

# Ireland's Defense Problem Isn't Neutrality

It's That the Country's Institutional System Is Optimized for Not Having a Military  
Sinéad O'Sullivan

## IDEA IN BRIEF

### THE PARADOX

Ireland ran a €42 billion budget surplus between 2022 and 2024. However, it spends 0.2% of GDP on defense—the lowest in the EU, half the rate of the next smallest spender, Malta. Its own military has stated it is “not equipped, postured or realistically prepared to conduct a meaningful defense of the State.” The money exists to create a defense program, but the capability does not.

### THE DIAGNOSIS

Ireland's defense crisis is not a funding problem; for a country of its wealth, resources are not the constraint. The constraint is architectural, in that the entire institutional ecosystem—political, legal, cultural, administrative—has been designed around the absence of military capability. Neutrality is not a policy choice layered on top of the system; it is the premise around which the system was built. Constructing a credible defense posture would require institutional transformation, and the state currently has near-zero adaptive bandwidth for that scale of change.

### THE RISK

Ireland is attempting to move from LOA 1 (inadequate) to LOA 2 (enhanced) by 2028 while its commander-in-chief opposes the existence of the military, personnel strength is at a fifty-year low, it has no radar, no air defense, no functioning naval armament, and no national intelligence agency. The architecture gap is widening.

Ireland is one of the wealthiest countries in Europe.

Between 2022 and 2024, the Irish state ran a cumulative budget surplus of over forty-two billion euros, and its GDP per capita is among the highest in the world. It hosts the European headquarters of most major American technology companies, and it sits on the Atlantic seaboard, astride subsea data cables and energy interconnectors that are critical infrastructure for the entire continent.

Despite this importance, Ireland spends 0.2 percent of GDP on defense—the lowest rate in the European Union, lower than even Malta or Luxembourg. Its permanent defense force counts 7,531 personnel

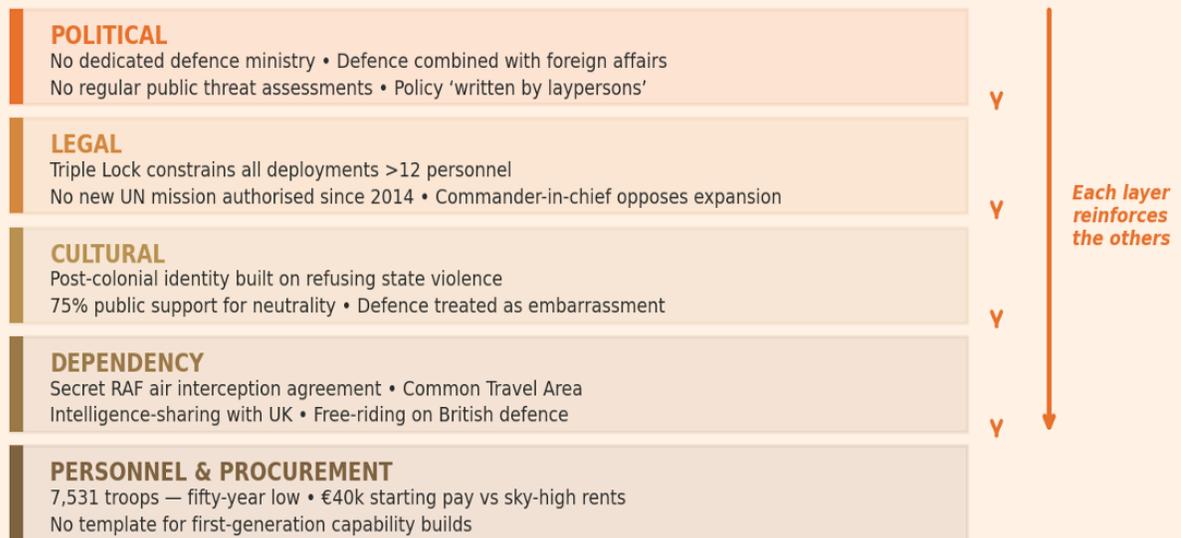
against an establishment it cannot fill. Its naval vessels have no functioning main armament, no radar, no air defense, no fighter jets, no surface-to-air missiles, and no capacity to detect or intercept aircraft entering its own airspace.

The conventional reading of this situation is that Ireland chooses not to spend on defense because it is neutral. This reading is also, at best, incomplete.

Ireland's defense crisis stems from the way the state is built. Its institutional architecture—political, legal, administrative, and cultural—has evolved around the sustained absence of military capability, with neutrality sitting at the foundation of that design. Debating neutrality alone does little to change the institutional reality that flows from it.

# Ireland's Architecture of Incapacity

Five institutional layers configured for the absence of military capability



**Figure 1:** Ireland's institutional system is not missing defense capability by accident. Five reinforcing architectural layers are each configured for its absence. Source: Author's analysis.

*Ireland's defense crisis is not a gap in an otherwise functional system. It is the system functioning exactly as designed—optimized, across every institutional layer, for the absence of military capability.*

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF INCAPACITY

What makes Ireland's case analytically interesting is not the low spending, as plenty of countries underspend on defense, but the completeness with which the institutional system has been configured around the absence of military capability. This is not a gap to be filled, it is the actual design of the state.

Consider the political architecture: Ireland has never had a dedicated defense ministry, and the portfolio has been combined with other briefs—most recently foreign affairs; here is no national intelligence agency; intelligence is split between the Defense Forces and An Garda Síochána—a fragmented arrangement unique in Europe; there is no regular public threat assessment by military or intelligence leaders; the 2024 defense white paper was drafted primarily by civil servants and external consultants

rather than by the military establishment. The institutional signal is clear: defense is an administrative afterthought, not a strategic function.

Also consider the legal architecture: the Triple Lock—requiring UN Security Council authorisation, government approval, and parliamentary consent for deployments—has functioned as a structural constraint. As such, no new peacekeeping mission has been authorised by the Security Council since 2014. While the government is attempting reform, the bill faces opposition from a president—the Supreme Commander of the Irish Defence Forces—who has publicly stated that Ireland “will never be able to have an army.” The legal system does not merely constrain military action abroad; it shapes the domestic political calculus in ways that make even modest capability investments politically expensive.

Now consider the cultural architecture: Irish national identity was forged in opposition to British military power. The Defense Forces emerged from the pro-Treaty IRA during the Civil War. Seventy-five percent of the public supports neutrality, which is not a policy preference that can be reversed by a white paper as it is an identity commitment embedded in the political economy of the state. Defense spending is not merely underfunded; it is culturally illegitimate in a way that no other category of public expenditure is.

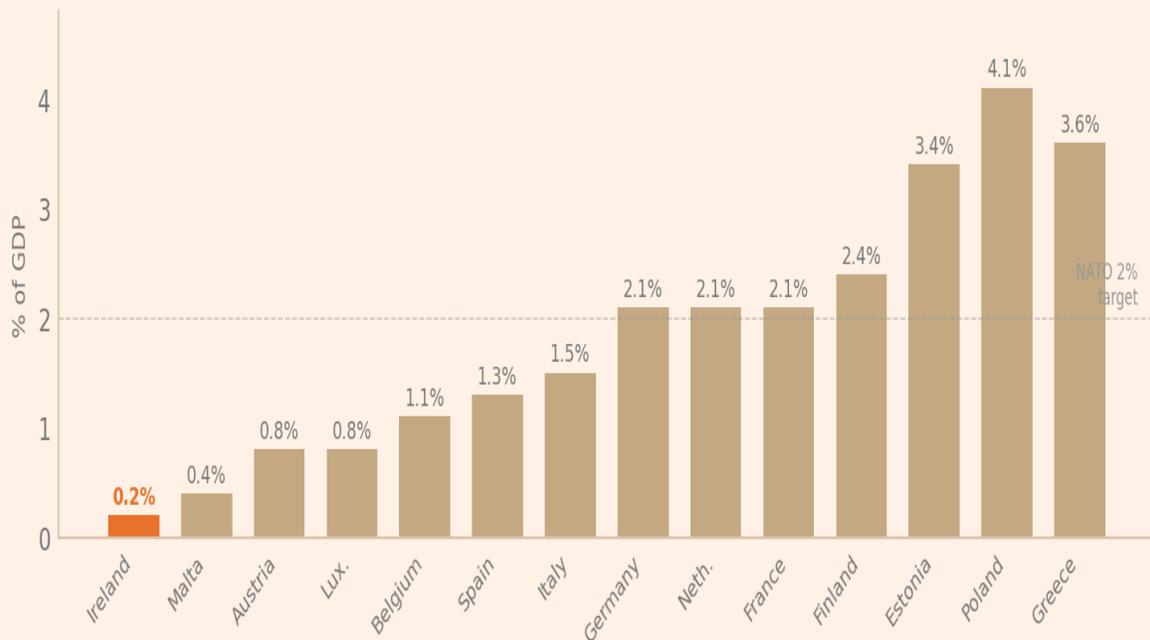
Additionally, consider the dependency architecture. Ireland's security ultimately rests on a secret agreement with the United Kingdom under which the Royal Air Force intercepts potentially hostile aircraft in Irish airspace. Indeed, Russian military aircraft

have been intercepted by RAF jets over Ireland without Irish authorities being initially aware. Ireland free-rides on British defense without acknowledging it—a dependency that its neutrality narrative actively obscures.

Finally, consider the personnel and procurement architecture. At 7,531, personnel strength is at a fifty-year low against an establishment of 9,739. A Private 3 Star starts at roughly forty thousand euros in a country where rent near military barracks averages over eighteen hundred euros per month. The system is losing people faster than it can recruit them, and the procurement apparatus has never been designed for first-generation capability builds. Every element reinforces the others.

## Defence spending as a percentage of GDP, 2025

Selected EU member states. Ireland highlighted in orange.



**Figure 2:** Defense spending as a percentage of GDP, 2025 estimates. Ireland's 0.2% is lower than every EU and NATO member. Sources: NATO, European Defense Agency, national government data.

## CAPABILITY GAPS AT A GLANCE

DOMAIN	CURRENT STATUS	WHAT IT MEANS
<b>Primary radar</b>	None. Programme targeting 2028.	Ireland cannot detect aircraft entering its airspace.
<b>Air defense</b>	No fighters. No SAMs. No interception.	Relies on secret UK RAF agreement to intercept hostile aircraft.
<b>Naval armament</b>	No functioning main armament on vessels.	Patrol vessels cannot engage threats. One large vessel deployable.
<b>Anti-submarine</b>	No subsurface detection or engagement.	Cannot monitor submarine activity in one of Europe's largest EEZs.
<b>Intelligence</b>	Split military/police. No unified agency.	Unique in Europe. Coordination frictions across IMIS, Garda CSB, NCSC.
<b>Cyber defense</b>	NCSC under-resourced.	2021 HSE ransomware attack cost hundreds of millions.
<b>Personnel</b>	7,531 vs 9,739 establishment. Fifty-year low.	Losing ~10 per week in 2022. Cannot staff existing platforms.

### THE LOA FRAMEWORK

Ireland has produced one of the more honest capability assessments of any European state. The Commission on the Defense Forces, which reported in 2022, created three Levels of Ambition that map directly onto the coordination architecture framework developed in this series.

**LOA 1 is the current state:** “inadequate for the defense of Ireland.” The Commission’s own language is striking in its directness. At LOA 1, Ireland cannot monitor its own airspace, cannot detect submarines in its exclusive economic zone, cannot arm its naval vessels, and cannot sustain its existing force structure. This is not a baseline from which to build, but an institutional acknowledgement that the defense establishment, as currently configured, cannot perform its constitutional function.

**LOA 2 is the government’s target by 2028:** “enhanced” capability including primary radar, improved naval capacity, a counter-drone system, and a reformed reserve. LOA 2 would give Ireland the ability to monitor its airspace and maritime domain—functions that every other European state already possesses. The capital budget has been raised to €1.7 billion over 2026–2030 to support this transition.

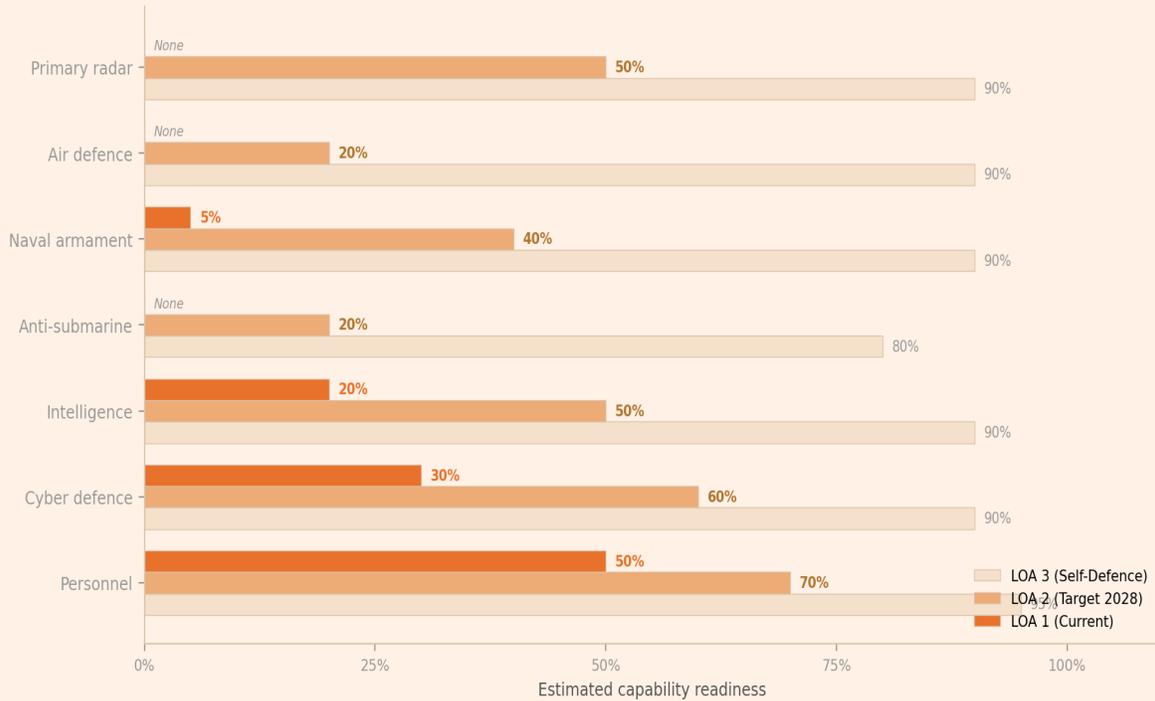
**LOA 3 is “the first level at which Ireland could defend itself.”** It would require ground-based air defense, a meaningful naval combat capability, anti-submarine warfare capacity, a unified intelligence agency, and personnel strength well above current establishment. The new Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Rossa Mulcahy, has stated that he views everything “through an LOA 3 lens.” But no budget, timeline, or institutional roadmap exists for LOA 3. It remains an aspiration without an architecture.

The gap between these levels is not primarily fiscal, as Ireland could fund LOA 3 from a single year’s budget surplus. Instead, the gap is institutional: the distance between what Ireland’s defense establishment can currently coordinate and what LOA 2—let alone LOA 3—demands. Every domain requires capabilities that have never existed in the Irish system: there is no template, no procurement precedent, and no institutional memory of building first-generation military capabilities at this scale.

As of December 2025, fifty-four of the Commission’s 130 recommendations have been completed—roughly forty percent, nearly four years after publication. The rate of implementation has slowed, not accelerated. Personnel strength continues to fall. The Naval Service cannot arm its existing ships. The radar programme, the centrepiece of LOA 2, faces the uncertainties that characterise every first-generation capability build in a system with no experience of delivering them.

## Ireland's Levels of Ambition: The Capability Gap

Estimated capability readiness across seven domains. LOA 1 = current. LOA 2 = government target by 2028. LOA 3 = minimum self-defence.



**Figure 3:** Estimated capability readiness across seven domains at each Level of Ambition. LOA 1 (current) shows near-zero capability in radar, air defense, and anti-submarine warfare. LOA 2 (target 2028) addresses monitoring but not defense. LOA 3 is the minimum for self-defense. Source: Author's assessment based on Commission on the Defense Forces report and public data.

### THE BANDWIDTH PROBLEM

The coordination architecture framework developed through O'Sullivan's work distinguishes between *transformation architectures*—high adaptive bandwidth, capable of reorganising under pressure—and *optimization architectures*, which maintain stability but resist change. Ireland's system is neither. Rather, it is an architecture optimized for the absence of a capability that it now needs to build.

However, this is harder than starting from zero, as Ireland has a defense establishment—barracks, brigades, a naval base, an air corps—but every element has been shaped by decades of operation at a scale designed to be inadequate. The institutional muscle memory is oriented toward peacekeeping deployments of a few hundred personnel, not national defense. The system must simultaneously maintain existing operations while building capabilities it has never possessed, through institutions that were never designed for transformation.

**The commander-in-chief problem:** President Catherine Connolly, elected October 2025, is constitutionally the Supreme Commander of the Defense Forces while ideologically opposed to their existence. During her campaign, she described the military as an institution Ireland “will never be able to have.” The president's public stance does not carry executive authority over defense policy, but it undermines the political legitimacy of the transformation the government is attempting. In a system where defense is already culturally marginal, a commander-in-chief who opposes the mission compounds the bandwidth constraint.

**The personnel death spiral:** At seven thousand five hundred—a fifty-year low—the Defense Forces cannot staff existing platforms, let alone new ones. A Private 3 Star salary starts at roughly forty thousand euros in a country where housing near barracks is among the most expensive in Europe. In 2022, the forces were losing roughly ten people per week. Recruitment competes not with other militaries but with multinational technology companies headquartered in Dublin.

**The procurement architecture.** Ireland is building capabilities it has never possessed—primary radar, ground-based air defense, counter-drone systems, naval armament—through a procurement system designed for routine replacement of existing equipment. First-generation capability builds require a fundamentally different approach: requirements definition for systems no one has operated, evaluation of suppliers no one has worked with, and integration into an operational concept that does not yet exist.

**The fragmented intelligence system.** The split between military intelligence (J2/IMIS) and police intelligence (Garda CSB), with the NCSC handling cyber and no unified national security agency, means threat assessment flows through channels

that do not naturally connect. Every comparable European state—including those of similar size—has established a unified intelligence or national security structure.

**Neutrality as institutional identity.** Every institutional reform unfolds within a political environment in which neutrality is treated as a core element of national identity. The Triple Lock reform alone has consumed enormous political energy, and seventy-five percent of the population supports neutrality as currently understood. Any capability that appears to move Ireland toward a military posture—even one confined to territorial defense—must therefore navigate a public discourse in which military spending is regarded as inherently suspect.

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*Ireland's security rests on a dependency it cannot acknowledge, provided by a partner it defined itself in opposition to, under an arrangement that has no treaty basis. This is not a stable architecture.*

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## NEUTRALITY IS NOT THE EXPLANATION

The most persistent misconception in Irish defense discourse is that neutrality explains the absence of military capability. *But it does not.* Europe's neutral and non-aligned states have historically maintained some of the continent's most capable defense establishments. Ireland is the exception, not the rule.

**Switzerland is the archetype.** Constitutionally neutral since 1815, it maintains universal male conscription, a trained reserve of roughly one hundred and forty thousand, a domestically produced infantry fighting vehicle (the Piranha series, now exported worldwide), and one of Europe's most sophisticated integrated air defense systems. Misunderstood in Ireland is that Swiss neutrality was never understood as an alternative to defense; it was understood as requiring *more* defense, because Switzerland could not rely on alliance guarantees. The institutional architecture was built accordingly: neutrality was the strategic posture, but military readiness was the operating assumption.

**Austria**, also constitutionally neutral since 1955, maintains a professional military of roughly sixteen thousand with a militia reserve, operates Eurofighter

Typhoons, and participates in EU battlegroups and peacekeeping operations. Austrian neutrality coexists with a domestic defense industry, regular threat assessments, and a military that is sized and equipped for territorial defense. The institutional system treats neutrality and defense capability as complements, not substitutes.

**Finland and Sweden**, both non-aligned for decades before joining NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, maintained formidable defense establishments throughout their neutral periods. Finland's reserve force of two hundred and eighty thousand, universal conscription, and domestically produced armoured vehicles and naval vessels made it one of the most defense-ready states in Europe while formally neutral. Sweden developed the Gripen fighter, a world-class submarine fleet, and a total defense concept that integrated civilian and military preparedness. In both cases, non-alignment was a diplomatic posture that demanded greater national defense capability, not less.

**Ireland's position is structurally unique** among neutral and non-aligned states, in that it is the only one that has treated neutrality as a reason *not* to build defense capability rather than as a reason to *build more* of it. The distinction reflects a

fundamentally different institutional architecture—one in which neutrality functions not as a strategic framework requiring self-reliance, but as a cultural system that has made military capability politically illegitimate.

### THE DEPENDENCY THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

The secret RAF agreement is the most visible expression of Ireland's dependency, but yet this issue runs even deeper. The Common Travel Area means border security is underwritten by British immigration controls, while intelligence-sharing provides threat information Ireland cannot generate independently. Ireland's geographic position, sheltered behind a major NATO power, means any conventional threat would first pass through British-monitored waters and airspace.

However this dependency is less stable than it appears: Brexit has introduced friction, and British defense priorities are shifting toward the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the RAF's willingness to cover Irish airspace is an existing courtesy, not a treaty obligation—and in today's geopolitical climates, we see that courtesies can be quickly withdrawn.

Meanwhile, Ireland sits astride some of Europe's most critical subsea infrastructure—data cables and energy interconnectors—with no naval capacity to monitor or protect it.

### CAN IRELAND INDUSTRIALIZE MILITARILY?

If Europe is rearming and Ireland has deep engineering talent, a pharmaceutical manufacturing base, and EU membership that provides access to European defense industrial programmes, could Ireland become a site for defense production? The surface-level inputs are there: precision manufacturing, a stable regulatory environment, and geographic position on the Atlantic flank of a continent that suddenly needs missile systems, drone platforms, and dual-use technology at scale.

But defense industrialization is not a factory-siting decision, it is a highly complex coordination architecture problem. Building a defense industrial base requires an aligned ecosystem of procurement demand, export control frameworks, classified information handling, a workforce with security clearances, testing and certification infrastructure, and—critically—a political system willing to sustain long-term commitments to military production.

Ireland has the engineering capacity. It lacks everything else, which take several decades to build.

**The procurement channel.** Defense industrialization begins with a domestic customer. Every successful defense-industrial state—from the United States to Switzerland—built its base on domestic procurement. Ireland's defense procurement is negligible: a few hundred million euros annually, almost entirely for basic sustainment, means that there is no pipeline of platform acquisitions, no institutional capacity to manage technical evaluation and through-life support. Without a domestic customer, there is no demand signal around which an industrial base can form.

**The export control architecture.** Defense exports require end-user certificates, re-export controls, classified technology handling, and alignment with international regimes like the Wassenaar Arrangement. Ireland has no export control infrastructure because, to date, it has had nothing to export. However, building one takes years of institutional development with deep political commitment to this long-term market. Switzerland's experience is instructive: in 2022, it blocked re-export of Swiss-made ammunition to Ukraine, infuriating NATO allies. If a country with two centuries of defense-industrial experience still struggles with the political economy of arms exports, could Ireland face these dilemmas without any framework for navigating them?

**The political economy.** Defense production requires sustained government commitment across electoral cycles, community acceptance of manufacturing facilities, and a workforce willing to build weapons—offensive or defensive—in a society where military capability carries cultural stigma. In Ireland, where seventy-five percent of the population supports neutrality and the president describes the military as something the country “will never be able to have,” the political foundations do not exist. Switzerland again provides the contrast: defense manufacturing operates within a society that views military readiness as a civic obligation; Ireland's does not.

The argument that Ireland could host European missile production confuses technical capacity with institutional readiness—precisely the error this coordination architecture framework is designed to identify. Ireland has engineering talent, but what it lacks is the procurement demand, export control

infrastructure, classified information architecture, political legitimacy, and institutional coordination capacity that would be needed to convert that talent into a defense industrial base.

In the language of this coordination framework: the technology could exist, but the architecture to support it does not.

## THE EU PRESIDENCY TEST

Ireland assumes the EU Council Presidency in July 2026, which is both a diplomatic showcase and a security test. The radar programme targets 2028, while counter-drone technology is supposed to be operational by summer 2026. But as of February 2026, the Minister for Defense confirmed “no agreement” with France or the UK for naval support during the presidency.

The presidency will bring heads of state, foreign ministers, and senior EU officials to Dublin for six months of meetings. During President Zelensky’s visit in December 2025, unidentified drones were detected seventeen kilometres off the coast. Portugal’s GNR—a NATO military gendarmerie—provided drone defense near Leinster House. Six months before assuming the EU presidency, Ireland cannot guarantee it can secure its own capital without foreign military assistance.

This is the architecture gap made visible: for while the political ambition exists, the fiscal resources exist, and the security requirement is immediate and specific, the institutional system cannot convert these inputs into capability at the speed the situation demands.

## THE REAL QUESTION

The debate has been framed as a neutrality question:

*Should Ireland remain neutral?*  
*Should it join NATO?*  
*Should it reform the Triple Lock?*

These are important political questions, but they are not the binding constraint, and numerous debates around these topics act as a distraction to the real issue.

Indeed, Ireland could resolve the neutrality debate tomorrow and still face the same institutional reality: a defense establishment at a fifty-year low, a procurement system that has never built first-

generation capabilities, a fragmented intelligence architecture, a commander-in-chief opposed to the military’s existence, and a dependency on Britain that no one in public life dares to name.

Thus, the binding constraint is not an ideology, it is *institutional bandwidth*. Ireland needs a coordination architecture capable of transforming a symbolic defense establishment into a functioning one, under time pressure, in a political environment hostile to the objective. That requires the kind of high-bandwidth institutional adaptation that O’Sullivan’s coordination architecture framework identifies as the distinguishing feature of states that transform successfully—and the kind that Ireland’s system is least equipped to deliver.

The forty-two billion euro surplus is not the *answer*; however, it is the *measure* of the problem.

Ireland has the resources to build a credible defense several times over, but what it does not have is the institutional architecture to convert those resources into military capabilities. Until that architecture is built, the money will continue to exist alongside the incapacity, acting as a proof that in defense, as in economic development, spending is not the hard part; coordination is.

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*This article draws on two working papers by Sinéad O’Sullivan: [Institutions as Coordination Architectures: Adaptive Bandwidth and the Dynamics of Economic Development and Market Formation as a Systems Engineering Problem](#). Both papers develop the formal models, mathematics, and cross-domain evidence summarised here.*

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*Companion articles: “[Power by Other Means](#),” “[Europe’s Defense Problem Isn’t Spending](#),” “[How Do You Pay for Rearmament?](#)” and “[The Chips Race Is a Systems Race](#).” Copies available on request: [s@sinead.co](mailto:s@sinead.co)*