

European Neutrals, then and now.

Patrick Keatinge

Introduction: Putin's War and the practice of neutrality in Europe

One of the many unexpected changes triggered by the invasion of Ukraine has been the decision of both Finland and Sweden to apply for membership of NATO. This has a bearing on debates about security and foreign policy in the few west European countries, including Ireland, still remaining outside the alliance. Is neutrality now an endangered species in this part of the world? Indeed, what do we mean by "neutrality"? It is perhaps natural to answer this question by looking at the experience of our own state. In its first hundred years neutrality was initially denied by the existence of foreign bases (the "Treaty ports"); from 1938 we were then able to adopt it during World War II, continuing the policy by staying out of NATO on the grounds of partition, and even carrying it through the several stages of European integration.

But there has been more than one variation on the theme of neutrality as practiced by those European states describing themselves as neutrals since the end of the last major war in western Europe in 1945. The context in which their policies have evolved has also varied, coming full circle from the divided continent of the Cold War, through a more peaceful era which has now regressed to the current crisis of European insecurity. A comparative analysis is necessary to consider the implications of Putin's War.

The European neutral democracies in the Cold War¹

World War II was not kind to the practice of neutrality: 20 states adopted the policy in 1939 but by 1945 only 5 had succeeded in maintaining it through to the Cold War which soon followed between the "west" and the Soviet Union. Even the concept of neutrality, codified in the 1907 Hague Convention on the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in War on Land, didn't quite fit this menacing ideological confrontation. The two blocs had not formally declared war with each other but competed through proxy wars, internal subversion and a dangerous nuclear rivalry. In this environment the pursuit of neutrality was a minority pursuit in western Europe.

Traditional neutrals. Two of these neutral states fully deserve the overused label of "traditional". **Switzerland** is the classical case. From the early sixteenth century the linguistically disparate alpine cantons decided to stay out of surrounding wars, a policy formally recognised by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 as being "in the interests of the whole of Europe". Swiss governments practised the concept of "permanent neutrality", later involving a strict interpretation of the 1907 Hague Convention. When the new collective security institution, the United Nations Organisation, was established in 1945 the Swiss took the view that membership, which required approval by referendum, was incompatible with neutrality and stayed out. Thus, although Switzerland remained a strong candidate for providing impartial good offices and mediation, and was the base for the international Red Cross, its general foreign policy profile was muted. That was not the case where Swiss defence policy was concerned. One of the main duties of a neutral in time of war is to maintain a credible defence, and this the Swiss have taken seriously, maintaining a long tradition of depending on a citizen army based on universal male conscription to complement the natural advantage of their alpine redoubt.

A second traditional neutral to stay out of wars has been **Sweden**. From being a leading regional power in northern Europe in the seventeenth century, Sweden's decline was marked by the loss of Finland to Russia in 1808-9. After the Napoleonic wars the Swedes' record of neutrality was unbroken (apart from

1. For an early comparative analysis, see Hanspeter Neuhold, "Permanent neutrality in contemporary international relations: a comparative perspective", *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 1, Number 3, 1982.

a partial concession of transit rights to the Germans in World War II). Sweden is located in a complex strategic environment, containing two potential predators of imperial scale and several smaller (some much smaller) states. Swedish governments had a more pragmatic approach to security policy than that of the more conservative and legalistic Swiss. In 1948 the government considered the formation of a Scandinavian alliance and had seen little difficulty in joining the UN and building an active profile in the development of disarmament proposals and peacekeeping operations. Sweden had some weight in these fields and in its military profile more generally; in the late 1940s its air force was regarded as the 4th strongest in world terms. Like the Swiss, the Swedes built their national defence policy on the basis of universal conscription.

Front-line neutrals. The front-line of the Cold War – the ideological confrontation between the capitalist democracies of the “west” and the communist Soviet Union and its central and east European empire – ran right through two new neutral states. **Finland**, having exchanged Swedish for Russian domination in 1808-9, gained independence in 1917 only to be invaded by Russia in 1939. This “winter war” and the following “continuation war” – in which the aggressors paid a high price for their gains – led eventually to an unusual bargain between the two sides. This took the form of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in 1948; Finland could continue to be a democratic capitalist republic but in return would have to defer to the security interests of her neighbouring “friend”. In short, this was Finnish neutrality in the context of a Russian “sphere of interest”, sometimes described as “Finlandisation” (though without much enthusiasm in Finland). However, Finland could join the UN, and was host to one of the high points of Cold War détente, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

Austria, the defeated core of a former multinational empire, annexed by Germany in 1938, came out of the second world war under a four-power occupation which echoed that imposed on its much larger neighbour. After the death of Stalin, Austrian sovereignty was restored in the State Treaty of 1955, after which the Austrian government formally adopted the status of permanent neutrality. Although modelled on the Swiss legal concept, the Austrians had no problems with UN membership (which was no longer a hostage to Moscow’s veto) and went on to develop an active foreign policy profile in that context.

Towards a model European neutral? At this point, from the late 1950s, it is possible to discern a consensus of sorts on the basic attributes of neutrality policy in the shifting tensions and accommodations of the Cold War.² First, with regard to security policy, the neutral’s military defence had to be matched to the particular strategic situation it faced, requiring a close analysis of threats and capabilities. Clearly a neutral could not hope to repel a concerted attack by either bloc, but they did have an obligation to deter such a possibility by mounting a credible response. In sum, armed neutrality is the name of the game.

Second, a characteristic foreign policy profile, reflecting pacific intent, emerged during this period. Neutrality was often understood by proponents of alliance in pejorative terms as “indifference” or “free riding”. The neutrals, for their part, pointed to a wide range of diplomatic behaviour, which aimed to counter the dangers of confrontation, and which they often described as “active” or “positive” neutrality. They prioritised the development of UN peacekeeping, the promotion of disarmament schemes, mediation as a third party in specific conflicts, humanitarian support and development policy. This often

2. For detailed comparative studies, see: Bengt Sundelius (ed.), *The Neutral Democracies and the New Cold War*, Westview Press/ Boulder and London 1987; Harto Hakovirta, *East-West Conflict and European Neutrality*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988; Hanspeter Neuhold (ed.), *The European Neutrals in the 1990s: New Challenges and Opportunities*, Routledge London 1992.

involved hosting international institutions and conferences; the UN's system of multilateral agencies developed branches in Geneva and Vienna.

It should be recognised that the neutrals did not enjoy a monopoly of these good works, and their capacity to engage in them varied. Switzerland's self-exclusion from the UN narrowed the scope of their activity and the Finn's pragmatic deference to Moscow defined their role in a particular (but important) way. The activity of the Swedes and Austrians was less inhibited; the Social Democratic duo of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky was a feature of European diplomacy in the 1970s. There was even an informal international collective, the neutral and non-aligned (n+n) group, which also involved "micro-neutrals" such as Liechtenstein and San Marino, together with Yugoslavia, a leading member of the wider Non-aligned Movement (which included several developing states with pro-Soviet leanings).

A third basic attribute of this loosely defined ideal type of neutral policy aroused less attention, perhaps because it concerned something which was ruled out for the four countries examined above. In 1961, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland came to the view that neutrality was incompatible with membership of the European Economic Community. Finland, after due consultation with its "friend" later concurred. The Treaty of Rome (1957) envisaged full political integration in the future and allowed for the EEC's continuing existence in time of war. For a respectable neutral joining the EEC was out.

A borderline neutral? Here is where **Ireland** became the exception to prove the rule. Initially excluded from the UN by the Soviet Union, Ireland subsequently excluded itself from NATO in 1949, not on the grounds of the alliance's aims or military methods but because its membership included the state responsible for the partition of Ireland. This was close to adopting neutrality-by-default. And when adherence to the Treaty of Rome became a possibility in the late 1950s, and particularly following Ireland's accession to the EEC in 1973, the demands of economic development, much greater in Ireland's case than for the continental neutrals, overruled those of security. Representing the only neutral would-be EEC member, Taoisigh Seán Lemass and Jack Lynch spent the 1960s at pains to reassure their interlocutors that in the event of the EEC adopting an alliance commitment Ireland would not be found wanting. However, by the time Ireland joined the bloc, the defence of the "west" was still the prerogative of NATO. The much looser discipline of "European Political Cooperation (EPC)" in the EEC was not regarded as precluding the exercise of neutrality when Ireland tested it by failing to follow EPC support for the United Kingdom in the Falklands war in 1982. By the end of the 1980s Ireland's overall foreign policy profile in any case was marked by the characteristics of active neutrality, particularly with regard to continuous participation in UN peacekeeping missions and the promotion of arms control measures.

At this point by far the most detailed and closely argued analysis of Ireland's practice of neutrality by Trevor Salmon was published under the title "Unneutral Ireland: An Ambivalent and Unique Security Policy"³ Bending too many rules in the time of war, Ireland was seen by the author as non-belligerent at best, and subsequently out of line with regard to membership of the EEC. Salmon was not alone in the small community of academic observers of European neutrality (and probably not in the somewhat larger number of diplomatic and legal practitioners in other countries) in coming to this point of view. If his analysis did not receive the attention it deserved at home, it was largely down to the wider context at the time of its publication. The dissolution of the Soviet empire and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself between 1989 and 1991 seemed to have removed the relevance of his argument.

3. See Trevor C. Salmon, *Unneutral Ireland: An Ambivalent and Unique Security Policy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989.

After the Cold War: Change and Change Again?

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the prospects for European security started on a hopeful note. But they were soon marred by the extreme economic and political fragility of the new Russia and the civil wars in the disintegrating Yugoslavia. East European members of the former Warsaw Pact, far from seeing neutrality as a natural safe haven, formed an insistent queue to join NATO.⁴ Eventually seven of them, together with three former Soviet Republics and three former Yugoslav Republics, became members.

As for the neutrals themselves, Switzerland took the plunge and joined the UN at last, following a referendum in 2002. Some years earlier, in 1995 Austria, Finland and Sweden joined Ireland in the successor institution of European integration, the European Union (EU). The absence of a proximate threat and economic difficulties in the early 1990s provided an incentive to overlook their earlier reluctance, as did the Maastricht Treaty's oblique qualification of a commitment to EU "defence".⁵

However, the four continental neutrals of the Cold War period have not seen their status evolve in quite the same way. After joining the EU Finland and Sweden began to assume the role of "front-line" neutrals, in response to negative developments in east-west relations. Russian governments' increasingly revanchist rhetoric and use of force against both internal and external challenges (Chechnya, Georgia, Syria) was amplified following the change of regime in Ukraine and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea in 2013-2014. The Nordic neutrals, given the number of former Soviet republics and client states in their region, emphasised the need for solidarity and presented their status as "military non-alignment" rather than "neutrality". After Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 they became "enhanced opportunities partners" of NATO, an arrangement which allows for close practical cooperation short of the ultimate claim to assistance which would preclude future neutrality.

Notably, the Nordic neutrals' defence expenditure is significantly higher than that of the other EU neutrals. In terms of military expenditure per capita, Finland moved from \$620.2 in 2015 to \$737.7 in 2020, and Sweden from \$551.7 in 2015 to \$639.0 in 2020 (figures for Ireland are \$214.3 to \$231.8 over the same period).⁶ Having ended conscription in 2010, Sweden restored it seven years later. The Finns never gave it up and can put 280,000 personnel into the field.⁷ However, it is the surge in public opinion in response to Putin's invasion of Ukraine that precipitates Finland and Sweden's departure from the camp of the European neutrals. Finnish support for joining NATO rose from 53% in February to 76% in May.⁸ Sweden's much longer and happier tradition of neutrality is reflected in a less emphatic majority of 57% in April in support of NATO membership.⁹

To date the other neutrals, though supporting the EU response to Russia, have not followed this path. Though the long-embedded and often controversial practice of bank secrecy in Switzerland has been modified by support for financial sanctions, the country's defence expenditure has been boosted and

4. See M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate*. Yale University Press 2022.

5. See Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union, where commitments to "the progressive framing of a common Union defence policy" (section 2) and "an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power" (section 7) to another Member State which is a victim of armed aggression "shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States."

6. These figures are from the Report of the Commission on Defence, Table 10.6, p.111.

7. See Charly Salonijs-Pasternak "Defence Innovation: New Models and Procurement Implications The Finnish Case". IRIS. March 2021.

8. For Finnish polls see: <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/finnish-support-for-nato-membership-jumps-to-76-in-latest-poll-1.1763176>

9. For Swedish polls see: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/growing-majority-swedes-back-joining-nato-opinion-poll-shows-2022-04-20/>

its traditional permanent neutrality remains. That is also the case in Austria. Support for the EU approach has required significant adaptation for a country with close economic and political relations with Russia, but both the government and public have drawn the line at their basic security policy. In Malta, which has been neutral since 1980 and joined the EU in 2004, opinion polls have also showed support for maintaining neutral status, which is written into the country's constitution.

And Ireland? Since Ireland welcomed other neutrals into the EU in the mid-1990s over the next two decades the commitment to neutrality became a serious political issue on only two occasions. The series of treaty changes on the Union's evolution which required popular endorsement by referendum included two negative results (i.e. the Treaty of Nice in 2001) and the Treaty of Lisbon in 2008). The no vote in part reflected opposition to the EU's security and defence policy, portrayed in pejorative terms, and reassurances that neutrality was not at stake had to be included in "second-thought" referendums not long afterwards. The upshot is that any unqualified commitment to join an EU military alliance will have to be endorsed by a referendum, and it is generally assumed the same would apply to membership of NATO.

Given this background, it is not surprising that neutrality can still be interpreted as a "core element in our national identity."¹⁰ The evidence shortly after the recent all-out Russian invasion showed high support for the retention of neutrality together with high support for Ukraine. Asked "do you support Ireland's current model of military neutrality, or would you like to see it changed?", 66% of those polled said yes, 24% no¹¹. However, it may be too early to see this as a settled view. Quite apart from the uncertainties that await in the unresolved war in Ukraine, any Irish debate on neutrality has still to absorb the full impact of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, which was published shortly before the war started.

This report provides much evidence that the military dimension of military neutrality may not be fit for purpose: the report states that "Ireland's investment in defence is far lower than that of its peers among smaller western European countries, including other neutral and non-aligned states. This has meant that our Defence Forces are largely staffed and equipped for constabulary and overseas taskings, rather than defence of the State from armed aggression."¹² There are serious capability gaps especially with regard to maritime and air defence, obvious vulnerability to cyber-attacks - geography is no protection here - and there is also a need for a fundamental reorganisation of the armed forces. In making its recommendations the report identifies three "levels of ambition" and estimates the financial implications of providing a credible defence for the state¹³. This may prove to be a difficult reminder that neutrality is both about responding to a rapidly changing security environment as well as a matter of national identity.

The government's intention, announced on 13 July, to raise defence expenditure from the lowest to the intermediate level of ambition by 2028 will, if implemented, be a significant change in the state's security policy, but in the context of what looks like a continuing "Russian problem" the question of neutrality won't go away. A recent report by a Dublin-based consultancy, BehaviourWise, showed a deeply divided opinion, influenced by the negative security context, but poorly informed about some

10. Ipsos opinion poll in The Irish Times, 15 April 2022

11. Ipsos opinion poll in The Irish Times, 15 April 2022

12. See the Report of the Commission on Defence, Dublin 2022, p. 15.

13. For an initial appraisal see Cian FitzGerald, "A New Level of Ambition: The Capability Recommendations of The Commission on The Defence Forces", IIEA, 18 May 2022.

aspects, particularly the EU's military dimension.¹⁴ Defining the operational limits of neutrality can be controversial, for example with regard to providing training for Ukrainian troops.

Neutrality in Europe now

So, is neutrality an endangered species in Europe? In the Baltic region, yes, but elsewhere the jury is either out or has not yet been called. There are even intermittent glimpses through the fog of war of the possibility of neutrality as a future security policy for the unhappy neighbours of Putin's Russia (e.g. the trio of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia).¹⁵ However, in the context of Putin's war in Ukraine, who or what will act as a credible guarantor of these countries' very survival remains unclear.

14. See "Neutrality or NATO? Irish attitudes to neutrality and possible NATO membership", behaviourwise.ie, 27 August 2002

15. See Samuel Charp, "How Neutrality Can Bring Security – and Satisfy Both Russia and the West", *Foreign Affairs* (online, 6 June 2022)

The Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) is Ireland's leading international affairs think tank. Founded in 1991, its mission is to foster and shape political, policy and public discourse in order to broaden awareness of international and European issues in Ireland and contribute to more informed strategic decisions by political, business and civil society leaders.

The IIEA is independent of government and all political parties and is a not-for profit organisation with charitable status. In January 2017, the Global Go To Think Tank Index ranked the IIEA as Ireland's top think tank.

© Institute of International and European Affairs, November 2022

Creative Commons License

This is a human-readable summary of (and not a substitute for) the license.

[https://creativecommons.org/licenses/Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0))

You are free to:

- Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt - remix, transform, and build upon the material
- The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union

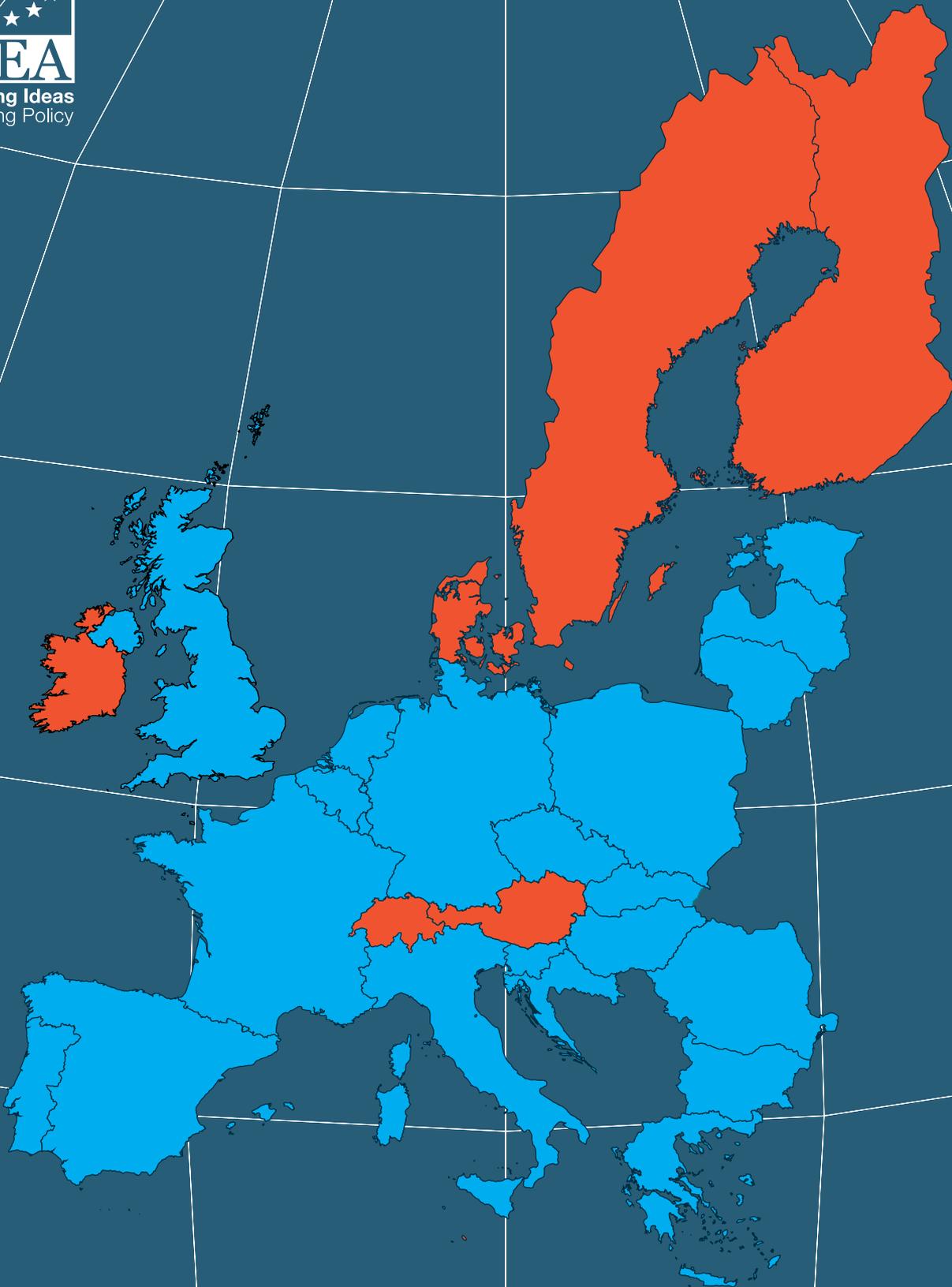


The Institute of International and European Affairs,

8 North Great Georges Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

T: +353-1-8746756 F: +353-1-8786880

E: reception@iiea.com W: www.iiea.com



European Neutrals, then and now.
Patrick Keatinge