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Neutrality as Security Policy?

Austria in an Integration-Based European
Security Order

by Werner Fasslabend and Christoph Schwarz
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AIIES COMMENT

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Introduction

Austria's policy of permanent neutrality has long occupied a central place in the country's foreign and security policy self-understanding. Originally embedded in the geopolitical conditions of the Cold War, neutrality was widely regarded as both a prerequisite for the restoration of sovereignty and a functional instrument of security in a divided Europe. Since then, however, the political and strategic environment in which Austrian neutrality operates has undergone a profound transformation. European integration, the end of bipolarity, and the re-emergence of a great-power rivalry have progressively altered the assumptions that once underpinned neutrality's security rationale.

This paper traces the evolution of Austrian neutrality from its Cold War origins to the present, examining how its function, meaning, and practical implications have shifted over time and assessing whether neutrality can still serve as a viable foundation for Austria's security policy within an increasingly contested European security order.

Cold War Neutrality

Between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in 1955, Austria had been divided into four occupation zones between the Allied Powers. In order to regain national sovereignty and avoid the risk of territorial partition – much like Germany –

Austria accepted the Soviet demand of “a permanent neutrality of the kind practiced by Switzerland”.¹ This decision was not solely the product of Austrian diplomatic ingenuity – decisive especially in the final phase of the negotiations – but rather reflected Austria's highly specific geopolitical position at the interface between NATO and Warsaw Pact. As a state of strategic relevance to both blocs, Austria was not acceptable as part of the opposing camp to either side, making neutrality a mutually tolerable compromise. This outcome was further enabled by a brief phase of *détente* between East and West, which facilitated agreement among the occupying powers and ultimately brought the occupation to an end.

The withdrawal of occupying forces following the conclusion of the State Treaty and the declaration of neutrality produced strategic consequences that extended far beyond Austria itself. Combined with Switzerland's long-standing neutrality, Austria's “neutralisation” created a continuous buffer along the northern Alpine arc, stretching from the Jura Mountains to the Carpathians and forming a *de facto* barrier at the centre of the European continent. For the Soviet Union, this configuration offered the advantage of separating the Federal Republic of Germany from Italy and, from a military-strategic perspective, of dividing NATO's northern and southern theatres, substantially

complicating force redeployment across the Alps. For the Western powers, the effective denial of the Upper Danube valley from Pressburg to Passau likewise impeded the prospect of a rapid Soviet advance into southern Germany.

For Austria, it can be regarded as largely uncontested that it benefited to a significant extent from its neutral status in the period between the adoption of permanent neutrality in 1955 and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Within this geopolitical setting, neutrality enabled Austria to assume a distinctive role in the international system, one that extended far beyond the natural sphere of influence of a country of its size, as Henry Kissinger once observed.² As a front-line state positioned between East and West, Austria became a valued mediator and bridge-builder for both sides of the Iron Curtain, a role that was further institutionalised through the hosting of major international organisations in Vienna, including the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Europe. Strategically leveraged as an instrument of foreign policy, neutrality thus allowed Austria and its representatives to exert influence on the international stage disproportionate to the country's material capabilities. The economic dividend of this position was likewise substantial. Relative to its population size, Austria ranked among the three largest recipients of

American post-war reconstruction aid and became firmly embedded in the economic architecture of the West³, while cooperative arrangements with the Soviet Union, such as the gas import agreement concluded in 1968⁴, also contributed significantly to Austria's rise into the ranks of the world's wealthiest industrialised states.

Post-Cold War Neutrality

The end of the Cold War, Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995, and the subsequent eastern enlargements of both the EU and NATO fundamentally altered the political environment in and around Austria. Within a remarkably short period of time, Austria moved from being a buffer and contact zone between antagonistic power blocs to the centre of a largely peaceful and increasingly integrated Europe, almost exclusively surrounded by EU and NATO member states. The bipolar order of the Cold War, characterised by persistent tension and mutual deterrence, gave way to a phase of US-dominated unipolarity in which the proclaimed "end of history" appeared, at least temporarily, within reach. In the euphoria following the perceived triumph of liberal democracy over autocracy and communism, security policy concerns increasingly receded into the background. What followed was a growing Europeanisation of Austrian foreign, security, and defence policy, in the course of which neutrality lost much of its former strategic distinctiveness and was gradually suppl-

mented by the principle of solidarity embedded in EU membership.⁵

This transformation briefly opened a window of political fluidity and strategic opportunity. By the late 1990s, NATO membership appeared, at least in principle, to be a conceivable option within Austria's domestic political landscape. Leading figures within the Austrian People's Party signalled openness to accession, the Freedom Party, then the largest opposition force, submitted the first parliamentary motion explicitly advocating NATO membership, and influential actors within the Social Democratic Party also expressed support, suggesting that the qualified majority required for constitutional amendments – necessary to abolish neutrality – appeared within reach.⁶ This moment, however, proved short-lived. The collapse of the grand coalition in 2000 marked an abrupt end to these considerations, which have since lacked any realistic prospect of revival. To the contrary, a critical and sustained engagement with questions of international politics – and in particular with Austria's evolving role within it, – increasingly appeared redundant against the background of EU membership and the rapid normalisation of Europe's post-Cold War order. This contributed to a gradual impoverishment of political and societal discourse on Austria's strategic orientation in international security affairs over the past three decades.

Had the international system remained frozen at the turn of the

millennium and had Francis Fukuyama's proclaimed "end of history" indeed materialised⁷, this development might not have carried significant consequences. It must be acknowledged, however, that the arc of global history does not appear to be bending inexorably towards a world in which values such as democracy, human rights, and peaceful coexistence among states are universally shared. On the contrary, it is becoming increasingly evident that revisionist forces seeking to undermine precisely these values and to rewrite the rules of international relations are not only on the rise but have already consolidated power in several of the world's most powerful states, including the United States, China, and Russia. These developments suggest that the international system is undergoing a profound structural transformation rather than a temporary disruption. The world is once again at risk of reverting to spheres of influence dominated by Great Powers, in which the fate and security of small- and middle-sized countries rests on their ability to either bandwagon or band together.

For Austria, these developments raise an increasingly urgent question concerning its long-term orientation in European and international affairs and, in particular, its foreign and security policy self-conception. What is certain is that Austria embarked on the path of European integration with its accession to the EU in 1995. The fact that this path has fundamentally transformed the structure of Austria's foreign, security, and defence

policy, as well as Austria's place in the global order, has, however, not yet fully registered among large segments of society. Neutrality has instead been elevated to the status of a largely uncontested element of political consensus, with sustained public debate about its continued purpose or necessary adaptation often being curtailed before it can meaningfully unfold – as became evident in the advent of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁸

Austria's strategic environment has also become markedly more demanding. In an era in which security concerns increasingly shape not only European but global politics more broadly, Austria is confronted with a growing tension between its international legal status as a permanently neutral state and the practical requirements arising from EU membership and from its geostrategic position at the centre of the continent. Located only a few hundred kilometres from acute and persistent crisis regions such as Ukraine, the Kaliningrad Oblast, Bosnia, or Kosovo, Austria finds itself in close proximity to multiple fault lines of contemporary European security. Under these conditions, the maintenance of the existing foreign and security policy status quo appears increasingly insufficient, both to ensure Austria's own security and to enable it to exercise the stabilising and agenda-setting role that is possible and, arguably, necessary in Central Europe and Europe at large. Whether Austria can continue to rely on inherited assumptions about neutrality without subjecting its function to

critical reassessment within an increasingly integrated and contested European security order must therefore be examined with renewed urgency.

Neutrality as a Security Policy

During the Cold War, Austrian neutrality was widely conceived not merely as a legal status requiring abstention from alliance structures but as a core instrument of its foreign and security policy. In other words, foreign and security policies were by and large a function of the country's neutrality policy. In a strategic environment structured by two rival alliance systems, national security was expected to be provided less through military deterrence – as would be traditionally assumed and even constitutionally mandated by Article I. of Austrian neutrality law⁹ – and more through the political utility that neutrality was able to generate in the international system. The central premise being that Austria could reduce the risk of coercion or encroachment by becoming valuable to both blocs as a predictable, stabilising, and diplomatically serviceable actor.¹⁰ In line with this logic, security was derived from a form of political indispensability, meaning that state survival was linked to Austria's capacity to perform functions that neither NATO nor the Warsaw Pact could easily replicate within their own alliance logics.

The concept of an "active neutrality policy", particularly associated with Austria's ambitious foreign policy in the 1970s, translated this premise into an

explicit security narrative. Neutrality was not framed as passive abstention but as a continuous diplomatic practice that sought to maintain credibility, manage perceptions, and widen Austria's room for manoeuvre in international politics. By positioning itself as a mediator and interlocutor, Austria aimed to mitigate the structural vulnerability of being located at a geopolitical fault line. The bridging function between the blocs was thus understood as a security contribution in its own right, one that complemented and perhaps even outweighed military preparedness. Bruno Kreisky articulated this security rationale with particular clarity in his 1971 government declaration, noting that he had "no intention of diminishing the importance of national defence when asserting, on behalf of the Federal Government, that Austria's neutrality and security in peacetime were best ensured through a successful foreign policy"¹¹. In analytical terms, the claim was that diplomatic performance was in itself a central security asset. A neutral Austria that was perceived as reliable, useful, and internationally engaged could raise the political costs of pressure by either side and, at the same time, increase the incentives to respect its sovereignty. This approach implicitly treated visibility, credibility, and mediation capacity as elements of national defence, in the sense that they contributed to strategic insulation. It also helps explain why neutrality, in the Cold War context as well as up to this day, could be narrated domestically

as a cornerstone of national security. The promise was not that Austria could ward off a great power militarily, but that it could make itself difficult to disregard in international affairs, thereby anchoring the state's survival in the stabilising role that neutrality made possible during the Cold War.

The Situation Today

In the contemporary European security environment, the structural conditions that once made neutrality appear as a distinct national instrument of security policy – above all the bipolarity during the Cold War – have changed fundamentally. Austria is no longer located at the interface of two antagonistic blocs whose mutual restraint could be reinforced through a credible bridging role. Austria's security is instead embedded within the political and institutional order of the European Union as well as NATO, and its security is generated through continental frameworks rather than through a strictly national logic of insulation. This shift is explicitly reflected in Austria's current strategic doctrine, which defines national security as “intrinsicly linked to the security of Europe” and identifies “the EU as the central framework for Austrian security policy”¹². This embeddedness, however, has to be understood in conjunction with the institutional reality of European defence. While Austria's security strategy emphasises an active and solidaristic participation in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including

the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the most consequential security and defence policy debates and decisions in Europe continue to take place within the framework of NATO. In light of the continuing relevance of the United States' nuclear umbrella and the absence of fully credible military leadership and operational capacity at the EU-level, NATO is likely to remain the central security architecture of the continent in the foreseeable future. Any substantial shift in European security policy away from NATO towards EU institutions appears therefore improbable, even in the wake of recent political frictions within the Alliance. At

Austrian security is inseparable from the security of Central Europe.

most, a gradual Europeanisation of NATO, accompanied in parallel by incremental advances in EU foreign and security policy, can be expected.

For Austria, this creates a structural tension at the heart of its contemporary security policy. On the one hand, Austria's security is no longer derived from an active foreign policy centred on neutrality and its role as a mediator and buffer between competing power centres, but from the resilience, coherence, and credibility of the European security architecture of which Austria is a part. On the other hand, Austria remains formally excluded from the central institution that continues to shape the strategic

parameters of this very architecture, namely NATO. Following the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, Austria now finds itself in an increasingly marginal position. Within the European Union, only a small group of peripheral island states – Ireland, Cyprus, and Malta – remain outside the Alliance, while NATO members now constitute 96% of the entire population of the EU.¹³ Austria's ability to influence core European security policy developments is therefore substantially limited. While it may seek information on agendas and outcomes, it lacks meaningful access to deliberative and decision-making processes, resulting in a lack of effective influence that stands in stark contrast to its dependence on, and integration into, the European security architecture.

This institutional asymmetry becomes particularly consequential in light of the nature of contemporary security threats. These are increasingly systemic and transboundary, targeting European infrastructure, political and societal cohesion, economic resilience, and the integrity of the rules-based order. In such an environment, abstention is not a cost-free posture. A stance of minimal involvement can weaken collective responses and thereby indirectly reduce Austria's own security. Directional pressures on Europe's security architecture further sharpen this dilemma. From the East, Russia's war against Ukraine has demonstrated the return of military force as an instrument to revise borders and erode core norms,

while its hybrid activities continue to undermine cohesion within Europe. From the West, transatlantic reliability can no longer be treated as an unchanging constant, as debates over US commitments and burden-sharing illustrate. At the same time, China's increasingly assertive foreign policy exerts growing pressure on Europe across economic, technological, and security domains. Within this setting, neutrality can no longer function as a self-sufficient security policy, as Austria's security is no longer produced through national insulation but through collective European responses to increasingly transboundary and systemic threats. Its contemporary relevance instead lies in how it is reconciled with this reality, even as the institutional centre of gravity of European defence remains located outside the European Union. Neutrality must therefore be assessed in terms of how it affects Austria's ability to participate in – and shape – this increasingly integration-based European security order.

The Road Ahead

In the present strategic context, the prospect of Austria abandoning its policy of permanent neutrality appears highly unlikely. Neutrality remains deeply embedded in public sentiment and continues to enjoy a broad political consensus. Opinion surveys consistently show that a substantial majority of Austrians regard neutrality as a defining element of national identity and foreign policy, with support levels regularly exceeding 70%.¹⁴

Public opposition to NATO membership remains equally robust, with successive polls indicating clear majorities rejecting accession and favouring the preservation of Austria's neutral status.¹⁵ This societal disposition is mirrored across the political spectrum. In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Austrian Chancellor and the leadership of all major political parties reaffirmed neutrality's continued relevance, effectively foreclosing any meaningful institutional debate about its further development, let alone its abandonment.¹⁶ These patterns suggest that neutrality is not merely a residual legacy of the Cold War, but a durable and widely shared point of reference in Austria's national security identity.

However, the persistence of neutrality does not necessarily imply restraint in collective security efforts in Europe, nor does it preclude an active and responsible role within the EU's security and defence framework. Historically, Austrian neutrality has coexisted with substantial international engagement, including participation in UN- as well as EU-led missions, and there is scope for this pattern to continue. Furthermore, the introduction of Article 23(j) into the Austrian Constitution in the wake of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2010 provided the legal basis for substantial engagement, effectively allowing for the suspension of Austrian neutrality within the framework of the EU's CFSP.¹⁷ Austria may consequently participate in the Petersburg tasks, contribute militarily to collective defence under Arti-

cle 42(7) of the Treaty on the European Union, as well as be actively involved in initiatives such as the European Peace Facility, the European Defence Agency, the European Defence Fund, and PESCO, among others. In other words, constitutional constraints on Austria's participation in EU defence initiatives and frameworks have been effectively removed. Thus, under the existing constitutional framework, Austria is legally enabled to provide meaningful and comprehensive contributions to European security and defence, irrespective of neutrality. Yet the absence of formal constraints does not resolve how far Austria is willing to translate this legal capacity into concrete commitments, particularly where such engagement entails reciprocal obligations and material costs, with public sentiment constituting the most significant limiting factor.

The central tension in Austria is therefore not one of legal incompatibility, but of asymmetrical solidarity. While public attitudes tend to endorse enhanced European collective security in the abstract, they remain markedly reluctant when such commitments imply reciprocal obligations, material burdens, or the possibility of Austrian force deployment under mutual defence scenarios.¹⁸ While 85% of Austrians expect military assistance from other EU member states in the event of an attack, for example, only 40% support Austria providing indirect military support in return, and merely 20% endorse direct Austrian military involvement.¹⁹ What therefore

requires reconsideration is less the formal policy of neutrality itself than the manner in which Austria engages with its own security identity and translates it into practice. Over much of the post-Cold War period, developments in European integration – particularly in the fields of security and defence – have unfolded largely at the margins of public awareness. This has contributed to a disconnect between the strategic demands of Austria’s security environment and societal understandings of how neutrality interacts with EU solidarity, institutional interdependence, and collective resilience. Regardless of their strategic preferences, Austrian political representatives therefore remain structurally constrained by public attitudes that limit the domestic legitimacy of more far-reaching commitments in European security and defence. Addressing this gap will require substantially more engagement and political leadership, including clearer public communication about the implications of European security cooperation and Austria’s role within it.

Within these constraints, a number of strategic orientations follow. Austria’s security interests point towards a continued engagement within the European Union, including efforts to shape norms and practices in common foreign, security, and defence policy. The institutional asymmetry created by Austria’s exclusion from NATO also cannot be ignored. While formal membership remains politically excluded, the pursuit of closer and more systematic forms of consultation and informal inclusion

– along the lines of arrangements enjoyed by non-member partners prior to accession – appears increasingly relevant if Austria is to avoid further marginalisation in European security debates. Finally, Austria’s geographical position underscores the importance of intensified cooperation with neighbouring Central European states. Regional formats and initiatives provide an additional avenue through which Austria can contribute to stability and resilience in its immediate strategic environment, reinforcing the insight that Austrian security is inseparable from the security of Central Europe as a whole. Taken together, these considerations suggest that the central challenge facing Austria is not so much whether neutrality should be retained, but how it can be credibly aligned with an active, solidaristic, and institutionally embedded role in European security. Strengthening public awareness of the strategic realities confronting Europe, and of the forms of collective action they necessitate, will be essential if Austria is to reconcile its long-standing tradition of neutrality with a coherent and effective contribution to continental security in the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

- Austria should clarify and publicly articulate a modernised doctrine of neutrality that reconciles its constitutional status with its obligations and opportunities within EU security and defence policy, accompanied

by sustained public engagement to strengthen domestic legitimacy for a more active European role.

- Austria should assume a more proactive and shaping role within EU security frameworks, including capability initiatives, in order to demonstrate that neutrality is compatible with substantive European solidarity.
- Short of NATO membership, Austria should institutionalise closer consultation and interoperability arrangements with the Alliance to mitigate strategic marginalisation and enhance situational awareness.

Austria should intensify structured regional security cooperation in Central Europe, recognising that its national security is inseparable from the stability and resilience of its immediate neighbourhood.

About the Authors

Dr. Werner Faslabend is President of the AIES. Previously, he was Federal Minister of Defence of the Republic of Austria (1990-2000), long-standing member of the Austrian Parliament and its Third President (2000-2002). Amongst other things, he initiated the first meeting of EU defence ministers in 1998.

Christoph Schwarz is Senior Research Fellow at the AIES. His research focuses on various issues of Austrian and European foreign and security policy. In his current research focus, he examines the changing role and significance of neutrality in the 21st century, particularly in relation to Austria in the context of European integration and contemporary dynamics in international relations.

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Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau
Tel. +43 (1) 3583080
office@aies.at | www.aies.at