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Freerider or Strategic Balancer? Austria vis-à-vis NATO and Russia US - perspective on Austrian neutrality politics

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Executive Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 highlighted the fragility of peace and security in Europe. The resurgence of war in Europe prompted a reassessment of the security postures of traditionally neutral countries. Norms on military spending and assistance have been shattered, leading to Finland and Sweden reversing decades of military non-alignment to join NATO. Even Switzerland is eyeing a strategic overhaul and is considering joint exercises with NATO (Revill, 2022). Despite Sweden and Finland's decision to join NATO Austria remains committed to neutrality. The public debate on Austria's strategic culture has remained largely the same and policymakers in Vienna have not changed their stance on NATO. Russia's war in Ukraine has underscored Austria's need to reevaluate its policy of neutrality and strategic approach vis-a-vis NATO and Russia.

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Austria's long history of neutrality

Historically, Austria has found great success in its policy of neutrality. Internally, Austrians have enjoyed neutrality, along with the added protection of being surrounded by NATO member states, and gained an international reputation as a diplomatic convener. The United Nations set up many of its offices in Vienna because it was perceived as a neutral location and a bridge builder between East and West (Gady, 2018). Dotted across Vienna are statues celebrating Russian military figures— a testament to the Soviet Red Army's liberation of Vienna in World War II (Hockstader, 2023). The 1955 Neutrality Law and Austria's constitution prohibit entry into military alliances and the establishment of foreign military bases on Austrian territory. The Neutrality Law and the State Treaty, which Austrian historian Oliver Rathkolb identifies as Austria's Magna Carta, continue to affect the country's self-perception as a neutral state.

Today, neutrality is one of the few unifying elements of Austrian political discourse, with 71% of Austrians supporting it, particularly in the context of potential NATO membership (Walter, 2022). Neutrality as a concept is a spectrum and has evolved over the decades— from countries such as Switzerland that waited to join the United Nations until 2002 over fears of compromising on neutrality (Bondolfi, 2024). However, despite its strong legal and

fundamental commitment to neutrality, Austria has not been truly neutral since it joined the European Union in 1995 (Cramer & Franke, 2021). Austria, along with the traditionally non-aligned Sweden and Finland, deliberately waited to join the EU until after the Cold War; a period during which neutrality served as a prudent political path for many European states. The EU is an inherently political organization and carries with it an obligation to defend allies militarily through Article 42(7). However, the scope to which an EU country provides military support is purposefully vague and could allow Austria the opportunity to not participate in the bloc's collective defense or potentially block a European Council vote to move forward with military assistance. Austria's strategic outlook has slowly evolved since the end of the Cold War. In 2013, Austria adopted its Security Strategy and pledged to resolve security issues through international cooperation. Austrian forces are currently contributing to peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Georgia, and Lebanon, despite not being a part of NATO.

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer made clear Austria's continued stance on neutrality, unequivocally stating, "Austria was neutral, Austria is neutral, and Austria will remain neutral" (Walter, 2022). An open letter from 50 prominent figures to Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen called for a re-evalu-

ation of Austria's neutrality and security policy—with little reaction from the wider public. This letter suggests a geopolitical shift from above in Austria, where the status quo with Russia is no longer sustainable or acceptable with consideration towards Ukraine, whereas that sentiment from everyday Austrians may not be the same. There can be multiple reasons for this juxtaposition, such as Austria's close energy relationship with Russia. Giving more space for a frank conversation about Austria's continued neutrality can provide for a strategic culture shift in Austria's thinking towards Russia, along with giving space to reassess whether Austria should join NATO.

NATO membership: an extremely unlikely endeavor

Unlike in Finland or Sweden, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not pushed Austria's public sentiment to re-evaluate its security posture, with only 17% of the population expressing interest in joining NATO (Jones, 2023). A prevailing misconception is that NATO equals the United States, an idea propagated by anti-American elements within Europe. Given the widespread lack of enthusiasm for NATO membership, this matter is regarded as a political hot potato, one that very few politicians are willing to handle, and has been the prevailing narrative since Austria regained its sovereignty in 1955. As for the alliance as a whole, NATO itself would probably gain very little in terms of capabilities from adding Austria as a member,

besides the public relations coup of another traditionally neutral country opting to join the NATO umbrella. In contrast to Sweden and Finland's membership which was described by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg as a "win-win situation" due to both countries' highly advanced and capable militaries, with Sweden boasting an impressive air force and Finland the most significant artillery capabilities in Europe. The recent history of neutrality made Austria's *Bundesheer* more adept at responding to natural disasters and has left Austria's security to its neighbors' militaries (Hoare, 2023). Austria's military is severely underfunded, with less than 1% of its GDP allocated to defense. While the Austrian government pledged it would increase defense spending to 1% of GDP in March 2022, it fell short of the commitment. Seven months later, a subsequent goal was announced to increase defense spending to 1.5% of GDP by 2027. However, the Austrian government has yet to meet these ambitious targets.

An even less favorable assessment suggests that Austria, having remained neutral since 1955, may be capitalizing from NATO's military build-up as a free-rider without committing to membership. Being a landlocked country surrounded by NATO members, Austria has traditionally benefited on the assumption that in the event of an attack, NATO would come to its aid. However, hybrid threats, cyber capabilities, and airspace violations remove this benefit. NATO membership provides resources

against hybrid threats, such as its extensive toolkit of cyber and hybrid expertise. Additionally, the security assurances of Article 5 make hybrid threats against Austria less palatable for malign actors.

Austria and Russia remain entangled

Regarding the phenomenon of far-right extremism, it is important to contextualize this when considering the Russo-Austrian relationship. Far-right parties are on the rise across Europe. The leading far-right party in Austria, the FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party) secured around 17% of the votes in 2021 (Schminke, 2023). Recent polls suggest that this party will be the country's strongest party in next year's election, meaning that populism is here to stay in Austria for the foreseeable future, despite the Ibiza scandal, which could be a boon to the Kremlin. This party views Putin's Russia as an effective bulwark against a liberal cultural and economic agenda pursued by the EU and the United States. The FPÖ has repeatedly criticized Western sanctions on Russia and labeled Ukraine a corrupt state (Heinisch & Hofmann, 2023). The FPÖ stood by the Kremlin, even after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014, and signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party in 2016 (Weiss, 2020). The FPÖ has avoided defending Russia's war of aggression outright but applies populist framing that presents Austrians as victims of the policy machinations of unaccountable national and Western political elites.

Besides Hungary, no other EU country remains as firmly entrenched in Russia's economy and energy as Austria. Despite supporting EU sanctions on Russia, Austria continues to receive 60% of its gas from Russia (down from 80% pre-invasion of Ukraine). Hundreds of Austrian companies continue to operate in Russia, ambivalent to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (Karnitschnig, 2023). Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer was the first European leader to meet Putin in Moscow after the invasion, in a widely criticized overture. Since 2014, Russia has been the second largest investor in Austria (after Germany) and invests nearly twice as much as the United States. Despite participating in EU sanctions, publicly criticizing Putin, and taking in Ukrainian refugees, Austria's economy and energy connections to Russia remain and are directly feeding Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Conclusion: Waltz on the Danube

Austria is unlikely to join NATO due to low public support, continued adherence to neutrality, lacking investment in its military, and its entrenched economic and energy linkages with Russia. Despite the lack of interest in NATO membership, more debates on moving away from neutrality in Austria are beginning to take place. Although NATO membership for Austria is unlikely in the immediate future, Finland and Sweden both saw a surge in support for membership after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Austria's neighbors have announced unprecedented levels of defense spending; it too needs to ensure it fulfills its plans to increase military spending and not fall short. Austria, at least,

needs to assess whether its economic and energy linkages with Russia are sustainable or a potential weakness for itself and the EU. It's time that Austria considers whether the age of neutrality in Europe is ending.

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