FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 23.05.2022 | Robert Misik

Is it time for Austria to re-evaluate its neutrality?

In the new security context, which prompted Sweden and Finland to apply for NATO membership, Austria's policy of neutrality seems outdated

'Black Thursday' - 24 February - the day Putin's army fell upon Ukraine, was a turning point for the whole of Europe, according to German chancellor Olaf Scholz. German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock put it like this: 'Today we woke up in a different world'.

Europe's unstable security architecture, but also all established routines have been swept away. On 12 May Finland applied for NATO membership, with the support of a broad majority of the population. This is striking for a country in which a policy of finding a neutral balance between the blocs had sunk its deepest roots. Neighbouring Sweden also took this step, in another remarkable turnaround, considering the non-aligned country's self-image as a 'peace power', with its associated small-state idealism.

In any case, the eastern European countries and the Baltic states are happier than ever to be members of NATO, with its mutual assistance clause. Other countries of the former Soviet bloc, such as Georgia, would jump at the chance to join the alliance, or at least increasingly define their security interests over against an erratic Russia. Kazakhstan has already done so.

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Taking a sober view, few would disagree that Putin has every reason to deplore these developments, which have occurred at his own instigation. A better NATO recruitment drive than the attack on Ukraine could scarcely be imagined.

But one country, rather astonishingly, has been totally oblivious to the debate and this paradigm change: Austria. The issue of joining NATO has arisen at most in a couple of TV debates, but then immediately

buried. Chancellor Karl Nehammer decreed that neutrality is 'not up for debate'. Opposition SPÖ leader and eager contender for the chancellery Pamela Rendi-Wagner invokes Austrian neutrality at every opportunity as 'non-negotiable'. The right-wing nationalist FPÖ, with its passive-aggressive mini-state patriotism see things the same way. For the Greens it would be a step too far to change course from being a pacifist party to campaigning for NATO membership. Finally, there are the liberal Neos, who have kept their own counsel amidst this melee.

Neutrality and Austrian identity

There is simply no debate on joining NATO and ending Austrian neutrality. The ostensible reason is simple: neutrality and non-alignment are so popular in Austria that no one has any intention of raising the issue. And thus, the spirit of neutrality still commands the field.

Partly of course this is because freeriding is so easy. Leaving aside the borders with Liechtenstein and Switzerland, Austria is surrounded by NATO countries. Austria thus does not have to join NATO to benefit de facto from the mutual assistance clause in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. In order to reach Austrian territory an invading army already has to attack a NATO country. If Austria, by contrast, was located on NATO's external borders its security policy concerns – and debate – would be very different.

Austrian neutrality is thus bound up in the collective memory with the restoration of 'freedom', but also with the then ÖVP-SPÖ coalition government's skilful handling of the situation.

But that is only part of the explanation. Neutrality is an intrinsic part of Austrian identity. Like Germany, Austria was occupied by the Allies after 1945 and divided into zones of occupation, although regarded as a 'liberated' country. Austria's status long remained unclear, but all the major parties were intent on regaining full sovereignty. After Stalin's death the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev wanted to signal a domestic and foreign policy thaw. Moscow decided that Austria would constitute a kind of foreign policy offering.

We now know that the Soviet Union had already decided to grant Austria sovereignty in exchange for neutrality. When several Austrian delegations set out for Moscow in 1954 and 1955, however, with the purpose of negotiating an end to the occupation that had gone on since 1945 they had no idea about this. Some observers even doubted whether the delegations would return alive. Austrian neutrality is thus bound up in the collective memory with the restoration of 'freedom', but also with

the then ÖVP-SPÖ coalition government's skilful handling of the situation.

Tradition over pragmatism

Over the decades the spirit of neutrality has become something of a 'civic religion'. A number of important superpower summits took place on Austria's neutral territory, such as the meeting between John F. Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1961, although it didn't stop the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year. Some UN institutions, such as the OSCE, are even based there. The country sees its role as peacemaker and intermediary. For example, in April Chancellor Nehammer was the first to travel to Ukraine and then the first western head of government since the beginning of the war to visit Putin in Russia, in a somewhat romanticised gesture to the past. Today Austrians across the political spectrum are proud of the independent foreign policy of former Social Democrat chancellor Bruno Kreisky, who was involved in the negotiations on sovereignty in Moscow and later governed the country from 1970 to 1983.

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This 'political emotionality of neutrality' has its amiable aspects – 'dialogue, not violence', 'peace, not war', 'a big task for a little people' – but also something of a shady flip side. In Austria people try to be non-partisan, even to excess, remaining impartial between the evil Americans and evil Putin. These days, however, it can be difficult to distinguish between neutralism and a morally dubious appeasement. While Kreisky approached his policy of neutrality in internationalist terms, Austria has become increasingly reclusive, something along the lines of 'if we hide behind the nearest tree no one will see us and then we'll be alright'. That is more or less, exaggerating only a little, the security-policy approach of virtually all Austrian parties.

In the real world, of course, neutrality has long been obsolete. As an EU Member State an independent foreign policy is scarcely possible or even desirable. In any case, Austria is integrated in the EU's common security policy. Recently the NATO member countries within the European Union issued a declaration of mutual assistance with regard to neutral members. In the past, maybe Austria had something like a 'neutrality policy'. Nowadays it is 'neutral, but without a policy'.



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