
NEUTRALITY IN THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM – WHY IT IS LIKELY TO FALL INTO DISFAVOUR AMONG EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract: Neutral countries have frequently been viewed as in certain respects constituting outliers when compared to states with more “traditional” foreign policy orientations. However, there have certainly been historical periods during which such nation-states have thrived and managed to preserve their sovereignty in the face of adversarial powers, in large part due to being consistent and predictable in sticking to neutrality, thus avoiding potentially costly entanglements in international armed conflicts. However, the 2020s have been beset by geopolitical turbulence due to a number of events, the most significant of which is Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine, that appear to be calling into question the viability of a continued reliance on neutrality as a foreign policy tool and as an identity construct from the standpoint of the vast majority of European countries. The paper utilizes qualitative methodology, which entails an integrated analysis of a wide array of (mostly contemporary) secondary sources that fall within the political science, sociology, and European studies disciplines. It advances a threefold argument. Firstly, it contends that the 2020s, to a large extent due to Russia’s actions in Ukraine and the increased assertiveness displayed by other world powers such as China, may be ushering in a paradigm shift in terms of the rules-based international order, as a result of which the international system is beginning to display characteristics in some respects typical of the more adversarial periods of the Cold War era, which is far from the most benevolent environment for the states that are inclined to tout their neutrality credentials. Secondly, the abovementioned developments, in particular the increasingly securitized environment, are generating endogenous and exogenous pressures that may encourage even countries such as Switzerland to reconsider the merits of neutrality as their default posture with regard to armed conflict and military alliances. Thirdly, the article looks at the situation in Ukraine, positing that true Ukrainian neutrality is no longer really a practical option for securing peace and resolving the conflict, with the term itself also in the process of acquiring a negative connotation in other Eastern European countries such as Moldova. In any case, while it would be too early to proclaim the end of neutrality, the political trends in many European countries do not paint a rosy picture with regard to the continued benefits expected to accrue from having a neutral status when it comes to international affairs.

Keywords: international system, neutrality, NATO, Ukraine, Switzerland

1. INTRODUCTION

In perhaps the most widely understood and intuitive sense, neutrality (or to be more precise temporary or occasional neutrality) is synonymous with a country abstaining from taking part in a war that involves other sovereign state actors. (Rolenc, 2008) Neutralisation, on the other hand, often entails requiring a state to abide by an international agreement, concluded after the end of an armed conflict, which essentially obliges it, at least for the foreseeable future, to behave in accordance with the principles of neutrality, with its territorial integrity guaranteed by the signatory countries. (Figiaconi, 2025) This course of action may be attributable to the country’s strategic importance and reflect the interests of the great powers to establish a buffer zone. (Ibid) Even though the neutral state frequently does not have a lot of agency when it comes to this decision, the small state or middle power in question may not necessarily regard such a development as being at odds with its particular national interests at the time. (Simpson, 2018) The term positive (also known as active or long-term neutrality) has also entered the literature and has a larger emphasis on voluntary choices made by sovereign states - it is applied to countries that do not desire to participate in geopolitical blocks and endeavour not to be shackled by any military alliances. (Ibid) Domestic legislation, such as certain provisions enshrined in the country’s constitution, may stipulate that such a sovereign state will remain perpetually neutral, which implies that as a matter of principle it will refrain from participating in any future conflict, as long as it is not directed against it and violates its sovereignty. (Gavrilova & Tryma, 2015) While the exact legal boundaries may be somewhat blurred, some scholars also draw a distinction between countries with “harder” or more internally binding (such as Switzerland) and “softer, i.e. significantly more permissive and amenable to change (as in the case of Finland) neutrality clauses in their constitutions. (Lottaz, 2023) In essence, for many states the adoption of neutrality has historically been attributable to pragmatic considerations – it has been described as a foreign policy tool that is suitable for the preservation of territorial integrity, is associated with a distrust of military alliances as well as one that is regarded as constituting a safety valve in case there is a breakdown in the system of collective security. (Figiaconi, 2025) Non-alignment has been depicted as a watered down version of neutrality that is linked to the Cold War period, manifesting itself in the unwillingness to align with either the

Soviet Union or the United States during the global geopolitical rivalry between the two world powers. (Simpson, 2018) Neutrality can also go hand in hand with totally pacifist foreign policies, as a few countries, in addition to proclaiming permanent neutrality, may undergo a process of full demilitarization. While the concept of neutrality has a relatively long history and the law of neutrality began to develop in the late Middle Ages, (Wentker, 2024) the possibility for states to employ neutrality as a long-term foreign policy option received an important acknowledgment by the great powers at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. (Abbenhuis, 2019) The rules governing neutrality were codified in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, (Rolenc, 2008) contributing further to the contemporary understanding of the neutral orientation as a particular status, largely defined by international law. The four guiding principles for neutral countries that still remain relevant today concern their non-participation in wars fought by other states, self-restraint by not starting any wars themselves, a strong willingness to defend neutrality (by remaining predictable and credible in their commitments to stay on the sidelines, though there may also be an emphasis on armed neutrality – possessing some level of military capability in order to safeguard their own independence), and in general abstaining from any policies or actions that could be conducive to the outbreak of conflicts. (Simpson, 2018) Scholarly interest in neutrality has recently been on the rise. (Wentker, 2024)

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The underlying methods that are utilized in the paper fall within the scope of qualitative research, with a prioritization of the analysis of secondary sources of information, including (amongst others) newspaper reports, opinion polls, interviews, policy recommendations, and journal articles. (Benton & French, 2024) Once the data is collected (courtesy of a literature review being conducted and contemporary studies pertaining to the phenomenon in question being brought to light), the findings begin to be integrated in a systematic fashion in order to gradually pave the way for the emergence of new insights. (Cho, 2022) The process remains open-ended throughout, allowing for the theory and the data to constantly interact with each other, with the initial expectations and theoretical frameworks perceived as amenable to change rather than set in stone. (Ahmed, 2025) In gauging the viability of certain theoretical propositions, the preponderance of evidence standard is applied and an attempt is made to properly contextualize the statements made as well as the actions taken by the relevant political actors.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Russia's decision to launch a full scale invasion against Ukraine has had profoundly negative effects on the rules-based international order (Lo, 2023) and the Western world's unified response to it notwithstanding, is believed likely to at least in the short-term continue to embolden other authoritarian countries with revisionist aspirations, as evidenced for instance by Chinese president Xi Jinping's less compromising stance (compared to his predecessors) regarding the "national reunification" with Taiwan, which was outlined in an August 2022 White Paper. (Legarda & Vasselier, 2023) The war in Ukraine has drawn Russia closer to the rogue regimes of Iran and North Korea, creating a new illiberal axis, to which China, even though it has attempted to publicly toe a neutral line in relation to the conflict, could be considered to belong to as well. (Lovgold, 2024) On 19 June 2024, Russia and North Korea signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty – over the course of approximately two years the relatively limited cooperation between the two states evolved into a structured and multifaceted alignment, (Friedrichs, 2025) with North Korean troops being deployed to Russia in the autumn of 2024, subsequently directly clashing with Ukrainian soldiers as part of the Kursk campaign. This development has been viewed as having the potential to transform the war in Ukraine from a regional conflict to a global one (Fatimah, 2025) due to further encouraging the flouting of international legal rules because of having an "outlaw state" essentially becoming a co-belligerent in a geographic location way beyond its territorial boundaries. Neutral countries are theoretically able to shun involvement in the direct conflicts of third parties, but unless they somehow completely isolate themselves, they remain part of the larger conflict constellations. While this is unlikely to be an issue during times of low international conflict, once a major conflict with paradigmatic effects on the structure international system breaks out, they suddenly have to contend with mounting pressures to pick a side and the concept of neutrality, (Lottaz, 2023) which previously was frequently viewed in a positive light, starts acquiring an increasingly negative connotation. (Rivasseau, 2022) In the context of a high stakes conflict involving a side attempting to illegally forge a new international world order, neutrality carries the risk of being tarred with the appeasement or irresponsibility brush. (Lottaz, 2023) Also, some analysts contend that one of the main factors that bolstered Putin's resolve to invade Ukraine was the perceived discord within NATO and the EU attributable to various reasons such as intense debates in the years prior to the war regarding defense spending (Inat & Duran, 2024) and the role of the EU within the realm of international security. Thus, after the conflict breaks out, there might be a natural inclination to engage in finger-pointing towards noncommittal and indecisive members that are perceived to have broken the spirit of unity, with neutral states that are in the geographic vicinity arguably (despite having no formal obligations towards security alliances and

supranational organizations such as the EU) at risk of also being apportioned at least a small part of the blame. In this regard, especially with the Global South's general non-alignment with the Western position on the war in Ukraine, (Lo, 2023) it may be the case that Europe has become even more committed to get its own house in order and project a united front at least among the countries that are part of its own continent. (Lovgold, 2024)

Also, if we are to turn back the clock to the Cold War international dynamics, it is notable that in the era of détente neutrality was viewed far more favorably than in the preceding years of the Cold War. This was due to the neutrals being in a position to use their strong suits to the fullest extent in terms of providing various services in relation to diplomacy, such as hosting conferences and proposing to mediate. (Albrecht et al., 1988) On the contrary, since 2022 tensions and antagonisms between the United States and Russia have heightened, with certain guardrails put in place courtesy of previous arms control agreements in the process of being dismantled. For instance, the new START treaty between the USA and Russia, which was signed on 8 April 2010 and placed limits on the deployment of long-range nuclear weapons, is set to expire on 5 February 2026, with Putin announcing in February 2023 that Russia is suspending its participation in it. (Kayali et al., 2024) In June 2024 then secretary general of NATO Jens Stoltenberg, referring to the nuclear threat posed by Russia and China, stated that the alliance was considering increasing the number of deployable nuclear warheads at its disposal (Sabbagh, 2024) and there is also some evidence that he has attempted to influence neutral Switzerland not to ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). (Mavris, 2023) Thus, in a political climate in which there is limited common ground between at least two of the major powers and both of them are inclined to be doubtful that diplomacy represents a superior alternative to the military solution of the conflict, neutral countries find it significantly more difficult to use their traditional competitive advantages, such as offering good offices and engaging in mediation efforts, which during periods of reduced tensions can conceivably move the needle in the direction of achieving compromises. It is worth noting that quite a few countries that are neither neutral nor fully fledged democracies, Turkey and Saudi Arabia amongst them, have actually been more active in providing the conditions for mediation in relation to the war in Ukraine relative to neutral states such as Austria and Switzerland. (Enderlin, 2024) In this regard, neutrals are likely to catch strays because of geographic proximities and perceived cultural affinities with one of the affected parties and their roles may be viewed with suspicion due to a noncommittal stance envisioned as simultaneously being part of the problem and not likely to be part of the solution. Furthermore, the current legal landscape exhibits significant differences to the one in which the traditional law of neutrality came into fruition. There are grounds on which to argue that contemporary international law allows neutral states to refer to the right of collective self-defense in order to justify significant support (e.g. material one) for one of the parties to the conflict that is widely perceived to be fighting a defensive war. (Nasu, 2022) The general shift towards what has been dubbed benevolent neutrality is also reflective of the reality of technological progress (due to the new possibilities offered, for instance, by airlifts and 3D printing), which have altered the ways in which wars are being waged and increased the channels for providing weapons and military equipment, making it more difficult for certain arms transfers to be detected and intercepted. (Ibid) In that regard, neutral countries, which face pressures by democratic states that are part of the Western world to support the beleaguered party, find it more difficult to hide behind legalese and make the argument that they are not exactly capable of doing their bit in terms of offering certain contributions. In the opinion of Austrian military analyst Franz Stefan Gady, the legal considerations aside, neutrality no longer guarantees that neutral countries in Europe, such as Austria, will be in a position to continue to remain de facto non-aligned, as in the case of a war that sees the participation of multiple European sovereign states, it would have to choose between closing its borders to EU and NATO troops (which would be almost inconceivable in a practical sense) or become an (air) hub for them. (Gasper, 2025)

In order to shed further light on the abovementioned points, Switzerland constitutes an interesting case study, as it represents an example par excellence of a country that has over centuries been extremely consistent in sticking to a neutral orientation. While, in what has been deemed to break a long-standing tradition, (Campagnola, 2025) the Swiss state, unlike in 2014 (when it only implemented rules preventing their bypassing), adopted the European Union's (EU) sanctions against Russia, the level of their enforcement has been regarded as halfhearted and it has come under fire by both Europe and the USA (Enderlin, 2024) while it has also raised eyebrows for indirectly helping Russia because of its ban on the re-export of war material to Ukraine, which is due to the provisions of the Swiss Federal Act on War Material. (LE News, 2023) In January 2023, Michael Flügger, the then German ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, claimed that the Swiss authorities were effectively hampering other European nations with regard to helping Ukraine, describing Switzerland's position as "incomprehensible". (Vohra, 2023) In fact, the vacillating and evasive stance of the Swiss Confederation has been challenged by both the proponents and opponents of strict neutrality due to undermining its credibility on the diplomatic front. (Widmer, 2025) Arguably, there may also be a bit of a domino effect in play, with the further reduction in the number of permanently neutral or at least non-aligned countries in Europe (courtesy of Finland and Sweden joining NATO in

2023 and 2024 respectively) negatively affecting the prospects for the creation of neutral blocs, making it more psychologically difficult to stick out and be a non-conformist. Neutrality essentially becomes too much of an aberration and starts to be perceived as a peculiar *modus operandi* in international politics. (Simpson, 2018) Such criticisms emanating from abroad have not been falling on deaf ears at home. While public support for continued Swiss neutrality remains quite high, there has still been a dent in it due to the dynamics associated with Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine. (Franke, 2024) *Swiss diplomat Jean-Daniel Ruch has admitted that because of the changed international environment, the continued emphasis on neutrality has negatively affected the reputation of his country.* (Aeschlimann, 2025) An independent expert report commissioned in August 2024 by the Federal Council (federal cabinet) of Switzerland has explicitly called for "increased cooperation" with NATO, refusing to completely rule out the possibility of Swiss soldiers taking part in joint military exercises outside the country's territory in the future. (Enderlin, 2024) The Swiss Federal Act on War Material has also come under domestic scrutiny, (Franke, 2024) with Swiss Minister of Defense Martin Pfister publicly urging lawmakers to reduce the restrictions on arms exports, citing the risks to Switzerland's credibility as a security partner. (Khan, 2025) The rhetoric emanating from Russia itself has also stoked the flames and may also be among the factors working in favor of a piecemeal shift in policy orientation, as the Kremlin has openly proclaimed that Switzerland no longer satisfies the conditions of neutrality, due to the latter's alignment with the sanctions imposed by the EU, (Leung, 2022) with the Swiss Confederation finding itself on Russia's unfriendly countries and territories list as early as March 2022. (Van Brugen, 2022)

Furthermore, with economic sanctions becoming ubiquitous in their use as a foreign policy instrument, which is largely attributable to Europe's response to the Russo-Ukrainian war and the rebirth of US protectionism, Switzerland has found itself with less wiggle room on the economic front as well. In the summer of 2025 the Trump administration imposed a 39% tariff on imports from Switzerland (which took effect on 7 August), citing the country's \$38 billion trade deficit, which Trump regarded as an indication that Swiss firms were unfairly profiting at the expense of the United States. Due to the Alpine state's perceived unwillingness to address the imbalance, the American president decided on a number that was more than double the rate (15%) imposed on the European Union. (Martin, 2025) While this development was not exactly connected to Switzerland's continued attempts to chart a neutral course in relation to the war in Ukraine, it has been viewed as reflective of the transformations engendered due to the rules-based order being gradually displaced by power economics. It serves as a cautionary tale of how not being a member of a protective bloc (the European Union) may make a country a more obvious target for economic coercion. (Ahmadi, 2025) Even though the USA and Switzerland signed a "non-binding memorandum of understanding" (with the Swiss state promising to invest \$200 billion in the USA by the end of 2028) in November 2025 after bilateral talks in Washington and intensive lobbying efforts by Swiss companies, which resulted in the tariffs being slashed to 15%, (Sexton, 2025) it is still too early to tell how quickly this import tax reduction will improve the overall outlook for Switzerland's economy and it is also not out of the question that, given the unpredictability of the Trump administration and the possibility that at some point in the future Switzerland will once again appear on the US radar for reasons that might be related to economics or geopolitics, the country will continue to be more vulnerable relative to its counterparts (that are at least formally allied with the USA) when it comes to having to deal with situations akin to (temporary) economic blackmail.

Another issue that is likely to tarnish the viability of neutrality as a foreign policy course concerns its salience with regard to a possible peace plan for ending the Ukrainian conflict. Ukraine's declaration of state sovereignty of 1 July 1990 expressed a desire for the country to become permanently neutral and pursue denuclearization. However, the country's commitment to neutrality notwithstanding (with a majority of Ukrainians consistently opposing membership in NATO prior to the start of the Ukrainian Revolution) did not prevent Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the Donbas war. The policy of neutrality was abandoned in December 2014 while in February 2019 the Verkhovna Rada, the unicameral Parliament of Ukraine, approved an amendment to the Ukrainian constitution, enshrining full membership in the EU and NATO as major foreign policy goals. This U-turn notwithstanding, a return to Ukrainian neutrality has been regarded by a number of experts as one of the necessary (but probably not sufficient) conditions for a permanent settlement of the war. However, it is doubtful that the reemergence of a neutral Ukraine is really on the books. There are three main factors that predispose countries to gravitate towards neutrality – institutional requirements, internal interests and external necessity. (Lottaz, 2023) In terms of the first one, the 2019 constitutional amendment in Ukraine (The Brussels Times, 2019) appears to have entrenched a "hard" non-neutrality clause in the country's constitution, with an overwhelming political consensus. The internal interests dimension is probably the most significant obstacle. On occasions a country may decide to settle for a policy of neutrality in order to ensure that the proper equilibrium is reached or sustained between the divergent aspirations of internal political factions, ethnic, cultural and/or linguistic groups. (Ilchevski, 2019) During the First World War, the German- and French-speaking sections of the Swiss population were sympathetic towards

opposing sides of the conflict, so the Swiss government stressed neutrality not only to fulfill its international legal obligations, but also to avoid internal polarization. (Lottaz, 2023) While a policy of neutrality made sense in Ukraine during the 1990s and 2000s when there was a relatively even split between Russophile and pro-Western voices within the wider society, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has had a consolidating effect on Ukrainian society, resulting in a clear majority of Ukrainians deciding to cast their lots with the Western world. Also, even though in March 2022 Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy appeared willing to agree to Ukrainian neutrality in order to conclude a peace agreement with Russia that could end the invasion in its early stages, (Lock & Boffey, 2022) the enormous physical, psychological, and material toll exacted on the Ukrainian people in the subsequent three and a half years makes it unlikely that Ukrainian citizens would be inclined to support neutralisation (Ash & Shapovalov, 2024) because it would understandably be perceived as a form of abandonment by the collective West and a capitulation to a major Russian demand, as from the Kremlin's standpoint, true Ukrainian neutrality would essentially be tantamount to a demilitarization of the country. The external necessity factor is possibly the most relevant one out of the three in terms of the likelihood of Ukraine accepting some form of de jure neutrality, though there are still plenty of potential issues that may turn out to be stumbling blocks. Having to reckon with exogenous constraints, a state may be compelled to choose neutrality due to the insistence of the great powers and the lack of a viable alternative. While the Trump administration and a number of European leaders have been lukewarm regarding the prospects for Ukraine joining NATO, it is difficult to argue that this is necessarily the consensus position of the Western backers of the Eastern European country. In fact, Ukraine has already been somewhat integrated into NATO operational practices, (Newton, 2025) and possesses a capable and battle tested army, so not being in a position to further pay its part in reinforcing the European (and international) security architecture due to a formal commitment to neutrality would not be that much in line with European and American interests. Furthermore, unless there is a pronounced change regarding the current state of the war, Ukraine may not have to negotiate with the Russians from a position of weakness (White, 2022) and may not view an imposed neutrality as the lesser evil compared to an invasion (which has already happened) or an occupation of its full territory (that is at this point not particularly realistic). Neighboring Moldova, despite remaining a constitutionally neutral state, also appears to be gradually letting go of the illusion that a neutral status will placate Russia's ambitions and will be a strong guarantee of its long-term territorial integrity. Since 2022 the Moldovan government has been increasingly distancing itself from the Kremlin. The Eastern European country has become much less dependent on Russian gas, its 2023 National Security Strategy designates Russia as the key threat to the country, it has signed a Security and Defense Partnership with the EU, a pioneering development and an integral part of its EU accession track, and it has also pursued an enhanced cooperation with NATO. (Samorukov, 2024) In response to Moldova's European reorientation, the Russian authorities have stepped up the political, economic and informational pressures, with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov derisively labeling Moldova as the West's new "anti-Russian project", which mirrors the "warning rhetoric" peddled against Ukraine after it decisively pivoted away from the Russian Federation following the Euromaidan. (Robert Lansing Institute, 2025)

5. CONCLUSION

Neutrality has sometimes been characterized as being among the more difficult foreign and security policy orientations to remain faithful to, as in former Finnish president Urho Kekkonen's terms, "it is easier to obey than to stand on one's own feet". (Lottaz, 2023). In the current political climate the unapologetically neutral states such as Switzerland have found themselves in an unusual situation because their neutrality is liable to be misinterpreted by the other Western countries, which are cognizant of the need to tighten their ranks in the face of the largest conflict that is taking place in Europe since the end of the Second World War II. The developments over the course of the next decade will be telling as to whether the countries that continue to intrinsically value their non-alignment will manage to demonstrate sufficient flexibility in modifying the nature of their neutrality policies, so that they are able to better correspond to the new realities, or will have to drop their neutral status altogether.

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