



83/2026

14/07/2026

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From “Sea Blindness” to Maritime Resilience: Protecting Critical Subsea Infrastructure in the North Atlantic

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Abstract:

Grey-zone competition increasingly targets critical maritime infrastructure, whose disruption can produce significant strategic effects without crossing the threshold of conventional armed conflict. This article examines how these dynamics have reshaped maritime security policy in the Republic of Ireland, a state whose waters host approximately 75 per cent of Northern Hemisphere transatlantic data cables, yet which has historically suffered from pronounced "sea blindness" and limited naval capability. The analysis draws on interviews with naval officers, defence officials, diplomats and policymakers conducted between 2021 and 2026, supplemented by parliamentary debates, strategic documents and policy reports. It is argued that Ireland's evolving approach, culminating in its first "National Maritime Security Strategy" published in February 2026, illustrates how smaller coastal states increasingly hold disproportionate strategic significance within transatlantic security architectures, and how the protection of maritime infrastructure is reshaping the boundaries between civilian resilience and defence cooperation in contemporary European security governance.

Keywords:

Maritime Security; Critical Subsea Infrastructure; Grey-Zone Competition; Maritime Resilience; North Atlantic Security

How to quote:

PARENTE, Giovanni. *From “Sea Blindness” to maritime Resilience: Protecting Critical Subsea Infrastructure in the North Atlantic*. Opinion Paper. IEEE 83/2026.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, the maritime domain has emerged as one of the primary arenas of geopolitical competition in global affairs. While naval power has historically been associated with conventional military confrontation and strategic deterrence, the current security environment increasingly reflects forms of competition that remain below the threshold of open armed conflict.¹ In this realm, grey zone activities occupy this highly ambiguous space between peace and war, encompassing cyber operations, intelligence gathering, strategic coercion, maritime interference, sabotage, infrastructure disruption, and hybrid operations deliberately designed to remain deniable while nevertheless generating substantial political and strategic effects. Maritime spaces are particularly vulnerable to such activities due to the inherent difficulties of surveillance, attribution, jurisdiction, and enforcement in underwater and offshore environments.²

The historical neglect of maritime security within Ireland reflects broader characteristics of Irish strategic culture and defence. Since independence, its security policy has traditionally prioritised military neutrality, peacekeeping operations under United Nations mandates, and a preference for land forces over naval forces.³ Consequently, the Irish Naval Service, the country’s main seagoing agency, evolved primarily as a constabulary and fisheries protection force rather than a navy designed for high-end maritime security operations or anti-submarine warfare.⁴ Academic literature frequently characterises this phenomenon as “sea blindness”, namely, the failure of political institutions and society to recognise the strategic significance of the maritime domain despite profound economic dependence upon it.⁵ In this light, the policymakers consistently underestimated the importance of subsea infrastructure and maritime governance, thus contributing to institutional fragmentation and capability deficiencies within the maritime security sector.⁶

This article examines how grey-zone competition has transformed Irish maritime security

¹ Till, G. (2013). *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

² Speller, I. (2023). *Understanding naval warfare*. Routledge.

³ Kinsella, E. (2023). *The Irish Defence Forces, 1922-2022: Servant of the Nation*. Four Courts Press.

⁴ FitzGerald, B. (2023). ‘The Irish Naval Service: The Burden of the Minimalist Approach’ in J. Carroll, M. G. O’Neill and M. Williams (eds) *The EU, Irish Defence Forces and Contemporary Security* (67-85). Springer.

⁵ McCabe, R., & Flynn, B. (2023). Under the radar: Ireland, maritime security capacity, and the governance of subsea infrastructure. *European Security*, 33(2), 324-344.

⁶ O’Keeffe, C. (2026). Maritime security strategy aims to restore sight to Ireland’s ‘seablindness’. Irish Examiner. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41800151.html>

policy and, more broadly, the protection of critical subsea infrastructure in the North Atlantic. The rationale for focusing on Ireland lies in its strategic position as the main transatlantic connectivity hub, hosting critical communication cables and energy infrastructure, despite historically limited maritime capabilities and persistent “sea blindness”. Ultimately, the study argues that the Irish case reflects a broader European shift towards integrated maritime resilience, in which infrastructure protection increasingly requires NATO-EU cooperation, public-private coordination, and enhanced maritime domain awareness.

Ireland and the geopolitical context

Recent incidents involving subsea infrastructure have altered European and transatlantic perceptions of maritime security. The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022 represented a turning point in contemporary European security debates, demonstrating the vulnerability of critical underwater infrastructure to hostile intervention.⁷ The incident accelerated broader concerns about the protection of subsea communication cables, energy interconnectors, offshore energy platforms, and other maritime critical infrastructure.⁸ Across the European continent, policymakers increasingly recognised that underwater infrastructure constitutes as both an economic asset and a strategic vulnerability that can be potentially exploited through hybrid and grey-zone activities.⁹

Within this evolving strategic environment, the Republic of Ireland occupies a uniquely significant geopolitical position. Ever since the first transatlantic communication cable from Valentia in County Kerry to Newfoundland in Canada, the Irish maritime domain has been fundamental in connecting North America and Europe, thus making the country a central hub in the global digital economy in recent decades.¹⁰ Approximately three-quarters of the

⁷ Borger, J. (2022). Nord Stream attacks highlight vulnerability of undersea pipelines in west. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/29/nord-stream-attacks-highlight-vulnerability-undersea-pipelines-west>

⁸ Neal, A. W. (2026). After Nord Stream: four security dilemmas in critical maritime infrastructure protection. *International Affairs*, 102(1), 207-225.

⁹ EUR Lex. (2022). Directive (EU) 2022/2557 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on the resilience of critical entities and repealing Council Directive 2008/114/EC (Text with EEA relevance). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2022/2557/oj>

¹⁰ Connolly, C., Hall, T. & Lenaghan, J. (2021). *The cable connecting Ireland to the Americas*. Raidió Teilifís Éireann. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0616/1228379-transatlantic-cable-valentia-island-newfoundland/>

Northern Hemisphere transatlantic telecommunications traffic cables pass through or near Irish waters.¹¹ These systems support financial transactions, military communications, cloud computing infrastructure, data centre operations, and broader transatlantic connectivity.¹² Simultaneously, the country’s energy security is heavily dependent upon subsea infrastructure, including gas and electricity interconnectors linking the island to the United Kingdom and continental Europe.¹³ Despite this strategic significance, maritime security historically occupied a peripheral position within Irish strategic debates.¹⁴

Geopolitical developments following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine significantly accelerated changes in Irish maritime security thinking. Russian naval activity in the North Atlantic, reports on seabed mapping and intelligence-gathering operations near Irish waters, and increased awareness of hybrid warfare vulnerabilities generated unprecedented political and public debate over maritime security.¹⁵ Media reports describing Russian surveillance activities near subsea cable routes, alongside growing concerns regarding offshore infrastructure protection, intensified scrutiny regarding Ireland’s maritime preparedness.¹⁶ In this regard, the Nord Stream incident further reinforced the perception that underwater infrastructure constituted a legitimate target within contemporary geopolitical competition even absent formal armed conflict.¹⁷

Against this backdrop, after a couple of years of strategic discussions, the Irish Government eventually published its first National Maritime Security Strategy in February 2026.¹⁸ The Strategy represented the most significant departure from previous Irish

¹¹ Raidió Teilifís Éireann. (2025). *How many of world's undersea cables pass through Irish waters?*. <https://www.rte.ie/news/2025/0219/1497714-irish-undersea-cables/>

¹² Houses of the Oireachtas. (2026a). National Security: Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday - 20 January 2026. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-01-20/615/>

¹³ Eirgrid. (2025). *Greenlink Interconnector to boost Ireland and UK energy resilience*. <https://www.eirgrid.ie/news/greenlink-interconnector-boost-ireland-and-uk-energy-resilience>

¹⁴ Speller, I. (2018) ‘Ireland’ in H. Meijer, and M. Wyss (eds.), *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ FitzGerald, C. (2022). *The Gray Zone: Ireland in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition*. The Institute of International and European Affairs. <https://www.ieea.com/blog/the-gray-zone-ireland-in-an-era-of-renewed-great-power-competition>

¹⁶ Fox, J. (2025). *Data flags hundreds of Russian 'shadow fleet' visits to Irish EEZ*. Raidió Teilifís Éireann. <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2025/0724/1525050-shadow-fleet-irish-eez/>

¹⁷ Permanent Representation of Ireland to the United Nations. (2022). *Statement at the UNSC Briefing on Nord Stream gas leaks*. <https://www.ireland.ie/en/un/newyork/news-and-speeches/security-council-statements/statement-at-the-unsco-briefing-on-nord-stream-gas-leaks/>

¹⁸ Department of Defence. (2026a). *First-Ever National Maritime Security Strategy launched*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-defence/press-releases/minister-mcentee-launches-first-ever-national-maritime->

security policy by identifying maritime security as a central component of national sovereignty, resilience, economic security, and infrastructure protection. The document explicitly recognised Ireland’s vulnerability within an increasingly unstable European security environment and proposed a more integrated approach to maritime governance involving defence, justice, energy, cyber security, and foreign policy institutions. Although significant operational limitations remain, the strategy nevertheless reflects a substantial transformation in Irish strategic discourse concerning the maritime domain.¹⁹

Reconfiguration of Maritime Security in Ireland after 2022

The Irish maritime domain has undergone a profound strategic re-evaluation following the deterioration of the European security environment after February 2022. Interviewees consistently highlighted the longstanding marginalisation of maritime affairs within Irish policymaking circles. For instance, one retired senior naval officer described maritime security as “the forgotten dimension of Irish national security for decades”, arguing that political attention only intensified following increased Russian activity near Irish waters and the Nord Stream sabotage incident.²⁰ Another serving officer characterised Irish maritime policy before 2022 as “fragmented and largely administrative rather than strategic”.²¹ In this context, particularly significant is the work of McCabe and Flynn, published in 2023, on Irish “sea blindness” and the governance of subsea infrastructure.²² Their analysis shows that maritime security in Ireland has long suffered from political neglect and institutional fragmentation, despite the country’s growing strategic significance as a transatlantic connectivity hub. Their conceptual framework provides an important foundation for understanding the evolution of Irish maritime policy following the deterioration of the European security environment after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Although Ireland possessed one of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones in Europe

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¹⁹ Parente, G. (2026a). Maritime strategy marks a turning point in Irish security policy. *Irish Examiner*. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-41800691.html>

²⁰ Interview 1, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2022

²¹ Interview 2, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.

²² McCabe, R., & Flynn, B. (2023). Under the radar: Ireland, maritime security capacity, and the governance of subsea infrastructure. *European Security*, 33(2), 324-344.

relative to its population and military capabilities, maritime governance remained largely oriented toward very narrow objectives.²³ The Naval Service primarily focused upon fisheries protection rather than broader strategic maritime security responsibilities, with only a few exceptions in the Mediterranean Sea (Parente, 2026b). Consequently, Irish policymakers devoted comparatively little attention to subsea infrastructure protection, maritime domain awareness, or underwater surveillance capabilities.

This situation became increasingly problematic, given that the country’s role in the transatlantic digital economy had expanded significantly. The country emerged as a major connectivity hub for transatlantic telecommunications infrastructure, hosting numerous subsea communication cables and associated data centre facilities.²⁴ McCabe and Flynn emphasise that the concentration of subsea cables within the Irish maritime domain renders Ireland strategically important not merely nationally but also for the broader security of allied and neighbouring states.²⁵ In sum, Ireland’s economic dependence on foreign direct investment, cloud computing infrastructure, and digital services further intensified the strategic significance of subsea systems linking Europe and North America.²⁶

The research indicates that geopolitical developments following the Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed official perceptions of maritime vulnerability. Reports on Russian intelligence-gathering activities, seabed-mapping operations, and surveillance missions near Irish waters generated unprecedented political concern about protecting offshore infrastructure.²⁷ In this context, the “Russian shadow fleet” emerged as the most frequently mentioned threat to the public over the last four years. Media coverage of Russian naval

²³ Interview 1, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2022.; Interview 2, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.; Interview 3, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.; Interview 4, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.; Interview 5, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.; Interview 6, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.; Interview 7, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.; Interview 8, Retired civil servant, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, January 2023.; Interview 13, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2025.; Interview 14, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2025.

²⁴ Interview 11, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, May 2024.; Interview 12, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, June 2025.; Interview 13, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2025.

²⁵ McCabe, R., & Flynn, B. (2023). Under the radar: Ireland, maritime security capacity, and the governance of subsea infrastructure. *European Security*, 33(2), 324-344.

²⁶ Connolly, C., Hall, T. & Lenaghan, J. (2021). *The cable connecting Ireland to the Americas*. Raidió Teilifís Éireann. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0616/1228379-transatlantic-cable-valentia-island-newfoundland/>

²⁷ Houses of the Oireachtas. (2025). *National Security: Dáil Éireann Debate, Thursday - 27 November 2025*. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-11-27/73/>; Houses of the Oireachtas. (2026b). Maritime Jurisdiction: Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday - 13 January 2026. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-01-13/272/>.

activity in the North Atlantic heightened public awareness of Ireland’s maritime exposure. The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022 proved especially influential, as it demonstrated that subsea infrastructure could become a direct target in contemporary geopolitical competition, even in the absence of formal armed conflict.

The evidence from elite interviews suggests that the Nord Stream incident marked the main strategic turning point in Irish security debates. One defence official described it as “the moment underwater infrastructure ceased being treated as technical infrastructure and became understood as strategic infrastructure”.²⁸ On a less dramatic note, another interviewee argued that policymakers suddenly recognised the implications of Ireland’s maritime geography within an increasingly contested European security environment.²⁹ Several interviewees highlighted that prior to 2022, maritime security discussions were often viewed as niche concerns confined largely to defence specialists and naval officers rather than mainstream political debates. Even though this circumstance remains valid to date, the general trend on the island has been shifting in favour of a conscious understanding of maritime security as of May 2026.

On another note, governance fragmentation remains a principal weakness affecting Irish maritime security. Responsibility for maritime governance and subsea infrastructure protection remains dispersed across multiple government departments and agencies, including the Department of Defence, the Department of Transport, the Department of Justice, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the national police -An Garda Síochána-, the Naval Service, and various regulatory authorities, as previously discussed by other scholars.³⁰ Such an institutional complexity contributes to overlapping jurisdictions, policy silos, and coordination difficulties, rather than providing a proper “whole-of-government” approach to maritime security. Multiple interviewees emphasised that no single state authority possessed comprehensive oversight responsibility for subsea infrastructure protection or maritime security coordination. Notably, a senior policymaker involved in defence planning noted that “too many agencies possessed partial jurisdiction while no institution possessed clear strategic authority”,

²⁸ Interview 10, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, March 2024.

²⁹ Interview 14, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2025.

³⁰ Tonra, B. (2024). *IACES Annual Lecture 2024: The EU's Westphalian Mirage and Ireland's Security Coma*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMjaOAe-r4Q>

which eventually led to duplication, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and policy silos.³¹ Similarly, another official observed that subsea infrastructure protection historically “fell between departments because it was simultaneously viewed as a telecommunications issue, an energy issue, a maritime issue, and a security issue without ever becoming a national security priority”, while other interviewees characterised the existing governance structure as “excessively bureaucratic” and “strategically incoherent”.³² On this matter, one seasoned civil servant argued that “maritime security historically suffered because no institution possessed both the authority and the political mandate to coordinate across sectors”.³³ To a similar extent, another official described Irish maritime governance as “institutionally fragmented to the point that responsibility became diluted”.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, industry stakeholders also highlighted concerns about unclear regulatory frameworks, insufficient coordination mechanisms, and the lack of structured engagement between state authorities and private infrastructure operators.

Additionally, the existing substantial operational capability gaps further complicate the maritime security challenges for Dublin. Personnel shortages within the Naval Service have been particularly acute and well-documented. As of early 2024, the Naval Service was operating with just 772 personnel, down from 1,090 in 2016.³⁵ The operational consequences have been severe, with the Naval Service patrol days more than halved over five years, falling from 1,061 in 2019 to just 428 in 2024.³⁶ To date, this remains the most frequently cited aspect of the country’s seagoing agency in the national newspapers.³⁷ Several interviewees described operational overstretch and recruitment difficulties as among the most serious obstacles affecting Irish maritime preparedness. For

³¹ Interview 3, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, December 2022.

³² Interview 10, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, March 2024.; Interview 11, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, May 2024.; Interview 13, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2025.

³³ Interview 8, Retired civil servant, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, January 2023.

³⁴ Interview 12, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, June 2025.

³⁵ Parente, G. (2024a). *Will new pay measures help retention in the Irish Naval Service?*. Raidió Teilifís Éireann. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2024/0112/1426020-irish-naval-service-personnel-retention-crisis-salaries-humanitarian-missions/>

³⁶ The Irish Times. (2025). *Naval Service missed 31 scheduled patrol days in past year because of lack of staff*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2024/04/05/naval-service-missed-31-scheduled-patrol-days-in-past-year-because-of-lack-of-staff/>

³⁷ Parente, G. (2024a). *Will new pay measures help retention in the Irish Naval Service?*. Raidió Teilifís Éireann. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2024/0112/1426020-irish-naval-service-personnel-retention-crisis-salaries-humanitarian-missions/>

example, a then-serving naval officer argued that “Ireland’s maritime vulnerability is not hypothetical but operationally real every day”, particularly given the scale of its maritime jurisdiction relative to available resources.³⁸ A similar remark was made by another interviewee who stated that “political recognition of maritime security has increased substantially, but capability development remains significantly behind strategic rhetoric”.³⁹

Despite these structural limitations, substantial changes in Irish strategic discourse and policy development occurred since 2022. The publication of the “National Maritime Security Strategy” in February 2026 represented the most vivid shift, in theory, by explicitly framing maritime security as central to sovereignty, economic resilience, and infrastructure protection. The Strategy proposed enhanced maritime domain awareness, increased interagency coordination, investment in surveillance technologies, and the establishment of a “National Maritime Security Centre” designed to integrate civilian and military maritime information systems.⁴⁰ While the members of the armed forces welcomed it positively, concerns remained regarding implementation and operational delivery.⁴¹ A number of interviewees observed that strategic ambition frequently exceeded available resources within Irish defence planning. For instance, one retired naval officer stated that “Ireland has often produced strong strategic documents without providing the sustained investment necessary to realise them”.⁴² The most cited concern was that personnel shortages and procurement delays continued to undermine operational effectiveness despite increased political attention.

On these premises, the evolution in the country’s strategic posture toward international maritime cooperation reflects broader tensions between a deeply institutionalised tradition of military neutrality and mounting imperatives of critical infrastructure protection. Ireland’s first “National Maritime Security Strategy”, published in February 2026, signals a notable shift, explicitly calling for closer cooperation with NATO member states, particularly with the United Kingdom and France, the two closest European countries to Dublin, and

³⁸ Interview 12, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, June 2025.

³⁹ Interview 13, Serving officer, Irish Naval Service, November 2025.

⁴⁰ Department of Defence. (2026a). First-Ever National Maritime Security Strategy launched. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-defence/press-releases/minister-mcentee-launches-first-ever-national-maritime-security-strategy/>.

⁴¹ Parente, G. (2026b, forthcoming in June). From Territorial Waters to the Mediterranean Sea: The Role of the Irish Naval Service in the European Union’s Humanitarian Operations, 2015-2018. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*.

⁴² Interview 12, Retired officer, Irish Naval Service, June 2025.

proposing Irish participation in the Joint Expeditionary Force, something that had already been discussed by scholars on the island.⁴³ At the multilateral level, Ireland has deepened engagement through EU frameworks that offer political insulation from the more contentious question of NATO alignment by participating in relevant PESCO projects, including those on maritime surveillance and critical seabed infrastructure protection, and engages with the “Common Information Sharing Environment”.⁴⁴

The political framing of these developments appears deliberate. As observed by McDonagh, the Strategy “tries to walk a narrow line” between recognising the necessity of international cooperation and formally maintaining military neutrality.⁴⁵ The rhetorical emphasis on infrastructure resilience rather than collective defence constitutes a politically acceptable register, consistent with scholarly observations that maritime security functions as a concept that rallies support for action while potentially camouflaging underlying political disagreements. Nevertheless, such a framing remains contested at the political level in the Republic. Opposition parties have cautioned that enhanced cooperation must not become a cover for mission creep toward a binding military alliance.⁴⁶ Ultimately, these debates suggest that, in the peculiar Irish case, the protection of critical maritime infrastructure cannot be fully decoupled from the usual questions about the country’s ideological alignment, even though this threat has been presented as a necessity for national security.

Strategic and policy implications

The Irish case study offers important insights into the evolving dynamics of grey zone competition, maritime governance, and subsea infrastructure protection in the North Atlantic security environment. Contemporary geopolitical competition increasingly unfolds below the threshold of conventional warfare, through activities designed to remain

⁴³ Parente, G. (2024b). Learning from jointness: An essay on the relevance of the Joint Expeditionary Force for the Irish Defence Forces’. *Defence Forces Review 2023*. https://www.military.ie/en/members-area/members-area-files/jn_17653_23_defence_forces_review_digital.pdf.

⁴⁴ European Commission. (2025). *Ireland and EU defence & security*. https://ireland.representation.ec.europa.eu/ireland-and-eu-defence-security_en.

⁴⁵ O’Keeffe, C. (2026). Maritime security strategy aims to restore sight to Ireland’s ‘seablindness’. *Irish Examiner*. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41800151.html>.

⁴⁶ Smith, D. (2026). *Maritime Security Strategy must protect critical infrastructure*. Labour Party. <https://labour.ie/news/2026/02/24/maritime-security-strategy-must-protect-critical-infrastructure/>

ambiguous, deniable, and difficult to attribute. Maritime spaces are particularly vulnerable to such competition because underwater environments complicate surveillance, monitoring, and legal enforcement, while hosting infrastructure critical to the functioning of modern economies and societies.

Grey zone activities around subsea infrastructure produce strategic effects even in the absence of direct physical attacks. Russian seabed-mapping operations, surveillance, and intelligence-gathering missions near Irish waters, conducted by the so-called “shadow fleet”, generated significant political and strategic concern without essentially crossing the threshold of armed conflict.⁴⁷ Such activities contributed to broader perceptions of vulnerability and uncertainty while exposing deficiencies in Irish maritime preparedness.⁴⁸ This reflects the broader logic of grey zone competition, in which ambiguity itself becomes strategically valuable because it complicates deterrence, response, and attribution.

The Irish experience also highlights the continued relevance of “sea blindness” as a conceptual framework for understanding the extent to which the maritime domain is woefully neglected within both political and strategic cultures. Despite profound economic dependence upon maritime trade, digital connectivity, and offshore infrastructure, Irish policymakers historically underestimated the strategic significance of the maritime domain.⁴⁹ Maritime security was often viewed as peripheral compared with traditional foreign policy priorities such as neutrality, peacekeeping, and multilateral diplomacy.⁵⁰ Consequently, naval capability development and maritime governance received comparatively limited political attention and financial investment for much of the post-Cold War period.⁵¹ However, geopolitical developments since February 2022 have significantly disrupted these assumptions. The deterioration of the European security environment,

⁴⁷ Department of the Taoiseach. (2025). *Statement by Taoiseach Micheál Martin on the Meeting of the European Council in Brussels, 18 December 2025*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/press-releases/statement-by-taoiseach-micheál-martin-on-the-meeting-of-the-european-council-in-brussels-18-december-2025/>.

⁴⁸ The Irish Times. (2025). *Naval Service missed 31 scheduled patrol days in past year because of lack of staff*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2024/04/05/naval-service-missed-31-scheduled-patrol-days-in-past-year-because-of-lack-of-staff/>.

⁴⁹ Speller, I. (2018) ‘Ireland’ in H. Meijer, and M. Wyss (eds.), *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*. Oxford University Press.

⁵⁰ Tonra, B. (2021). Foreign, security, and defence policy in D. M. Farrell & N. Hardiman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics* (pp. 161–176). Oxford University Press.

⁵¹ Parente, G. (2026b, forthcoming in June). From Territorial Waters to the Mediterranean Sea: The Role of the Irish Naval Service in the European Union’s Humanitarian Operations, 2015-2018. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*.

coupled with heightened awareness of hybrid warfare and infrastructure vulnerability, accelerated the securitisation of the maritime domain in Irish political discourse.⁵² Maritime security increasingly became associated not solely with defence policy but also with economic resilience, digital sovereignty, energy security, and infrastructure protection.⁵³ On this note, the current Minister of Defence, Helen McEntee, reflected on the fact that the “protection of critical undersea infrastructure is now a central pillar of Ireland’s national security”.⁵⁴

At the same time, a tension emerges between the strategic ambition and the operational reality. Although Irish policymakers increasingly recognise the strategic significance of the maritime domain, the capability deficiencies remain considerable to date, as of June 2026. Personnel shortages, limited surveillance capacity, inadequate subsea monitoring systems, and procurement constraints continue to undermine operational effectiveness with only ship out at sea among the entire fleet of the Naval Service.⁵⁵ Besides these numerical difficulties, maritime governance increasingly requires integrated civilian-military approaches involving both public and private actors to protect critical infrastructure in the North Atlantic. Most subsea communication cables and associated systems remain privately owned and operated, creating complex governance dynamics regarding responsibility, accountability, and security coordination.⁵⁶ On these premises, the Irish experience highlights the need for structured public-private cooperation mechanisms that integrate state authorities, infrastructure operators, regulatory agencies, and security institutions into coherent governance frameworks.⁵⁷ On these premises, the proposed “National Maritime Security Centre”, envisioned to integrate civilian and military information

⁵² Commission on the Defence Forces. (2022). *Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/commission-on-the-defence-forces/publications/report-of-the-commission-on-the-defence-forces/>.

⁵³ Department of Defence. (2026a). First-Ever National Maritime Security Strategy launched. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-defence/press-releases/minister-mcentee-launches-first-ever-national-maritime-security-strategy/>

⁵⁴ Department of Defence. (2026b). Valentia Island Subsea Cable Symposium Speech - Minister for Defence Helen McEntee TD. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-defence/speeches/valentia-island-subsea-cable-symposium-speech-minister-for-defence-helen-mcentee-td/>.

⁵⁵ Wall, M. (2026). *Imminent Naval Service renewal agenda to shape direction*. The Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2026/02/23/imminent-naval-service-renewal-agenda-to-shape-direction/>.

⁵⁶ Bandura, R. & Bryja, T. (2025). Ireland’s Strategic Interest in Subsea Cables. The Azure Forum. <https://azureforum.substack.com/p/irelands-strategic-interest-in-subsea>.

⁵⁷ McCabe, R., & Flynn, B. (2023). Under the radar: Ireland, maritime security capacity, and the governance of subsea infrastructure. *European Security*, 33(2), 324-344.

into a shared maritime picture, represents a particularly significant institutional innovation.⁵⁸ However, its effectiveness will depend on resolving longstanding coordination challenges. The Strategy itself acknowledges that success requires “a comprehensive, multi-agency approach with clear roles and responsibilities and appropriate policy coordination”, thus spanning defence, justice, transport, energy, and foreign affairs. Nevertheless, several interviewees warned that institutional overlap and bureaucratic competition could undermine effectiveness in the absence of strategic coordination mechanisms. In this vein, without a clear legal authority underpinning this “whole-of-government” architecture, institutional fragmentation risks undermining coherent implementation, which is a longstanding challenge across European maritime governance.⁵⁹

The Irish case also has broader implications for NATO-EU maritime security cooperation. Although Ireland remains militarily neutral, its participation in EU frameworks such as PESCO and the “Common Information Sharing Environment”, together with the Strategy’s explicit orientation towards NATO partners and the Joint Expeditionary Forces, illustrates that critical infrastructure protection offers a politically flexible framework for security cooperation. Resilience and economic security logics enable deeper alignment without the domestic costs of formal military commitment. In this sense, maritime security increasingly serves as an institutional bridge between civilian resilience policy and traditional defence cooperation across Europe. These dynamics support broader scholarly arguments concerning the convergence of NATO and EU security agendas around hybrid threats and critical infrastructure.⁶⁰ In sum, subsea systems simultaneously underpin economic activity and national security, requiring integrated responses that span institutional levels and blur civil-military boundaries.

In conclusion, this case study shows that smaller coastal states can hold disproportionate strategic significance within transatlantic security architectures. With 75 per cent of Northern Hemisphere data cables passing through or near Irish waters, the security of the

⁵⁸ Department of Defence. (2026a). First-Ever National Maritime Security Strategy launched. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-defence/press-releases/minister-mcentee-launches-first-ever-national-maritime-security-strategy/>.

⁵⁹ Germond, B. (2015). *The maritime dimension of European security: Seapower and the European Union*. Springer.

⁶⁰ Hofmann, S., & Sus, M. (2026). ‘The Dynamics of Organizational Overlap in European Security: EU, NATO, and the Politics of Inter-Organizational Cooperation’ in M. Knodt, N. Chaban, O. Costa & P. Müller (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of European Union Politics* (pp. 531-542). Routledge.

country’s maritime domain is not simply a concern of national interest but, rather, a matter of collective strategic importance for European and North Atlantic connectivity.

Conclusions

The current analysis shows that Ireland’s transition from maritime “sea blindness” to a more resilience-oriented approach has been driven by growing recognition that critical subsea infrastructure is a strategic asset vulnerable to grey-zone threats. The evidence demonstrates that increased Russian activity in the North Atlantic, the Nord Stream sabotage, and Ireland’s role as a hub for transatlantic data and energy connectivity have fundamentally reshaped national security priorities. However, persistent governance fragmentation and capability shortfalls continue to hinder the effective implementation of the 2026 National Maritime Security Strategy.

Fragmented governance is the principal obstacle to effective maritime security. With multiple agencies retaining overlapping responsibilities for subsea infrastructure protection, creating coordination gaps and unclear lines of authority, Ireland should therefore establish a dedicated maritime security coordination authority, building on the proposed “National Maritime Security Centre”, with a clear legal mandate to oversee the protection of critical infrastructure across government departments. This would improve information sharing, reduce bureaucratic duplication, and ensure that maritime security is treated as a national security priority rather than a collection of sectoral responsibilities.

A gap between strategic ambition and operational capability persists. Personnel shortages, reduced patrol capacity, and limited surveillance assets continue to undermine Ireland’s ability to monitor and protect its extensive maritime domain. Policymakers should prioritise long-term investment in recruitment, retention, and maritime domain awareness technologies, including seabed monitoring and unmanned surveillance systems. Without addressing these capacity constraints, the objectives outlined in the National Maritime Security Strategy risk remaining largely aspirational rather than operationally effective.

Since most subsea cables and associated infrastructure are privately owned, effective protection requires structured cooperation between government agencies, infrastructure operators, and international partners. Ireland should formalise public–private resilience mechanisms, including joint risk assessments, incident-response exercises, and

information-sharing arrangements. At the same time, participation in the EU and broader European maritime security initiatives should be expanded to strengthen situational awareness and collective resilience. The evidence suggests that infrastructure protection increasingly depends on coordinated responses that transcend traditional distinctions between civilian and military security.

Overall, the Irish case demonstrates that maritime resilience has become a central component of contemporary security governance. As grey-zone threats increasingly target critical infrastructure below the threshold of armed conflict, effective protection will depend less on traditional military responses alone and more on integrated governance, operational readiness, and sustained cooperation across public, private, and international actors. Ireland’s experience therefore offers broader lessons for European states seeking to adapt their security policies to the vulnerabilities of an increasingly interconnected maritime environment.

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