

Make Neutrality, Not War

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🕒 Long Read

Russian President Vladimir Putin has long wanted it; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has now accepted it. Could neutrality be the solution to end the war in Ukraine?

Neutrality as Peace-Maker

Neutrality is the key concept that could bring Russia's war of aggression against its neighbour to an end. Any eventual peace deal hinges on it, and at the very least, a ceasefire could be achieved.

In the middle of March, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky proposed to Russian negotiators that Ukraine could take on a neutral status. He also acknowledged that his country would not seek to join NATO. These are two major concessions on his part since the war began.

Although the proposal on Ukrainian neutrality meets a key demand of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin has not commented on it yet. On the contrary, negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have stalled for weeks as Russian troops try to consolidate and expand Russian-controlled territories in Ukraine. At the traditional 9 May parade on Red Square in Moscow, Putin re-stated his claim that Russia had to declare war to 'demilitarise and de-nazify Ukraine'. Meanwhile, NATO countries have stepped up their weapons deliveries to Ukraine. The war will not be easily won or lost by either side in the coming months, or possibly even years. In the light of this, the concept of

neutrality could be floated as a model for a possible post-war solution for Ukraine.

‘Ukrainian neutrality is the solution’, argues Pascal Lottaz, Assistant Professor for Neutrality Studies at the Waseda Institute for Advanced Study in Tokyo. Ukraine previously had a neutrality clause in its constitution until 2014; it cancelled it after Russia annexed Crimea. ‘Now we could build a scenario around neutrality, with which all the parties – the Russians, the Ukrainians, the US, Europeans and NATO – can live with’, says Lottaz.

Armed Neutrality in History

Neutrality as a political concept was developed in the 19th century. Before that, Catherine II of Russia used it as an economic initiative in the so-called ‘First League of Armed Neutrality’ in 1780. Armed neutrality was not seen as a contradiction, as Catherine wanted to endorse the right of neutral countries to trade with belligerent countries. Britain opposed the concept, as it was thought to be a cover for trading contraband. Catherine signed bilateral agreements with Norway and Sweden establishing armed neutrality. In 1781, Austria, Prussia and Portugal joined, followed by Turkey in 1782.

After the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the significance of armed neutrality ended. A Second League of Armed Neutrality was started with the same intention during the Napoleonic Wars, but never gained the same importance.

Under the Hague Convention of 1907, a neutral country was defined as a state that will not participate in fighting against a belligerent country.

Several countries in Europe currently have a neutral status, or had one throughout the Cold War. But one country’s neutrality is not like the other, and if investigated more deeply, in most cases neutrality turns out to be more a term for being non-aligned rather than neutral. Neutrality never seems to actually mean neutral, and can be a very different thing in different places and at different times.

Although officially neutral during the Second World War, Sweden exported tons of iron ore to Nazi Germany. While remaining independent, Sweden let two million German soldiers pass through its territory in the direction of Norway and Finland. Joseph Goebbels noted in 1942 in his diaries: ‘Sweden did more for the German war efforts than commonly known ... They emphasise their neutrality, but in a way, that is to our advantage’.

Neutrality as Independence Tool

Switzerland is the most well-known neutral country. Its status is even referred to proverbially as ‘I am Switzerland on this’ to indicate a non-position taken on a certain subject. Switzerland’s neutrality was established by the Treaty of Paris in 1815. Unlike other small neutral countries in Western Europe, Switzerland possesses a strong army.

Other tiny European countries that opted for neutrality to stay out of conflicts include Liechtenstein, Malta and the Vatican. Cyprus is non-aligned.

“ **Given that the war will not be easily won or lost by either side in the coming months, or possibly even years, a neutral Ukraine could serve as a model for de-escalation**

Together with Malta, some neutral countries in Europe with armies have joined the EU: Ireland, Austria, Sweden and Finland. This article takes a closer look at the debate concerning neutrality and defence alliances within EU member states, as this is most relevant for the future of Ukraine.

Sweden

Sweden's neutrality has a long tradition. After the Napoleonic Wars, Sweden lost a third of its territory – including Finland, which was then part of Sweden – to Russia. The loss of territory was blamed on King Gustav IV Adolf for his strong anti-Napoleon policy, and he was subsequently overthrown in the Coup of 1809.

His successors weighed the constant meddling of foreign powers from the east, west and south against Sweden's own appetite for power, and decided to adopt the Policy of 1812: neutrality. Sweden has never initiated armed conflict since.

This position became a lot more complicated when faced with Nazi Germany and its appetite for invading neighbouring countries. It was Sweden's attempt to stay independent by supplying Germany with iron ore that led Great Britain and the Allies to launch Operation *Wilfred* and the Norwegian Campaign in 1940. When this failed, Sweden continued to supply the Nazi regime with iron ore, steel and machine parts.

After the war, Sweden embraced the concept officially, while cooperating closely with Western powers and even developing its own nuclear weapons programme. This was abandoned in the 1960s. But Sweden received a guarantee from the US that it would provide military force in the case of Soviet aggression. This promise was only made public in 1994.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sweden gave up neutrality, officially ending almost two centuries of the policy. Sweden joined the EU in 1995. Since then, Sweden has participated in various NATO and EU battle groups.

Since Russia launched its war in Ukraine, public opinion in Sweden on NATO membership has shifted. Opinion polls suggest that 48% of Swedes favour NATO membership, with 25% against. This shift was certainly helped by the fact that four Russian fighter planes violated Sweden's airspace while the Swedish and Finnish armies were carrying out exercises in March 2022.

Sweden's Social Democratic Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson is now preparing to submit Sweden's application for NATO membership together with Finland as soon as possible.

Finland

During the Cold War, Finland found itself in a unique position among European countries. The Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 – signed by Finland – found that Finland had been 'an ally of Hitlerite Germany'. Still, the Soviet Union accepted Finland as a democratic country with a market economy, even though it was a neighbouring country.

It did insist, though, on an Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, in which the Soviet Union demanded that Finland become a neutral country. For the following decades, Finland would be allowed to buy arms from East and West in a balanced way, and it would not join NATO.

Even before this, Finland found itself in a peculiar situation. During the Second World War, Finland sided with Germany, but it still protected Finnish Jews from persecution – or most of them at least. In addition, it found itself fighting alongside Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, while retaining a democratic government.

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At the time of publication, neutrality is a thing of the past for Finland. Since the war against Ukraine began, the Finnish population has felt increasingly

threatened by Russia. In late February 2022, the Finnish government declared that the country would supply Ukraine with weapons to defend itself against Russia's aggression. By March, opinion polls showed a majority of 62% in favour of NATO membership. On 12 May, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin announced that the country was applying for NATO membership.

Austria

Austria's military neutrality was declared in 1955 when the country became independent after having joined the Third Reich in 1938 and then being ruled by the Allies from 1945. Austria's neutrality pleased the Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev, as well as US President Dwight Eisenhower.

After 1995, the country's military neutrality – politically, Austria has always had a Western concept of democracy and a market economy – was de facto ended. 'The concept of neutrality has lost its significance since Austria joined the European Union', says Austrian historian Anton Pelinka.

Since this date, Austria's constitution has allowed it to participate in EU-led battle group operations. The first EU battle group was established in 2005. Meanwhile, a law enacted in 2001 states that Austria will follow EU regulations on the transit of war material – and will agree to it when asked.

The EU is not a military alliance, but it has a duty to assist if a member state is being attacked. This is set out in Article 42/7 of the EU treaty, which was agreed in 2009.

Nestled in the centre of Europe between larger and militarily more powerful neighbours that are protected by the bigger shield of NATO, for many years Austria could avoid building a powerful defensive army. Austrian historian Oliver Rathkolb points out: 'Austria has been living on credit for too long'.

It is not only out of economic interest that Austrians are attached to their neutrality. It has become a real and valued part of Austria's identity as an

independent country, and will be hard to officially remove, even if practically it has ceased to exist.

In some ways, it may look totally outdated from the outside – especially compared to the *Zeitenwende* proclaimed by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who decided after initial scepticism to **double Germany’s military budget** in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

A glimpse into Austria’s peculiar state of mind was provided by a debate in March 2022 about a possible speech by Zelensky to the Austrian parliament. The Social Democratic Party and the far-right Freedom Party both thought that inviting Zelensky was a breach of Austria’s neutrality.

Ireland

How differently neutrality can be viewed in this respect is demonstrated by Ireland. Ireland became neutral by choice between the two World Wars. Unlike its continental European counterparts, neutrality was not chosen by Ireland to protect itself from Russian aggression. Its neutrality has more to do with its proximity to the UK.

‘Neutrality was a pragmatic tool to distance Ireland from the colonial history of the British Empire and also geographically from the United Kingdom’, says Ben Tondra, Professor of International Relations at University College Dublin. ‘Neutrality in Ireland is defined as not being part of a security alliance like NATO’. According to recent opinion polls, Tondra says, there is a majority for neutrality as well as for joining a common European defence structure.

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As much as the concept of neutrality has been called into question in Western European countries, it could still serve as a pragmatic instrument of peace-making for Ukraine

Ireland has also taken a clear stance concerning the war in the Ukraine. ‘Ireland is not neutral concerning the war of aggression Russia is conducting against Ukraine’, says Tondra. ‘Neutrality means Ireland decides when we get involved and when we don’t’, claimed Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney. In this war, however, ‘Ireland is not neutral’. As a consequence, Zelensky was invited to speak to the Irish parliament in Dublin via video link at the beginning of April.

Neutrality – Outdated?

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, neutral countries in the vicinity have seen renewed debate around their neutrality.

In Finland and Sweden in particular, Russian aggression has found an immediate response. Both countries are about to apply for NATO membership; neutrality will then be a thing of the past.

Even in countries where military neutrality is still backed by most of the population – in Ireland and Austria – there is still a question around what neutrality means in 2022.

This is especially the case given that the EU has, in a certain sense, become a defence alliance. Since 2009, Article 42/7 of the EU treaty has contained a **solidarity clause**: ‘If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter’. In 2015, France invoked the clause for the first time after the Islamist attacks in Paris.

On 22 March 2022, the European Council in Brussels formally approved the Strategic Compass, a plan to strengthen the EU’s security and defence policy by 2030. The EU will establish a strong **Rapid Deployment Capacity** of 5,000 troops for different types of crisis.

If the EU is strengthening its common defence policy, neutral countries need to define how they will contribute to it. So far, all neutral countries have agreed to join EU battle groups.

Neutral countries are also in the process of rethinking their military defence capabilities. In terms of military budget, neutral countries are, unsurprisingly, at the lower end of the scale. While the UK is currently spending 2.7% of its GDP on defence according to World Bank data, Finland is spending only 1.41%, Sweden 1.18%, Austria 0.81% and Ireland 0.26%.

Make Neutrality , Not War?

While neutrality is a concept of the 20th century, so is war in Europe. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has drawn European countries into renewed military spending, and it is certainly necessary at this point to provide Ukraine with military support. Currently, the debate is turning around stepping up the war effort.

But the strategy for possible peace negotiations must be worked on, too. As Anatol Lieven noted in a piece for *Foreign Policy*: 'If sufficient guarantees are in place, neutrality can be a great boon for a nation'. As much as the concept of neutrality has been called into question in Western European countries, it could still serve as a pragmatic instrument of peace-making for Ukraine.

The idea is not new. In the 1990 *Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine*, the country states the 'intention of becoming a permanently neutral state that does not participate in military blocs'. The Ukrainian constitution, which was based on the 1991 *Declaration of Independence*, reflected this principle.

In the *Budapest Memorandum* of 1994, Ukraine gave up its Soviet nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees concerning its territorial integrity. But when Russia annexed Crimea and established separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, these security guarantees proved to be useless.

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Ukrainian neutrality was redefined every time the government switched from pro-Russian to pro-Western tendencies, and vice versa. Former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma declared in 2004 that the new military doctrine did not foresee preparations for NATO accession. However, after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine's new President Viktor Yushchenko amended the military doctrine further to state that Ukraine intended to join NATO.

Faced with Russia's grip on Crimea and the Donbas region at the end of 2014, the Ukrainian parliament voted to abandon the country's 'non-aligned' status and to seek NATO membership.

The Minsk Agreements in 2014 and 2015 were designed to stop the fighting but failed to do so. In 2019, Ukraine amended its constitution to state that NATO membership was a priority for the country.

The war has changed this. As declared by Zelensky in the middle of March, Ukraine is now ready to give up its aspiration to join NATO, to refrain from hosting foreign military bases and to declare neutrality.

Zelensky, however, wants to put any deal to a referendum. The future status of the Russian-occupied regions, Crimea and Donbas, remains unclear. The chances of reaching a deal quickly are low, but the direction is clear. Ukrainian and Russian negotiators have already discussed in detail a 15-point peace plan which includes neutrality.

In a new neutrality deal, Ukraine would keep its armed forces. Mykhailo Podolyak, senior advisor to the Ukrainian president, told the *FT*: 'Ukraine

definitely keeps its own army'. He added: 'We also propose a Ukrainian model of security guarantees'. Russia's chief negotiator, Vladimir Medinsky, has said there are discussions about how big the army would be. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov compared the concept to Austrian or Swedish neutrality.

Unfortunately, it is not enough for the Ukrainian government and parliament to adopt neutrality and a non-aligned status. The leadership seeks security guarantees from the original signatories of the Budapest Memorandum – the US and the UK, Russia, and its allies Kazakhstan and Belarus – plus others like Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has indicated he could provide these guarantees.

EU states like France and Germany will have to decide bilaterally if and how they are willing to come to Ukraine's defence in case the agreement is breached. Charles Fries from the European External Action Service thinks the security guarantees would be '**more than Budapest but less than Article 5**' – the commitment clause of NATO.

The fact that Putin does not respect the defence capabilities of the EU could be helpful to finding an agreement. The examples of Austria and Ireland show that the concept of neutrality in all its shapes and forms gives enough room for manoeuvre to simultaneously claim non-aligned status in NATO terms but still be part of a growing common European security and defence policy. For Ukraine's future, this would mean giving up on NATO, but moving closer to the EU.

There is, of course, the looming question of whether it makes sense to strike a deal with the current president of Russia. Who will ever trust Putin's word again?

Then again: while neutrality may sound like a repetition of a concept which has failed to protect Ukraine from Russian aggression, it might be the only concept all sides could live with. 'Neutrality does not mean being neutral

towards Russia or the US', says Lottaz. 'Neutrality means staying out of a conflict'.

For a country like Ukraine with strong ties to the East and the West, staying out of future conflicts would already be a big achievement. Neutrality could therefore be the ticket to peace.

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