

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/07/10/the-neutralities-of-austria-and-switzerland-akin-but-not-alike/>

PASCAL LOTTAZ, JUL 10 2024

**This is an excerpt from *Neutrality After 1989: New Paths in the Post-Cold War World*, edited by Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.**

Switzerland and Austria are connected not only by a border in the Alps but also by a long-standing and surprisingly intertwined commitment to neutrality. At the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), the Austrian Empire was one of eight Great Powers giving guarantees for Switzerland's 'perpetual neutrality'. Over a century and two empire-breaking world wars later, the Austrians themselves had to sign a memorandum agreeing to become a neutral state 'like Switzerland' to end the post-war occupation. In recent years, Switzerland used the Austrian example to argue that it could join the United Nations without damaging its neutrality. What goes around comes around. Nevertheless, both states exhibit considerable variances on policy matters. For instance, despite the written promise of the Austrians to follow the Swiss model, one of the first things Vienna did after making neutrality the law of the land was to apply for United Nations (UN) membership – something Switzerland had ruled out for itself, arguing that it would be incompatible with neutrality. In Berne's view, the UN was the club of the winners of World War Two, lacking universality, and was hence off-limits for a neutral state. Similarly, once the Cold War had ended, Austria, together with the northern European neutrals Sweden and Finland, joined the European Union in 1995 – while Switzerland refrained. Although the government and parliament wanted to join the European Economic Community (the EU's precursor), a referendum in 1992 returned a 50.3 per cent no-vote. Swiss critics of European integration have since argued EU membership is incompatible with neutrality – leading to Switzerland's continued absence from the union. Only in 2002 did the country become a UN member, after enough of its people were convinced that the organisation had achieved 'true universality' and thus compatibility with its neutrality.

Austria understands its neutrality in a less limiting way when it comes to participation in international organisations. This is exemplified by various Austrian initiatives, like Chancellor Bruno Kreisky's (1970–83) appeals to resolve the Palestinian question, or more recently Austria's leadership in creating the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and its proactive role in facilitating an agreement on Iran's nuclear capabilities (the JCPOA) between Tehran and Washington. Economically and diplomatically, Vienna often understood its foreign policy as what historian Heinz Gärtner (2018) has termed 'engaged neutrality'. In military matters, Vienna also often went different ways, using its neutrality policy as an argument to reduce the size of its forces or advocate for global disarmament and non-proliferation while spending the Cold War straddling the Iron Curtain. In Switzerland, the opposite argument was prominent, that the state needed to maintain a large and heavily equipped army to defend its neutrality against potential threats. Until the late 1960s, Switzerland even contemplated building nuclear weapons – significantly supported by parts of the military establishment who believed only a Swiss bomb could uphold the country's neutrality in the nuclear age (Zogg 2024).

Why is it that on paper it looks as if Switzerland and Austria shared a commitment to the same neutral principles, but in practice they deviate so significantly on concrete policies? This chapter explores the main factors for the differences and similarities in contemporary Austrian and Swiss neutrality conceptions. On the one hand, analogous developments in the early days of both legally guaranteed neutralities partially elucidate why they have more in common with each other than with other neutrals of comparable ages. On the other hand, the differences in Berne's

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

and Vienna's international needs and their individual historical trajectories explain why they both went their own ways in defining this fuzzy concept.

## Children of War

Before discussing the differences, let us consider which factors make Swiss and Austrian neutralities look alike. First and foremost, they were both shaped by how different European wars ended, during which both states experienced occupation: For the Swiss, it was the Napoleonic Wars that came with conquest by the French. For the Austrians it was the Second World War and the subsequent Allied occupation. In both cases, their modern-day neutralities were part of a package deal as a post-war settlement.

In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, the assembled eight Great Powers put down in writing that they 'acknowledged that the general interest demands that the Helvetic States should enjoy the benefit of a perpetual neutrality; and wishing, by territorial restitution and cessions, to enable it to secure its independence and maintain its neutrality' (Hansard, 1816). This landmark treaty, to which Switzerland acceded a few months later, was pivotal in two ways. On the one hand, it neutralised Switzerland under international law and bound the great powers to recognize this status while also adding important state territory to the Helvetic body; Geneva, a corridor leading to it, and Basel would henceforth be part of the nineteen cantons of Switzerland. The Great Powers were in words and deeds interested in making the Swiss body politic a viable part of the European concert system, strong and independent enough to buffer Austria and France, preventing the Alps between them from being used as a staging ground by either side to threaten the other, and ensuring that Switzerland would not again become a vassal-state – as had happened under Napoleon (Bonjour 1978, 42). On the other hand, the inclusion of a 'perpetual neutrality' clause was also a novelty in international law.

Promises of occasional neutrality (maintaining neutrality under certain circumstances toward a partner state) in bilateral treaties have been a staple of European politics since the thirteenth century (Neff 2000). Even imperial Austria would go on to use it during the Crimean War (1853–56), but never before had a state signed up to maintain unconditional neutrality in all future wars. In an age when the power to make war was a prerogative of a sovereign state, this was unheard of and attested to Switzerland's relative weakness. It was, however, based on its own wishes for such an arrangement, mediated by a skilled Genevan diplomat, Charles Pictet de Rochemont, who managed to gain Russia's support to pitch the suggestion to the other powers who then adopted it in the form of a treaty and who understood that Switzerland had to serve European peace in the coming balance of power (Lehmann 2020, 209–216; 333–334).

One hundred and forty years later, it was again the Russians (the Soviets to be precise) who slowly but gradually warmed up to the idea of settling another alpine question – this time, defeated Austria – by way of a neutrality agreement. Again, the arrangement had a very strong geopolitical component, as the Soviets above all wanted to forestall Austria from joining the young NATO alliance. But the four-way occupation (the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, and France) of the country made it impossible to integrate Austria completely into the Soviet orbit as Stalin had done elsewhere. Hence, a nonaligned buffer state between the Soviet and US spheres of influence started to look reasonable when the occupations of both Austria and Germany dragged on, especially after Moscow started to understand that Austria might serve as a template for solving the German question – an outcome that did not materialise but influenced Soviet decision-making (Gehler 2015).

The Austrian government delegation that visited Moscow in April 1955, sensing the shift in the Kremlin's attitude, convinced General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev to accept an Austrian neutrality 'like Switzerland' in return for an end to Soviet (and other Allied nations) occupation. The Soviets even agreed to make this only an informal understanding between the diplomatic representatives in the form of a memorandum instead of a hard clause in the State Treaty that restored Austrian sovereignty a month later. This was a point of considerable importance to Vienna. Its delegates did not want to be 'neutralised' through an international agreement but to choose the policy of their own free will. They dutifully lived up to their promise, as on 26 October 1955, the Austrian parliament passed a constitutional law making their state perpetually neutral. Vienna subsequently notified all states that it was in diplomatic contact with of its new status, asking for their active acceptance or passive acknowledgment. The country's foremost legal scholars

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

count this as the beginning of Austria's neutral status under international law (Schreiner 2018, 41).

In both cases, it was a combination of Great Power willingness to accept a neutral solution together with a defeated nation's willingness to promise permanent neutrality that finally cleared the way for a neutral solution to a great power contest.

## Bound By Their Own Laws

This brings us to a second important similarity – for both states, the internationally recognized characters of their neutralities led to their codification into national legislation. Switzerland enshrined it in two key paragraphs of its 1848 constitution, the founding document of modern-day Switzerland. Although the wording slightly changed over time, the principles of the paragraphs remained the same. They oblige the legislative and executive branches of the state (the National Assembly and the Federal Council) to maintain the 'external security, independence, and neutrality' of the state (Art. 173 and 185). This does not make neutrality part of the national objectives, as the federal administration has insisted repeatedly (Motion 05.3213), but it does elevate it to a principle of foreign policy to which both branches of government are bound (Interpellation 14.3331). A similar obligation is put on the Austrian state through a federal constitutional law (Bundesverfassungsgesetz, 1955):

- For the purpose of asserting its independence to the outside world and for the purpose of safeguarding the inviolability of its territory, Austria voluntarily declares its perpetual neutrality. Austria will maintain and defend this neutrality using all means at its disposal.
- Austria will not enter into any military alliances in order to secure these purposes in the future, and it will not allow the establishment of military bases of foreign states on its territory.

This provision even defines Austrian neutrality to some extent, which is lacking in the Swiss case. Regardless, the fact that both constitutions mention neutrality is a domestic legal aspect differentiating the Alpine nations from other neutrals of similar periods that used neutrality policy merely as a tool in the absence of better options. The prime examples are Sweden and Finland, which never had explicit neutrality provisions in their national laws. The Swedes had been neutral like Switzerland since 1815, but not because of an agreement with foreign powers. They simply did not join any wars or alliances for 200 years. They even tried to create a Scandinavian defence alliance several times before and after World War II. It was the failure of those endeavours and the lack of alternatives that led the Swedes back to neutrality several times. Finland, too, started calling its foreign policy neutral out of necessity after having lost World War Two and having been forced into a security arrangement with the USSR. For Helsinki, calling their foreign policy neutral was a way of resisting Soviet demands for closer integration – much to the chagrin of Moscow, which until the Gorbachev era did not agree to call the Finns neutral (Juntunen 2024).

However, like Stockholm, Helsinki never actually codified its neutrality in national legislation, nor did it seek the status of a permanent neutral under international law like Austria. Both Nordic states were following pragmatic neutrality policies geared toward specific security predicaments. While the Finns had to be careful of their relationship with the USSR and thus followed a policy beneficial to Moscow (in the West pejoratively referred to as 'Finlandization'), the Swedes were leaning their security thinking heavily on the West, or, as Mikael af Malmborg (2001, 52) explains, 'anyone with the slightest acquaintance with Swedish military planning (...) knew that there was never talk of more than one enemy' – i.e. the Soviet Union.

Consequently, it was relatively simple for both Nordic states to discard their neutral positions after the Cold War. Once the East-West dichotomy had ceased and the threat level declined, Sweden and Finland first reframed their foreign policies around the turn of the millennium as 'non-alignment in peacetime', discarding references to hard neutrality in their foreign policy communication – and ultimately, gave up also on that stance in 2022 when they applied for NATO membership. Unlike when Sweden joined the EU, this step was achieved without a long and hard public debate since no public referendum was needed to change their constitutions or national laws. This aspect differs strongly from Switzerland and Austria, both of which would face much larger public hurdles to change the policy, as that would necessitate an extensive involvement of the general public for the sake of changing such a fundamental element of national identity. In Austria, a two-thirds majority in both chambers of parliament would be

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

needed to change the neutrality law. An even bigger hurdle exists for Switzerland, where changes to the constitution can only be achieved through a mandatory referendum. In this regard, the Alpine neutralities have always been more firmly rooted in domestic law than their Nordic counterparts.

## Neutrality Provides Identity

Lastly, in both countries, the discourse about the fundamental principles of the state led to the identification of large parts of the population with it. People perceive neutrality as an essential part of what it means to be Austrian or Swiss. At different times but in similar ways, private citizens, politicians, and thinkers started attributing values to neutrality that went well beyond a simple foreign policy. For instance, Pictet de Rochemont, the aforementioned nineteenth century Swiss diplomat and one of the intellectual fathers of modern Swiss neutrality, viewed the policy as a service to Europe, allowing for the establishment of lasting peace by guarding the Alps against Great Power competition. This idea impacted many contemporary liberals to rethink Switzerland's position in the nation-building process of that age as an inherently European project. A century later, the experience of having survived two world wars unharmed had another deep impact on the national psyche, convincing generations of Swiss that policies of self-defense and self-reliance – neutrality included – were right to protect their livelihoods inside a small state. Neutrality had become itself a value and an identity that needed to be maintained (Fischer & Möckli 2016).

Hence, Cold War Swiss discourse was centred around the perils of being part of foreign efforts to consolidate power away from the state, like European integration or the UN. Much of this was firmly rooted in popular beliefs about fundamental Swiss values. Consistently, opinion polls came out with astronomical approval rates for neutrality – even after the Cold War. Since 1989, the Center for Security Studies in Zürich conducts yearly surveys on popular opinion about various security issues, showing an unwavering approval for maintaining neutrality between 80 and 97 percent. Although the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 led to a 'plummeting' of those values from 97 per cent to 89 per cent, they have since gone up again to 91 per cent in 2023 (Szvircsev Tresch et al., 2023). If anything, the end of the Cold War made neutrality only more appealing to the Swiss populace.

The same is true for Austria, where neutrality has become an important part of national identity. For instance, 26 October, the day Austria passed its neutrality act, is today celebrated as the republic's national day. The decision to adopt a holiday to celebrate the Austrian state was taken in 1965. For the entirety of the Cold War it was celebrated under the name 'Day of Neutrality'. This contrasts with other national holidays like the United States' Independence Day or Germany's Day of German Unity, and reflects how strongly neutrality was part of Austria's emerging national identity. Although this tradition has been changing in recent years (Schreiner 2018, pp. 225– 229), the identification of Austrian statehood with neutrality is still fundamental, enunciated most recently by the speeches of the President of the Republic Alexander van der Bellen and Minister of Defense Klaudia Tanner in their addresses to the nation on 26 October 2022. Although Chancellor Karl Nehammer did not mention neutrality in his speech, Van der Bellen (2022) and Tanner (2022) called it a 'principle' giving Austrians a sense of orientation and a 'high value'. Consequently, as in Switzerland, neutrality has remained extremely popular among the public also after the Cold War, with most approval rates hovering between 60–80 per cent, depending on the year and questions asked. Even in 2023, only 16 per cent of Austrians wanted to join NATO while 71 per cent preferred remaining neutral (Gallup 2023).

## Blurry Origins versus New Beginnings

There are, however, fundamental differences in the normative developments of the two neutrality conceptions that partially explain the observable variations on the policy level. To begin with, the origins of the two neutralities are remembered differently. In this regard, the two nations are as different as it gets. Austria became a small state in the heart of the Alps only after being defeated in two world wars. The Second Republic that emerged after World War Two was a far cry from the vast, multi-ethnic, multilingual empire that Vienna once controlled. This experience is radically different from Switzerland, which was not fighting in either war and had been a small alpine republic for centuries, tracing its statehood back to 1291. The Austrian trauma of being reduced from a Great Power to a small state leaves little space for narratives of historical continuity. The Austria of the nineteenth century is a memory of a long bygone past, not part of today's lived experience. Even 'modern Switzerland', meaning the political order

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

founded in 1848, is 100 years older than the Second Republic. Hence, when it comes to identity, the Swiss claim much older origins of their contemporary statehood and foundational national policies. This is especially pertinent for the neutrality debate.

In fact, there are long-running debates about the origins of Swiss neutrality. Since the early twentieth century, historians (e.g. Bonjour 1946; Lyon 1960; Sherman 1918) inside and outside of Switzerland date neutrality not to 1815 but to the Battle of Marignano in 1515 where the Confederate forces were decisively beaten by the French. It was through that defeat, the argument goes, that the Swiss had learned their lesson to remain outside of European great power politics – and instead of fighting in foreign wars, to practice an even older tradition of ‘sitting still’. While Marignano was indeed an important moment in Swiss history, there is no consensus around whether the battle should be considered as the beginning of the neutrality policy (see Bugmann 2000 and Nünlist 2017). The tradition of Swiss mercenaries serving foreign kings did not cease – to this day the Vatican still employs the last remnants of that practice – nor did a coherent foreign policy among the different cantons follow from it. It was rather the mutual defence agreements, the so-called ‘Defensionals’ among the cantons that followed in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that were more important, as they bound the loosely connected confederate cantons together militarily for strictly defensive purposes, hence making an offensive use of Swiss soldiers or an alliance with foreign powers much less likely. However, the Helvetic construct of mostly sovereign cantons was so weak and heterogeneous that until the late eighteenth century there were serious doubts within the confederation if it was even a viable national project (Holenstein 2019). Still, the idea that Switzerland ‘has been neutral since Marignano’ (Maissen 2018) is widespread and popular not only among national conservative circles. Even the Swiss Government in a 1993 booklet on ‘The Neutrality of Switzerland’ distributed by the federal administration until 2022, traced Switzerland’s neutrality timeline back to 1515. Before, during, and after the Cold War, the Swiss seem hard set on claiming a 500-year-old tradition.

Austria is completely different in this respect. There are no mythical origin stories or romantic memories of the old days. For most Austrians, it is even a surprise to learn that their empire had brushes with neutrality before the twentieth century, during the Crimean War. There are no attempts of connecting the policy of 1955 with older principles relating to Austrian history or pre-World War identity. On the contrary, Austrian neutrality was part of a much-needed new beginning after forty years of identity-shattering events, from the loss of empire to the direct collaboration with Nazism and genocide. This is well visible looking at the way neutrality has been glorified as more than just a foreign policy but a status under international law – a way for Austria to exist in the international community. Hence, the national day celebrations that revolve around neutrality are no coincidence. Neutrality was consciously elevated to a fundamental principle of the state, something each and every Austrian ought to be aware of. In 1965, there were other options to choose from for a national day, but parliament decided explicitly to use neutrality as the focal point of national identity. Socio-psychological factors might have played a role in this but, at least in part, it was a conscious political decision for the sake of building a new Austrian identity after a painful cut with the past.

## The Dogmatic Fork in The Early Cold War

Another fundamental difference is the conceptualization of what concrete foreign policies of a small permanent neutral state should look like. A ‘dogmatic split’ with far-reaching consequences occurred in the 1950s, from the very beginning of Austrian neutrality. Two prominent and respected international law thinkers were the theoreticians of the split: Rudolf Bindschedler of Switzerland and Alfred Verdross of Austria. Although neither was the originator of the political approaches – those decisions had been made previously – they enunciated them in jurisprudential terms influencing generations of Swiss and Austrian thinkers until now. Their interpretations of neutrality became so prominent that academics and officials literally started using the word “doctrine” to refer to their respective theses.

In 1954, Bindschedler, who had been working as an in-house lawyer for the Political Department (Switzerland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs), wrote a short four-page memo on the meaning of neutrality. Although it never became the official position of the Federal Council, the memo was widely circulated in the administration and referred to throughout the Cold War. He established the idea that permanent neutrals, due to their obligation to remain neutral in all future wars, were under special, secondary obligations during peacetime to make sure none of their foreign policy

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

decisions would make neutrality impossible during wartime. This line of thinking developed into the so-called *Vorwirkungslehre* (doctrine of preconditions) according to which the status of permanent neutrality came with preconditions that needed to be fulfilled by way of a correct peacetime neutrality policy in addition to maintaining strict legal neutrality when war broke out. One such precondition was (for obvious reasons) not to join a military alliance. But just as important was not being part of economic or political clubs that could force their members to commit 'unneutral' actions during wartime. Bindschedler phrased it as follows:

When participating in international conferences and organisations, it is important to distinguish whether they have a predominantly political, economic, cultural, or technical aspect. If they are conferences or organisations of a political nature, participation can only be considered if they exhibit a certain universality. The main representatives of the relevant political groups must participate, especially both parties involved in any potential conflict. Also in this respect it is important for Switzerland to avoid taking sides (Bindschedler, 1954).

The Bindschedler Doctrine line of thinking was one of the main reasons Switzerland stayed away from UN membership until 2002 (Fischer and Möckli 2016).

A distinctly different theory of permanent neutrality was formulated by Alfred Verdross, a dean of the law faculty at the University of Vienna and one of the country's foremost experts in international law. In conjunction with his colleague, Laurenz Kunz, he held that not only was it in the discretion of the Security Council to exempt member states from participating in military coercive measures, but that UN members had acknowledged Austria's status as a permanent neutral by virtue of being notified thereof. Furthermore, Austria's intention to join the UN was part of the State Treaty which was then signed by 4 of the 5 permanent members of the Security Council. Verdross interpreted this as more evidence of the UN taking note of Austria's new status and that this would oblige the Security Council to allow Austria's adherence to neutrality law if a conflict should break out. Although both men recognized that the collective security principle of the UN was somewhat at odds with the principle of neutrality, they also argued that both aimed at the same goal, namely protecting peace and international security, and that the contradiction was hence only one of means but not one of ends, and thus could co-exist (Schreiner 2018, 32–34). In essence, the central tenet of the Verdross doctrine was to give precedence to the responsibilities of neutrality over the responsibilities of solidarity within the collective security system. This understanding of the interplay between neutrality and collective security became the dominant viewpoint in the field of international law and still shapes Austria's approach to foreign policy today (Senn 2023, 33–34).

## Neutrality Changing or Disappearing?

For the above dogmatic and ideological reasons, Swiss foreign policy during the Cold War remained focused for a long time on maintaining as much independence as possible in security, economic, and political terms. It was not an isolationist policy like that of Albania, or a nonaligned stance in the way Yugoslavia started developing it. Switzerland participated in key elements of the West's Cold War economic structure like the Marshall Plan (starting in 1947) and later unofficially cooperated with COCOM export controls, bringing Switzerland into the Euro-Atlantic trade system. Neither did Bern oppose diplomatic participation in universal but non-binding pan-European endeavours like the Council of Europe, which it joined in 1963. Also, together with Europe's other neutral and non-aligned states, it played an important role in creating the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the mid-1970s (Fischer 2009). Furthermore, Switzerland remained willing to support international peace and diplomacy activities when asked to do so. It was part of two neutral commissions implementing the Korean armistice after 1953. It also remained willing to provide Geneva as a European meeting ground for the UN and a plethora of other international organisations. Finally, there is Bern's long-standing practice of providing good office services to mediate between third states that broke relations. Some of these efforts remained low-key, while others became visible, as during the Iran hostage crisis of 1979–80, the 1985 superpower summits in Geneva (Fischer and Möckli 2016) and, more recently, the mediation efforts between Russia and Georgia in 2010–11 and the 2021 US-Russia summit in Geneva.

However, on issues touching directly on military affairs and political independence, Bern has been maintaining an arms-length distance. Whenever supranational organisations and the pooling of sovereignty are involved, the Bindschedler understanding of neutrality influenced the political debate – albeit this inclination gradually decreased

## The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

after the Cold War. Some activities, especially the ones of military nature, have been prompted by the changed nature of the international system. Even after Russia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994, the Swiss also started cooperating in that format from 1996 – there was no more danger of being one-sided. Switzerland also contributed troops to the KFOR mission established in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (the peace plan for Kosovo) starting from 1999. Although the step was emotionally debated inside Switzerland and opposed by national conservatives, the fact that the resolution had the backing even of Yugoslavia meant that at least on paper, the universality of the mission was given in addition to its peacekeeping nature. Then, in 2002, Switzerland joined the UN and over the next 20 years, gradually reduced also its reservations toward NATO, to the point that in 2023 the Federal Council published a new security doctrine (Zusatzbericht 2022) which explicitly says that cooperation with the alliance is pivotal to the point that even 'interoperability' is mentioned as an objective.

The plan is to allow for joint defence of Switzerland in case of an attack by an outside force – in which case all neutrality laws would cease to apply. Post- Cold War Switzerland thus seems to have fewer reservations toward collaboration in EU politics than before. It joined several EU-led policy schemes like the Schengen agreement for visa-free travel (joining in 2008). However, not all is clear on this trajectory. In 2021, the negotiations for a framework agreement that the EU wanted to negotiate with the Swiss as a fundament for future cooperation was rejected by Bern, leading to the deepest crisis in Swiss-EU relations in decades as the EU is unwilling to negotiate new bilateral agreements without the framework.

Which direction Switzerland's sovereign and neutral path in Europe will take is anything but clear. This is also illustrated by a popular initiative that wants to force a public referendum on whether economic sanctions should be part of Swiss neutrality, or not. After the breakout of full-scale warfare in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Swiss government declared that it would impose the same sanctions as the EU did on Russia. This was not a breach of neutrality, the Federal Council argued, because it was a sovereign decision and not breaching the letter of neutrality law, nor its track-record of the last 30 years. Switzerland had applied wartime sanctions for the first time on Iraq in 1990, in reaction to its invasion of Kuwait. Henceforth, the Federal Council applied sanctions several times, as in 2014 in the reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea. Each time, Bern's approach to sanctions became more partisan. In the Iraqi case, sanctions had at least been ordered by the UN. In 2014 Switzerland implemented sanctions similar to those the EU imposed on Russia (but Berne still defined the content of the sanctions by itself). Finally, in 2022, it simply copied the same sanctions the EU levied on Russia.

Thus, sanctions were not only a Post-Cold War issue but also one that increased in its partisan character over time – all while Switzerland defended the view that sanctions are compatible with its legalistic understanding of neutrality. But the national conservative People's Party disagrees. Considering that US president Joe Biden (2022) said about the sanctions that 'even Switzerland' had joined them, they view the credibility of neutrality as under threat. Legal neutrality helps little, they say, when warfare is implemented through economic measures. Therefore, together with supporters from the left, they initiated a process to force a referendum on the sanctions issue in the form of a new constitutional definition of Swiss neutrality. In early 2024 this succeeded in gathering the required 100,000 signatures to become a referendum that will be held in 2027 or 2028.

Austria, as we have seen, was and still is much less hesitant when it comes to reconciling neutrality with international integration. Like Switzerland, it was partially integrated with COCOM export controls but had one of the highest trade volumes of West European states with the East (Luif 1984). Bruno Kreisky, the popular and long-serving Social Democratic chancellor of the 1970s, implemented what he called an 'active neutrality', which saw him engaging in dynamic third-party diplomacy, promoting multilateralism, supporting the process of détente between the East and West, and getting involved in North-South disputes, even proposing a so-called 'Marshall Plan for the Third World'. Kreisky also strongly advocated for the rights of Palestinians and collaborated with the German and Swedish Social Democratic leaders, Willy Brandt and Olof Palme, on issues of international socialism (Gärtner 2018). Such proactive initiatives set Austria's diplomacy apart from the much more reactive foreign policy of Switzerland during the Cold War.

While some of these activities are influenced by individual personalities, the more engaged character of the Austrian approach is visible also after the end of the Cold War when Vienna joined the EU – and thereby also became a

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

member of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In 1998 and 2010, the national parliament adopted another constitutional law that such EU policies were not a breach of the 1955 neutrality law. Since neither the CFSP nor the CSDP amount to an alliance commitment, Austria, like all other EU member states, has a de facto veto over the creation of alliance-like mechanisms in these areas because decisions have to be unanimous. In addition, the provisions of an opt-out for neutral states (the 'Irish-clause'), means that maintaining neutrality even during an armed attack on the EU, is still possible even if the CSDP collective defence article should be triggered (Hauser 2020).

The more proactive nature of Austrian neutrality in comparison to the Swiss version was showcased again in April 2022, when Chancellor Karl Nehammer became the first EU head of state to visit Moscow and talk directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin after the invasion of Ukraine. Like Switzerland, Austria is part of the sanctions regime against Russia but has so far resisted sending weapons to Ukraine. On the other hand, it has allowed military transports through its territory and made monetary contributions to the Orwellian-sounding 'European Peace Facility' which has been financing weapon systems for use by Ukraine against Russia (Janik 2022).

## Conclusion

The neutralities of Austria and Switzerland might look alike and have influenced each other for a long time, but under the hood, they are different animals, philosophically and practically. That should not be all too surprising because, after all, they are different countries with different historical trajectories and different challenges to master. Hence, they adapted their neutrality principles and foreign policies to their own needs. In this process, country-specific developments matter as much as the common experiences of the two states. To the Austrians, the status of neutrality is part of a new beginning, while to the Swiss it is a connection to a mythological past. Hence, political rhetoric about the concept differs today as one is prone to emphasise the importance of neutrality for regaining independence while the other portrays it as something that has guaranteed its sovereignty throughout the centuries and which it had to defend several times.

In the Cold War, Swiss and Austrian neutralities looked different because one understood the principle as meaning little or no participation in international structures, while the other did not. The difference is not induced by the neutrality concept itself but rather by the experience of prior years, leading local thinkers, politicians, and the public to fill the neutrality concept with meanings suiting their conceptions about that past. The difference melts away if we compare not the contemporary neutrality concepts but the progression thereof. Switzerland in 1815, at the beginning of its guaranteed permanent neutrality, had no problem connecting its status with the security of Europe – as Pictet de Rochemont did – and even in 1919 it still saw no contradiction in joining the League of Nations. Early Swiss conceptions of permanent neutrality resemble early Austrian conceptions of the same; they only change over time as new wars shaped new experiences about the neutrality concept.

That is why there are some strange contradictions between the two. While Austria is forbidden from joining a military alliance by its own constitution, it does not view the EU or the CSDP as such and is hence perfectly able to reconcile neutrality with EU integration. Switzerland, on the other hand, does not (yet) have a hard prohibition against joining a military alliance in its constitution, but large parts of the population view EU sovereignty-pooling and the CSDP as incompatible with how they understand neutrality. This is a position strongly influenced by the Cold War definitions that became popular decades ago. Unless either or both states will follow in the footsteps of Sweden and Finland, giving up their neutralities completely, this process will probably continue. New wars will keep shaping the understanding of what neutrality means to the Swiss and the Austrians and impact the policies of their governments. Likely, they will not be the same.

## References

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Bundespräsident Alexander van der Bellen. "Bundespräsident mahnt in seiner TV-Ansprache zu integrierter Politik und ruft zu Zuversicht in Zeiten multipler Krisen auf." Accessed June 28, 2023. <https://www.bundespraesident.at/>



# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

aktuelles/detail/tv-ansprache-1

Bundesverfassungsgesetz vom 26. Oktober 1955 über die Neutralität Österreichs. StF: BGBl. Nr. 211/1955

Biden, Joseph R. "Remarks of President Joe Biden – State of the Union Address As Prepared for Delivery." The White House, March 1, 2022. Accessed July 19, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/01/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-delivered>

Tanner, Klaudia. "Nationalfeiertag 2022." NYC Mayor's Office. Streamed live on January 10, 2019. YouTube video, 2:23:22. <https://www.youtube.com/live/59GIYo30EqY?feature=share>

SNC Motion 05.3213. Ernst Schibli, "Bessere Verankerung der Neutralität in der Verfassung." Swiss National Council, March 18, 2005. Accessed July 19, 2023. <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20053213>

SNC Interpellation 14.3331. Hans Fehr, "Ukraine-Krise. Schweizerische Neutralität oder Annäherung an die Nato?" Swiss National Council, May 8, 2014. Accessed July 19, 2023. <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20143331>

"Zusatzbericht zum Sicherheitspolitischen Bericht 2021 über die Folgen des Krieges in der Ukraine" Swiss Federal Council, September 7, 2022. Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/fga/2022/2357/de>

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Bindschedler, R. 1954. "Der Begriff der Neutralität". In S. Zala (Ed.), *Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland*. Dodis. [dodis.ch/9564](https://dodis.ch/9564).

Bonjour, E. 1946. *Swiss Neutrality: Its History and Meaning* (M. Hottinger, Trans.). Routledge.

Bonjour, E. 1978. *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität : Kurzfassung* [History of Swiss Neutrality : Condensed Version]. Helbing & Lichtenhahn.

Bugmann, U. 2000. "How to Create a National Myth: Switzerland Reflected in its Contemporary Writing". In M. Butler, M. Pender, & J. Charnley (Eds.), *The Making of Modern Switzerland, 1848–1998*. MacMillan.

Eidgenössisches Departement für Verteidigung, B. u. S. V. 2014. *Die Neutralität der Schweiz* (4 ed.). Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft.

Fischer, T. 2009. *Neutral Power in the CSCE – The N+N States and the Making of the Helsinki Accords 1975*. Nomos for the Austrian Institute for International Affairs.

Fischer, T., & Möckli, D. 2016. "The Limits of Compensation: Swiss Neutrality Policy in the Cold War". *Journal of Cold War Studies*. 18, 12-35. [https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00678](https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00678)

Gallup. 2023. *Gallup Stimmungsbarometer: Zwei-Länder-Umfrage zum Thema Neutralität: Österreich und Schweiz*. Gallup Institut.

Gärtner, H. 2018. "Austria: Engaged Neutrality". In A. Cottey (Ed.), *The European Neutrals and NATO*. 129–150. Palgrave MacMillan.

Gehler, M. 2015. *Modellfall für Deutschland? Die Österreichlösung mit Staatsvertrag und Neutralität 1945–1955*. StudienVerlag.

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

- Hansard, T. C. (Ed.). 1816. *The Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time*. Vol. 37. T.C. Hansard.
- Hauser, G. 2020. "Neutral and Nonaligned States in the European Union". In
- H. Reginbogin & P. Lottaz (Eds.), *Permanent Neutrality: A Model for Peace, Security, and Justice*. 111–128. Lexington Books.
- Holenstein, A. 2019. "Miliz im Reformstau. Das Scheitern einer nationalen Verteidigungsorganisation als Spiegel der schweizerischen Integrationsblockade im späten Ancien Régime". In P. Rogger & R. Schmid Keeling (Eds.), *Miliz oder Söldner? : Wehrpflicht und Solddienst in Stadt, Republik und Fürstenstaat 13.–18. Jahrhundert*. 173–191. Brill. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657792580\\_010](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657792580_010)
- Janik, R. 2022. "Neutralität und der österreichische Beitrag zur EU- Sicherheitspolitik". *ÖGfE Policy Brief* (14/2022), 1–10.
- Juntunen, T. 2024. "Finland: From Curious Observer to Active Accommodator of the NPT Process". In P. Lottaz & Y. Iwama (Eds.), *Neutral Europe and the Creation of the Nonproliferation Regime 1958–68*. Routledge.
- Lehmann, P. 2020. *Die Umdeutung der Neutralität: Eine politische Ideengeschichte der Eidgenossenschaft vor und nach 1815*. Schwab Verlag.
- Luif, P. 1984. "Embargoes in East-West Trade and the European Neutrals: The Case of Austria". *Current Research on Peace and Violence*. 7(4), 221–228.
- Lyon, P. 1960. "Neutrality and the Emergence of the Concept of Neutralism". *The Review of Politics*, 22(2), 255–268. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.temple.edu/stable/1405320>
- Maissen, T. 2018. Seit wann ist die Schweiz "neutral seit Marignano"? Zu den Wurzeln eines nationalpädagogischen Topos. *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*. 68(2), 214–239.
- Malmberg, M. a. 2001. *Neutrality and State-building in Sweden*. Palgrave. Neff, S. C. 2000. *The Rights and Duties of Neutrals: A General History*. Manchester University Press.
- Nünlist, C. 2017. "Neutrality for Peace: Switzerland's Independent Foreign Policy". In H. Gärtner (Ed.), *Engaged Neutrality* (pp. 161–187). Lexington Books.
- Schreiner, J. 2018. *Neutralität nach "Schweizer Muster"? Österreichische Völkerrechtslehre zur immerwährenden Neutralität, 1955–1989*. Nomos.
- Senn, M. 2023. "Österreichs Neutralität". In M. Senn, F. Eder, & M. Kornprobst (Eds.), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs*. 23–50. Springer.
- Sherman, G. E. 1918. "The Neutrality of Switzerland I". *The American Journal of International Law*. 12(2), 241–250. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2188141>
- Szvircev Tresch, T., Wenger, A., De Rosa, S., Ferst, T., Rizzo, E., Robert, J., & Roost, T. 2023. *Sicherheit 2023: Aussen-, Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitische Meinungsbildung im Trend*. Center for Security Studies.
- Zogg, B. 2024. "Switzerland: The Nuclear Path And The NPT". In P. Lottaz & Y. Iwama (Eds.), *Neutral Europe and the Creation of the Nonproliferation Regime 1958–68*. Routledge.

# The Neutralities of Austria and Switzerland: Akin but Not Alike

Written by Pascal Lottaz

---

## About the author:

**Pascal Lottaz** is an Associate Professor at Kyoto University where he investigates neutrality in international relations and directs the research network [neutralitystudies.com](http://neutralitystudies.com). He received his MA and PhD from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) and previously worked at Waseda University and Temple University (Japan Campus). His recent books include *Sweden, Japan, and the Long Second World War* (Routledge, 2022), *Neutral Beyond the Cold: Neutral States and the Post-Cold War International System* (Lexington Books, 2022), and *Notions of Neutralities* (Lexington Books, 2019). He also wrote entries on 'Neutrality Studies' for Oxford Encyclopedia and 'The Politics and Diplomacy of Neutrality' for Oxford Bibliography.