

# A sheep in wolf's clothing?

Karen Devine reviews nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament strategy in Irish foreign policy.

Coloured by historical struggles for self-determination and independence amid centuries of colonisation, Ireland is a natural-born international norm entrepreneur. During the pre-state era, Ireland conducted 'international relations' in many forms that are recognisable if one sets aside international relations' mainstream state-centric framework of understanding, through a range of different non-state collective-network actors from religious missionaries who set up schools to the diaspora created through migration that developed into a network of significant 'hybrid Irish' business and political leaders. These non-state actors positively shaped the image of Ireland in their adopted communities abroad, as their work was perceived as enabling the rise of developing nations, economically, politically and socially. Many streams of pre-state international relations work continued after Ireland gained partial political independence from Britain in 1921, and state activism expanded significantly after Ireland gained sovereignty over foreign affairs through the 1937 Constitution.

The legacy of Ireland's international relations activism that has created a unique form of networked small-state agency is reflected in symbolic foreign policy practices, such as the annual St Patrick's Day presentation of the Bowl of Shamrocks at the White House by Ireland's Taoiseach to the US president. The Irish people, as a sovereign collective, constitute the third part of the network of non-state agents of Irish foreign policy. Then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan predicted in 2000 that what he termed 'the new diplomacy, the people power' — publics determined to play a role and have a say in the decisions which affect them — would rise in international relations.<sup>1</sup> The Irish public have always played this role, and as the bearers of ancestral historical legacy, values and identity, they, acting as individuals within a shared network, drive numerous collective international actions.

Many central tenets of Irish foreign policy can be traced back to values stemming from Ireland's small-state historical experience. For example, Ireland's overseas development and assistance programme, Irish Aid, is strong-

ly focused on food security and the prevention of hunger, based on the memory and legacy of Irish famines. The state works with and supports non-governmental organisations such as Gorta: The Freedom From Hunger Council to further this foreign policy objective. The Irish people's agency and activism is also seen in the area, as they are traditionally one of the top five global contributors to those in need in the world.<sup>2</sup> Recently, tens of thousands of Irish people made individual contributions amounting to several million dollars to the Navajo and Hopi nations' Covid-19 pandemic crisis fundraiser in the United States, in memory of the Choctaw nation's efforts to alleviate the Great Famine in Ireland in 1847. The Choctaw sent an aid package worth \$170–778 to Ireland for 'the relief of the starving poor of Ireland', just sixteen years after their own suffering and loss of life on the 'Trail of Tears', a forced relocation to Indian territory in what is now Oklahoma. Irish non-governmental organisation AfrI (Action from Ireland) has commemorated the Choctaw act of solidarity for more than 30 years, as part of AfrI's annual Famine Walk.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this article, Ireland's disarmament and non-proliferation strategy, according to the government of Ireland, is 'one of five signature foreign policies for Ireland and builds upon Ireland's historic legacy in this area'.<sup>4</sup> Questions addressed include how and why this policy has been sustained, especially in the context of Ireland's membership of the European Union and participation in a nascent European Defence Union, and what kinds of supports, be they public, non-governmental or international, have been involved? This contribution is structured in three sections: the first section outlines the theoretical framework and working hypothesis, the second section presents the competing values and identities that determine the path of Ireland's disarmament and non-proliferation strategy and the third section tests the hypothesis using the case of a new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017. Evidence suggests that Ireland has continued its small state activism in foreign policy, despite competing pressures from the European Union to do otherwise. In harnessing new non-state avenues to progress its international agenda, the article concludes that Ireland appears to be a sheep in wolf's clothing in the area of disarmament and non-proliferation.

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**Ireland's neutrality and dedicated commitment to nuclear disarmament are widely recognised. From its pathfinding, agenda setting role in 1961 at the United Nations seeking a nuclear non-proliferation treaty to its support for the 2017 Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, Irish foreign policy has maintained a dedicated consistency. Yet how does this posture accord with Ireland's membership of the European Union, an entity comprising states parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which remains officially wedded to doctrines of nuclear deterrence? Evaluating that incompatibility and posing different hypotheses offers the opportunity to assess whether this has left Ireland's nuclear disarmament credentials wanting.**

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## Theoretical framework

*Critical Social Constructivist Approach:* International relations theories differ in terms of their ontological and epistemological bases. Materialism — the view that material reality exists, regardless of perception or interpretation; that what we know is a faithful representation of ‘reality out there’ — informs functionalist and rational choice political theories, which are the basis, respectively, of neo-realism and neo-liberalism in international relations. The (neo)realist focus on structure is criticised because it ignores the role of human will and the notion of agency (one of the key considerations of social constructivism) in international politics. Social constructivists do not reject the notion of material structure but argue that the interpretation of material structures is cognitive/theoretical. They also conceive of behavioural regularities as theory-laden interpretations of action. Such scholars contend that social actors inform state identity and, in turn, identity shapes foreign policy.

Constructivists, particularly ‘critical’ constructivists, challenge realist and liberal assumptions that interests derive from material sources and argue that ‘who we are’ can predict ‘what we want’: for constructivists, identities underpin interests. And we know ‘who we are’, in part, by ‘what we stand for’ because all identities involve values and commitments, and the acquisition of identity means coming to accept these values and commitments.<sup>5</sup> The logical corollary suggests that values determine identity, from which interests are derived. Values are essentially higher order cognitions (beliefs) that determine identities and interests, and in turn, behaviour, that is, state foreign policy. In the case of Ireland, neutrality is the orientation of state foreign policy; the only white paper on foreign policy acknowledged this, saying ‘the values that underlie Ireland’s policy of neutrality have therefore informed almost every aspect of our foreign policy’.<sup>6</sup>

Critical social constructivists differ from conventional social constructivists in factoring the role of non-governmental organisations, public opinion and other non-state actors in the formation of a state’s foreign policy orientation.<sup>7</sup> Patrick Keatinge and Bill McSweeney both recognise the emergence of the Irish peace movement as a variable in shaping the concept of Irish neutrality.<sup>8</sup> McSweeney, in particular, has also strongly argued that the Irish people constitute an important agent shaping Irish foreign policy and Irish neutrality. A number of studies have established that ‘the public has a reasonably stable and coherent concept of neutrality; it is a more “active” and broader concept than the Irish government’s realist concept, which amounts to staying out of military alliances’.<sup>9</sup> (‘Military neutrality’ is a term created by governments of neutral states that sought membership of the EEC/EU as a way to agree at the EU level to the progressive framing of a common defence policy, leading to a collective EU defence and the eradication of neutrality, whilst, at the same time, telling their electorates at home that the neutrality of the state is retained.) Consistently over three decades of opinion polling, four in five Irish people support active Irish neutrality and want it to be retained.<sup>10</sup> Public opinion, along with the activism of non-governmental organisations, explains why Irish neutrality persists over time, despite realist hypotheses<sup>11</sup> of Irish neutrality’s demise in the post-Cold War era.

The next section will explain the divergence between the historical trajectory of Irish foreign policy values and identities prior to EEC membership, and Irish government discourses and practices on participation in European integration in the areas of foreign policy, security and defence post-EEC/EU membership. This divergence suggests the need for a post-structuralist investigation into ‘the interrelationship of power and representational practices that elevate one truth over another, that legitimate and subject one identity against another, that make, in short, one discourse matter more than the next’.<sup>12</sup>

## Working hypothesis

The working hypothesis suggests that government allegiance to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and its identity and practices predicts the likelihood of government discourses and practices aligning with the European Union’s approach to disarmament, arms control and nuclear weapons.

- Ireland’s historical activism on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, as a constitutive element of Irish neutrality, has died away.

A critical constructivist approach evaluating both discourses and practices assumes a synergy and correlation between the two, that is, we do what we say, and we say what we do. However, if the analysis shows that there is no relationship between Irish governments’ and the European Union’s discourses and practices on disarmament, what are the alternatives?

- Either nuclear disarmament strategy has entered a zone of meaningful silence in terms of discourses, and the Irish government has stopped disarmament practices, in order to avoid EU censure, indicating a decision to ‘abstain’.
- Or Ireland’s values and identity continue to strongly influence a progressive strategy in the area, and the Irish government has continued to pursue disarmament initiatives in the tradition of Irish foreign policy, but has done so by harnessing alternative, autonomous, non-state agencies.

The data used to evaluate these hypotheses include the actions and discourses reflected in EU policy documents, Irish foreign policy texts (state, parliamentary and governmental), non-governmental organisation policy documents and recorded activities at the United Nations on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

## Nuclear conundrum

Article IX.5 of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons defines a nuclear-weapon state as one ‘which has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967’.<sup>13</sup> The United Kingdom, France, Russia, the United States and China are the five official nuclear-weapon states.

There are 15,000 nuclear weapons in the world — most of them are American or Russian, with fewer numbers held by the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan and Israel. The NPT was designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to other states, that is, ‘horizontal’ proliferation. It is held that universal adherence to full compliance of the treaty by all the parties guarantees the security of all

member states. Promoting nuclear energy leads more states to develop technical capacities that then offer a temptation to use them for military ends. Geopolitical strategy of US foreign policy is another catalyst for the spread of nuclear technology.

The George W. Bush administration ordered the Pentagon to draft contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons against at least seven countries, naming not only the ‘axis of evil’ (Iraq, Iran and North Korea) but also Russia, China, Libya and Syria, provoking other nations to develop their own arsenals. The view is common among the nuclear powers that nuclear weapons from the first wave of proliferation are tolerable, while such weapons in the hands of additional states are dangerous. None of the states of the second wave of proliferation, Israel, India and Pakistan, have signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The NPT requires the nuclear-weapon states to undertake to disarm their nuclear weapons, in return for which all other states agree to forgo nuclear weapons. All states are granted the right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, subject to verification. Of the three pillars, disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful uses, *disarmament has had the least progress made*. The Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) declared that ‘the NPT remains the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the essential foundation for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy’.<sup>14</sup>

## Eurobomb option

*The European Union — Nuclear-Based Foreign Policy Identity and the ‘Eurobomb’*: At the Copenhagen European Summit of 14 and 15 December 1973, the nine heads of state or government introduced the concept of a European identity into EEC common foreign relations ‘to play an active rôle in world affairs’. The ‘Declaration on European Identity’ by EEC foreign ministers on 14 December 1973

- embodied a political goal to achieve a European Union,
- with common attitudes, common actions (point 2),
- and common positions (point 9) in the sphere of foreign policy,
- coupled with NATO members’ concept of *security as provided by the nuclear weapons of the United States* (point 8).

These plans for a ‘European Union’ and the creation of a ‘European identity’ were intimately tied to a common foreign policy and a nuclear weapons-based common defence.<sup>15</sup>

The EEC morphed into the planned ‘European Union’, politically through the ratification of the Treaty on European Union in 1993 and legally through the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Wolfgang Schäuble declared in Dublin in March 1995 that ‘the four neutral countries in the EU — Ireland, Austria, Finland and Sweden — would have to join NATO eventually’.<sup>16</sup> The European Union had successfully hampered the attempts of three accession states — Austria, Sweden and Finland — to join the



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European Union with their neutrality recognised and safeguarded, and demanded the eradication of the policy, declaring that ‘The anticipated effects [of neutrality] even if they are of a political nature, can pose problems for the Union.’<sup>17</sup>

In September 1995, Wolfgang Schäuble, along with his CDU party colleague Friedbert Pflüger, suggested the Europeanisation of French and British nuclear weapons. The latter stated,

It is imperative that the American deterrent, which we Germans have so much to be thankful for, be maintained. The Atlantic alliance remains the key protective shield for Europe. However, a second, small but effective shield could also be erected — in the form of French (and British) atomic weapons with a European function.<sup>18</sup>

The so-called ‘Eurobomb’ option was raised repeatedly since, most recently by leading French and German politicians.<sup>19</sup> President Macron declared on 7 February 2020,

Let’s be clear: France’s vital interests now have a European dimension. In this spirit, I would like strategic dialogue to develop with our European partners, which are ready for it, on the role played by France’s nuclear deterrence in our collective security.... France will not sign any treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup>

How does the ‘Eurobomb’ strategic culture, involving Ireland’s adoption of a nuclear-backed accord as a member of the European Union, fit with her traditional foreign policy values and identities?

## Norm entrepreneur

*Ireland as a Disarmament Norm Entrepreneur — Instigating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty*: Mohammed Shaker, as president of the 1985 NPT Review Conference and author of the most comprehensive history of the NPT’s negotiation to date, notes that it was in response to Irish endeavours in the United Nations in the years 1958–61 that a concept of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons was laid down in a UN General Assembly resolution. This concept served as a guide to successive steps within and outside the United Nations with the intention of arresting the proliferation of nuclear weapons.<sup>21</sup>

Ireland’s pioneering role in the NPT process was subsequently recognised when Minister for External Affairs Frank Aiken was invited to become the treaty’s first signatory — ‘we have been associated by name with it ever since’. Ireland’s white paper on foreign policy recalls

From the earliest days of our UN membership, Ireland has worked to halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to promote nuclear disarmament. Resolution 1665, which was adopted unanimously by the General Assembly on 4 December 1961 was referred to as ‘the Irish Resolution’. The resolution contained the essence of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)... Successive Irish governments have advocated the complete abolition of nuclear weapons and have worked for and



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encouraged concrete steps to that end.<sup>22</sup>

Ireland officially launched the New Agenda Coalition along with Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, New Zealand and South Africa in Dublin in June 1998, with a Joint Declaration Initiative designed to get agreement on thirteen practical steps towards accelerating nuclear disarmament in 2000. These steps were subsequently reaffirmed at the 2010 NPT review conference.

Yet, since the publication of the white paper, Ireland's position on nuclear weapons has become increasingly questionable, given the state's acquiescence in the development of European Union security and defence policy discourses and practices. Six Irish foreign policy reversals and four major policy shifts have occurred:

- reformulation and redefinition of neutrality, including its dissociation from peace policy;
- extension of EU political co-operation to military affairs;
- acceptance of and participation in a Western European Union (WEU)–EU merger;
- Ireland's WEU membership and assumption of its mutual defence clause;
- 'antonym-ing' the meaning of the concept of 'military neutrality';
- adopting 'sharp end of peacekeeping' WEU Petersberg Tasks and NATO-led missions.

Policy shifts include:

- from commitment to the United Nations itself to a commitment to the principles of its Charter;
- support for the Iraq War;
- meaningful silence on neutrality and replacing it with a new 'foreign policy cornerstone' of 'EU solidarity', and
- joining Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), adoption of NATO military goals through the back door of membership of PESCO.<sup>23</sup>

The CSDP is driven by France's desire to create a 'Europe Puissance' or European super-power against the 'hyper puissance' of the United States in the context of a perceived 'unipolar world' created by the end of the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> Ireland has acquiesced in all aspects of the CSDP, leading the French ambassador in Ireland to declare in 2018: 'The way we see Ireland is not as a neutral state.'<sup>25</sup> Coupled with the fact that 'Ireland has never chosen to use the veto'<sup>26</sup> in European Union negotiations and decision-making, expectations are that the Irish government will toe the Franco-European line with regard to nuclear disarmament.

Left-wing and independent members of the Irish Parliament are determined to remind the state of 'Ireland's role as one of the driving forces behind the nuclear non-proliferation treaty as a neutral country'.<sup>27</sup> Currently, the state declares through the Department of Foreign Affairs' webpage titled 'Neutrality — Ireland's Policy of Neutrality', that its 'policy has been complemented by a set of values, including the protection of human rights, support for development, and **the promotion of disarmament and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction — which we see as essential complements to the *military aspects of neutrality***' (emphasis added).<sup>28</sup> In this context, how does Ireland reconcile the latter discourses with the European Union's nuclear-based identity and foreign policy ambitions? The answer can be seen in the positions the European Union and Ireland took on initiatives arising out of frustration at the lack of nuclear disarmament progress among nuclear weapon states.

## Case study

Significantly, Ireland has progressed its work on nuclear disarmament into an outright ban on weapons, and cited Ireland's identity and past history of UN activism as a driver, stating, 'In line with long-standing foreign policy, Ireland took a lead role in the process that led to the adoption of the TPNW'.<sup>29</sup> The TPNW provides for states to fulfil their disarmament obligations under the non-proliferation treaty, Article VI. Ireland kick-started the process by bringing forward the resolution that proposed negotiations to draft the new treaty — Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations, Leading Towards their Total Elimination — that was subsequently adopted at the UN General Assembly on 27 October 2016 by 123 states.<sup>30</sup> Nearly all states that voted against the resolution were EU members, including Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom. Only Ireland, Austria and Malta voted in favour. The Netherlands and Finland abstained.

The negotiations were successful — the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons opened for signature at the United Nations in New York on 20 September 2017. Ireland's domestic legislation to ratify the TPNW, the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Act 2019, was signed into law on 11 December 2019.<sup>31</sup> Ireland's position could not have been more at odds with that of the European Union, subtly acknowledged by government ministers mentioning the fact that 'attempts to strengthen the disarmament provisions have traditionally been fiercely resisted, in particular by the nuclear weapons states'.<sup>32</sup> The state continued:

Nuclear disarmament has been a priority for Ireland from the outset of our membership of the United Nations. We are proud to have played a leadership role, together with Austria, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa, in negotiating this ground-breaking treaty.... *Ireland will continue to support the work of civil society organisations including the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons to achieve this goal.*<sup>33</sup>

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons had been purposefully excluded from EU institutional debates on the issue, amid reports that NATO had pressured member-states not to sign the treaty.<sup>34</sup> When the TPNW is ratified (to date, 34 out of the required 50 states have done so), these weapons will not only be delegitimised but also stigmatised. Civil society will have a new instrument at its disposal. The European Union's failure to adopt a position on the treaty marked a turning point — Ireland had effectively become a sheep in wolf's clothing.

To address the hypothesis, evidence shows that Ireland's historical activism on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament has *not* died away. The Irish government has continued to pursue disarmament initiatives in the tradition of Irish foreign policy and neutrality. In terms of discourses, it is the European Union, not Ireland, that has moved into a zone of meaningful silence; in terms of practices, it is the European Union that has abstained. Perhaps to avoid clashes with the European Union, the government has harnessed alternative, autonomous, non-state agencies to see their objectives through:

The work of ICAN and other Civil Society organisations was fundamental to achieving a treaty-based prohibition of nuclear weapons earlier this year. Ireland believes that work in disarmament and non-proliferation processes are more effective when there is strong cooperation between states and Civil Society. Ireland is delighted that ICAN, *one of its long-term partners in the area of nuclear disarmament*, has had its work recognised by the Norwegian Nobel Committee.<sup>35</sup> (emphasis added)

While not a novel practice, relationships between state officials, diplomats and the non-governmental organisation sector were always used for informing, not fulfilling, Irish foreign policy objectives. The state's declared fostering of a new movement as an active agent in the policy-making process is a novel hybrid form of small state foreign policy activism and practices.

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