

Austria's security policy – a guide

Austria's security policy framework in three key points.



Walter Feichtinger

graduated from the Theresian Military Academy in 1979, was in command of Panzer Battalion 10 and received his doctorate in political science from the University of Vienna in 2002. From 2001 on, he was security and defence policy advisor in the Federal Chancellery, Secretary General of the Austrian Officers Association and most recently head of the Institute for Peacekeeping and Conflict Management. The retired Brigadier now runs the Center for Strategic Analysis (CSA) in Vienna with a team, founded in 2008 as an informal platform for topics of geopolitical and security policy relevance. csa-austria.eu

The participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI, see article on page 46) has inevitably sparked a heated debate among political parties in Austria, questioning whether it is permissible due to the country's "everlasting neutrality". The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 already caused significant uncertainty about the stance Austria should take and how it should behave on specific issues, such as the transit of weapons.

Even for a seasoned Austrian, it is not always easy to follow these discussions and discern the actual cornerstones of Austrian security policy. Positions oscillate between isolationist neutrality and a pro-western, liberal-oriented active engagement in international affairs.

The three pillars of Austrian security policy

So, what are the pillars of Austria's security and defence policy that serve as pointers for orientation? The automatic answer to this question is often "our neutrality". Neutrality represents security, defence, reputation, image, and national identity. However, this view falls short of encompassing the whole picture. When the Neutrality Act was passed on October 26, 1955, the then Federal Government emphasised that Austria aligns itself with the Western world, embracing liberal and democratic values.

Taking a comprehensive view, the following three characteristics can be identified in Austrian security policy: neutrality as the "foundation" of security and defence policy, a striving for a special status as a mediator in international conflicts and a provider of good offices ("bridge builder"), and Austria's membership and participation in international organizations to preserve or restore peace and security.

Neutrality at the core

Undoubtedly, neutrality stands as the central feature. However, not in the Swiss model, but rather in the unique "Austrian way". This means that from the outset, more emphasis was placed on diplomatic engagements than defence efforts. Austria joined the UN at the end of 1955. In the following year, it welcomed hundreds of thousands of Hungarian refugees fleeing from Soviet troops. Over time, Austria's neutrality was modified and adapted to real needs. Joining the EU in 1995, in particular, demanded political flexibility to avoid potential conflicts between the status

of neutrality and the rights and obligations as an EU member. Thus, a constitutional amendment was made, de facto suspending neutrality in the realm of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The simple political formula became: "solidarity within the EU, neutrality outside the EU". However, in practice, this can be challenging as most foreign policy decisions are made within the EU framework. This is, therefore, often referred to as "residual neutrality". As such, Austria may not engage in any war, join any military alliance, or tolerate the permanent stationing of foreign troops on its territory.

Austria's special status

A second characteristic is Austria's aspired special status as a neutral conflict mediator and provider of good offices. Undoubtedly, during the Cold War, Austria achieved success in this area, gaining a reputation. Examples include the meeting between US President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1961, as well as mediation efforts by former Chancellor Bruno Kreisky in the Middle East conflict in the 1980s. Crucially, Vienna became the headquarters for significant international organisations such as the UN, the OSCE, or OPEC.

However, with Austria's EU accession in 1995 and the rapid pace of globalisation, the opportunities to present itself as a negotiation venue and dealmaker have diminished significantly. Even the recent talks on the Iranian nuclear programme cannot conceal this fact. Many emerging countries in other regions of the world have gained importance and are now offering themselves as locations for negotiations, like Singapore, for instance. So far, Vienna has managed to hold its ground, but the current prevailing geopolitical power struggles, the restriction of arms control measures, and the marginalisation of security organisations like the OSCE are significantly limiting the possibilities for conflict mediation and trust-building efforts.

Austria's ambition to maintain a special status as a neutral country has become more challenging in the face of this turning point. Nevertheless, Austria continues to enjoy an excellent reputation as a host for international organizations, which it strives to uphold.

Membership in and contributions to international organisations

Last but not least, Austria's contribution to international peace efforts should also be mentioned. In addition

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tion to being a member of the UN, Austria has also joined the OSCE, the EU, and the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP). Within these frameworks, numerous special envoys or high representatives have provided valuable services. Civil and military peace operations have also been carried out under the auspices of the UN, EU, OSCE, and NATO PfP. For many years, UN missions dominated, with the first troops deployed in the Congo as early as 1960. However, after joining the EU and the NATO PfP in 1995, the focus of Austrian deployments shifted to neighbouring regions, specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Kosovo. Austria has even committed to permanently providing a specific contingent for international peacekeeping missions. Through this engagement, Austria makes a solidary contribution to international peace and security, which, in turn, is expected to have a positive impact on its own security situation.

However, for its immediate defence, Austria is solely responsible. It cannot rely on NATO's protection, as participating in a collective defence would contradict the Neutrality Act. Within the EU framework, Austria, along with Ireland, Malta, and Cyprus, claims an exception for itself regarding mutual defence obligations ("Irish clause"). Consequently, it remains uncertain to what extent other EU members would provide Austria with military assistance.

The future of Austrian security policy

For over 20 years, Austria has emphasised that the EU forms its most crucial security framework. Despite Finland's existing NATO membership and Sweden's foreseeable accession, Austria continues to adhere to this position. Together with Ireland, Malta, and Cyprus, it belongs to the small group of alliance-free/neutral EU full members. Realistically speaking, NATO membership while abandoning neutrality is not considered an option. The strong insistence of major political parties, deep public support, and limited efforts to engage in a well-founded, rational discourse on the benefits and risks of neutrality make it difficult to reconsider this stance.

After initial hesitation and pressure from experts, the government is now revising Austria's central planning document, the Austrian Security Strategy (ÖSS) from 2013. However, this revision is conducted under the condition not to tamper with the status of neutrality. An initial result is expected by the end of 2023,

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BUNDESGESETZBLATT FÜR DIE REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH

Jahrgang 1955 Ausgegeben am 4. November 1955 57. Stück

211. Bundesverfassungsgesetz: Neutralität Österreichs.
212. Verordnung: Errichtung von Ergänzungskommandos zur Durchführung der Erfassung und Einberufung der Wehrpflichtigen.
213. Verordnung: Änderung der Sprengel der Gerichtsbezirke Neulengbach und Purkersdorf.
214. Kundmachung: Änderung der Kundmachung, betreffend die Anrechnung von Vordienstzeiten für die Vorrückung in höhere Bezüge bei den Beamten der Österreichischen Bundesbahnen.
215. Notenwechsel über die Aufhebung der Sichtvermerkplicht zwischen Österreich und Monaco.

211. Bundesverfassungsgesetz vom 26. Oktober 1955 über die Neutralität Österreichs.

Der Nationalrat hat beschlossen:

Artikel I.

(1) Zum Zwecke der dauernden Behauptung seiner Unabhängigkeit nach außen und zum Zwecke der Unverletzlichkeit seines Gebietes erklärt Österreich aus freien Stücken seine immerwährende Neutralität. Österreich wird diese mit allen ihm zu Gebote stehenden Mitteln aufrechterhalten und verteidigen.

(2) Österreich wird zur Sicherung dieser Zwecke in aller Zukunft keinen militärischen Bündnissen beitreten und die Errichtung militärischer Stützpunkte fremder Staaten auf seinem Gebiete nicht zulassen.

Artikel II.

Mit der Vollziehung dieses Bundesverfassungsgesetzes ist die Bundesregierung betraut.

Körner

Raab	Schärf	Helmer	Kapfer
Drimmel	Maisel	Kamitz	Thoma
Illig	Waldbrunner	Figl	

212. Verordnung des Bundeskanzleramtes vom 15. Oktober 1955, betreffend die Errichtung von Ergänzungskommandos zur Durchführung der Erfassung und Einberufung der Wehrpflichtigen.

Auf Grund der §§ 17 und 18 des Wehrgesetzes, BGBl. Nr. 181/1955, wird verordnet: Ergänzungskommandos werden mit folgendem örtlichem Wirkungsbereich in folgenden Städten eingerichtet:

Für den Ergänzungsbereich			
Burgenland	in Eisenstadt,	
Kärnten	in Klagenfurt,	
Niederösterreich	in Wien,	
Oberösterreich	in Linz,	

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Salzburg	in Salzburg,
Steiermark	in Graz,
Tirol	in Innsbruck,
Vorarlberg	in Bregenz,
Wien	in Wien.

Raab

213. Verordnung der Bundesregierung vom 25. Oktober 1955, womit die Sprengel der Gerichtsbezirke Neulengbach und Purkersdorf geändert werden.

Auf Grund des § 8 Abs. 5 lit. d des Übergangsgesetzes vom 1. Oktober 1920 in der Fassung des Bundesgesetzes Nr. 368 vom Jahre 1925 wird mit Zustimmung der niederösterreichischen Landesregierung verordnet:

§ 1. Die Gemeinden Gablitz, Mauerbach, Preßbaum, Tullnerbach und Wolfsgraben werden aus dem Sprengel des Bezirksgerichtes Neulengbach ausgeschieden und dem Sprengel des Bezirksgerichtes Purkersdorf zugewiesen.

§ 2. Diese Verordnung tritt am 1. Jänner 1956 in Kraft.

Raab	Schärf	Helmer	Kapfer
Drimmel	Maisel	Kamitz	Thoma
Illig	Waldbrunner	Figl	

214. Kundmachung des Bundesministeriums für Verkehr und verstaatlichte Betriebe vom 29. Oktober 1955, womit die Kundmachung des Bundesministeriums für Verkehr vom 19. Juli 1948, BGBl. Nr. 174, in der Fassung der Kundmachung des Bundesministeriums für Verkehr und verstaatlichte Betriebe vom 27. November 1952, BGBl. Nr. 218, betreffend die Anrechnung von Vordienstzeiten für die Vorrückung in höhere Bezüge bei den Beamten der Österreichischen Bundesbahnen, abgeändert wird.

Auf Grund des zustimmenden Beschlusses des Hauptausschusses des Nationalrates vom 24. Ok-

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potentially influencing this government's term.

Yet, the overarching question remains how Austria's security can best be ensured. The participation in Sky Shield demonstrates that Austria does not pursue an isolationist security policy but is aware of the necessity of international cooperation. However, it will not be easy to navigate the changing geopolitical conditions while maintaining the balance between perpetual neutrality and defence policy necessities. ●

Federal Law Gazette of
4 November 1955:
Federal Constitutional
Act of 26 October 1955
on the Neutrality of Austria.