

# Engaged Small Neutral States

By **Heinz Gärtner**

## Abstract

*In February 2019, the Middle East Institute organised a workshop titled “The Statecraft of Small States: Foreign Policy and Survival Strategies” to examine the various strategies and policies that small states adopt to navigate their regional environments. This issue of Insights carries a paper from the workshop that looks at how some small states in Europe, notably Austria, have used what the author calls “engaged neutrality” to maintain their security.*

## Introduction

The concept of neutrality has proven time and again to be a flexible one that can be adapted to new situations. The big new challenges since the end of the Cold War are the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; terrorism, which potentially holds new dangerous dimensions in combination with proliferation; and fragile and dysfunctional states, which can be breeding grounds for terrorism, a source of uncontrolled immigration, and a source for the development and spread of organised crime. Terrorism also contributes to the loss of important economic areas. Small neutral states are well suited (in many ways better than other states) for making important contributions to the fight against these new dangers. Small neutral states in Europe sometimes enjoy higher international acceptance than members of alliances. Some have assisted in reconstruction and humanitarian aid efforts in war-torn countries under the framework of the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the NATO Partnerships. The small neutral states that are members of the European Union participate in the foreign policy and crisis management of the European Union. Some small neutral states also deploy their armed forces in robust peace operations where there is UN Security Council (UNSC) authorisation. A UNSC mandate is indispensable for the participation of small neutral states where international operations include the use of force. The mandate has to have clear political and military objectives that are both reasonable and attainable.

## Neutrality: No Cold War phenomenon

The notion that the concept of neutrality is a phenomenon and a part of the Cold War is false in many ways. First, the history of neutrality is much older; for example, the Swiss idea of neutrality dates back to the 15th and 16th centuries. And, it was recognised by the big European powers in 1815. International law has known the institution of neutrality since the Hague convention of 1907. Second, neutrality was not constitutive of the Cold War but rather an anomaly of the Cold War. The Cold War was about building blocs; neutrality about staying out of them. From 1975 until the end of the Cold War, small neutral states in Europe offered mediation and good offices and fought against the stagnation of the détente policy, especially in the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the forerunner of the OSCE.

After the end of the Cold War, the small neutral states became active in peace operations outside of military alliances. In many ways, neutral states have more room for manoeuvre than members of alliances or big powers. They enjoy more acceptance and have fewer geopolitical interests. Small neutral states in the 21st century do not envisage evading conflict but much rather engaging in it. In contrast to disengagement and evasion, “engaged neutrality” entails active participation of small states in international security policy in general and in international peace operations in particular. It means involvement whenever possible and staying out only if necessary. It goes without saying that there always has to be a balance between engagement and disengagement. When and how much should a small neutral state be involved in or keep distance of a conflict? What is too much and what is too little? These questions are always difficult to address in a complex and volatile security environment. It has to be said, however, that the issue of engagement is not unique to neutral states per se but rather relates to deeper philosophical and moral questions about issues such as state sovereignty and the use of force. However, neutral and non-aligned small states may possess more normative power than the military and economic powers that otherwise dominate the international relations of Europe and the North Atlantic area.

How does engaged neutrality contribute to the security of small neutral states? Neutrality is a guarantee to the great powers that the country would not join any military alliance. In return, these powers would respect the independence of the neutral states. Neutrality is the means by which small states maintain external independence and the inviolability of their territory. Neutral states define their security policy as measures intended to protect their populations and basic values as well as maintain and defend their permanent neutrality. Engaged neutrality for the small neutral states of Europe is based on solidarity with the European Union and takes into account that their security is largely interconnected with the security of the European Union as a whole.

## The case of Austria

As the Cold War was about building blocs in Europe and military alliances, neutrality represented the anomaly. Austria managed to stay out of the spheres of influence created by the two military superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. As a neutral state, Austria is well suited for making an important contribution to addressing the new challenges after the end of the Cold War. Austria is developing important niche capabilities regarding evacuation, support for catastrophes and humanitarian crises (e.g., the construction of field hospitals or water purification), peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts, atomic, biological and chemical defence (ABC defence), rescue and security deployments, as well as prevention, stabilisation and combat missions. Austria’s engaged neutrality means active participation in international security in general, and in international peace operations in particular.

Not least because of its neutral status, Austria became host to several international organisations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), the secretariat of the OSCE, and the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Control of Conventional Arms. In 1979, then US President Jimmy Carter and his Soviet counterpart, Leonid Brezhnev, signed the second Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT II) Treaty in Vienna. In 2015, the five members of the UNSC, along with Germany and Iran, chose Vienna, not least because of its neutrality, to negotiate the agreement on Iran’s nuclear materials (JCPOA).

## NATO and neutrality<sup>1</sup>

The most important feature of any alliance is mutual defence obligations that are enshrined in Article V of the NATO Treaty. Neutrality and alliances are negatively related. When the importance of collective defence obligations — that come into force in case of an attack on a member state’s territory — increases, neutrality becomes less relevant. On the other hand, when alliance obligations are no longer necessary, the status of neutrality is not really required any more. Thus, neutrality is non-membership in an alliance based on constitutional and international law.

Apart from the existing collective defence and crisis management core tasks, NATO’s Strategic Concept, adopted at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, introduced the additional task of “cooperative security”. This core task involves coordinating the network of partner relationships with non-NATO countries, including those outside Europe, and other international organisations around the globe. Cooperative Security is intended to contribute to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. It is meant to provide a framework for political dialogue and regional cooperation, increase military interoperability and prepare for operations and missions.

Non-membership of an alliance, anchored in neutrality law, is a clear characteristic of neutrality. Mutual obligations of assistance are the most important feature of an alliance and this is incompatible with neutrality. Membership in a military alliance remains impossible for a neutral state. But within the framework of partnerships, crisis management and cooperative security, neutral states can undertake measures similar to those undertaken by members of NATO except Article V obligations.

Austria as a small non-NATO state has been able to participate in crisis management and cooperative security missions and cooperate with NATO while retaining its current status of neutrality. Naturally, the fundamental priority of a neutral security policy during security deployments and deployments abroad precludes alliance obligations. However, modern neutrality does not exclude cooperation with alliance members or alliances, as long as they can agree on the key issues. Austria shares basic threat analyses and goals with NATO within the framework of the partnerships, which are not necessarily limited to the institution of “Partnership for Peace” (PfP), launched in the early 1990s as a means to enable and facilitate interoperability and common training between members and non-members of NATO. In this partnership context, peace operations are well compatible with neutrality. For Austria, the concept of cooperative security provides a framework for political dialogue and regional cooperation, enhances military interoperability and prepares it for operations and missions.

## The European Union and neutrality<sup>2</sup>

Within the framework of the European Union the Treaty of Lisbon formulated a solidarity clause (Article 222), which stipulates the provision of support in case of man-made disasters (e. g., terrorist attacks) and natural disasters following a request by the concerned state. However, this clause is not part of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and must not be confused with assistance obligations (Article 42.7 of the Treaty of Lisbon). Contributions from member states are still voluntary and only provided upon a state’s request. Such contributions involve mainly police and other forms of civilian support rather than military support. Behind the solidarity clause stands very much the idea of collective security. The concept of collective security aims to enhance security among member states and partners, while the concept of collective defence is aimed at an outside enemy.

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<sup>1</sup> Heinz Gärtner, “Austria: Engaged Neutrality,” in *The European Neutrals and NATO Non-alignment, Partnership, Membership?*, ed. Andrew Cottey (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2017), 129–150.

<sup>2</sup> Gärtner, “Austria”.

Article 42.7 of the Treaty of Lisbon contains a clause on security obligations. It requires that member states provide each other with “aid and assistance by all means in their power” in case of armed aggression towards a member state. Such aid includes the promise to use military force. However, the Treaty of Lisbon includes the so-called Irish Formula, which adds to this article by stating that the requirement to provide aid “shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defense policy of certain member states”. This exception is not only valid for neutral and non-aligned states, but also for NATO members. The provision of aid must “be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which ... remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation”. The Treaty of Lisbon, therefore, allows opting out for both the neutral members and the NATO allies of the European Union. This exception clause effectively puts the meaningfulness of the EU’s security obligations in question.

## The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

An example of successful engagement of a neutral state in security affairs is Austria’s role as an initiator of the treaty that prohibits nuclear weapons. After the adoption of its neutrality declaration in the second half of the 1950s, Austria became a model for a zone of disengagement without nuclear weapons in Central Europe (the Rapacki Plan, named after the Polish foreign minister then). Because of the emerging concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), the plan was not implemented, although the idea never died.

In 2010 Austria became the main sponsor of the initiative on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. An “Austrian Pledge”, which later became the “Humanitarian Pledge”, was signed by 127 states in 2014. Austria hosted one of the three conferences on this issue after Norway and Mexico. In 2016 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that called for “a total elimination” of nuclear weapons. At a UN conference on 7 July in New York, 122 state parties voted in favour of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which expresses concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons and calls for their complete elimination. No nuclear weapon state nor its allies participated (except the Netherlands, which voted against).

## Engagement vs. entrapment<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to disengagement and staying out, “engaged neutrality” means active participation in international security policy in general, and in international peace operations in particular. Engaged neutrality means involvement whenever possible and staying out if necessary; it does not mean staying out when possible and engagement only if necessary. It goes without saying that there can be no neutrality between democracy and dictatorship, between a constitutional state and despotism, between the adherence to human rights and their violation. Nonetheless, neutrality allows for a crucial advantage in the debate on these values. Neutral states do not have to take account of geopolitical and alliance-related considerations.

The participation of a small state in a war with a designated enemy when there is no mandate from an international organisation can be dangerous. Small states could be drawn unwillingly into the wars waged by big states. Empirical research shows that the magnitude, duration, and severity of war are substantively connected to alliance configuration, for the reason that war spreads through alliances.<sup>4</sup> Alliances turn small wars into big wars. Small states are thus always caught between being “entrapped” and being “abandoned”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Heinz Gärtner, “Introduction: Engaged Neutrality,” in *Engaged Neutrality: An Evolved Approach to the Cold War*, ed. Heinz Gärtner (Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2017), 1–15.

<sup>4</sup> Volker Krause and David J. Singer, “Minor Powers, Alliances, and Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns,” in *Small States and Alliances*, eds. Heinz Gärtner and Erich Reiter (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2001); and J. David Singer and Melvin Small, “National Alliance Commitments and War Involvement, 1815-1945,” *Peace Research Society (International) Papers* 5, 1966, 109–140.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics Before and After Hiroshima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

The greater one's dependence on the alliance and the stronger one's commitment to the ally, the higher the risk of entrapment. The looser the ties, the larger the risk of being abandoned in case of war. One strategy to escape this trap has been to adopt "neutrality" or "hide."<sup>6</sup>

Diplomacy and conflict prevention are traditionally fields in which small neutral states can be active. Neutrality must not be interpreted as sitting on the sidelines. This definition, discussed in the literature on neutrality, would support economic neutrality and an equidistance between the blocs but would be incompatible with membership of the United Nations. Neutrality has never oriented itself along such lines but instead has proven its adaptability to modern requirements. But such flexibility cannot be interpreted as loss of the significance of neutrality. Multilateralism, readiness to talk, and global partnership have priority for small neutral states; use of force must remain the exception.

## About the author

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994), 108–148.