily secure the undersea infrastructure in the Atlantic, but setting this as a priority area for NATO and the EU provides a pretext under which vast sums of public money can be channelled to private arms companies and the war industry. It also serves a second NATO – EU goal of territorial expansion. For Ireland, participating in these, and similar initiatives, will likely come at a significant cost to the public purse, to the detriment of areas such as health care, housing, education and social services. Ireland's efforts would be much better placed in fomenting diplomatic ties that underscore Ireland's neutrality rather than falling into step with the imperialist aspirations of NATO and the EU.

The Triple Lock is an embarrassing obstacle for the government as it seeks to cosy up to its warmongering friends in Brussels and Washington. Abandoning it would allow the government to show that it is fully committed to forging ahead with NATO partnerships and participating in EU battlegroups and PESCO. At a time when a war frenzied logic has taken hold in the corridors of power, Ireland's Triple Lock is keeping us out of war alliances and military structures that our government seems hellbent on dragging us into. It is for this reason that the government has decided that the Triple Lock is no longer fit for purpose.

## • Evacuating Irish citizens from abroad

The government argues that this legislative change is required because of the 'growing need to be able to dispatch our troops quickly with the flexibility to urgently respond to any crisis where, for example, Irish citizens require assistance abroad'.<sup>35</sup> The government is right - we should be able to act quickly to evacuate Irish people from abroad. But the Triple Lock shouldn't inhibit Ireland from doing so. The spirit of the Triple Lock is to safeguard against the deployment of Irish defence forces into situations that might breach Irish neutrality. The government knows this. Yet it got itself into a bind in 2021 and 2023 with regard to the evacuation of Irish citizens from Afghanistan and Sudan respectively, and the Triple Lock was framed as an impediment. If indeed it was, then **the logical conclusion would be to provide legislative clarity in respect of evacuation missions, not to abandon the Triple Lock altogether.**

## • Cyber attacks

Cyber attacks are a reality and the consequences can be devastating. But **the only defence against such attacks is the implementation of digital security measures, not the amendment of legislation to deploy troops outside a UN mandate.** Nonetheless, the government will regularly include cyber attacks when advocating for the removal of the Triple Lock.

## Government Argument No. 4: 'We must deal with the world as it is now'

'We cannot isolate ourselves from the wider geopolitical and security environment and we, therefore, need to take our own security interests, and our responsibilities towards our partners, more seriously than ever before ... Simply put, our starting point in addressing our security must be the world as it is, not the world as we wish it to be or how it might once have been.'<sup>36</sup>

Opinion piece by Tánaiste Micheál Martin published in the Irish Examiner in June 2023

The argument goes that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe's security has changed significantly and as such Ireland must 're-examine' its neutrality. 'The world has changed' we were told by then Taoiseach/now Tánaiste Micheál Martin.<sup>37</sup>

The world has changed multiple times since Irish people formed the Irish Neutrality League in 1914 advocating a neutrality policy rooted in anti-imperialism.<sup>38</sup> It has experienced two world wars, the Cold War and a nuclear arms race, anti-colonial liberation struggles, the so-called Global War on Terror, and most recently the Russo-Ukrainian war and Israel's genocidal war on Gaza.

**If we were to abandon our neutrality every time the world changed we would have done so decades ago.**

Similarly, we are often told that it is no longer 1939. This was the case in April 2024 when a delegation of peace activists appeared before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and An Taoiseach, that examined the EU's Act in Support of Ammunition Production.<sup>39</sup> Fine Gael TD and Committee Chair, Bernard Durkan, declared that 'neutrality worked well in 1939 and it was the only obvious option available to this country' but went on to say that 'we cannot declare neutrality on an aggressor'. It was a long intervention but the gist of it was that neutrality is an outdated and redundant concept, and we should stop being a nuisance and let the government get on with setting out Ireland's foreign policy as it sees fit.

Indeed it's not 1939. It is 2024, but times are far from peaceful. Geopolitical analysts now regularly debate whether or not we might be headed for World War Three and the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has set the Doomsday clock at 90 seconds to midnight forewarning of 'a moment of historic danger' in respect of a nuclear disaster.<sup>40</sup> In 1939 there were no nuclear powers. Today there are nine and they are in possession of 12,512 nuclear warheads, with Russia and the US in possession of over 5000 each. Detonating just one of these could kill hundreds of thousands of people and cause catastrophic environmental damage for decades to come.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile Israel's genocide on Gaza, armed and supported by the US and Europe, looks set to expand and plunge the entire Middle East into a devastating regional war and Ukrainian troops have recently crossed into Russian territory further escalating that war. Armed conflict plays out too across parts of the African and Asian continents, with extreme levels of violence in countries across the Americas.

Globally, the arms trade is booming with states regularly doing highly lucrative arms deals. These generate massive wealth for arms companies which, far from being passive actors, are often instrumental in shaping the policies that they later reap the benefits from.<sup>42</sup> War is big business and the massive profits it generates fuel a permanent cycle of instability and violence. Military spending has never been higher globally,<sup>43</sup> with the result being more war, more conflict, and consequently more forced displacement, death and destruction. **Ireland would now like a piece of this murderous pie, so abandoning the Triple Lock must be understood within a broader context in which the government seeks, not only to renege on its commitments to UN peace-keeping, but to fully embrace the war industry and let its key players know that Ireland is open for business.**

In October 2022, the government held an arms fair titled 'Building the Ecosystem identifying connections for collaboration in Security, Defence and Dual Technologies',<sup>44</sup> meanwhile the Irish Defence and Security Association, composed of members that include, among others, US arms giant Lockheed Martin, has been 'lobbying government to increase state participation in the arms trade'.<sup>45</sup> Fine Gael Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, recently wrote that 'more spending on defence is vital - the world is a very different place'.<sup>46</sup> Sounding a bit like a broken record, her article concluded with the usual vacuous refrain that 'none of this involves abandoning our neutrality or joining NATO'.

The reality is that the government has been hollowing out our neutrality for decades. Dismantling the Triple Lock will be the final blow. Nowhere is this more evident than in US military use of Shannon airport. This violated Irish neutrality in 2003 during the Iraq war and it violates it now in the context of Israel's genocide in Gaza, with the US being Israel's main arms supplier. According to Shannon Watch,<sup>47</sup> since 7 October 2023 at least 200 military flights have transitted through Shannon airport. In addition, it recently emerged that Israeli military planes flew through Irish airspace transporting at least 54.6 tonnes of weaponry.<sup>48</sup> In January 2024 the International Court of Justice formally put Israel on trial for genocide and all states parties to the Genocide Convention were put on notice of their obligations under international law. Ireland, by failing to prohibit military access to Irish airspace and Shannon Airport, is consequently failing in its obligations under international law, which may render it complicit in genocide before the world's highest court.

The government stated in its July 2024 Defence Review that we must meet 'our responsibilities as a trusted and reliable partner to other nations who share our values and support of the rules-based international order'.<sup>49</sup> One might wonder, which rules and what order? The Defence Policy Review is instructive.<sup>50</sup> It states that 'Ireland is no longer protected by its geographic position and history of military non-aggression. We are vulnerable to the same threats as our European neighbours and partners ... The international security environment is contested, dynamic and volatile and there are challenges to the rules-based international order which supports a small open economy like Ireland'. It goes on to say 'Ireland's engagement with NATO remains within our policy of military neutrality', though it does not say how, and that 'we also have a responsibility to our neighbours and EU partners to contribute in key areas to the defence and security of Europe', though there is no suggestion that these 'responsibilities' might encroach on our sovereignty in the same way that the UN system apparently does.

The review is peppered with language such as 'interoperability', 'readiness', 'robust', 'dynamic'. But perhaps the most revealing word of all is 'Oireachtas' alongside its English translation 'Irish parliament', indicating that the review was written, not so much for an Irish audience,

but rather to let our like-minded partners in the rules based order realm know, that in Ireland we're able to talk the talk, and once we bin the Triple Lock, we will step up and walk the walk. In fact, in 2022 the Commission on the Defence Forces suggested that a 'range of proactive measures' be taken to increase recruitment, including 'engaging with sports clubs and other voluntary bodies, especially in areas challenged by poverty or isolation'.<sup>51</sup> Both reviews taken together would indicate that the **government is planning to enact defence policies that will likely see working class people from across the country being sent off to fight imperialist wars to defend the 'rules based international order'**. This is Ireland a century after gaining independence (26 of 32 counties).

In 1939, Taoiseach and Fianna Fáil leader Eamon de Valera could well have argued that 'the world has changed' and re-examined Ireland's neutrality. Instead he showed courage and smart leadership and affirmed Ireland's neutral position, though it was highly unpopular with our nearest neighbour. Almost two decades later at the height of the Cold War, Fianna Fáil's Frank Aiken, as Minister for External Affairs, championed the cause of nuclear non-proliferation at the UN. He also put forward proposals for de-escalation, including military withdrawal from central Europe. He too could have said 'the world has changed', as states developed nuclear arsenals, and urged Ireland to join NATO but he didn't. He stayed the course and forged ahead with an unwavering adherence to the emerging structures of international law and the principles of demilitarisation, de-escalation and peace. Both men showed an incredible commitment to international peace and Irish neutrality and the current spectacle, being led overwhelmingly by Fianna Fáil, likely has them turning in their graves.

More recently, in 2017, Ireland was part of the 'core group' of nations that included Austria, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa, and played a pivotal role in the process that led to the adoption of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Similarly Ireland played a central role in crafting the Sustainable Development Goals, and in proactively advancing the UN's New Agenda for Peace, among other initiatives. **Irish neutrality is key to cultivating trust and confidence and showing that Ireland is invested in peace and multilateralism with no hidden agenda.**<sup>52</sup> The government must realise that it can't have it both ways - if it deploys troops to EU battlegroups or NATO missions, this will negatively affect Ireland's capacity to do diplomacy.

So yes, Tánaiste, we must deal with the world as it is now, a world experiencing various crises, driven by advanced capitalism, causing death and destruction, the deterioration of the environment and the exacerbation of climate breakdown. We need political leaders to show integrity and moral courage, not timidity and cowardice, to represent the will of the people and not the interests of industry, even if that means rowing against the tide of the 'rules based international order'. We need to protect the Triple Lock as a fundamental component of Irish neutrality and as a tangible demonstration of Ireland's commitment to multilateralism and we need to uphold the rule of law by enacting the Arms Embargo Bill and the Occupied Territories Bill in line with our legal obligations under the Genocide Convention. This would set an urgently needed global precedent. In the words of lifelong peace activist, Lelia Doolan, **'peace takes brains'**. **It's about time we saw some coming from the political leadership in Leinster House.**

# Conclusion

The arguments set out by the government do not justify dismantling the Triple Lock. The UN does not encroach on Irish sovereignty; Irish neutrality and the Triple Lock are intrinsically linked; the Triple Lock remains fit for purpose; and the Triple Lock is precisely what is needed to deal with the world as it is now. Globally, we are experiencing escalating militarism, hostility, war and conflict. The Triple Lock provides Ireland with a unique opportunity to show decisive leadership, to reassert itself as a neutral state and to actively use its voice and its leverage in the multilateral sphere to advocate for justice and peace, and for the protection of international law.

Our Bunreacht establishes that sovereignty is vested in the people. The Triple Lock embodies a legal and political commitment from the government to the people and without consulting us the government has no mandate to revoke it. Our Bunreacht also affirms Ireland's 'devotion to the ideal of peace and 'adherence to the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes'. All public representatives elected to the Oireachtas must uphold these obligations and must reverse the trend of eroding Irish neutrality by enacting the necessary democratic and legislative processes to give it constitutional protection.

Irish neutrality is not simply a matter of government policy. Neutrality, like sovereignty, emanates from the people. It is part of our identity stretching back over a century and is rooted in anti-imperialist struggle. It is a rejection of the notion that Irish people would be sent to fight on foreign soil and return scarred from the horrors of war, with life-altering wounds, or in body bags. At its core, neutrality is a deeply held belief that we, the people of Ireland, oppose war and cherish peace. And our neutrality, which encompasses the Triple Lock, provides us with a pathway to realise those aspirations.

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