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Neutral Yet Aligned? Malta's Security and Defence
Identity as an EU Member State

VALENTINA CASSAR

Neutral Yet Aligned? Malta's Security and Defence Identity as an EU Member State

Valentina Cassar ¹

Abstract

Malta joined the European Union in 2004 as a neutral member state, joining the likes of Ireland, Austria, and then neutrals Sweden and Finland. Malta has aligned itself within the EU and utilizes its membership as a source of shelter through its economic and political integration. It also participates and aligns itself in broader foreign policy positions and on transnational and nonmilitary security concerns and uses its membership as a platform to project its broader foreign policy initiatives.

Its neutrality has allowed it flexibility and room for manoeuvre, whereby it has increasingly postured itself as militarily neutral and nonaligned, but not politically neutral. Yet, Malta's neutrality is driven by pragmatism, rather than principle alone. It retains and utilises its neutrality as a safeguard for its political autonomy and sovereignty. The dynamics and debate surrounding neutrality have been inevitably impacted by the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine, which has raised questions over the meaning, relevance and implementation of neutrality for small, neutral EU member states such as Malta. Neutrality in the context of EU membership and war in Ukraine mean that Malta is effectively aligned and integrated within European security and defence architecture, yet, unlike other former European neutrals it is still unprepared to commit more actively to EU defence integration or NATO. Yet the available frameworks and contributions that a small state can make should be maximized to the country's advantage and capacity building.

Keywords:

Malta, neutrality, small states, foreign policy, strategic autonomy, European Defence.

Introduction

Malta's foreign policy was characterized by neutrality and non-alignment since 1973. Neutrality was entrenched in its constitution in 1987. The end of the Cold War, combined with a shifting political landscape, allowed the country to seek a closer relationship with the European Union (EU), particularly at a time when other European neutrals were also pursuing membership. Malta became a member of the EU in 2004, adding to the group of neutral states which were already members namely Austria, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden. This paper seeks to explore the way Malta's security and defence identity has evolved within this context as a neutral yet effectively aligned EU member state.

¹ Valentina Cassar is a Senior Lecturer at the department of International Relations, University of Malta.

Contact: valentina.cassar@um.edu.mt

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Since the end of the Second World War, neutrality and nonalignment became typically associated with smaller and weaker states within the international system and were seen as an alternative to alignment within the bipolar divide and traditional power politics. Yet neutral and nonaligned states also actively used their postures in multilateral fora to pursue issues of collective interest. Thus, neutrality has been driven by both realist as well as idealist functions (Goetschel 2011). At the end of the Cold War, European neutral states sought membership of the European Union and cooperation with NATO. However, this did not lead to radical shifts in policy or the renunciation of military nonalignment (Ferreira-Pereira 2006). Goetschel has argued that these policies became ingrained within their foreign policy identities and “geopolitical constellations did not automatically lead to a weakening of neutrality” (Goetschel 2022). In the last three decades, the relevance and utility of neutrality in an international order characterised by the decline of liberal principles has increasingly come under scrutiny.

The paper begins with a review of Malta’s neutrality and the debates and themes that have emerged on the subject within the context of the wider literature on small states, neutrality, and EU membership. An overview of the way neutrality featured in Malta’s foreign policy and EU affairs over the past twenty years shows that its neutrality has allowed it flexibility and room for manoeuvre, whereby it has increasingly postured itself as militarily neutral and nonaligned, but not politically neutral. The dynamics and debate surrounding neutrality have been inevitably impacted by the onset of Russia’s war against Ukraine, which has raised questions over the meaning, relevance, and implementation of neutrality for small, neutral EU member states such as Malta.

Malta has aligned itself within the EU and utilizes its membership as a source of shelter through its economic and political integration. It also participates and aligns itself in broader foreign policy positions and on transnational and nonmilitary security concerns and uses its EU membership as a platform to project its broader foreign policy initiatives. Yet, it will be argued that Malta’s neutrality is driven by pragmatism, rather than principle alone. Successive governments appear to remain cognisant of Malta’s colonial past and the use of its territory’s geostrategic advantages without local consultation. Therefore, Malta retains and utilises its neutrality as a safeguard for its political autonomy and sovereignty.

Small, Neutral and European

Following the Maltese Government’s declaration on neutrality in 1980, agreements were concluded with Italy and the USSR to shore up guarantees for the respect of Malta’s neutrality from either side of the bipolar divide (Sceberras Trigona 1982). Neutrality became entrenched in Malta’s Constitution in 1987 as part of a broader political compromise between the two leading political parties (see Fenech 1997; Pace 2013; Cachia 2023).

Chapter 1 Article 3 of the Constitution states that “Malta is a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance” (Constitution of Malta 1964). The Constitution goes on to highlight the implications of Malta’s neutrality, namely that no foreign military base be permitted on the territory; no military facilities were to be used by foreign forces unless at the request of the Maltese government in relation to the defence of Malta, or when a threat exists to the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, or integrity of the country. The Maltese Government is permitted to allow its military facilities to be used by foreign forces “in pursuance of measures

or actions decided by the Security Council of the United Nations". The Constitution also declares that no foreign military personnel would be allowed on the island unless performing civil works or activities. Moreover, it states that the shipyard may be used "within reasonable limits" for the repair of military vessels, and in reference to the Cold War context in which it was drafted, declares that "in accordance with the principles of non-alignment the said shipyards will be denied to the military vessels of the two superpowers."

The wording of the constitution reflected the language used in the government's earlier declarations, particularly those made in the treaties signed with Italy and the USSR. Pace rightly argues that "the definition is a minimalist one and the scope and definition of neutrality could be still stretched further by a government bent on doing so." (Pace 1999, p. 206-207). This malleability has indeed proven to be useful over the decades and has allowed the principle to be applied and maintained to varying degrees and defended according to the political objectives of the governments of the day.

However, Malta's neutrality should also be understood within a broader historical context, and in light of geographical considerations and infrastructural realities. With a population of approximately 518,000 and an army of less than 2,000 personnel, its defence spending amounts to 0.5% of GDP (IISS 2023). As an island in the Mediterranean, it has been historically colonised due to its geostrategic position. It was a British colony until 1964, and Britain retained bases after Malta achieved independence. The two political parties disagreed on the post-independence relationship that Malta was to cultivate with Britain. After Independence in 1964, the Nationalist Government explored the possibility of NATO membership but was turned away (Pace 2013b). The Labour government elected in 1971 pursued a policy of non-alignment and set in motion a process that would see the closure of NATO and British bases on the island, as well as the transformation of the country's economy away from its dependence on British military presence.

The Cold War came to an end soon after the introduction of the 1987 Constitutional amendments. The shifts within the international community resulted in rapid developments in globalisation and integration and the subsequent widening and deepening of security concerns (Hough 2018). Malta's foreign policy options and prospects for European integration once again became debated and contested, and its security concerns became focused on cross-border issues. Pace notes that whilst Malta does not face "immediate military threats from its neighbours", it shares with them nonmilitary maritime and transnational concerns (Pace 2013). During an address to the UN General Assembly in 1989, then Prime Minister Fenech Adami indeed argued that Malta's size means that its national interests coincide with the global interest and "a point of view that is singularly alert to the prospects and problems of the survival of all in a danger-filled environment" (Fenech Adami 1989).

The notion of neutrality also became "entangled with the political parties' own historical narrative" (Pace 2013, p.168), particularly in the debates surrounding EU accession during the 1990s until the 2003 referendum and election. Yet even as EU membership and participation in Partnership for Peace (PfP) were contested on the basis of neutrality during the 1990s, it was acknowledged that "there is consensus that Malta lies within the European sphere" (Fenech 1997).

Since joining the EU in 2004 Malta's foreign policy has been embedded within its status as a Member State and participant in the EU's CFSP (Pace 2013). Pace has also argued that once NATO membership remained excluded, the CFSP/CSDP became a viable route towards Malta's inclusion in a "security community that could eventually underwrite Maltese national security" (Pace 2013b).

Briffa (2021) also maintains that through EU membership Malta has placed itself firmly within Europe and benefits from the “shelter afforded by the regional union.” She argues that Malta has balanced such shelter seeking in ways that are compatible with its neutrality and furthermore demonstrating that its military neutrality does not constrain it from being an active player within the region. Briffa also observes that Malta utilises a “smart state” approach whereby it leverages its geostrategic location to position itself as a trusted interlocutor between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Briffa argues that “Malta has learned to use neutrality in a creative way to pursue her national interest and increase her flexibility and options” (Briffa 2022). Whilst it has been observed that Malta does not face a singular external existential threat, it remains vulnerable to several nonmilitary and hybrid security concerns. Adamides and Petrikkos argue that small peripheral states such as Malta, Cyprus and Estonia must develop adequate policy and resilience to such threats for their own security but also for that of the EU as a whole (Adamides and Petrikkos 2023).

The particularities, debates and concerns that have characterised Malta’s foreign policy as a small, neutral, and European state are not exclusive to it. In discussing Neutrality and Small States towards the later years of the Cold War, Karsh (1988) viewed neutrality as a means to maintain independence and sovereignty, and disputed the notion that neutrality denotes passivity and abstention or a reactive approach. Cottey (2018) also argues that whilst neutrality may be a middle ground between balancing and band wagoning, it may also be a means for small states to maintain independence within an international order dominated by great powers. Similarly, Briffa (2022) argues that small states may pursue neutrality to avoid entrapment or vulnerability and sustain their autonomy. Simpson (2018) notes that small states’ decisions to adopt neutrality will also be shaped by their tendency to possess fewer military resources, and also by their geography.

Agius and Devine (2011) claim that with the end of the Cold War and through their membership of the EU, countries like Austria, Finland, Sweden, Ireland and Malta aligned their security policies with European priorities. Subsequently their neutrality has diminished as a priority, and they regard themselves as “*militarily non-aligned* as opposed to *neutral*”. They go on to argue that “as a result of the altered external security environment and international structure, the purpose of neutrality has come under scrutiny.” (Agius and Devine 2011, pp.266)

Neutral states within the European Union have been described as Ambiguous Allies whose reluctance and reticence to participate in a defence union has rendered them problematic in creating an element of uncertainty in the efforts to develop an EU defence union or alliance (Cramer and Franke 2021). However, it is not only small neutral states that face challenging considerations when it comes to European security and defence integration. Wivel (2005) argued that while small states played a marginal role in EU’s development as a security actor, EU integration would serve their security interests well in the wake of the Cold War. He notes that the security identity of small states, founded on the promotion of a “multilateral and non-military approach to security policy based on ideals of conflict resolution, peaceful coexistence and a just world order” applies to all small EU member states, whether they are neutral or NATO members (Wivel 2005, p.395-396). He also observes that the normative and soft-power identity of the EU allows small member states to preserve their traditional security identities. Yet, Wivel argues that increased cooperation in EU security and defence might challenge the traditional security identities of smaller member states by requiring a more functional role or by increasing their dependence on larger member states. In order to mitigate their “abandonment” or “entrapment”, he suggests that these states

may take a more substantive and tactical approach by accepting the inequalities in decision making but instead focusing on championing transnational issues, seeking to build consensus and acknowledging their ability to influence issues, rather than trying to act as “great powers writ small” (Wivel 2005, p.408).

Cesnakas and Juozaitis et al (2023) explore how small, non-neutral European states contend with proposals for greater European strategic autonomy. They argue that while they generally view NATO and the EU as their primary security providers, debate exists as to whether European efforts at strategic autonomy would create a rift between the EU and the US, or whether this should be pursued as complementary. Pedi (2021) examines the challenges and opportunities faced by small states in the context of the further integration efforts that have been pursued by EU member states in relation to European Security and Defence, in particular the developments following the establishment of ESDP (CSDP since the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty) and further defence integration following the 2016 EU Global Strategy. Whilst noting some variations between NATO and non-NATO members' concerns that decision-making procedures are driven by larger member states, she notes that smaller EU member states have, at the risk of being side-lined or left behind, chosen to engage with further integration, and have also sought opportunities and benefits from projects and initiatives.

Neutrality has also not excluded the possibility for cooperation with NATO, and since the end of the Cold War, European Neutrals have acceded to the Alliance's Partnership for Peace, allowing them to develop collaboration that is tailored to their needs and political will. Cottey (2018) argues that European neutrals “retain significant distinctive elements to their national foreign and security policies, as well as the capacity to shape wider Western policies, especially in the EU context.” (Cottey 2018, p.41)

In their exploration of the politics of neutral states such as Austria, Finland and Ireland in the context of CSDP and NATO's Pfp, Beyer and Hoffmann (2011) observe that neutrality has continued to inform their foreign policies as a norm rather than strategic policy and has become embedded within both the political and popular outlook. They argue that there are variances regarding the way neutrality inhibits – or does not inhibit – the participation of states within international institutions, adding that there may also be variances in the way in which the public and political elite may react to international developments as well as changes in perceptions of the utility of the state's own neutral politics.

Maintaining Neutrality as an EU member state

Whilst it is not the objective here to enter into the details of Malta's highly contested EU membership bid, neutrality was one of the key points of contention. This echoed the way the leading political parties viewed and interpreted the definition of Malta's neutrality over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. The Labour Government's policy of neutrality and nonalignment was rooted in the closure of the military base underpinned by bilateral agreements with the USSR and Italy. The government viewed these agreements as security guarantees with actors that were representative of the Cold War blocs, and assurances of the recognition of Malta's neutrality (see Sceberas Trigona 1982; see also Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1980; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1981).

Following a change in government in 1987, Nationalist Prime Minister Fenech Adami defended Malta's neutrality and the closure of the UK military base due to the country's economic development

and independence, and the decreasing significance and value of Malta as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” (Fenech Adami 1987). Moreover, he described Malta’s neutrality as “*sui generis*” and based on the consensus over the principles that were enshrined in the constitution. Several months later, when addressing the UN General Assembly, Fenech Adami also reiterated that Malta was neutral, yet not passive, disinterested or colourless in ideological beliefs (Fenech Adami 1987b).

When in 1995, the government proposed Malta’s participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace, Prime Minister Fenech Adami and Foreign Minister Guido de Marco justified this proposal by reference to the changing realities in the international system following the end of the Cold War. They argued that the reference to the superpowers and nonalignment in the Constitution had become irrelevant and outdated (see Parliament of Malta 1995). During the parliamentary debate on the subject, the opposition spokesperson George Vella argued that Malta’s participation amounted to indirect attempts to pursue NATO membership and alignment. He also maintained that Malta’s neutrality could not be compared to that of other neutral states, since it was defined in relation to a unique set of geographic circumstances (see Parliament of Malta 1995b).

Vella reiterated these arguments when he became Foreign Minister two years later and the Labour Government suspended Malta’s EU membership application and withdrew from the PfP. He argued that participation in the PfP ran counter to Malta’s constitutional neutrality and that neutrality is ‘site specific’ and dependent on a country’s particular geopolitical situation and therefore could not be compared to the neutrality of other countries. He also added that the decision to freeze the EU membership application was not ideologically motivated but was based on the conviction that full membership would not benefit Malta given its characteristics. The government sought instead to achieve close cooperation with “a partnership with the EU which would be beneficial to both Malta and the EU”. (Times of Malta 1997)

During the EU referendum campaign, the Labour Party deemed neutrality to be crucial in protecting the country from becoming embroiled in a potential conflict and argued that it would permit it to develop stronger relations across the region. The Party argued consistently that EU membership conflicted with Malta’s Constitution, and actively campaigned against it during the 2003 referendum and national election campaigns (Cachia 2023). On the other hand, the Nationalist Government viewed the European Union as a natural space within which Malta should be integrated. Moreover, it argued that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union had resulted in geopolitical shifts that had led other European neutrals to join the EU. Nonetheless, a Declaration on Neutrality was annexed to the Accession Treaty, which affirmed that Malta’s participation in the EU’s CFSP would not prejudice its neutrality. The declaration reiterated that according to the Treaty on European Union, decisions related to common defence “would have to be taken by unanimous decision of the European Council adopted by the Member States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.” (See Act concerning the conditions of accession, 2003)

EU Accession in 2004 was followed by a broader national consensus on Malta’s foreign policy. Nonetheless, further shifts in world politics and in the EU itself instigated more public airing of views on neutrality’s relevance and character, and the need to amend the definition of neutrality in the Constitution.

In 2006, the Maltese Government published a document outlining the Strategic Objectives of Malta’s Foreign Policy (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2006). This document stemmed from Malta’s geopolitical realities as a Mediterranean and EU Member State, but also reflected the perspectives,

concerns and values that had shaped Malta's foreign policy in the past and would continue to do so in the future. It served as a framework that identified the primary objectives for Malta's foreign service (Office of the Prime Minister 2006). Whilst the strategic objectives did not specifically refer directly to Malta's neutrality, the objectives reflected the values and principles that have traditionally been associated with Malta's posture. These include playing a proactive role in the promotion of peace and stability in the Mediterranean, encouraging and participating in dialogue; promoting Malta as an ideal location for international dialogue, and as a host for international institutions and meetings; the promotion of democracy, human rights, humanitarian and development assistance, good governance, and international rule of law; and addressing global issues such as the vulnerabilities of small states, climate change, energy security, ageing and children (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2006).

The Debate on the Partnership for Peace

As discussed earlier, Malta's participation in the Partnership for Peace had been a bone of contention during the 1990s, reflecting the political nuances over the way neutrality was interpreted. Whilst the Nationalist Government argued in favour of the benefits of Malta's participation in a post-Cold War international order that was no longer characterised by an ideological divide between the Soviet Union and the United States, the Labour opposition maintained that participation would translate into alignment with a military bloc and would be counter to Malta's constitution (Parliament of Malta 1995 & 1995b).

Malta's participation was suspended in 1996 and reactivated soon after the re-election of the Nationalist Government in 2008 when it was argued that Malta's participation would not impinge on Malta's neutrality, but would facilitate Malta's presence and participation in the EU's foreign policy and defence discussions (Xuereb 2008). Furthermore, it was claimed that Malta's participation was an acknowledgement of shifts within the international security order and the nature of threats, would enhance dialogue, and allow for cooperation, training and the modernisation of Malta's Armed Forces (Times of Malta 2008a). The government then came under criticism due to the lack of parliamentary debate or consultation, and over the fact that the issue had not been included in the Nationalist Party's electoral manifesto published just a few weeks earlier (Times of Malta 2008b).

Former foreign Minister Michael Frendo had then called for a "serious unemotional debate" over Malta's broader relationship with NATO and the definition of Malta's neutrality as inscribed in the constitution in the context of the changing international environment (Schembri 2008). Labour Party representatives had indicated a willingness to have a "frank discussion on neutrality" and discuss constitutional reforms that might be necessary in the light of changing international circumstances and due to Malta's membership of the EU". (Massa 2008)

The 2011 Libya Crisis

The 2011 Libya Crisis proved to be an opportune moment during which the realities of Malta's neutrality, and the constitutional restraints versus the opportunities that it offered, were put to the test. The developments in Tripoli garnered high levels of political and public attention due to the proximity as well as the close political and economic bilateral relations that existed between the two countries. Early in the crises, then Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi declared that

the Gaddafi regime had lost its legitimacy, and that whilst Malta was “a neutral country with constitutional responsibility”, it would be at the forefront with respect to humanitarian support (Peregin 2011).

The crisis served as an opportunity to demonstrate “greater Maltese self-confidence in crisis operations” (Fiott 2015). Whilst debate emerged over the nature of Malta’s contribution to the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 implementing the no-fly zone in Libya, the country played a central humanitarian role over the subsequent months primarily through assistance in evacuations from Libya as well as a transit hub of humanitarian aid (Office of the Prime Minister 2011). Malta’s position was particularly tested when in February 2011 two Libyan Air Force Mirage Fighter jets landed at Malta’s airport. The pilots sought asylum, having defected following orders to target civilians in Eastern Libya (Cassar 2013). The Maltese Government’s position was all the more sensitive considering that many Maltese and other foreign nationals were still being evacuated from Libya, and the government’s main concern was that its decision to retain the jets might lead to retaliation. Malta stuck to its policy, the evacuation of foreign nationals proceeded smoothly and the feared retaliation from the Ghaddafi government never materialised.

EU Strategic Autonomy

Over the past two decades, the EU has undertaken several efforts to enhance cooperation in external affairs and on security issues, strategic capabilities and autonomy, and mutual defence. Malta’s major political parties are not openly and actively supportive of a European defence policy but have not opposed it either (Calleja Ragonesi 2017). In this respect, the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs has maintained that “Malta believes in a strong and united CFSP and strives to contribute to an effective EU external action to address the challenges presented by the present strategic environment especially in the EU’s neighbourhood” (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade 2023). Malta has also contributed to several CSDP peacekeeping missions in cooperation with other EU Member States, and also participates in projects and defence cooperation via the European Defence Agency.

Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (2016) provides the possibility for mutual defence and solidarity amongst EU member states:

“If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States. Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation.”

The clause provides assurances for both NATO member states for whom the alliance remains the “foundation of their collective defence”, and for the neutral member states, for whom their “specific character” would not be prejudiced. When this clause was invoked by France following

the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015, the Government declared that, upon the advice of the Attorney General, such a request was not in breach of Malta's constitutional neutrality and that the request would eventually be discussed bilaterally (see Department of Information 2015, Vella 2015). France requested assistance and support in its foreign military engagements, particularly relief of CSDP and UN missions (Puglierin 2016).

However, in a different but related development, Malta decided to opt out of PESCO, the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation, and adopt a so-called 'wait and see' approach (Times of Malta 2017). Then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat had indicated that Malta preferred to observe the way in which PESCO would evolve and how it would work first, and the implications that this might have, though admittedly unexpected, on Malta's neutrality (Costa 2017). Even in the aftermath of Russia's war against Ukraine while still the only member state not participating, Malta has continued to reiterate that it will remain outside of PESCO, despite arguments that have been raised by observers in favour of participation (Sansone 2023).

An area where Malta's neutrality, along with that of other neutral member states such as Austria and Ireland, has demonstrated a distinct position compared to other EU Member States, has been with regard to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Whilst Austria has taken the lead in drafting and ratifying the Treaty (Kmentt 2021), NATO member states consider deterrence a core element of their security and NATO's overall posture. Nonetheless, certain NATO states have been less staunchly opposed to the TPNW and have been more constructive in nurturing the humanitarian initiative (Meier & Vieluf 2021). Malta has taken pride in being one of the first 50 states to ratify the Treaty, and in defending its neutrality frequently recalls its commitment towards non-proliferation and support for the TPNW (Cutajar 2021).

The EU member states adopted the "Strategic Compass" in 2022, a strategy intended to provide "a shared assessment of the strategic environment" and contemporary challenges, develop a coherent and common approach towards security and defence amongst member states, and identify both approaches and targets in addressing such issues collectively (European Council 2022).

In this regard, Malta has supported a more proactive role for the EU in taking responsibility for its security and believes that Member States should contribute "to the best of their abilities and resources while respecting the specific character of their security and defence policies" (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade 2023). In order to safeguard its neutrality, Malta has emphasised this line during the discussions and drafting of the Strategic Compass, and identified the Mediterranean as an area of strategic importance for the EU, and "the primacy of the UN as the cornerstone of the international rules-based order (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade 2023). Malta has also supported a greater EU role in the areas of crisis management, conflict prevention and resolution, capacity building, and the strengthening of regional and multilateral partnerships.

Public Support for Neutrality

The Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade undertook a consultation exercise that resulted in the launch of a new Foreign Policy Strategy in February 2022. The strategy maps out the guiding principles that underpin Malta's foreign policy, and strategic goals that will be pursued in its implementation, namely supporting the values, well-being and prosperity of Maltese citizens; promoting peace and security; and maximising opportunities for influence in strategic regions and

multilateral fora (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs 2022). The strategy embeds neutrality at the centre of its objectives, and reiterates that “Malta’s neutrality does not mean that it is indifferent to what happens around it. Malta’s policy of neutrality safeguards its effectiveness and credibility, which in turn enables it to play a significant role in actively promoting peace and security in the region and beyond.” (Ministry for Foreign & European Affairs 2022, p.7)

In the context of the Foreign Policy Strategy, the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs also commissioned research on Maltese public opinion on Malta’s foreign policy, its international role and reputation, as well as the politics of neutrality. When asked on the importance of Malta’s neutrality, 62.6% of respondents replied that it was very important (Martin 2022). Thus, officials have reiterated that neutrality, like EU membership, is no longer politically controversial but enjoys public support and is considered integral to Malta’s global posture.

A new world order? Malta and European Neutrality after Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has been a critical juncture for European Security and the rift between Russia and the transatlantic community. We have subsequently seen shifts in policy amongst several international actors. The United States has had to pivot, in part, back to Europe, while Germany has departed from some of the major traditional tenets of its foreign and defence policy. Finland and Sweden have abandoned their neutrality and non-alignment and applied for NATO membership, and both the EU and NATO have experienced a revived unity and sense of purpose. While Finland and Sweden have taken the decision to pursue NATO membership, Malta, like Ireland and Austria, has maintained its neutrality. Yet these developments have led to reflection and debate in these neutral states over how their neutrality should be applied and defined.

The remaining European neutral states have declared themselves, particularly in the current circumstances, to be militarily neutral but not politically neutral (Scally 2022).

At the start of the war, Malta immediately condemned Russia’s aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and its people, called for an end to hostilities, and aligned itself firmly within the positions adopted by the European Union (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs 2022b). Echoing the position that the Maltese Government adopted during the 2011 Libya crisis, Malta reiterated that whilst it retains its military neutrality, it is not neutral on values or neutralized, and pursues what it describes as an active neutrality (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs 2022c). Malta welcomed and concurred with the EU’s unity in support of Ukraine against Russian aggression. Moreover, in view of its constitutional neutrality, Malta has constructively abstained from measures to provide lethal support, and has, like other neutral states, provided Ukraine with humanitarian and non-lethal means of assistance (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade 2023). The other European neutral states have also participated in the sanctions packages adopted against Russia, and are also contributing towards the EU’s support for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility through non-lethal means (Killeen 2022). In March 2023 Malta also signed a European Defence Agency initiative for the collaborative procurement of ammunition to aid Ukraine, and to replenish national stockpiles. Whilst assistance to Ukraine is a central part of this project, it also allows for the participation of neutral member states as it enables the replenishing of national stockpiles without providing military support to Ukraine (Cordina 2023).

Malta began its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in January 2023, and assumed the Presidency of the Council during February of the same year. In this role, it has continued to strongly condemn Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and its

people. It was observed that in an address to the UN Security Council in February 2023, Foreign Minister Ian Borg categorically condemned Russia's behaviour without directly recalling Malta's neutrality, reflecting a significant shift in tone. The Minister himself acknowledged "Our foreign policy has changed a lot in the past year [...] Perhaps it has changed without us even realising it." (Borg 2023b) Likewise, the evolutionary nature of Malta's foreign policy and its response to the developing international circumstances has also been acknowledged, whereby Ministry officials maintain that "Malta will ensure that its neutrality is preserved as a proven principle of its foreign policy while adapting it to the unfolding changes in the security environment and the challenges being faced." (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade 2023)

In the meantime, there are similar domestic debates in Malta, Ireland and Austria on neutrality in the wake of the war, wherein a distinction can be observed between public opinion versus political and academic discussions (see Agius 2023; Martin 2022b; Bury & Murphy 2023; Cioffi 2022; Fsadni 2023; Swaton 2023). As discussed above, public opinion appears to be attached to the retention of neutrality in Malta, whilst a large percentage is supportive of the Government's and EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (European Commission Representation in Malta 2023). On the other hand, many political observers, academics, and decision makers indicate greater awareness that neutrality may need to be updated and implemented differently due to the war.

Russia's war against Ukraine has also spurred a new wave of cooperation between the EU and NATO. The EU published its Strategic Compass shortly after the start of the war, while NATO published its own Strategic Concept that same year (NATO 2022). Greater EU-NATO cooperation, particularly in relation to non-military aspects of their shared security, and their participation in the PfP provides a means for strengthened integration for neutral states such as Malta, Ireland and Austria within the broader European security architecture. Moreover, whilst Malta finds comfort in the TEU's shelter and mutual defence clauses (Briffa 2021; Cachia 2023), it can afford to continue to engage and develop cooperation and capacity building with NATO partners, like the other European neutral states have done (see Cottey 2018; Ewers-Peters 2022). In May 2023, the Government began negotiating the renewal of Malta's Individual Tailored Partnership Programme as a participant within the PfP. When Foreign Minister Ian Borg raised the issue during the Maltese Parliament's Standing Committee on Foreign and European Affairs, he highlighted several areas of cooperation and argued that there would be a focus on interoperability in nonmilitary areas, such as cyber security and civil protection. The debate within the Committee was uncontroversial and unanimous (Parliament of Malta 2023). This is reflective of the convergence between the two political parties on foreign policy and the interpretation of Malta's constitutional neutrality, particularly with regard to the Partnership for Peace.

A further consideration for European neutrals relates to the perception of their neutrality within current realities and alignments. Neutrality is said to be "contingent upon the acceptance of other states" (Simpson, 2018) and therefore should be considered in terms of how it is perceived by the state declaring this posture, but also how it is received and perceived by those around it. It is worth recalling Karsh's analysis of the way European neutral states would be perceived by the Soviet Union were they to pursue membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) during what would prove to be the later years of the Cold War. He noted that Soviet propaganda maintained that EEC membership would provide indirect assistance to NATO by strengthening its economic base, and in the event of war, serving its aggressive designs (Karsh 1988). Thus, he

argued whether such fears “were grounded or exaggerated”, the concern for neutral states then was that this would detract from the credibility of their neutrality (Karsh 1988, pp. 127).

Considering its 20-year membership of the European Union, Malta, like other EU neutrals, is under no illusion or pretence that its foreign policy is not aligned with that of its fellow member states and within the West (see Pace 2013; Fiott 2015; Briffa 2022). At the same time, concerns have been raised regarding Malta’s low defence spending, weak infrastructure, and its perception as a security ‘free rider’ amongst other EU member states (Fiott 2015). Yet it has been argued that its neutrality may offer comfort and a guarantee to regional and neighbouring states that Malta would “not be used as a springboard for military action against them” (Pace 2013 p.162). Within the current climate, Malta is not being perceived by Russia as neutral (Borg 2023) nor would Malta, as a small island state, whose foreign policy has been built on promoting the sanctity of international law, and the respect for international law and territorial sovereignty, want to be seen as being neutral or indifferent.

Writing in a post-9/11 environment, Wivel (2005) advocated that to avoid being side-lined or constrained, smaller EU member states should focus on transnational concerns, advocate and lead on particular issues; and also accept imbalances within EU foreign and security policy decision making – even formalized imbalances such as Qualified Majority Voting.

As an EU member state for two decades, Malta has grappled with seeking the benefits of integration without being constrained. Malta has retained its normative security identity and constructively contributes on transnational security concerns and through humanitarian assistance. It has also contributed to UN and CSDP peacekeeping missions and participates in efforts to develop capabilities and capacity building. Malta has also maintained that whilst its neutrality must adapt to an ever-changing security environment, the specific foreign and security policies of individual member states should be respected.

Thus, the maintenance of its neutrality has allowed it the flexibility to contribute where it can, whilst also retaining greater autonomy and sovereignty over the extent of its integration in areas of security and defence. Malta’s position has been driven by pragmatism rather than principle alone, and remains sensitive to the prospect of foreign interference in its sovereignty and the exploitation of its geostrategic location, the erosion of the government’s autonomy and participation in decision-making.

Malta’s neutrality deserves closer assessment – both constitutionally and pragmatically – in terms of how it should be defined and conceptualized within the current realities, and how Malta can effectively integrate in frameworks provided by the EU and other regional partnerships to invest further in its own capacity building and credibility. Yet, within the current climate and emerging situation in international order, Malta is less likely to accept decision making reforms at an EU level. Consensus in foreign policy issues allows a small state like Malta greater autonomy and assurances over concerns regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has explored Malta’s security and defence identity as a neutral yet aligned EU member state over the past two decades. Malta’s approach is that typically upheld by other small states – with a focus on multilateral cooperation and nonmilitary security issues, and an emphasis on humanitarian assistance and the respect for sovereignty and international law.

Malta has retained this approach, whilst also maintaining its neutrality as means to safeguard

its territorial integrity and autonomy. While the nature and purpose of neutrality within a post-Cold War international order shaped by European integration has long been under scrutiny, such debates have been even more amplified by the developments in European security and defence that emerged following the start of Russia's war against Ukraine.

Neutrality in the context of EU membership and war in Ukraine mean that Malta is effectively aligned and integrated within European security and defence architecture, yet, unlike other former European neutrals it is still unprepared to commit more actively to EU defence integration or NATO.

Even though not seriously pursuing NATO membership, Malta would do well to explore the experiences of other small European NATO members, the deeper levels of integration of other European neutrals within partnership or associated programmes, and the experience of former neutral states which have joined the alliance. In this way, Malta will be in a better position to consider various scenarios and policy options, or reaffirm its approach and application of neutrality.

Nonetheless, an effective approach towards security and defence within the current climate, whether retaining active neutrality or otherwise, requires continued investment in capabilities, and attention to non-military concerns that require investment and interoperability. Furthermore, considering the EU's mutual defence clause, Malta must assess where its abilities and possible contributions lie, and ensure that the necessary training, investments and interoperability are in place should Malta be required to contribute to or receive assistance from its fellow member states.

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