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Abstract

This thesis examines why Austria's conception of neutrality must evolve in order to remain a viable security strategy in the contemporary international order. Taking Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent reordering of European security as the empirical anchor, the paper traces the trajectory of Austrian neutrality from its constitutional adoption in 1955 through its integration into the European Union and into the present period of contested relevance. The argument advanced is that Austria's neutrality has become structurally misaligned with the security environment in which it must operate. The doctrine was forged in a bipolar context that rewarded buffer status and presupposed a functioning rules-based international order. Both conditions have eroded. Hybrid threats, the partial paralysis of multilateral institutions, the militarization of the EU's security architecture and the strategic isolation of Austria following Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO have together reduced the protective value of the 1955 doctrine. Yet, neutrality remains constitutionally entrenched and overwhelmingly popular, supported by more than three-quarters of the population. The thesis argues that resolving this tension does not require abandoning neutrality but rather a substantive redefinition: a doctrine that combines credible national defense, deepened European cooperation in non-alliance-binding domains, hybrid resilience and a more honest public discourse about what neutrality can and cannot do. This paper draws on deterrence theory, constructivism, hybrid threat theory as well as institutionalism, and applies a single-case study methodology with document analysis. It concludes that an adaptive, armed and networked neutrality is the only configuration in which Austria's chosen status can continue to provide viable security.

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht, warum sich Österreichs Konzeption der Neutralität weiterentwickeln muss, um als tragfähige Sicherheitsstrategie in der gegenwärtigen internationalen Ordnung bestehen zu können. Ausgehend vom russischen Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine im Jahr 2022 und der daraus resultierenden Neuordnung der europäischen Sicherheitsarchitektur als empirischem Ankerpunkt, verfolgt die Studie den Verlauf der österreichischen Neutralität von ihrer verfassungsrechtlichen Verankerung im Jahr 1955 über die Integration in die Europäische Union bis in die gegenwärtige Phase ihrer umstrittenen Relevanz. Das zentrale Argument lautet, dass Österreichs Neutralität in einem strukturellen Missverhältnis zu dem sicherheitspolitischen Umfeld steht, in dem sie wirken muss. Die Doktrin wurde in einem bipolaren Kontext geprägt, der Pufferstaaten begünstigte und eine funktionierende regelbasierte internationale Ordnung voraussetzte. Beide Voraussetzungen sind erodiert. Hybride Bedrohungen, die partielle Lähmung multilateraler Institutionen, die Militarisierung der Sicherheitsarchitektur der EU sowie die strategische Isolation Österreichs infolge des NATO-Beitritts Finnlands und Schwedens haben den Schutzwert der Doktrin von 1955 gemeinsam gemindert. Dennoch ist die Neutralität verfassungsrechtlich verankert und genießt breite Unterstützung in der Bevölkerung, wobei mehr als drei Viertel der Bevölkerung sich für ihre Beibehaltung aussprechen. Die Arbeit argumentiert, dass die Auflösung dieses Spannungsverhältnisses nicht die Aufgabe der Neutralität erfordert, sondern eine substanzielle Neudefinition: eine Doktrin, die

glaubwürdige nationale Verteidigung, vertiefte europäische Zusammenarbeit in nicht bündnisbindenden Bereichen, hybride Resilienz und einen ehrlicheren öffentlichen Diskurs über das, was Neutralität leisten kann und was nicht, miteinander verbindet. Die Arbeit stützt sich auf Abschreckungstheorie, Konstruktivismus, hybride Bedrohungstheorie sowie Institutionalismus und wendet eine Einzelfallstudie mit Dokumentenanalyse an. Sie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass eine adaptive, bewaffnete und vernetzte Neutralität die einzige Konfiguration darstellt, in der Österreichs gewählter Status weiterhin tragfähige Sicherheit gewährleisten kann.

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

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1. Introduction

On the morning of 24 February 2022, the assumption that large-scale interstate war on the European continent belonged to the twentieth century collapsed. Russian armored columns advanced into Ukraine from several directions, missiles struck Kyiv and a strategic order that European publics had treated as effectively permanent began to unravel. For the historically neutral states of the European Union - Austria, Ireland, Malta and (until then) Finland and Sweden - the war forced a question that decades of relative comfort had allowed them to defer. If the post-1945 order is contracting, if great powers are again willing to pursue territorial revision through force, and if the threats facing European societies extend well beyond conventional invasion to encompass cyber operations, disinformation, sabotage and economic coercion, then what work does neutrality actually do?

Austria's neutrality is not merely a foreign-policy preference. It is enshrined in the Federal Constitutional Law on Neutrality of 26 October 1955, passed one day after the last Allied occupation soldier left the country (Mueller, 2024). It is overwhelmingly popular: opinion surveys consistently report that more than three-quarters of Austrians want to retain neutrality, and only a small minority would consider NATO membership (Phillips, Prinz & Straub, 2025; Robinson, 2025). It has become a cornerstone of national identity, conflated in everyday discourse with sovereignty, peace and Austria's distinct international personality (Foster, 2024). And yet, in legal and operational terms, Austria's neutrality has been substantially reshaped since 1995 by EU membership, by participation in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), by the NATO Partnership for Peace and by mutual-assistance commitments under Article 42(7) TEU (Janik, 2024; Popławski, 2020). The gap between symbolic neutrality and operational practice has become a structural feature of the doctrine.

This thesis takes that gap as its analytical starting point. The central research question is: Why must Austria's conception of neutrality evolve in order to remain a viable security strategy? The question is deliberately framed in normative terms ("must") because the empirical claim being defended is conditional. Neutrality remains, in principle, available to Austria. What is contested is whether the version of neutrality currently enacted, with its legacy of low defense investment, identity-driven public discourse and ad hoc adaptation to EU obligations, can continue to deliver the security features that neutral states are supposed to enjoy: territorial inviolability, freedom of action, exemption from great-power conflicts and the diplomatic flexibility that comes with non-alignment. The argument advanced is that under present and foreseeable conditions it cannot, and that the doctrine therefore must be reconceived if it is to remain functional rather than merely emblematic.

Three connected hypotheses guide the empirical analysis. First, the protective conditions that made Austrian neutrality strategically credible during the Cold War (bipolar restraint, mutual interest in buffer states, a relatively well-resourced Bundesheer and a robust multilateral framework) have eroded substantially since 1990 and especially since 2014 (Agius & Devine, 2011; Baciú, 2022). Second, the kinds of threats Austria now most plausibly faces (hybrid operations, cyber intrusion, disinformation, economic coercion, infrastructure sabotage) bypass the legal categories on which neutrality law rests, leaving traditional neutrality without operational traction in the gray zone (Borch & Heier, 2025; Hoffman, 2009). Third, the structural integration of Austria into European security architectures (from

PESCO to the European Sky Shield Initiative) is generating a de facto post-neutral practice whose dissonance with the de jure doctrine and the de jure self-understanding is increasingly difficult to manage politically (Janik, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025). Taken together, these propositions support the broader claim that Austria faces a choice not between neutrality and alliance, but between a modernized, credible neutrality and a residual, symbolic one whose protective value is diminishing.

1.1 Relevance

The relevance of this inquiry is at once practical, theoretical and normative. Practically, Austrian decisions about defense spending, conscription, air defense cooperation, hybrid resilience and EU integration are being taken now, in conditions of significant strategic uncertainty. The Bundesheer's modernization under the "Aufbauplan 2032+" program has roughly doubled the defense budget between 2020 and 2026, with appropriations of around €4.74 billion in 2025 and €5.18 billion in 2026 (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2025). A Military Service Commission reported in January 2026 with proposals to extend basic service and introduce mandatory militia (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2026a). The September 2025 cross-party agreement of all parliamentary defense spokespersons on the need for an "honest discussion" of neutrality marked a striking departure from decades of taboo (Tschiderer, 2025). These developments demand a clear analytical framework for evaluating their cumulative effect on the meaning of Austrian neutrality.

Theoretically, the case sits at the intersection of several debates in international relations: the viability of small-state strategies under conditions of great-power revisionism, the relationship between identity and security policy, the legal and political status of the gray zone and the interaction between regional institutional integration and constitutional commitments. As Agius and Devine (2011) argue, repeated obituaries of neutrality have proved premature, but each cycle of revival raises new questions about the doctrine's content and limits. Examining how the most prominent constitutionally neutral EU member state navigates the Ukraine moment provides leverage on broader questions about how small, embedded states can maintain distinct foreign-policy identities when systemic pressures intensify.

Normatively, the question implicates Austrian democratic deliberation. As former Austrian foreign minister Ursula Plassnik (2024) and others have argued, the conflation of neutrality with national identity has insulated the doctrine from the kind of policy scrutiny that other security commitments routinely receive. If neutrality is to remain a deliberate strategy rather than a reflex, citizens and elites need a clearer account of what it costs, what it requires and what it cannot deliver. A thesis that engages those questions seriously contributes to a public conversation that has only recently, and reluctantly, opened up.

1.2 Approach and Disciplinary Position

Methodologically, the thesis adopts a qualitative single-case study design (Lamont, 2021), treating Austria as what George and Bennett (2005) would call a "critical case" for the broader question of neutrality's viability in the twenty-first century. Document analysis is the principal data-collection method, drawing on Austrian government strategy papers (notably the Austrian Security Strategy 2024),

constitutional and treaty texts, parliamentary records, speeches by senior figures, EU and NATO documents, and a substantial body of secondary scholarship. Process tracing is used to follow the trajectory of Austrian policy from 1955 through the present, identifying the decision points and external shocks that have shaped the doctrine.

Theoretically, the analysis is multi-paradigmatic. Deterrence theory clarifies the material conditions under which neutrality can be credibly defended; constructivism captures the identity-laden quality of Austrian neutrality and its grip on public opinion; hybrid threat theory addresses the changing character of conflict and the gray-zone challenges that legacy neutrality doctrine cannot accommodate; and institutionalism situates Austria within the EU's evolving security architecture. The combination is not eclectic for its own sake. Each lens illuminates a dimension of the central problem that the others cannot reach, and the argument is precisely that a viable Austrian neutrality must be credible (deterrence), culturally legitimate (constructivism), adaptive to new conflict forms (hybrid threats) and compatible with cooperative security structures (institutionalism).

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized in seven principal chapters following this introduction. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on neutrality, Austrian foreign and security policy, hybrid threats and small-state security, identifying both established findings and the gaps the present study addresses. Chapter 3 elaborates the four-part theoretical framework. Chapter 4 specifies the methodology, including the rationale for the single-case design, the choice of document analysis and the limitations of the approach. Chapter 5 sets out the conceptual foundations of neutrality, distinguishing legal forms and clarifying what Austria's neutrality has and has not committed it to. Chapter 6 contains the empirical analysis, organized around five connected sub-cases: the contraction of the rules-based order, Austria's neutrality during the Cold War (1955-1990), the post-1990 transformation, contemporary security policy and the Ukraine war as a stress test. Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings, engages directly with the principal counterarguments and considers what an evolved Austrian neutrality might look like. Chapter 8 concludes by returning to the research question and outlining implications for policy and further research.

2. Literature Review

Four streams of scholarship inform the analysis that follows: the international-relations literature on neutrality and small-state security, the more specialized body of work on Austrian foreign and security policy, the rapidly expanding literature on hybrid threats, and a set of cross-cutting concepts (deterrence, identity, institutions) that recur across the others. This chapter surveys each in turn, with two purposes. First, to map the established findings on which the thesis builds. Second, to identify the analytical gaps it seeks to address. The principal gap, set out at the chapter's end, is the absence of a sustained, integrative treatment of how Austria's specific configuration of legal neutrality, EU integration and contemporary threat exposure interacts with the changing architecture of European security.

2.1 Neutrality in International Relations

Neutrality is one of the older subjects of international legal and political thought. Its modern legal form is conventionally traced to the Hague Conventions of 1907, which codified the rights and duties of neutral powers in land and naval warfare and gave the doctrine its core content: non-participation, impartiality and self-defense (El-Zein, 2024; Verdross, 1958). The classical scholarship treated neutrality as a wartime status with peacetime implications, distinguishing permanent from ad hoc neutrality, neutralization from non-alignment and military from political neutrality (Ogley, 2022; Rubinson, 2025). These distinctions remain analytically important, and the conceptual chapter of this thesis draws on them. What the early literature largely failed to anticipate, however, is the extent to which the conditions under which neutrality could function as a security strategy would change (Agius & Devine, 2011).

Twentieth-century scholarship on European neutrality clustered around the experience of Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Ireland, with comparative work emphasizing both the diversity of arrangements and the structural conditions that made neutrality viable in the bipolar Cold War system (Hilpold et al., 2023; Murphy, 2020; Reginbogin & Lottaz, 2020). Hanspeter Neuhold's contributions, in particular, framed Austrian neutrality as a strategy whose external credibility depended on bipolar restraint and whose internal sustainability depended on a cohesive political consensus (Neuhold, 1993; Neuhold 1994). For Sweden and Finland, neutrality was practiced as armed non-alignment; for Austria and Switzerland, it was constitutionally entrenched and accompanied by elaborate doctrines of comprehensive national defense (Agius & Devine, 2011; Reginbogin & Lottaz, 2020; Rubinson, 2025).

After the end of the Cold War, the literature divided. One camp, exemplified by early commentary in the 1990s, treated neutrality as a Cold War artefact whose rationale had collapsed with the bipolar system (Bebler, 1992). A second line of work argued that neutrality was adaptive and could be repurposed for new conditions; Heinz Gärtner's (2015) influential concept of "engaged neutrality" exemplified this position, framing neutrality as compatible with active participation in international security cooperation. A third, more recent strand, sharpened by the Ukraine war, examines whether neutrality has "lost relevance or remains an adaptive principle" (Allison, 2022; Senn, 2024). Agius and

Devine's (2011) influential reprise ("a really dead concept?") anticipated this debate and concluded that neutrality survives precisely because it is more than a strategic posture; it is also a political identity that resists the obituaries periodically written for it.

What this body of work establishes well is the historical and conceptual variability of neutrality. What it is less equipped to do is provide a systematic framework for evaluating neutrality under the specific conditions of twenty-first-century hybrid conflict, eroding multilateralism and deepening regional security integration. As Wolford (2019) notes in his analysis of "neutrality regimes," the strategic value of neutrality depends on the willingness of belligerents to respect it; and the conditions sustaining that willingness have shifted in ways the older literature did not anticipate.

2.2 Austrian Foreign and Security Policy

Within the broader neutrality literature, Austria has long been a leading case. Early work in the 1960s through the 1980s tended to treat Austrian neutrality as a successful strategy: it had restored sovereignty, enabled Austria to host major international organizations and supported a distinctive bridge-building diplomacy under chancellors such as Bruno Kreisky (Graf-Steiner, 2024; Knoll & Röhrlich, 2024). Verdross (1958), writing soon after the Neutrality Act's adoption, established the influential legal interpretation that neutrality obligations took precedence over obligations of solidarity within collective security systems. Eventually, a doctrine that continued to shape Austria's foreign-policy reasoning for decades (Senn, 2023).

The post-1990 literature is denser and more contested. Three positions can be distinguished. The first, exemplified by Gärtner (2015) and elements of Senn's earlier work (Senn, 2023), argues that Austrian neutrality has been successfully reconciled with EU membership through a doctrine of engaged or active neutrality and that it remains a coherent and useful policy posture. The second, articulated by Popławski (2020), Janik (2024) and El-Zein (2024), argues that Austria's accession to the EU and its subsequent acceptance of CSDP obligations, sanctions regimes and Article 42(7) TEU effectively superseded the 1955 doctrine in most of the domains where it would have practical bite, leaving Austria "alliance-free" in name and practice but no longer neutral in the classical legal sense. The third, increasingly visible in recent work, frames Austrian neutrality as primarily a matter of identity and political culture rather than strategy: as Foster (2024) puts it, neutrality has become a marker of Austrian self-understanding whose strategic content is now relatively thin.

Senn's periodization of Austrian neutrality into four phases - consolidation (1955-1970), expansion (1970-1990), integration (1990s-2000s) and stagnation/ ambivalence (2010s onward) - has become a reference framework in the field (Gaspar, 2025; Senn, 2024). Each phase corresponds to a distinct strategic and domestic-political context, and the periodization is useful precisely because it foregrounds the changes in what neutrality has meant in practice. The Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES) study by Schwarz (2025) reports that a majority of European security experts now view Austria's neutrality as strategically outdated. From the outside, Austria appears increasingly as what Moyer and Kornegay (2024) describe as a "free-rider" benefiting from NATO's protective umbrella without contributing to collective defense. Within Austria itself, the most influential recent contribution

may be Plassnik's (2024) blunt argument that the country has "forgotten security policy" and must learn it again.

Yet a notable feature of this literature is the absence of consensus. Kmentt (2024) defends an active neutrality posture rooted in disarmament diplomacy; Cede (2024) explores ethical tensions in maintaining strict military neutrality in the face of Russian aggression; Bußjäger (2024) parses the constitutional ranking of neutrality and a hypothetical NATO accession; Eder and Salinger (2024) document the paradox of high public support for neutrality combined with low willingness to defend it. The very richness of the disagreement reveals the unresolved conceptual problem: there is no shared analytical baseline against which to evaluate whether Austrian neutrality is, in current conditions, working.

2.3 Hybrid Threats and Small-State Security

The literature on hybrid threats has expanded rapidly since 2014, prompted in particular by Russian operations in Ukraine and the rest of Europe. Hybrid warfare, in Frank Hoffman's (2009) influential original formulation, refers to the integrated use of conventional and irregular methods, criminality and information operations within a single battle space. NATO and EU policy literatures have institutionalized the concept, broadening it to include cyber operations, disinformation, sabotage, weaponized migration, economic coercion and influence operations more generally (NATO, 2026; European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2020). The unifying analytical claim is that adversaries deliberately exploit thresholds (between war and peace, between attribution and ambiguity, between civilian and military assets) to inflict strategic damage while minimizing the risk of escalation.

For small and open European states, this body of work converges on three findings. First, hybrid threats are well suited to attacking precisely the features that small open states value: economic interdependence, free media, dense civil-society networks, reliance on critical digital infrastructure. Second, the legal architecture of inter-state war does not capture most hybrid activity, leaving target states with limited international-legal recourse and complicating their domestic political responses. Third, effective resilience requires cross-border cooperation: intelligence sharing, joint cyber-incident response, common attribution frameworks and harmonized counter-disinformation policy (Borch & Heier, 2025; Hoffman, 2009; NATO, 2026). As Borch and Heier (2025) argue, preparing for hybrid threats is increasingly conceived as a collaborative undertaking rather than a national one.

The implications for neutral states have received more attention in policy outputs than in scholarly literature, but the basic argument is straightforward. Classical neutrality law presupposes a recognizable state of war between identifiable belligerents and regulates the neutral's conduct in relation to that war. Hybrid operations frequently fall below the threshold of armed conflict in international law, are conducted with intentional ambiguity of attribution, and persist across the supposed boundary between war and peace (Borch & Heier, 2025; Hoffman, 2007). As Austria's own progressive contributions to the international-law debate on cyber operations have begun to recognize, the legal framework is still

being developed (Roguski, 2024). For a state whose security commitments are organized around a war-peace binary, the gray zone is, by design, a gap.

There is, however, a genuine scholarly gap in the systematic analysis of how neutral states adapt their doctrines to the hybrid-threat environment. Most of the empirical work on hybrid threats focuses on alliance members, especially NATO frontline states. Switzerland and Austria appear in this literature mainly as case examples, not as cases. The present thesis contributes to closing that gap by treating Austria as a sustained empirical focus.

2.4 Deterrence, Identity and Institutions

Three further bodies of work cut across the categories above and inform the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3. The first is deterrence theory. Classical deterrence scholarship, developed by Schelling, Brodie, Snyder and others in the early Cold War, focused on the conditions under which a defender can dissuade an aggressor by manipulating the latter's expected costs and benefits (Zagare, 1996; Zagare, 2004). Although the original literature concerned great-power and especially nuclear deterrence, its core insights (capability, credibility, communication) extend straightforwardly to small-state defensive postures, including those of neutral states. Rickli's (2008) analysis of post-Cold War European small states distinguishes between territorial and niche strategies, and notes that small neutrals face particular difficulties in generating credible deterrence given their limited resources. Danspeckgruber's (1986) work on armed neutrality remains a useful entry point for thinking about how neutral states have historically combined non-alignment with deterrent capability.

The second is the constructivist literature on identity and norms in foreign policy. Wendt's (1999) account of socially constructed interests, Katzenstein's (1996) edited volume on the cultural foundations of national security, and the broader norm-diffusion literature have shaped how analysts approach the relationship between national identity and security policy. For Austria, this lens is indispensable. Multiple studies document that neutrality is treated by the Austrian public not primarily as an instrumental policy but as an identity marker, often conflated with sovereignty and peace (Baciu, 2022; Foster, 2024; Phillips, Prinz & Straub, 2025). Kořan (2006) argues that Austrian neutrality is best understood as a "moral good" that has been rediscovered by successive generations even as its strategic content has changed. This identity-centered reading helps explain why public support for neutrality has remained stable at around three-quarters of the population through events that, in other neutral states, produced major reorientations.

The third body of work is institutionalism. Liberal institutionalist scholarship, associated with Keohane, Ikenberry and Ruggie, argues that international institutions reduce the costs of cooperation, constrain great-power behavior and provide small states with disproportionate influence relative to their material capabilities (Ikenberry, 2018). Austria's neutrality co-evolved with the post-1945 multilateral order: UN membership (1955), CSCE/OSCE engagement, EU accession (1995) and a host of partnership arrangements with NATO. Where the multilateral order is robust, neutral states can substitute institutional embeddedness for alliance protection. Where it weakens, the calculus changes (Murphy, 2020; Wolford, 2019). Ikenberry's (2018) analysis of the crisis of the liberal international

order is therefore directly relevant to the Austrian case: as the order that supported Austrian neutrality contracts, so too does the protective space within which the doctrine operates.

2.5 Identifying the Gap

The combined picture from these literatures is rich but uneven. Austrian neutrality has been studied legally, historically and politically. Hybrid threats have been studied operationally and doctrinally. Deterrence, identity and institutions provide cross-cutting frameworks. What is missing is a sustained analytical synthesis that brings these strands together in the context of the present strategic moment: an account of why the cumulative weight of changes in the international order, in the threat environment and in the institutional setting around Austria has rendered the legacy doctrine no longer fit for purpose, and what the implications are for the doctrine's future content.

Recent contributions are converging on this synthesis. Robinson's (2025) mixed-methods study of Austrian elite and public opinion finds a strong attachment to neutrality even after the war in Ukraine but documents the elite-public gap that the present thesis takes as a central object of analysis. Schwarz's (2025) AIES study captures external European perceptions. Senn (2024) calls explicitly for a structured public debate. Gasper (2025) argues that Austria has now had "70 years of neutrality and three decades in the European Union" without resolving the underlying contradictions. The present thesis aims to contribute to this emerging conversation by offering a structured, multi-perspectival analysis of why and how Austria's neutrality must evolve, organized around a clear research question and a coherent theoretical framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

The empirical analysis that follows engages a layered question (about material capability, identity, threat type and institutional context) that no single theoretical lens fully captures. This chapter develops a framework that combines four bodies of theory: deterrence theory, constructivism, hybrid threat theory and institutionalism. Each is selected for its analytical leverage on a specific dimension of the central question. Deterrence theory clarifies the material conditions for credible neutrality. Constructivism captures the identity-laden quality of the doctrine and its grip on public discourse. Hybrid threat theory addresses the changing character of conflict and the misalignment between contemporary aggression and the legal categories on which neutrality rests. Institutionalism situates Austria within the multilateral and regional architectures whose evolution is reshaping the space available for neutral states. The overall analytical claim is that a viable Austrian neutrality must satisfy each of these criteria simultaneously: it must be credible (deterrence), legitimate (constructivism), adaptive (hybrid threats) and compatible with cooperative security (institutionalism). The current doctrine, the analysis will argue, satisfies none of them fully.

3.1 Deterrence Theory and Small-State Security

Deterrence theory's central claim is that an aggressor can be dissuaded from a contemplated action by the credible expectation that the costs of the action will outweigh its benefits (Schelling, 1966; Zagare, 1996). The literature distinguishes deterrence by denial (preventing an adversary from achieving its objectives by frustrating its operations) from deterrence by punishment (imposing costs that exceed any gains the aggressor might secure). For nuclear powers the second logic has historically dominated; for small states, the first is more tractable. As Rickli (2008) shows, post-Cold War European small states have generally pursued one of two strategies: territorial defense built on deterrence by denial, or niche specialization within alliance frameworks.

Permanently neutral states face a particular variant of this problem. Because they cannot rely on alliance guarantees, the credibility of their neutrality depends substantially on the credibility of their own defensive capability. Switzerland is the paradigmatic case: a militia-based armed neutrality combined with elaborate civil defense and infrastructure protection, intended to make occupation prohibitively costly (Danspeckgruber, 1986; Jorio, 2023). Austria's 1955 doctrine of "comprehensive national defense" (umfassende Landesverteidigung) was conceived in similar terms, though it was implemented less consistently. Deterrence theory provides a precise vocabulary for evaluating both the original Austrian model and its current state. A neutral whose defense forces are visibly insufficient to impose meaningful costs on a determined aggressor cannot generate credible deterrence by denial; the willingness of belligerents to respect its neutrality then depends on factors outside its control (Allison, 2022; Gallouët, 2024; Senn, 2023).

Two further refinements from the deterrence literature matter for the analysis. First, credibility has a psychological as well as a material dimension. As Mercer (2010) and others have emphasized, an adversary's assessment of the defender's resolve is at least as important as its assessment of its capability. A society visibly unwilling to defend itself may not be deterred even by capabilities on paper.

Eder and Salinger's (2024) finding that only around a third of Austrians would personally be willing to fight to defend their country, against more than 80 per cent in Finland, is therefore directly relevant to deterrence credibility. Second, deterrence is communicated. Strategic signaling (through doctrine, exercises, public statements and procurement) shapes how adversaries read intentions. Austria's recent "Aufbauplan 2032+" with its associated political rhetoric of a domestic *Zeitenwende* ("turning point") should be read in part as such a signal (Janik, 2024; Kmentt, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025). Whether the signal is sufficient is a separate question, addressed in the empirical chapters.

3.2 Constructivism and National Identity

Where deterrence theory focuses on material capability and rational calculation, constructivism centers ideas, identities and norms (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). For the Austrian case the constructivist contribution is essential, because no purely material account can explain the durability of neutrality through changes in the strategic environment that, in other states, produced major reorientations. Finland's centuries-long experience of neutrality and non-alignment was overturned within months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Austria's was reaffirmed. The asymmetry cannot be explained by differences in material vulnerability as Finland's were more acute, but its identity attachment to non-alignment was less complete (Rubinson, 2025).

Austrian neutrality functions, in constructivist terms, as a constitutive norm: it is part of how Austrians understand their state to be Austrian (Foster, 2024; Baciu, 2022; Phillips, Prinz & Straub, 2025). Public-opinion data is unambiguous on this point. The University of Innsbruck's Austrian Foreign Policy Panel Project (Senn, Duell & Eder, 2024) and other surveys consistently report majorities of around three-quarters in favor of retaining neutrality, with shares supporting NATO membership in the low double digits. Phillips, Prinz and Straub's (2025) qualitative work with young adults shows that respondents associate neutrality with peace, sovereignty and Austrian identity, often without reference to the legal or strategic content of the doctrine. The doctrine is, as Kořan (2006) puts it, a "moral good" whereas in some readings a national myth in the constructivist sense developed by Mueller (2024) and others.

This identity dimension imposes real political constraints on policy reform. Even if elite analysts conclude that the doctrine is strategically misaligned with current threats, attempts to renegotiate it confront a deeply rooted public attachment that elected officials are reluctant to challenge. The constructivist lens helps explain why Austrian leaders so consistently frame new commitments (sanctions on Russia, participation in EU missions, joining the European Sky Shield) in language that asserts compatibility with neutrality ("militarily neutral, not morally neutral"; "solidarity and neutrality") rather than acknowledging tensions or trade-offs (Der Standard, 2022). It also helps explain the political potency of the populist-right Freedom Party's (FPÖ) framing of EU defense integration as a betrayal of neutrality, and the corresponding caution of mainstream parties (Janik, 2024; Plassnik, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025).

Crucially, constructivism does not imply that identities are immutable. They are reproduced through discourse and practice, and they can change (sometimes rapidly, as Finland's case shows). But change

typically requires either a sustained discursive effort by elites willing to argue against the inherited self-understanding or a sufficiently severe external shock to disrupt it (Rubinson, 2025; Senn & Troy, 2025). Both conditions are presently weak in Austria. The constructivist framework therefore predicts that any evolution of Austrian neutrality will need to work with, rather than against, the inherited identity narrative. Therefore, finding ways to redefine neutrality that do not feel to the public like its abandonment.

3.3 Hybrid Threat Theory

Hybrid threat theory is less a unified theoretical edifice than a working framework developed at the interface of military doctrine and security studies. Hoffman's (2009) original formulation emphasized the integration of conventional and irregular methods within a single battle space; subsequent elaborations, particularly after 2014, have extended the concept to encompass cyber operations, disinformation, economic coercion, weaponized migration and the orchestrated use of proxies (Borch & Heier, 2025; European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2020; NATO, 2026). Three analytical claims unify the literature. First, hybrid operations target an adversary's vulnerabilities holistically, treating military and civilian, kinetic and non-kinetic instruments as components of a single coercive campaign. Second, they exploit ambiguity (about attribution, about thresholds, about intent) to constrain the target's response options. Third, they unfold over time, blending periods of overt confrontation with periods of seemingly normal interaction.

For neutrality doctrine, the implications are corrosive. The legal categories that organize neutrality (the recognized state of war, the identifiable belligerents, the obligations of impartiality) assume an environment in which the war-peace distinction is operative. Hybrid operations are designed to make that distinction inoperative. A cyberattack on a power grid, an influence operation in a domestic election, the cultivation of dependent business elites or the staged orchestration of a refugee crisis can each impose strategic costs comparable to those of conventional military action without crossing any threshold that would, under classical doctrine, activate neutrality's protections or constrain a neutral's responses (Borch & Heier, 2025; Senn & Troy, 2025).

The 2024 Austrian Security Strategy explicitly recognizes this challenge, identifying hybrid threats such as cyber, disinformation, sabotage and economic coercion as among the principal contemporary risks to Austrian security (Bundeskanzleramt, 2024). What is less clear is how the doctrinal commitment to neutrality interacts with the operational requirements of hybrid resilience, which generally include intensive intelligence sharing, joint cyber-incident response with European partners and coordinated political attribution of hostile actions. As Austria's own progressive contributions to the international-law debate on cyber operations show, the legal framework here is still being constructed, and small states have a particular interest in the development of clear thresholds (Roguski, 2024).

Hybrid threat theory thus generates a sharp prediction for the Austrian case. The doctrines and institutions designed to manage Austria's status under classical neutrality cannot, on their own, address the dominant contemporary threat profile. Effective response requires either a substantive revision of

how Austria interprets its neutrality in non-kinetic domains, or deeper operational integration with European partners that may itself raise questions about the doctrine's content, or, most likely, both.

3.4 Institutionalism and Multilateral Security

Liberal institutionalist theory provides the macro-level framework for situating Austria in its institutional environment (Ikenberry, 2018; Keohane, 1984). The core claim is that international institutions, by reducing transaction costs, generating shared expectations and constraining great-power behavior, allow states (particularly small ones) to pursue cooperative outcomes that would not be available under pure anarchy. For neutral states, this argument is particularly important. Austrian neutrality co-evolved with a dense network of multilateral institutions: the UN system, the CSCE/OSCE, the European integration process, the international-law framework that made hosting major organizations in Vienna both possible and politically valuable (Knoll & Röhrlich, 2024). A robust multilateral order substituted, partially, for alliance protection.

The institutionalist framework therefore predicts that as global institutions weaken (as the UN Security Council is paralyzed by great-power vetoes, as the WTO dispute system is hobbled, as the ICC faces sustained challenges) small states will rely more heavily on regional institutions and on bilateral arrangements that can deliver some of the same goods at smaller scale. Austria's deepening engagement with EU CSDP, PESCO, the European Sky Shield and the EU's hybrid-threat infrastructure can be read in precisely these terms. The European Union has become, for Austria, a partial functional substitute for the multilateral architecture whose protective value is contracting (Ikenberry, 2018; Murphy, 2020).

This shift has direct implications for what neutrality can mean. Substituting EU embeddedness for multilateral protection works tolerably well in domains short of collective defense such as sanctions, crisis management, hybrid resilience or capability development. It fits less neatly with the harder commitments associated with Article 42(7) TEU and the ongoing intensification of EU defense cooperation. The institutionalist framework predicts continuing pressure on Austria to clarify how its neutrality relates to these intensifying commitments. The "Irish clause" inserted into the Lisbon Treaty preserved neutral states' interpretive discretion under Article 42(7), but discretion is not, by itself, a doctrine (Cede, 2024; Gärtner & Janik, 2025). What does Austria interpret its obligations to require? In what circumstances would it provide which forms of assistance? The institutional framework around Austria is changing in ways that make these questions increasingly difficult to defer.

A useful concept here, drawn from the small-state literature, is "engagement without entrapment" (Cooper, Higgott & Nossal, 1993). Neutral states have historically sought to engage in international institutions in ways that enhance their security without binding themselves to the harder reciprocal commitments of alliance. The institutionalist analysis in this thesis examines whether the contemporary EU security architecture still permits this strategy, or whether the trajectory of integration is closing the space for it. The conclusion of the empirical chapters is that the space has narrowed substantially and that maintaining a meaningful version of the strategy requires an explicit doctrinal effort, not the inherited reflexive caution.

3.5 Putting the Framework to Work

The four lenses are not competitors but complements. Each addresses a dimension of the central problem that the others under-specify. Deterrence theory cannot, by itself, explain why publics defend strategically irrational positions; constructivism does. Constructivism cannot, by itself, address the changing nature of the threat environment; hybrid threat theory does. Hybrid threat theory cannot, by itself, situate Austria within the institutional context that shapes both the threat and the response; institutionalism does. And institutionalism cannot, by itself, explain whether the resulting posture would actually deter; deterrence theory does. The empirical chapters apply the combined framework systematically: at each stage, the analysis asks what the Austrian doctrine looks like through each of the four lenses, and how the answers fit together. The synthesis chapter then draws the cumulative implications.

4. Methodology

This chapter sets out the research design, data sources and analytical procedures employed in the empirical chapters that follow. The design is a qualitative single-case study of Austria, with document analysis as the principal data-collection method and process tracing as the central analytical strategy. The chapter justifies these choices, identifies methodological limitations and explains how they have been mitigated.

4.1 Research Design: A Qualitative Single-Case Study

The thesis adopts a qualitative single-case study design (Lamont, 2021; George & Bennett, 2005). A single-case approach is appropriate where the goal is to develop a detailed, multi-dimensional understanding of a phenomenon in its real-world context, and where the case selected has features that make it unusually informative for the broader research question. Austria meets both conditions for the question of neutrality's viability under contemporary conditions. It is the most prominent constitutionally neutral member state of the European Union; its neutrality is doctrinally robust, legally entrenched and overwhelmingly publicly supported; it is structurally integrated into European security cooperation; and it sits geographically and politically at the center of the contemporary debate about how the European security order should evolve in response to Russia's war on Ukraine. As such, Austria functions as a critical case in the sense developed by Eckstein (1975): a case in which the empirical conditions are particularly conducive to evaluating the theoretical claim under examination.

A comparative design, for example, contrasting Austria with Switzerland, Ireland or post-2023 Finland would have its own merits and is indicated as a productive line of further research. The choice of a single-case design here reflects a judgment that the analytical complexity of Austria's specific configuration of legal, identity-based, institutional and threat-environment factors warrants sustained focus, and that comparative analysis would necessarily compress one or more of these dimensions. The trade-off, acknowledged here, is that the findings cannot be generalized in the manner of large-N statistical work; their generalizability is instead the analytic generalizability that follows from rigorous theoretical engagement with a well-chosen case (Yin, 2018).

4.2 Data Sources

The empirical analysis draws on three categories of primary documentary evidence and a substantial body of secondary scholarship. The primary categories are official government and inter-governmental documents, parliamentary and political-elite communications, and quantitative reference data.

Official government and inter-governmental documents include the Austrian Federal Constitutional Law on Neutrality (1955), the Austrian State Treaty (1955), the 2024 Austrian Security Strategies, the annual Bundesheer development plans associated with "Aufbauplan 2032+," published budget documents from the Ministry of Defense, the Treaty on European Union (specifically Article 42(7) and the associated declarations), Council of the European Union conclusions on CSDP and sanctions, NATO partnership documents including the Partnership for Peace framework, and the Hague

Conventions of 1907 as the foundational instrument of modern neutrality law. These documents constitute the formal record of Austria's commitments and self-understandings.

Parliamentary and political-elite communications include relevant parliamentary debates, statements by sitting and recent chancellors, foreign ministers and defense ministers (notably Karl Nehammer, Christian Stocker, Beate Meinl-Reisinger, Alexander Schallenberg, Klaudia Tanner, Andreas Babler), and significant interventions by other political and military figures (former president Heinz Fischer, former chief of defense Robert Brieger, former foreign minister Ursula Plassnik, military analyst Franz-Stefan Gady). Statements published in major Austrian press outlets (Der Standard, Die Presse, Kurier, ORF, Heute and others) are used to capture the texture of elite discourse. International coverage from Reuters, The Economist and others provide external triangulation.

Quantitative reference data include defense-spending series from the World Bank, Bundesheer budget figures from the Austrian Ministry of Defense, public-opinion data from the Innsbruck-based Austrian Foreign Policy Panel Project and other survey series, and operational data on Bundesheer deployments, NATO transit movements and overflights. These figures are not analyzed statistically; they are used as descriptive evidence in qualitative narratives.

Secondary scholarship is drawn principally from the German- and English-language literatures on Austrian foreign policy, the comparative study of European neutrality, hybrid threats and small-state security. The 2024 special issue of the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* on the "state and future of Austrian neutrality" is a particularly important reference, comprising fifteen contributions from leading scholars and practitioners (Senn, Plassnik, Janik, Bußjäger, Cede, Eder & Salinger, Kmentt, Knoll & Röhrlich, Foster, Gallouët, Mueller, Nowotny and others). Other key contributions include Senn and Troy's (2025) edited volume *Österreichs Neutralität*, Robinson's (2025) mixed-methods study, Schwarz's (2025) AIES expert survey, and Gärtner and Janik's (2025) work on neutrality and arms exports.

4.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, in Chapter 5, the conceptual content of neutrality is specified, both in international law generally and in Austria's specific legal-political form. This conceptual chapter functions as a baseline against which the subsequent empirical analysis is conducted. Second, in Chapter 6, the empirical analysis is organized chronologically and thematically across five connected sub-chapters: the contraction of the rules-based order, Austria's neutrality during the Cold War (1955-1990), the post-1990 transformation, contemporary security policy, and the Ukraine war as a stress test. Within each sub-chapter, the four-lens theoretical framework is applied to evaluate developments. Third, in Chapter 7, the cumulative findings are synthesized, the principal counterarguments are engaged, and the implications for the doctrine's future content are drawn out.

Process tracing is the central analytical strategy within the empirical chapters (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Process tracing seeks to identify the causal mechanisms linking initial conditions to outcomes by examining the sequence of intermediate steps, decisions and intervening events. In the present case, this means following Austrian policy decisions through their immediate context (the Soviet position in

1955, the post-1989 strategic vacuum, the post-2014 hybrid escalation, the 2022 invasion) to specify how and why the doctrine took the form it did at each stage. Triangulation across primary documents, elite discourse and secondary analysis is used to validate inferences.

4.4 Limitations

Three principal limitations should be acknowledged. First, the single-case design constrains generalizability, as discussed above. Second, document analysis without elite interviews limits access to the informal reasoning underlying official positions. The thesis partially mitigates this by drawing extensively on published interviews with senior figures and on secondary scholarship that incorporates elite interviews, notably Robinson (2025) and Schwarz (2025), but the limitation remains. Third, the analysis of contemporary developments is conducted in real time, with the war in Ukraine continuing and Austrian policy continuing to evolve. The cut-off for empirical material is the early months of 2026; subsequent developments may revise some of the specific findings, though the underlying analytical claims about the structural conditions of Austrian neutrality are designed to be robust to such revisions.

A further methodological caution concerns the interpretation of official documents. As the Austrian case repeatedly illustrates, official discourse on neutrality often uses ambiguous language designed to accommodate divergent constituencies ("solidarity and neutrality," "militarily but not morally neutral," "engaged neutrality"). The analysis treats such language not as transparent statements of policy but as artefacts of the political compromises being managed at the moment of utterance. Where possible, official statements are read against contemporaneous external commentary and operational practice to reach a more reliable interpretation.

5. Conceptual Foundations of Neutrality

Before evaluating Austria's neutrality empirically, the doctrine itself requires careful specification. "Neutrality" is used in everyday Austrian political discourse to mean a great many things such as a guarantee of peace, a marker of identity, a refusal of bloc politics, an affirmation of multilateralism, a brake on military commitments. Most of which exceed or diverge from its content in international law. This conceptual chapter does three things. It sets out neutrality's content as a wartime legal status under classical international law. It distinguishes neutrality from neighboring concepts (non-alignment, non-belligerency, neutralization) with which it is frequently conflated. And it specifies the particular form of neutrality that Austria has adopted, including its constitutional basis, its three pillars and the conditions under which it can credibly function. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the four conditions (capability, political will, international respect, adaptability) that determine whether a given neutrality remains strategically viable.

5.1 Neutrality as a Wartime Legal Status

The legal architecture of modern neutrality is built principally on the Hague Conventions of 1907, supplemented by customary international law and a body of state practice that has accumulated since the nineteenth century (El-Zein, 2024; Verdross, 1958). The Fifth Hague Convention codifies the rights and duties of neutrals in land warfare; the Thirteenth, in naval warfare. Their core content is straightforward. A neutral state, in relation to a war it has chosen to remain outside, is obliged not to take sides: it must not provide troops, weapons or other direct military support to a belligerent; it must not allow its territory to be used for military transit, communications or bases; it must apply its rules impartially to all belligerents. In return, belligerents are obliged to respect the neutral's territorial inviolability, refraining from attack or occupation (Neuhold, 1994; Robinson, 2025).

Two features of this legal architecture matter for what follows. First, neutrality is, fundamentally, a wartime status. The classical law presupposes a recognizable state of war between identifiable belligerents and regulates the neutral's conduct in relation to that war. The peacetime obligations associated with permanent neutrality, for instance, the duty to maintain a defensive capability sufficient to prevent territorial violations are derivative of the wartime status, oriented toward making the wartime obligations credible. Second, the legal status of neutrality is not synonymous with political neutrality, with non-alignment or with isolationism. A neutral state may engage actively in international diplomacy, criticize belligerents, impose economic sanctions, contribute to UN- or OSCE-mandated stabilization missions and host major international institutions. What it may not do is take direct part in armed hostilities or place its territory at the disposal of a belligerent (Allison, 2022; Hilpold et al., 2023; Senn & Troy, 2025).

The 1907 Hague framework also embeds a tacit set of background assumptions about the kind of war it regulates. Wars are envisaged as relatively bounded interstate conflicts between identifiable parties, conducted predominantly through conventional military means. The legal obligations of neutrals are calibrated to that type of conflict (Agius & Devine, 2011; Gärtner & Janik, 2025). As later chapters argue, the assumptions are increasingly strained by the contemporary character of conflict,

where the war-peace distinction is deliberately blurred and many of the most consequential coercive activities take place below the threshold at which the laws of war apply.

5.2 Forms of Neutrality and Adjacent Concepts

Within the broader neutrality concept, several distinct forms can be specified, each with different legal and political implications.

Permanent neutrality is the most demanding form. A state declares its neutrality in advance and commits to maintaining it in any future conflict. Switzerland is the canonical example, with international recognition dating from the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Austria is the modern example, with neutrality declared in 1955 (Jorio, 2023; Mueller, 2024). Permanent neutrals typically codify the commitment in domestic law and, where possible, secure its acknowledgment by other states. The commitment is not formally guaranteed by external powers (Austria's neutrality is unilaterally declared, not treaty-guaranteed) but it acquires international weight through the practice of recognition and respect (Allison, 2022; Janik, 2022).

Ad hoc neutrality is the more common historical form. A state declares itself neutral in a specific conflict, with the declaration lasting only for the duration of that conflict. Spain's neutrality in the Second World War is a frequently cited example. A state may shift between belligerency and neutrality across different conflicts, as Sweden did in earlier centuries before adopting a longer-term neutral posture in the nineteenth and twentieth (Agius & Devine, 2011; Janik, 2024; Robinson, 2025).

Neutralization refers to the establishment of a neutrality status by international agreement, typically guaranteed by external powers. Belgium's pre-1914 neutralization is the textbook case, and its violation in 1914 famously demonstrated both the strength and the fragility of the institution. Neutralization may be applied to particular regions (the demilitarization of certain zones) as well as to whole states, and it may be limited to specific conflicts or relationships (Agius & Devine, 2011; Antonopoulos, 2022; Robinson, 2025).

Non-alignment is a concept of peacetime foreign-policy posture rather than a legal status. The Non-Aligned Movement, founded in 1961 by Yugoslavia, India, Egypt and others, refused membership of either Cold War bloc but did not commit its members to neutrality in particular wars. Sweden and Finland during the Cold War described themselves as militarily non-aligned rather than legally neutral, and their post-2022 NATO accession illustrates how non-alignment may be revised in response to changed circumstances (Agius & Devine, 2011; Bebler, 1992). As Köchler (2021) argues, the conceptual distinction between neutrality and non-alignment matters analytically, even though the categories shade into one another in political discourse.

Non-belligerency, finally, denotes a position in which a state remains outside active military operations but openly favors one side, perhaps providing non-combat assistance. Mussolini's Italy described itself as non-belligerent in 1939-1940 before entering the war. Non-belligerency is not a recognized legal status in the same sense as neutrality, but it captures a category of behavior that has been politically significant (Antonopoulos, 2022; Mercer, 2010).

These distinctions matter for the Austrian case because Austria's actual current posture is hard to characterize within the classical taxonomy. As Popławski (2020) argues, Austria's substantial commitments under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, including support for sanctions regimes, contributions to civilian and military missions and acceptance of Article 42(7) TEU obligations, have moved it toward an "alliance-free / post-neutral" position whose relationship with classical permanent neutrality is more declaratory than substantive. Whether one accepts this characterization or prefers Gärtner's (2015) framing of an "engaged neutrality" that integrates these commitments into the neutral status, the analytical point is the same: Austria's actual practice is at the boundary of what the classical concept can accommodate.

5.3 Austria's Neutrality: Legal Form and Political Content

Austria's permanent neutrality has a specific legal and political genealogy that shapes how it operates today. Its origins lie in the Cold War diplomacy of the early 1950s. After Stalin's death in 1953, negotiations over ending the four-power occupation of Austria intensified. The Soviet Union conditioned its withdrawal on assurances that Austria would not join Western military alliances and would not host foreign military bases (Graf-Steiner, 2024; Mueller, 2024). In April 1955 a delegation of Austrian envoys travelled to Moscow and agreed, in the Moscow Memorandum, that Austria would adopt neutrality "of the Swiss type" after the occupation ended. The May 1955 State Treaty, signed by the four occupying powers and Austria, restored Austrian sovereignty and prohibited unification with Germany; significantly, it contained no reference to neutrality (Mueller, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025).

Neutrality was instead enacted by Austria's own parliament. On 26 October 1955, one day after the last Allied soldier left, the Nationalrat passed the Federal Constitutional Law on Neutrality. Article I declares Austria's perpetual neutrality and obligates it to defend the status "with all means available"; Article II prohibits Austria from joining military alliances or permitting foreign military bases on its soil. Austria then notified all states with which it had diplomatic relations of its neutral status; with no objections, the status acquired *de facto* international recognition without becoming a formal treaty obligation (Mueller, 2024; Senn, 2023).

The political framing of this sequence has been important to Austria's self-understanding. By enacting neutrality through a domestic constitutional law rather than as a clause of the State Treaty, Austria established the doctrine that the commitment was "freely chosen" rather than imposed, and that it remained in principle revisable by the same constitutional procedure that adopted it. As Bußjäger (2024) explains, this means that the Neutrality Act does not enjoy any privileged position in Austria's normative hierarchy: it could be repealed or amended by a two-thirds majority in the Nationalrat, without the requirement of a constitutional referendum. The widespread popular belief that revising or abandoning neutrality would require a referendum is, as Fink and Corn (2025) note, one of the persistent myths that has shaped public discourse without legal foundation.

Three pillars are conventionally identified as the operational content of Austrian neutrality: no membership in military alliances, no hosting of foreign troops and no participation in foreign wars. Within these limits, Austria has from the outset engaged actively in international organizations, joining

the United Nations in 1955, hosting the headquarters of the IAEA, OPEC, the OSCE, the UN Office at Vienna and many others (Knoll & Röhrlich, 2024). It has framed its neutrality as militarily defined but politically active. The formula "militarily neutral, but not morally neutral" associated with successive foreign ministers captures the position. Verdross's (1958) early legal interpretation, in which neutrality obligations take precedence over collective-security obligations within UN frameworks, established the doctrinal baseline that has informed Austrian practice for decades.

Several features of this Austrian formulation are important for the empirical analysis. First, Austria's neutrality has from the outset been more permissive than Switzerland's: Austria joined the UN immediately in 1955, while Switzerland did not until 2002, and Austria has been considerably more comfortable with multilateral commitments that Switzerland regarded with caution (Hilpold et al., 2023). Second, the Article II prohibition on foreign military bases has been interpreted to permit transit of foreign forces under specified conditions, including the substantial NATO transit and overflight activity that takes place across Austrian territory in support of operations in the Western Balkans and elsewhere (Höller, 2025). Third, the doctrine has been progressively reinterpreted to accommodate EU obligations, including a 1998 amendment of Article 23j of the Federal Constitutional Law (B-VG) explicitly authorizing participation in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and, after 1999, in the EU's emerging defense cooperation (Cede, 2024; Gallouët, 2024).

The cumulative effect of these reinterpretations, as Janik (2024) argues, has been substantial. Austria's actual practice today involves contributions to EU- and NATO-led missions, support for EU sanctions regimes, participation in PESCO defense-industrial projects, joining the European Sky Shield Initiative and acceptance of Article 42(7) TEU obligations. Each step has been justified as compatible with neutrality through interpretive moves that, individually, are defensible. Their cumulative effect is harder to characterize within the classical framework. The empirical chapters analyze this evolution in detail (Janik, 2024; Nowotny, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025).

5.4 Conditions for Credible Neutrality

Whether a particular neutrality functions as a security strategy depends on conditions both internal to the state and external to it. Drawing on the literatures reviewed above and the conceptual material set out here, four conditions can be specified.

The first is military capability. Permanent neutrality entails an obligation to defend the neutral status, which requires defensive capability sufficient to make territorial violation prohibitively costly to a potential aggressor. The level of capability required varies with the strategic context. In a relatively benign environment with high background respect for the neutral status, modest capability may suffice; in a more contested environment, the capability bar rises. Austria's defense spending fell to historically low levels (around 0.6 per cent of GDP in the late 2010s, rising to 0.8 per cent of GDP by 2025) over a long period in which the perceived threat environment was benign (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2025; World Bank, 2024). The *Aufbauplan 2032+* program, with its commitment to reach 2 per cent of GDP by 2032, represents a substantive correction whose adequacy is examined in Chapter 6.

The second is political will and clarity. A neutrality whose content is contested, ambiguous or uncertainly defended in domestic political discourse generates a weaker deterrent signal. The condition has both a domestic and an external dimension. Domestically, society must be coherent enough about what neutrality requires that an aggressor can predict the response to a violation. Externally, the state's communications must convey both the determination to defend neutrality and a credible interpretation of what defense entails (Foster, 2024; Mueller, 2024). Eder and Salinger's (2024) finding that Austrian willingness to defend the country is markedly lower than in comparator neutrals (only around a third of Austrians personally willing to fight, against more than 80 per cent in Finland or Sweden) indicates a significant weakness on this dimension.

The third is international respect. Neutrality, as Wolford (2019) emphasizes, is a relational status: it functions only when other relevant states recognize and respect it. International respect depends on the strategic value of the neutral to powerful actors, on the strength of the broader international norms supporting territorial inviolability and on the credibility of the neutral's own defensive posture. Each of these factors is variable. Austria's strategic value to East and West during the Cold War was substantial; its strategic value in a post-bipolar Europe is more contested, and the contemporary willingness of revisionist powers to violate territorial norms (as Russia has done repeatedly since 2008) has corroded the broader normative environment within which respect for neutral status is generated (Agius & Devine, 2011; Ogley, 2022; Senn, 2023; Senn & Troy, 2025).

The fourth is adaptability to new threats. The classical doctrine of neutrality was developed for an era of declared interstate war between conventional militaries. Contemporary threats (cyber operations, disinformation, sabotage, economic coercion, infrastructure targeting, weaponized migration) operate largely below the war-peace threshold and exploit precisely the institutional and legal gaps left by the classical framework (Borch & Heier, 2025; NATO, 2026). A neutrality doctrine that does not develop operational responses to these challenges leaves the neutral state structurally exposed in the domains where contemporary aggression is most likely to occur (Kmentt, 2024; Nowotny, 2024).

These four conditions provide the analytical framework against which Chapter 6 evaluates Austrian neutrality across its successive phases. The thesis advanced is that the four conditions were jointly satisfied, partially, but jointly, during much of the Cold War, that they have been progressively eroded since the early 1990s, and that they are now individually under stress in ways that, taken together, render the inherited doctrine no longer sufficient as a security strategy. The empirical chapter that follows specifies the analysis.

6. Empirical Analysis

This chapter applies the conceptual and theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapters to the empirical record of Austrian neutrality. The chapter is organized into five sub-sections, moving from the broader international environment to the specific Austrian trajectory and ending with the contemporary stress test produced by the war in Ukraine. The first sub-section examines the contraction of the rules-based international order and its implications for neutral states. The second analyses Austria's neutrality during the Cold War (1955-1990), with particular attention to the conditions that made the doctrine viable in that period. The third examines the post-1990 transformation of Austrian neutrality through European integration. The fourth addresses Austria's contemporary security policy and the tensions inherent in trying to combine deeper European cooperation with a maintained neutral status. The fifth treats the war in Ukraine as a stress test, examining how Austria has and has not adapted to the most consequential security shock the European order has experienced since 1989. Throughout, the four-lens theoretical framework developed in the previous chapter is applied to evaluate developments.

6.1 The Contraction of the Rules-Based Order

Austrian neutrality has always operated within a wider international order whose character has shaped what the doctrine could deliver. The early Cold War order, for all its tensions, generated relatively predictable expectations about what powerful states would and would not do; the post-1989 liberal order, in its peak phase in the 1990s and early 2000s, generated comparatively strong norms of territorial inviolability and dispute resolution through institutional channels. Both orders provided what might be called a structural subsidy to neutrality: external conditions that did much of the work the neutral state would otherwise have had to do for itself. The contraction of those conditions (the partial erosion of the rules-based order) is therefore a foundational element of the contemporary problem.

Several developments since the early 1990s document this contraction. The use of force outside UN authorization by major powers (NATO's 1999 Kosovo intervention, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine) has progressively normalized the practice of revising international borders by force or threatening to do so (Allison, 2022; Ikenberry, 2018). China's militarization of features in the South China Sea has demonstrated a parallel pattern in the Asian sphere. The capacity of multilateral institutions to constrain such behavior has weakened in tandem: the UN Security Council is paralyzed when permanent members are themselves party to the dispute, the WTO appellate body has been hobbled by sustained US blocking of judges and the ICC has faced increasingly direct opposition from major powers including, since 2025, sanctions imposed by the United States (Nowotny, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025).

For neutral states the implications are direct and significant. The strategic value of neutrality has historically been a function not only of the neutral's own posture but of the broader willingness of powerful actors to respect the institution. As Wolford (2019) argues, neutrality regimes function as long as belligerents calculate that the costs of violating them (reputational, normative, strategic) exceed the benefits. Where powerful actors increasingly behave as though those costs are negligible, the protective

space within which neutrals operate contracts. Austria's foreign minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger has explicitly identified this dynamic as her central concern, framing the corrosion of "the entire rules-based international order" as the principal contemporary threat to small-state security (Riedmann & Honsig-Erlenburg, 2025).

The argument can be sharpened by distinguishing two distinct ways the contraction operates. First, it reduces the institutional protections that small states can invoke in their own defense: the threshold for great-power intervention to enforce territorial norms, for instance, has visibly risen, and small states cannot count on collective sanctions or institutional condemnation translating into operational support. Second, it shifts the structural balance between alliance members and non-aligned states. Where institutional substitutes for alliance protection weaken, the implicit cost of remaining outside alliance structures rises. This is the calculation that drove Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024. Austria's response to the same structural shift has been more cautious, but the underlying pressure is the same (Rubinson, 2025; Senn & Troy, 2025).

The contraction of the multilateral order does not affect each of the four conditions for credible neutrality independently. It affects them through a common mechanism. The institutionalist implication (that regional EU and NATO-adjacent frameworks become more attractive substitutes as the global order weakens) generates the very engagement that, from a constructivist standpoint, then strains Austria's self-understanding as a respected neutral whose status is secured by international norms. The same contraction raises the deterrence-credibility burden, since the implicit external support for the neutral's status has diminished, while simultaneously expanding the gray-zone space in which classical neutrality has no operational vocabulary (Hoffman, 2009; Wolford, 2019). Each lens, in other words, illuminates a different facet of the same structural shift: as multilateral rules thin, the neutral state is asked to do more for itself, in a wider range of domains, with a doctrinal toolkit designed for a different mix of conditions. For Austria, that means the deeper engagement with EU CSDP, the European Sky Shield Initiative, the hybrid-threat infrastructure and the Article 42(7) TEU framework is not separate from the credibility, identity and gray-zone strains but a partial response to them - one whose adequacy the empirical sections that follow assess (Janik, 2024; Nowotny, 2024; Senn & Troy, 2025).

The contraction is uneven and contested, not absolute. The European Union has, in some respects, become more capable as a security actor since 2014, particularly in coordinating sanctions and supporting Ukraine through the European Peace Facility. NATO's enlargement has reinforced collective defense in Europe's east and north. The international-law debate on cyber operations is producing slow but real progress in clarifying obligations and thresholds. None of these developments restores the comprehensive multilateral order that Austrian neutrality co-evolved with, but each represents a partial regional or functional substitute. The structural condition facing Austria is therefore not collapse but rearrangement: the protective architecture is being rebuilt around alliance and EU foundations to which Austria has only a partial relationship. The next sub-sections examine how the trajectory of Austrian doctrine has interacted with this shifting structural environment, beginning with the Cold War period in which the original doctrine took shape.

6.2 Austria 1955-1990: Conditions for Workable Neutrality

Austria's neutrality during the Cold War operated under conditions that, in retrospect, were exceptionally conducive to the doctrine's success. Bipolar restraint, mutual great-power interest in buffer states, geographic positioning, a relatively well-resourced Bundesheer and a robust multilateral framework jointly generated what the conceptual chapter identified as the four conditions for credible neutrality. The fact that Austrian neutrality "worked" during this period is therefore as much a statement about the period as about the doctrine. The structural conditions that made it work no longer obtain, and the implications of that absence are central to the analysis that follows.

6.2.1 Origins and Initial Consolidation, 1955-1970

The path to neutrality has been documented in detail in the historical literature (Graf-Steiner, 2024; Mueller, 2024). The basic sequence (the post-Stalin negotiations, the April 1955 Moscow Memorandum, the May 1955 State Treaty, the October 1955 Federal Constitutional Law on Neutrality) is well established. What matters for the present argument is the political framing that emerged from this sequence. By placing the neutrality declaration in domestic constitutional law rather than in the State Treaty, Austria preserved the doctrine that neutrality was "freely chosen" rather than imposed; by combining it with immediate UN membership, it asserted a neutrality that was active rather than isolationist; by embedding it in a self-conscious break with the Nazi past and the "first victim" narrative drawn from the 1943 Moscow Declaration, it gave the doctrine a moral charge that would persist for decades (Baciu, 2022; Knoll & Röhrlich, 2024, Kořan, 2006).

Senn's (2024) periodization labels the years 1955-1970 the consolidation phase. Two features stand out. First, the Bundesheer was built up to a scale that, by later standards, was substantial. Defense spending peaked at approximately 1.9 per cent of GDP in 1964, the highest level in Austria's post-1955 history (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2025). The doctrine of "comprehensive national defense" (umfassende Landesverteidigung) in terms of military, civil, economic and psychological mobilization across the whole of society gave the Bundesheer's deterrent function broad institutional support. From a deterrence perspective, the Austrian neutrality of this period satisfied the capability condition reasonably well. Second, the doctrine was institutionalized internationally through Vienna's emergence as a major host of international organizations. The IAEA was headquartered in Vienna from its founding in 1957; the UN Industrial Development Organization joined in 1967; what would become the UN Office at Vienna opened in 1980. The cumulative effect was to anchor Austria's neutrality in a network of multilateral functions that gave it both political content and economic value (Knoll & Röhrlich, 2024).

6.2.2 The Expansion Phase, 1970-1989

A substantial portion of Bruno Kreisky's chancellorship (1970-1983) corresponds to what Senn (2024) terms the expansion phase of Austrian neutrality. Kreisky pursued an active foreign policy that leveraged Austria's neutral status to play diplomatic roles disproportionate to its size: mediation between East and West, engagement with Middle Eastern actors including the PLO, advocacy of disarmament, leadership in development cooperation. The CSCE process, with Austria as a constructive

participant, exemplified the kind of diplomacy that neutral Austria was particularly well placed to support (Gallouët, 2024; Köchler, 2021). Graf-Steiner's (2024) study of Austria's role in the CSCE Helsinki Final Act documents this bridge-building function in detail.

From a constructivist perspective, this period is critical for understanding contemporary Austrian neutrality. The Kreisky-era successes embedded a self-image of Austria as an "honest broker," an active middle-power diplomat whose neutrality was the foundation of a constructive international role (Köchler, 2021). This self-image has had remarkable durability, surviving long after the structural conditions that supported it have changed. Phillips, Prinz and Straub's (2025) qualitative work shows that young Austrians today routinely associate neutrality with peace and bridge-building, often without specific reference to the Cold War context that gave those associations operational substance. The Kreisky-era narrative remains, in identity terms, a generative reservoir for Austrian self-understanding.

From an institutionalist perspective, the same period demonstrates how robust multilateralism amplified the diplomatic returns to neutrality. Austria's role in the CSCE, in UN peacekeeping (with Austrian troops deployed in Cyprus, the Golan and elsewhere), in arms-control discussions and in development cooperation depended on a wider international system that valued neutral mediation (Senn, 2023). As that system has changed, the structural returns to bridge diplomacy have correspondingly diminished, a development whose contemporary implications are addressed in 6.4.

6.2.3 Strategic Conditions and Their Limits

From a strategic perspective, the credibility of Cold War Austrian neutrality rested on conditions that operated largely outside Austrian control. Declassified Warsaw Pact planning documents indicate that, in the event of a NATO-Warsaw Pact war, the Pact intended to advance into eastern Austria up to the Enns river; NATO planning anticipated the possibility of having to re-establish defensive lines on Austrian territory if the Pact moved through the country (Nowotny, 2024; Mueller, 2024; Rauchensteiner, 2010). Austria would, in other words, almost certainly have been a battlefield in any such war, and its neutrality would have been violated by both sides. What protected Austria during the Cold War was therefore not the inherent credibility of its neutrality against a determined aggressor, but the broader bipolar restraint that prevented the war from happening at all.

This is an analytically important distinction. The success of Austrian neutrality during the Cold War is sometimes invoked as evidence that the doctrine itself is robust. The historical record is more complicated. The doctrine functioned because the structural environment functioned. Because both blocs had reasons to value buffer states, because bipolar nuclear deterrence kept the central conflict from going hot, because the multilateral order rewarded Austria's mediation role with diplomatic returns that compensated for any strategic costs. As subsequent sub-sections show, those structural conditions have changed in ways that reduce the implicit external subsidy that Cold War Austrian neutrality enjoyed. The doctrine has not become inherently weaker; the world around it has become less hospitable to it.

By 1990, Austrian neutrality could be assessed against the four conditions of credibility specified in Chapter 5 with a relatively positive verdict. Military capability was meaningful, though declining.

Political will and clarity were broadly maintained, even if the specific content of the doctrine was contested at the margins. International respect was robust, sustained both by superpower interest in buffer states and by the wider multilateral framework. Adaptability to new threats was not tested in the way it would later be, since the threat environment was still defined predominantly by the conventional bipolar conflict for which the doctrine had been designed. The post-1990 trajectory examined in the next sub-section can be read as the progressive erosion of each of these conditions, against a doctrinal continuity that has not kept pace with the changes.

6.3 Transformation after 1990: Integration and the Fading Doctrine

The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact removed the strategic context that had defined Austrian neutrality for thirty-five years. Austria found itself surrounded entirely by Western-oriented democracies, no longer functioning as a buffer between two hostile alliances. The structural conditions for the original doctrine had effectively dissolved. The political response was to maintain the doctrine while progressively integrating Austria into the institutional architecture of the post-1989 European order. The result, over the subsequent three decades, was a substantial transformation of Austrian neutrality whose cumulative effect has been to leave the doctrine increasingly hollow at its operational core, even as it has retained (and in some respects strengthened) its identity-political weight.

6.3.1 EU Accession and the Reinterpretation of Neutrality

Austria applied for membership in the European Communities in 1989, before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The application was initially controversial precisely on neutrality grounds: could a permanently neutral state credibly join an institution whose Common Foreign and Security Policy might require positions that constrained the neutral's freedom of action? The political answer reached by the Austrian government in 1989 (and confirmed in the negotiation process that followed) was that EU membership and neutrality were compatible, with neutrality remaining intact while Austria participated fully in the CFSP (Janik, 2024; Popławski, 2020).

The June 1994 referendum on EU accession produced a 66.6 per cent vote in favor. The campaign foregrounded economic prosperity rather than security, and government rhetoric explicitly emphasized that the EU was not a military alliance and that Austria's neutrality would not be compromised. Austria, Sweden and Finland acceded together on 1 January 1995. The compatibility claim was supported by the Maastricht Treaty's relatively soft CFSP architecture; subsequent treaty revisions, particularly the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy and the introduction of mutual-assistance provisions, would test the claim more sharply (Allison, 2022; Köchler, 2021; Robinson, 2025).

The 1998 amendment of Article 23j (now 23j of the Federal Constitutional Law, B-VG) was a substantial domestic constitutional adjustment, explicitly authorizing Austrian participation in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and, implicitly, in its emerging defense cooperation. Austria accepted the obligation to join EU sanctions regimes and the possibility of contributing to EU peacekeeping missions. As several legal scholars argue, this effectively superseded the 1955 Neutrality Act in domains where EU obligations apply (Popławski, 2020; Janik, 2024). The doctrinal

characterization that neutrality "remained intact" was politically and rhetorically maintained, but the substantive content of the doctrine was being rewritten by the integration process.

6.3.2 NATO Partnership for Peace and Practical Cooperation

Parallel to EU integration, Austria joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1995 and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. The PfP was framed as cooperation short of membership: it permitted joint training, interoperability development and contributions to NATO-led operations, without entailing collective-defense commitments. Austrian leaders argued, plausibly, that this was compatible with neutrality because the obligations were voluntary and any operational deployments would in practice be conducted under UN or OSCE mandate. In the late 1990s and 2000s Austria contributed to the UN-mandated Bosnian peacekeeping force (UNPROFOR and successor missions), to the NATO-led KFOR in Kosovo from 1999, and to the NATO-led ISAF in Afghanistan during the 2000s (Neuhold, 1994; Robinson, 2025; Senn, 2023).

From a critic's perspective, this involvement in NATO-led operations represented a steady normalization of cooperation with the alliance that, cumulatively, made the formal non-membership distinction less significant in practice. Austrian troops served under NATO command structures; Austrian officers participated in NATO planning processes; Austrian materiel and procurement aligned with NATO interoperability standards. From the government's perspective, this was "cooperation without alliance". Austria was leveraging the operational benefits of partnership while preserving its formal neutral status. The two characterizations are not mutually exclusive. Both are accurate descriptions of different aspects of the same evolving practice (Moyer & Kornegay, 2024; Schwarz, 2025).

The Lisbon Treaty's introduction of Article 42(7) TEU in 2009 (the EU's mutual-assistance clause) sharpened the question of how Austrian neutrality interacted with EU obligations. The clause, often described as analogous to NATO's Article 5, commits member states to provide aid and assistance "by all the means in their power" to a member state that is the victim of armed aggression. The treaty includes the so-called "Irish clause," which preserves "the specific character of the security and defense policy of certain Member States" (Cede, 2024; Gärtner & Janik, 2025). This language was designed to give neutral members interpretive discretion about the form of assistance they would provide. Austria has consistently emphasized this discretion, arguing that the clause permits assistance through humanitarian, diplomatic, logistical or other non-military means.

From an institutionalist perspective, the Article 42(7) compromise illustrates both the strength and the limits of accommodation strategies. The discretion clause allowed neutral members to sign on to the broader treaty without overtly violating their domestic doctrines; it also created persistent uncertainty about what they would actually do in the event of an aggression triggering the clause. France's invocation of the clause after the November 2015 Paris attacks provided the first significant test, and Austria's response (a relatively limited contribution to logistical support for French operations in the Sahel) fell within the discretion the clause permitted but was modest by alliance standards (Cramer & Franke, 2021). The clause has not yet been tested under conditions of acute strategic stress,

and the discretion it preserves has not been seriously contested by other member states. Whether that would survive a more demanding case remains an open question.

6.3.3 The "Stagnation" or "Ambivalence" Phase

Senn's (2024) periodization labels the period from roughly the mid-2000s onward the stagnation or ambivalence phase. The label captures a doctrinal pattern in which Austria's actual practice continued to evolve (joining new EU defense-industrial initiatives, extending PESCO participation, deepening interoperability cooperation, signing on to the European Sky Shield in 2023) while the doctrinal content of neutrality was held constant in political rhetoric. Defense spending continued to fall through most of this period, reaching the historic low of around 0.6 per cent of GDP in the late 2010s. The Bundesheer was, as Franz-Stefan Gady famously characterized it, "clinically dead" by the early 2020s. Eventually, a deliberately provocative formulation intended to capture decades of accumulated under-investment (Samec, 2025; Vindobona, 2025).

The stagnation phase combined weaknesses that reinforced rather than offset each other. The credibility condition was weakened by one of the lowest defense-spending levels in Europe and a Bundesheer whose readiness was, by widely shared expert assessment, severely degraded. Moyer and Kornegay (2024) describe this as a structural posture of free-riding on the surrounding NATO environment, even where it was not politically described in those terms. That posture was possible because the institutional condition gave Austria the political-strategic margin in which to defer the capability question: deepening engagement with European frameworks without formally committing to them, generating de facto post-neutral practice while leaving the de jure doctrine intact. And both the institutional accommodation and the capability deferral were sustainable because the constructivist condition (identity attachment to neutrality, increasingly disconnected from the operational content of the doctrine) supplied the political cover under which the gap between practice and doctrine could widen without acute domestic pressure. The 2018 revelation that an Austrian colonel had spied for Russia for decades was, in this light, an early signal that the hybrid-threats condition was also weakening, but the signal did not yet trigger a doctrinal reassessment because the constructivist cover absorbed it (Girardi, 2020; Murphy, 2018). By the late 2010s the four conditions were not independently weakened. They were mutually weakening, with each compounding the others.

The result by the late 2010s was a posture that combined the worst of several spheres: declining military capability, doctrinal ambiguity that sent weak signals to potential adversaries, identity attachment to a doctrine whose strategic content was thinning and an institutional position that was deep enough to attract obligations but shallow enough to preserve the formal claim to non-alignment. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought the contradictions of this posture into sharp relief, but the contradictions had been building for two decades.

6.4 Austria's Security Policy Today

Austria's contemporary security policy is best understood as an attempt to manage the cumulative tensions identified in the previous sub-section. Namely, to upgrade material capability and deepen European cooperation while preserving the formal neutrality doctrine and its identity-political weight.

The result is a posture characterized by genuine substantive change and persistent rhetorical continuity. This sub-section examines four dimensions of the contemporary policy: defense reform under the *Aufbauplan 2032+* program, deepening European cooperation, the relationship with Russia and the domestic political debate about neutrality.

6.4.1 Defense Reform: Aufbauplan 2032+

The single most consequential change in Austrian security policy since 1995 has been the post-2022 commitment to substantial defense reinvestment. The government announced in October 2022 the goal of raising defense spending to 2 per cent of GDP by 2032, with associated capability targets organized under the "*Aufbauplan 2032+*" program. The defense budget, which had reached approximately €2.7 billion in 2020, increased to €4.74 billion in 2025 and €5.18 billion in 2026. Thus, roughly a doubling over six years and the largest sustained increase in Austria's post-war history (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2025; Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2026b). Approximately €16 billion in additional acquisitions has been earmarked for the period to 2032, with major procurements in air defense, mechanized forces and helicopter capability.

Specific procurement priorities for 2026 illustrate the operational content of the reform. Twenty-five modernized Ulan infantry fighting vehicles and Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks, twenty-eight new Pandur Evolution wheeled armored vehicles, the first twelve AW169M multi-role helicopters, two further modernized S-70 Black Hawk helicopters and continued modernization of the 35-millimetre Skyguard short-range air defense system are among the planned deliveries. A major capability gap (the absence of medium and long-range ground-based air defense) is being addressed through Austria's participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative, with budget allocations of approximately €4 billion earmarked for the relevant systems. The Eurofighter successor program and long-range air defense acquisitions are being financed outside the regular defense budget, indicating both their scale and the government's determination to insulate them from ordinary budgetary cycles (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2026b).

From a deterrence perspective, the *Aufbauplan* represents a serious attempt to address the capability deficit that had hollowed Austrian neutrality since the 1990s. Defense Minister Klaudia Tanner has framed the program explicitly in these terms, arguing that meaningful military capability is necessary "so that neutrality, which is politically desired, can actually be protected" (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2025). The framing is significant: it explicitly links the credibility of neutrality to material capability, in a manner consistent with the deterrence-theoretic analysis developed in Chapter 3. Whether the program is sufficient to restore credible deterrence is a separate question. Even at full implementation, Austria's defense posture will remain modest by European standards, and the capability gaps in cyber defense, electronic warfare, modern command-and-control systems and counter-UAV capabilities are substantial.

The January 2026 report of the Military Service Commission, which proposed extending basic military service and introducing mandatory militia exercises, addresses a different but related dimension of the credibility condition: the personnel base for sustained operations and the broader societal commitment to defense (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, 2026a). All variants proposed by

the Commission involve extension of basic service; some include compulsory military service for women. The political reception of the report will be a significant test of whether the public commitment to defense has caught up with the elite recognition that more is needed. Eder and Salinger's (2024) finding that only around a third of Austrians would be personally willing to fight for their country (a willingness gap relative to comparator neutrals) suggests that significant cultural work remains.

6.4.2 Deepening European Cooperation

Austria's contemporary practice involves dense and increasing engagement with EU and, indirectly, NATO frameworks. Austria currently participates in eleven military and civilian missions under EU, NATO or UN mandates, with the largest contribution to the EUFOR Althea operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (more than 200 troops). It participates in ten PESCO projects and coordinates one. It contributes to EU Battlegroups and supports the development of an EU rapid reaction force, though it consistently opposes the establishment of a standing "EU army." Through the European Peace Facility, Austria has contributed funds to non-lethal assistance for Ukraine, an interpretation of its neutrality obligations that other neutral EU members have largely shared (Gärtner & Janik, 2025; Gasper, 2025).

Two recent developments warrant particular attention. The first is participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), launched by Germany in 2022 and joined by Austria and Switzerland in 2023. ESSI is a NATO-aligned air-defense cooperation framework, and Austrian participation has triggered significant domestic debate. Supporters argue that modern air-defense cooperation is operationally indispensable for any small state and that ESSI is a procurement and interoperability arrangement rather than an alliance commitment. Critics (including parts of the political opposition and several constitutional scholars) argue that participation in a NATO-led, mutual-defense-oriented architecture risks substantively eroding neutrality even if it does not formally violate it (Bußjäger, 2024; Vindobona, 2025). The argument is unresolved; what is significant is that an arrangement of this character is now compatible, in the government's assessment, with Austria's neutral status.

The second is the substantial use of Austrian territory and airspace for NATO-related military movements. In 2024, more than 3,000 NATO-related military transports and over 5,000 overflights crossed Austrian territory (Höller, 2025). This activity is legal under Austrian neutrality law as currently interpreted (transit can be authorized on a case-by-case basis under conditions specified by domestic regulations) but it sits uneasily alongside the rhetorical insistence on neutrality. The April 2026 episode in which Austria refused US overflights related to operations against Iran, on neutrality grounds, demonstrates that the discretion is exercised. It also demonstrates how the application of neutrality varies with the nature of the requesting party and the operational context (Reuters, 2026).

Austrian engagement with EU hybrid-threat infrastructure is more limited than is sometimes assumed. The 2024 Austrian Security Strategy explicitly identifies hybrid threats as a primary concern and emphasizes cooperation with European partners on cyber and resilience issues (Bundeskanzleramt, 2024). Austria has been a notable contributor to the international-law debate on cyber operations, including a position paper that endorsed the view that disinformation campaigns may, under specified conditions, breach the principle of non-intervention (Roguski, 2024). Operationally, however, Austria's integration with EU rapid-response cyber units and with the Hybrid Fusion Cell has lagged the rhetoric,

reflecting both the constitutional sensitivities involved and the constraints of a small intelligence service.

6.4.3 Russia: From Pragmatic Engagement to Distancing

Austria's relationship with Russia has historically been one of the most distinctive features of its post-Cold War foreign policy. Austria was the first Western European country to sign a long-term natural gas supply agreement with the Soviet Union, in 1968; until recently more than 80 per cent of Austrian gas was imported from Russia. Vienna emerged in the post-1990 period as a significant hub for Russian capital and business activity, with Russian investment in Austrian banks and real estate at substantial levels. Cordial political relations with Putin's Russia were maintained by successive Austrian presidents, chancellors and foreign ministers, and Austria positioned itself in EU debates on Russia policy as one of the more accommodating member states (Girardi, 2020; The Economist, 2022).

This pattern has changed substantially since 2022, though the legacy continues to shape contemporary perceptions and capabilities. Austria has supported all EU sanctions packages against Russia following the full-scale invasion, condemned the invasion in unambiguous terms and significantly reduced its dependence on Russian gas (though not eliminated it). The April 2022 visit by then-Chancellor Karl Nehammer to Moscow, the only Western leader to meet Putin in the early weeks of the war, was widely criticized but represented Austria's traditional self-image as a bridge-builder rather than a substantive divergence from Western policy on the war (Janik, 2022; The Economist, 2023). Russian intimidation of Austria has continued and intensified. This included a notable threat from Dmitry Medvedev in August 2025 that, if Austria moved toward NATO, Russian forces could include Austrian targets in their operational plans, with Vienna potentially targeted (Kurier, 2025b).

From a hybrid-threats perspective, the legacy of close Austrian-Russian engagement created a substrate of vulnerability that Russian operations have actively exploited. The 2018 case of the Austrian colonel revealed to have spied for Russia for decades was an early indicator of the depth of Russian penetration of Austrian institutions (Lansing Institute, 2025). Subsequent reporting has identified a range of Russian intelligence activities, influence operations targeting Austrian political and media discourse and economic activities that have continued to operate through Austrian channels even after the invasion. Pflügl's (2025) reporting on the export of Swarovski Optik rifle scopes to Russian markets via UAE intermediaries through 2022 illustrates how civilian commercial activity can become entangled in conflict supply chains in ways that complicate neutrality's claim to operational distance.

From a constructivist perspective, the Russian relationship has been a source of both strategic complication and identity protection. Strategic complication: Austria's economic and institutional ties with Russia made it more vulnerable to Russian leverage than less embedded EU members. Identity protection: the long-standing self-image of Austria as a bridge between East and West, which Russia has consistently encouraged, provided a narrative resource for justifying neutrality after the bipolar context that originally generated it had dissolved. The 2022 invasion has corroded both functions. The strategic complication is being addressed through reduced gas dependence and tightened compliance with sanctions; the identity protection has weakened as the bridge metaphor has become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of Russian behavior.

6.4.4 The Domestic Debate: A Taboo Slowly Cracking

For most of the post-1990 period, neutrality was politically untouchable in Austrian discourse. Mainstream parties treated the doctrine as sacrosanct; only the small NEOS party openly raised the question of whether the doctrine remained adequate. The orthodox position was articulated with particular force by Chancellor Nehammer's March 2022 declaration, immediately after the Russian invasion, that the political debate about Austria's status was "over". A statement that effectively closed off public discussion at the moment when, in retrospect, it would have been most warranted (Gasper, 2025).

This taboo has begun to crack. Foreign Minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger's July 2025 interview with *Die Welt*, in which she explicitly called for a public debate on neutrality and stated that "neutrality alone does not protect us," was a significant departure from the orthodox position (Höller, 2025). Former Chief of Defence Robert Brieger, an Austrian general who served as Chairman of the EU Military Committee, has called publicly for Austria to consider its neutral status under international law and to contribute to a "reinforced European defense architecture" (Kurier, 2025a). Former Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik (2024) has argued bluntly that Austria has "forgotten security policy" and treats neutrality as a "blockade" against contemporary security thinking. Former Defence Ministers Werner Fasslabend and Herbert Scheibner have both expressed a preference for NATO membership, with Scheibner arguing that Austria is already "alliance-free, not neutral" given the cumulative effect of constitutional changes and EU commitments (ORF.at, 2023). The September 2025 cross-party agreement of all parliamentary defense spokespersons on the need for an "honest discussion" of neutrality represents a meaningful breaking of the taboo at the political level (Tschiderer, 2025).

Public opinion has not moved in tandem. Survey work continues to show approximately three-quarters of Austrians supporting neutrality, with NATO-membership support in the low double digits (Phillips, Prinz & Straub, 2025; Senn, Duell & Eder, 2024). Robinson's (2025) mixed-methods study, including survey experiments designed to test whether opinion can be shifted by framing effects, finds remarkably durable attachment to neutrality even in the face of strong EU endorsements or explicit security and economic incentive framings. The implication is that the elite-public gap is widening rather than narrowing: the orthodoxy that elites can no longer fully sustain remains the lived political reality at the level of public attachment.

From a constructivist perspective, this gap is the central political fact of contemporary Austrian neutrality politics. It constrains what reform can plausibly be attempted, and it makes any visible departure from the inherited doctrine politically risky. The rise of the FPÖ (polling at around 37 per cent in May 2026 and routinely framing EU defense integration as a betrayal of neutrality) adds a further constraint, since reformist initiatives can be discursively coded as elite betrayal of a core national value (Kurier, 2026). The political-feasibility analysis advanced in the synthesis chapter takes these constraints seriously and argues that they shape, rather than preclude, the kind of doctrinal evolution that is achievable.

6.5 The Ukraine War as a Stress Test

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 functions in this analysis as a stress test for Austrian neutrality: a sharp external shock that exposed the doctrine to demands and conditions for which it was not designed and against which the existing institutional and material capacities could be measured. The verdict that emerges from the empirical record is mixed and instructive. The doctrine has held (politically, constitutionally and in identity terms) but the conditions under which it has held have shifted, and the strain on the underlying assumptions has been substantial. The contradictions that the previous sub-section identified at the level of contemporary policy are sharpened by the Ukraine moment rather than resolved by it.

Several features of the post-2022 record warrant analytical attention. The first is the durability of the public attachment to neutrality. Surveys conducted in March 2022, immediately after the invasion, indicated that Austrian support for neutrality had increased rather than decreased; subsequent survey series have shown the elevated support persisting. The pattern parallels Austrian responses to earlier conflicts (the Kosovo war in 1999, for instance, also produced a strengthening rather than a weakening of neutrality sentiment) and reinforces the constructivist reading developed above. Where conflict produces uncertainty, identity attachment provides reassurance, even when the strategic logic of that attachment is unclear (Rubinson, 2025).

The second feature is the manifest gap between the protective claim of neutrality and the actual security consequences of the war for Austria. Austria has experienced significant economic disruption from the war, has hosted more than 90,000 Ukrainian refugees, and has been the target of cyberattacks and influence operations attributed to Russia and Russia-aligned actors (Bundesministerium für europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten, 2023). None of these consequences was prevented or mitigated by Austria's neutral status. The implication is that classical neutrality offers no insulation from the principal contemporary forms of strategic exposure, even where it continues to perform its narrower function of keeping the country out of direct military involvement. This is not a refutation of neutrality but a clarification of its scope: the doctrine prevents the country from being drawn into a war as a belligerent; it does not prevent the country from being affected by the war.

The third feature is the asymmetry between Austrian responses and those of other neutral and non-aligned European states. Finland and Sweden, both with longer histories of military non-alignment than constitutional neutrality, concluded within months of the invasion that their security required NATO membership. Both have now acceded. Switzerland, the other large permanently neutral state in Europe, has supported EU sanctions against Russia and has continued an internal debate about the meaning of neutrality, but has retained the doctrine. Austria has retained the doctrine and has reaffirmed it more vocally than Switzerland. The asymmetry has multiple drivers (geographic vulnerability, historical experience, identity attachment, the specific role of EU membership) but it underscores that there is no single "neutral" response to the war. Austrian responses sit at one end of a spectrum that runs through Switzerland to Finland and Sweden at the other.

The features noted above can be read separately, but the most analytically striking lesson of the post-2022 record is that they are not separate. Identity durability and gray-zone vulnerability are not

independent dimensions of the doctrine's performance but causally linked aspects of the same configuration. The post-invasion strengthening of public attachment, taken in isolation, would look like vindication of the doctrine. The same identity attachment is precisely what gives Russian influence operations their vector. Pro-Russian narratives in Austrian discourse have consistently coded EU defense integration as betrayal of neutrality, weaponizing the identity attachment as the entry point for hybrid penetration (Lansing Institute, 2025; Krasina, 2025). The result is a doctrine whose identity-political function is reinforced by the war while its operational-strategic function is corroded by it through that same mechanism. Classical neutrality offers no doctrinal vocabulary for managing the paradox, because the gray zone is, by design, a space in which neutrality's legal categories have no purchase (Hoffman, 2009; Borch & Heier, 2025); and because, in the Austrian case, the doctrine itself has become part of the contested terrain.

The credibility deficit is similarly entangled with the doctrine's institutional position and its identity protection rather than being a separate weakness running alongside them. The shock of the invasion catalyzed *Aufbauplan 2032+* funding, the most substantial correction since the Cold War; implementation runs to the early 2030s, air defense is incomplete in the interim, and force readiness lags behind comparator European states. Franz-Stefan Gady's characterization of the pre-reform Bundesheer as having been "clinically dead" was provocative but not inaccurate (Samec, 2025). The reason the deficit had accumulated to that depth, however, is institutional as much as material (the implicit assumption that the surrounding NATO security architecture would do the structural work) and constructivist as much as institutional: the identity treatment of neutrality as self-sufficient, which obscured the question of how it would be defended. Closing the deficit therefore requires both material reinvestment and a shift in how the doctrine is publicly framed; running the institutionalist response without the constructivist shift leaves the underlying configuration intact. The April 2026 refusal of US overflight requests related to operations against Iran (announced by Vice Chancellor Babler on neutrality grounds) juxtaposed with the routine NATO-related transit elsewhere, illustrates the live cost of leaving that configuration intact: the rhetorical commitment is reaffirmed where it is symbolically legible, while the operational alignment continues where it is institutionally embedded (Höller, 2025; Wälde & Knapp, 2026). Both patterns coexist because the four-condition framework is not being applied as a whole.

Read across all four lenses at once, the war's stress test does not reveal four parallel weaknesses but one structurally connected weakness whose dimensions reinforce each other. The institutional embedding tightens because identity prevents formal commitment; the credibility deficit persists because identity discourages defense reinvestment; the hybrid vulnerability deepens because identity provides the discursive vector; the doctrinal silence on the gray zone holds because identity has no vocabulary for it. The asymmetry with Finland and Sweden (both of which concluded within months that their security required NATO accession) is intelligible in this frame: their non-alignment, unlike Austrian neutrality, was less embedded in identity and therefore more responsive to the changed strategic calculus. The Austrian configuration is more durable in its identity dimension but, by the same token, less adaptable across the others. The European Sky Shield decision, the deepening of PESCO participation, the European Peace Facility contributions and the intensified use of Austrian territory for

NATO-related transit have together produced a tighter operational integration with European security cooperation than would have been politically conceivable five years earlier. The framing of that integration as compatible with neutrality is becoming difficult to maintain in international discussion, where Austria is increasingly perceived by partners as combining the political claim of neutrality with the practice of selective alignment (Schwarz, 2025). The doctrine continues to deliver its narrowest function (keeping the country out of direct military involvement as a belligerent) but the conditions under which it continues to deliver even that function have shifted in ways the inherited doctrinal vocabulary does not capture.

The cumulative verdict of the stress test is that Austrian neutrality has held but has been substantially exposed. The doctrine continues to deliver its narrower function (keeping the country out of direct military involvement in the war) but it has not delivered protection from the war's broader consequences, has not prevented hybrid penetration, has not generated international respect at the level the inherited self-image presumed, and has produced political and operational positions that are increasingly difficult to reconcile internally. The synthesis chapter that follows draws the implications of this finding for the central research question.

7. Synthesis and Discussion

The empirical analysis developed in Chapter 6 supports a clear cumulative claim: under contemporary conditions, the inherited form of Austrian neutrality is no longer sufficient as a security strategy. This chapter draws the synthesis of the four-lens framework, engages directly with the principal counter-arguments and considers what an evolved Austrian neutrality might look like. The argument is not that neutrality is impossible or undesirable for Austria; it is that the version of the doctrine currently in operation is structurally misaligned with the security environment and that resolving that misalignment requires a substantive reform of the doctrine's content rather than a defense of its symbolic form.

7.1 The Four Conditions Reassessed

The conceptual chapter specified four conditions under which neutrality functions as a credible security strategy: military capability, political will and clarity, international respect, and adaptability to new threats. The empirical chapter traced how each condition has fared in the Austrian case. The summary verdict is unflattering.

Military capability collapsed across the post-1990 period and is now, under the Aufbauplan 2032+, being substantially rebuilt. The trajectory is positive, but the gap is large, and full implementation will not occur before the early 2030s. The reform addresses some of the most serious capability gaps (air defense, mechanized forces, helicopter capacity) but leaves others substantially untouched, particularly in cyber defense, electronic warfare, modern command-and-control and counter-UAV capability. Even at full implementation, Austria's defense posture will be modest by European standards. The reform is necessary; whether it is sufficient is, as Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (2025) and outside analysts including Gady acknowledge, unresolved.

Political will and clarity have weakened across the post-1990 period and remain weak. The Austrian electorate is broadly attached to neutrality but generally lacks a clear understanding of its content; Austrian elites increasingly recognize the inadequacy of the inherited doctrine but have only just begun to discuss alternatives publicly. The willingness-to-defend gap relative to Finland is striking and has direct implications for the credibility of any deterrent posture. The September 2025 cross-party agreement on the need for an "honest discussion" is a significant procedural step but does not, by itself, generate the political will and clarity required (Tschiderer, 2025). The current configuration produces ambiguous signals to potential adversaries, and ambiguity in deterrent signaling tends to weaken rather than strengthen deterrence.

International respect for Austrian neutrality is more contested than the inherited self-image presumes. Among European partners, perceptions of Austria as a security free-rider have hardened, with the AIES expert survey reporting majority views that the doctrine is strategically outdated (Schwarz, 2025; Moyer & Kornegay, 2024). Among potentially hostile actors, the relevant signaling is more difficult to read but the Medvedev threats indicate at minimum that Russia does not regard Austrian neutrality as a constraint on its rhetorical or operational practice (Kurier, 2025b). The structural underpinning of Cold War respect for Austrian neutrality (bipolar restraint, mutual interest in buffer

states, robust multilateral norms) has eroded, and the doctrine has not generated the kinds of new institutional supports that might compensate.

Adaptability to new threats is the dimension on which the doctrine is most clearly inadequate. Hybrid operations bypass the legal categories on which neutrality rests; the gray zone is, by design, a space in which neutrality has no operational guidance to offer. Austria has begun to develop substantive capacities for hybrid resilience (the 2024 Security Strategy is explicit about this) but the development is partial, and the doctrinal framework within which it occurs continues to be the legacy doctrine designed for a different type of conflict. The April 2026 refusal of US overflight requests related to operations against Iran, announced by Vice Chancellor Babler on neutrality grounds, juxtaposed with the routine NATO-related transit in support of European operations, illustrates how case-by-case discretion is beginning to substitute for coherent doctrine in this domain (Wälde & Knapp, 2026; Höller, 2025).

The cumulative verdict is that all four conditions are individually under stress and that the cumulative weight of the pressures is not adequately captured by the inherited doctrinal vocabulary. Austrian neutrality, as currently configured, is not failing catastrophically; it is being progressively hollowed by the divergence between its content and the conditions it must operate in.

7.2 Engaging the Counter-Arguments

Three principal counter-arguments to the thesis advanced here warrant direct engagement. Each is associated with a substantial body of scholarship and political opinion in Austria, and each has analytical purchase that any rigorous treatment must take seriously.

7.2.1 "Engaged Neutrality" Is Already the Reform

The first counter-argument, associated principally with Heinz Gärtner's "engaged neutrality" framework and developed across decades of Austrian scholarship, holds that the substantive evolution of Austrian neutrality since 1995 already constitutes the kind of reform the thesis is calling for (Gärtner, 2015; Kmentt, 2024). On this view, the cumulative integration of Austria into EU CSDP, the participation in PESCO and Sky Shield, the contribution to international missions, the support for sanctions and the substantial defense reinvestment under Aufbauplan 2032+ together represent a reformed doctrine that combines continuity in legal status with substantive adaptation. The doctrinal frame of "engaged neutrality" simply describes what Austria already does.

There is significant force to this argument. The substantive practice of Austrian neutrality has indeed evolved substantially. The thesis's claim that the doctrine "must" evolve is, in this respect, partly redundant: it has been evolving for thirty years. But the engaged-neutrality framing has two limitations that the thesis pushes against. First, it tends to underplay the gap between operational practice and political-rhetorical framing, leaving the latter to function as identity reassurance while the former does the actual security work. The result is a doctrine whose strategic content is increasingly post-neutral but whose self-presentation is increasingly identity-political. Ultimately, a configuration that produces ambiguous signals and constrains further necessary adaptation. Second, it tends to treat the integration

trajectory as a stable equilibrium rather than as a process whose contradictions are sharpening. The Sky Shield debate, the Article 42(7) discretion question, the gray-zone gap and the willingness-to-defend deficit are all consequences of the engaged-neutrality framework operating under conditions for which it was not fully designed. The argument is not that engaged neutrality is wrong, but that it is incomplete; the further evolution it is gestured toward needs to be made explicit and sustained.

7.2.2 Public Attachment Makes Reform Politically Impossible

The second counter-argument is the political-feasibility argument: even if reform is analytically warranted, the depth of public attachment to neutrality makes substantive doctrinal change politically impossible and attempts to force the issue would generate backlash that worsens rather than improves Austria's strategic position. The argument is supported by the survey work cited above. Three-quarters durable support for neutrality, Robinson's (2025) finding that opinion does not shift even under strong framing effects, the political potency of FPÖ messaging on the issue.

The argument is empirically strong, but its normative implication is weaker than it appears. The claim that public attachment makes reform impossible is properly understood as a claim about the form of reform that is achievable, not about whether reform is needed or possible at all. Three observations sharpen the point. First, the elite-public gap that Robinson (2025) documents is widening, and persistent gaps between elite recognition and public attachment are not stable indefinitely; they generate pressure for either elite alignment with the public position (which would entail intellectual surrender) or for sustained elite communication aimed at moving the public position. Second, the September 2025 cross-party agreement on the need for an "honest discussion" indicates that elite political actors have begun to choose the second path and the Foreign Minister's July 2025 interview stating "neutrality alone does not protect us" is an instance of that path being pursued. Third, the form of reform that is feasible under the political constraint is precisely the form the thesis is advocating: a reformed neutrality rather than a discarded one. The argument is not for NATO accession but for a substantively credible neutrality that retains its identity-political resonance while addressing the security demands of the contemporary environment.

The political-feasibility argument also tends to underestimate the costs of doctrinal stasis. Maintaining a doctrine that is increasingly disconnected from operational practice generates its own political costs: it leaves the elite-public gap to widen, it gives space to populist framings that exploit the disconnect, it constrains the public conversation that could otherwise build democratic legitimacy for the actual policy choices being made. The choice is not between costly reform and costless continuity; it is between explicit reform and an implicit drift whose costs are accumulating.

7.2.3 The Hybrid-Threat Critique Is Overstated

The third counter-argument holds that the hybrid-threat critique of neutrality is overstated. On this view, Austrian capacities for cyber resilience, intelligence cooperation and counter-disinformation are being developed under existing legal and political frameworks, and the argument that classical neutrality leaves the country defenseless in the gray zone misrepresents the operational reality. Austria participates in EU information-sharing and cyber-cooperation frameworks; the Federal Office for the Protection of

the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BVT, now its successor agency DSN) maintains active intelligence engagement with European partners; the 2024 Security Strategy explicitly addresses hybrid threats.

This counter-argument has surface appeal but it concedes more than it defends. The fact that operational capacities for hybrid resilience are being developed under existing frameworks does not establish that the doctrine accommodates them; it establishes the opposite. Operational practice has moved past the doctrine without explicit recognition. The very phenomenon the counter-argument cites as showing the adequacy of neutrality in the gray zone is itself evidence that doctrine and practice have decoupled. Once that is seen, three further difficulties for the position become visible, and they compound rather than offset.

First, the analytical scale of the counter-argument is mismatched to the problem. It asks whether Austria can do hybrid resilience at all; the relevant question is whether the doctrine specifies under what conditions, to what end, with what justification and within what limits it does so. Operational activity without doctrinal articulation is not adequacy. It is silence dressed as adequacy, and silence becomes acutely costly the moment fast-moving incidents force attribution, retaliation and cooperation decisions that cannot be improvised in real time. The 2024 Security Strategy's identification of hybrid threats as a primary concern, juxtaposed with its silence on what the neutrality framework permits in response, is the clearest official acknowledgment that the gap has been recognized at the highest level and that the recognition has not been operationalized.

Second, the counter-argument treats the gray zone as a domain external to the doctrine when the post-2022 evidence shows the opposite. Russian influence operations have actively colonized the neutrality narrative itself, coding EU defense integration as a betrayal of neutrality and amplifying the identity attachment to depress public support for the very operational responses the counter-argument cites as adequate (Lansing Institute, 2025; Krasina, 2025). A doctrine that the adversary actively weaponizes against its own polity cannot be defended on the grounds that the operational work continues. The operational work is, in part, what the doctrine's silence is being used to undermine. Classical neutrality, by remaining doctrinally mute, supplies the rhetorical terrain on which hybrid penetration operates.

Third, the empirical record is more demanding than the counter-argument acknowledges. The Pflügl (2025) reporting on civilian commercial activity reaching Russian end-users through intermediaries, the documented limits of Austria's intelligence integration with EU rapid-response cyber frameworks and the lag relative to comparator services in the Hybrid Fusion Cell are not residual operational shortfalls. They are systemic constraints on what the current framework can deliver, and they are constraints that flow directly from the doctrinal silence the counter-argument defends. The strongest version of the counter-argument (that hybrid resilience can be developed without doctrinal change) collapses when the doctrine itself becomes part of the terrain the adversary is contesting and when the operational work is being constrained by the very framework that is supposed to permit it. Hybrid resilience without a doctrine is, in the end, hybrid resilience without a stopping rule: capable of

doing more on any given day, but unable to say in advance what it will not do, why and on whose authority. That is not a marginal weakness. It is the central one.

7.3 What an Evolved Doctrine Might Look Like

This thesis advances no specific blueprint for an evolved Austrian neutrality (that work belongs to structured public deliberation) but the analytical framework supports a sketch of what such a doctrine would need to satisfy. Five elements stand out.

First, an explicit articulation of the relationship between neutrality and EU obligations under Article 42(7) TEU and the broader CSDP framework. The current discretion-based interpretation has worked tolerably well in conditions of moderate stress; under conditions of acute stress it is likely to generate either ad hoc decisions that strain the doctrine's coherence or political crises that strain Austria's relationships with European partners. A more explicit doctrine would specify, in advance, what forms of assistance Austria would and would not provide under what circumstances, providing both greater predictability for partners and greater political legitimacy domestically.

Second, a substantive doctrine for the gray zone. The Austrian Security Strategy 2024 identifies hybrid threats as a primary concern; what is needed is a doctrinal framework that integrates the response to those threats into Austria's neutrality posture rather than leaving it as an implicit operational practice. This would include explicit positions on what cyber operations Austria treats as breaches of its sovereignty, what forms of intelligence and operational cooperation with European partners are doctrinally compatible with neutrality, and how attribution and response decisions are made. Austria's progressive contributions to the international-law debate on cyber operations provide a useful starting point.

Third, sustained material reinvestment in defense at levels that produce credible deterrence. The Aufbauplan 2032+ is necessary but should be understood as a floor rather than a ceiling. Closing the gaps in cyber defense, electronic warfare, modern command-and-control and counter-UAV capability will require continued investment beyond the 2 per cent of GDP target and beyond the current acquisition planning horizon. The political work involved in sustaining this commitment beyond the immediate post-2022 shock will be substantial and is unlikely to succeed without a more explicit public conversation about what defense requires.

Fourth, a reformed political discourse about neutrality that addresses the elite-public gap. This is the most politically delicate element. It does not require, and would probably be counter-productive to attempt, a frontal challenge to the inherited identity attachment. It requires instead a sustained explanation of what neutrality is and is not, what it can and cannot deliver, and how the current evolution of practice relates to the inherited doctrine. The cross-party September 2025 agreement on the need for an "honest discussion" is a procedural commitment to this work; the substantive content remains to be developed.

Fifth, a more disciplined practice of "engagement without entrapment" in European institutional structures. The contemporary EU defense-integration trajectory (toward joint procurement, military

mobility, deeper PESCO cooperation, possibly an EU rapid reaction force) generates both opportunities and risks for a neutral state. Opportunities include the operational benefits of pooled capability and the resilience gains from collective hybrid defense; risks include the gradual erosion of distinct neutral status through accumulated obligations. A reformed doctrine would specify which forms of engagement are sought, which are constrained, and on what principles the distinction is drawn.

These five elements do not amount to a different doctrine; they amount to the same doctrine, made operational. They preserve the constitutional core of Austrian neutrality (non-membership in military alliances, non-hosting of foreign bases, non-participation in foreign wars) while developing the additional content that the contemporary security environment requires. They are compatible with the engaged-neutrality framework but extend it in the direction of greater explicitness and operational coherence. They take public attachment to neutrality seriously as a political constraint while seeking to strengthen the substantive content of the doctrine that the public is attached to.

7.4 The Cost of Inaction

A final analytical observation concerns the cost of not undertaking the kind of doctrinal evolution sketched above. The default trajectory (continued substantive integration with European security cooperation, continued rhetorical emphasis on neutrality as identity, continued under-investment in the doctrinal articulation of the relationship between the two) is not a stable equilibrium. It generates accumulating contradictions: between operational practice and rhetorical positioning, between elite recognition and public attachment, between Austrian self-presentation and European partners' perceptions, between defense reform and broader strategic framing. Each contradiction is individually manageable; their cumulative weight constrains the country's strategic options and weakens the political legitimacy of the policies actually being pursued.

The risk is not catastrophic failure but strategic drift: a slow erosion of the strategic value of the neutrality doctrine combined with a slow erosion of the political legitimacy of the contemporary policy that operates beneath it. The end-state of such a drift is an Austria whose security policy is dominated by ad hoc adaptation to external pressure, whose claim to a distinct neutral identity has thinned to the point of implausibility, and whose democratic ownership of the security choices being made on its behalf has been progressively diluted. Avoiding that end-state requires an explicit doctrinal effort. The thesis's normative claim (that Austria's conception of neutrality must evolve) is, in the end, a claim about democratic ownership as much as about strategic effectiveness. A doctrine that is not articulated cannot be deliberated; a posture that drifts cannot be legitimated by its citizens.

8. Conclusion

This thesis began from a research question deliberately framed in normative terms: why must Austria's conception of neutrality evolve in order to remain a viable security strategy? The argument advanced across the empirical and synthetic chapters supports a clear answer. The version of neutrality currently in operation (a constitutionally entrenched, identity-laden doctrine combined with a thirty-year practice of substantive but un-articulated reinterpretation) is structurally misaligned with the security environment Austria now faces. The misalignment cannot be resolved by reaffirming the doctrine more loudly, nor by abandoning it for alliance membership for which there is no domestic political consensus. It can be resolved only by an explicit reform of the doctrine's content, of the kind sketched in the synthesis chapter and developed here in summary form.

8.1 Summary of the Argument

The thesis advanced three connected hypotheses. The first held that the protective conditions sustaining Austrian neutrality during the Cold War (bipolar restraint, mutual interest in buffer states, a relatively well-resourced Bundesheer, robust multilateral norms) have eroded substantially since 1990 and especially since 2014. The empirical analysis in Chapter 6 supports this hypothesis. The structural conditions that gave Cold War Austrian neutrality its credibility have changed in ways that reduce the implicit external subsidy the doctrine has historically enjoyed; the doctrine itself has not adapted in pace with the change.

The second hypothesis held that the kinds of threats Austria now most plausibly faces (hybrid operations, cyber intrusion, disinformation, economic coercion, infrastructure sabotage) bypass the legal categories on which neutrality law rests, leaving classical neutrality without operational traction in the gray zone. The empirical record again supports the hypothesis. Russian hybrid operations have continued and, in some respects, intensified across the post-2022 period; classical neutrality has provided neither protection nor doctrinal guidance for the response. Austrian capacities for hybrid resilience have begun to develop, but they sit uneasily alongside the formal doctrine and lack a coherent doctrinal framework.

The third hypothesis held that the structural integration of Austria into European security architectures is generating a de facto post-neutral practice whose dissonance with the de jure doctrine and the de jure self-understanding is increasingly difficult to manage politically. Again, the empirical record supports the hypothesis. The accumulated commitments under EU CSDP, PESCO, the European Sky Shield, Article 42(7) TEU and the broader European Peace Facility framework constitute a substantial reorientation of Austrian security practice that has not been matched by an equivalent reform of the doctrinal frame. The dissonance is generating accumulating political costs even where it is not visibly disruptive.

These three findings, taken together, ground the central claim that Austria's conception of neutrality must evolve. The evolution required is substantive rather than formal: it does not require constitutional repeal of the Neutrality Act or political abandonment of the inherited identity attachment. It requires an

explicit articulation of the doctrine's contemporary content (its relationship to EU obligations, its operational stance toward hybrid threats, its material capability requirements, its discursive framing in public deliberation) at a level of specificity that the inherited doctrine has not been pushed to provide.

8.2 Implications for Austrian Policy

The analytical findings have several implications for Austrian policy that are worth specifying. Detailed policy design will require sustained public deliberation; the implications below identify the analytical priorities such deliberation would have to address.

First, the Aufbauplan 2032+ program should be understood as a necessary but not sufficient response to the credibility deficit. Sustaining the trajectory beyond the immediate post-2022 shock will require continued political work, and closing the remaining capability gaps (particularly in cyber defense, electronic warfare, modern command-and-control and counter-UAV capability) will require additional investment beyond the current acquisition planning horizon. The political case for sustained reinvestment will be strengthened by an explicit doctrinal articulation that links capability to credibility in the way Defense Minister Tanner has begun to do.

Second, the public deliberation that the September 2025 cross-party agreement opened up should be developed substantively rather than allowed to stall. The form of deliberation matters: a binary debate between "keep neutrality" and "join NATO" reproduces the orthodoxy by treating neutrality as a fixed object. A productive deliberation would examine the doctrine's contemporary content, the practical trade-offs involved in different forms of European cooperation, the operational requirements of hybrid resilience, and the relationship between defense reinvestment and the credibility of Austria's chosen status. Foreign Minister Meisl-Reisinger's framing of the question as one about how Austria can be secure, rather than about whether neutrality should be retained, points toward this more productive register.

Third, the Article 42(7) TEU discretion should be developed into an articulated doctrine rather than left as case-by-case decision-making. Specifying in advance what forms of assistance Austria would and would not provide under what circumstances would provide both greater predictability for European partners and greater political legitimacy domestically. The exercise need not generate binding commitments that would compromise Austria's neutral status; it would generate the kind of doctrinal clarity that makes the status credible.

Fourth, the relationship between neutrality and the gray zone needs explicit doctrinal treatment. The 2024 Security Strategy identifies hybrid threats as a primary concern; what is needed is a successor document or doctrinal supplement that integrates Austria's response to those threats into its neutrality framework, specifying which forms of intelligence and operational cooperation with European partners are doctrinally compatible and how attribution and response decisions are made. Austria's progressive contributions to the international-law debate on cyber operations provide a strong starting point for this work.

Fifth, the broader European integration trajectory needs to be approached with a more disciplined understanding of which forms of engagement are sought and which are constrained. The current pattern (engaging with most initiatives on a case-by-case basis with neutrality cited as a soft constraint) produces accumulating commitments without an organizing principle. A more disciplined approach would specify the principles on which Austria participates in or abstains from particular initiatives, providing both internal coherence and external clarity.

8.3 Limitations and Further Research

The thesis's findings are subject to limitations that warrant explicit acknowledgement. The single-case design constrains generalizability; the document-analysis methodology limits access to the informal reasoning underlying official positions; the contemporary cut-off (early 2026) means that subsequent developments may revise specific findings. The analytical framework is designed to be robust to these limitations, but the limitations are real.

Several productive lines of further research are suggested. A comparative study of Austrian, Swiss, Irish and post-2023 Finnish responses to the contemporary security environment would provide leverage on the question of how different configurations of neutrality and non-alignment interact with broadly similar external pressures. A more focused study of Austrian hybrid resilience capacities, drawing on elite interviews and access to classified planning documents, would test the doctrinal-gap argument more specifically. A study of public-opinion dynamics on neutrality, designed to identify the conditions under which the elite-public gap might be narrowed, would inform the political-feasibility analysis. A legal-comparative study of how different EU member states have interpreted Article 42(7) obligations would clarify the discretion available within the existing framework. Each of these lines builds on the foundations the present thesis has laid.

8.4 Closing Reflection

Austrian neutrality is a fortunate inheritance: a doctrine adopted in 1955 under specific conditions of Cold War diplomacy, embedded subsequently in national identity and political culture, sustained through the post-1989 reorientation of European order without major disruption. It has served Austria well over its seventy years. The question that the contemporary moment poses is not whether the doctrine should be discarded but whether the form in which it has functioned for seventy years is sufficient to function as a viable security strategy for the next seventy. The answer this thesis defends is that it is not. The conditions under which the doctrine was first articulated have changed; the conditions under which it has worked have changed; the conditions under which it must now operate are changing further. A doctrine that does not change in response will not stop being a doctrine, but it will progressively stop being a viable security strategy. The choice facing Austria is therefore not between neutrality and alliance, but between a credible neutrality and a residual one. The case for choosing the former is substantial - analytically, strategically and democratically.

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Declaration of AI Assistance

I hereby declare that this master's thesis was independently written and researched by me. All content, arguments, analysis and conclusions are my own. In the course of completing this thesis, I made use of AI-assisted tools for the following purposes: language, grammar, as well as coherence and style improvement; assistance with chapter structuring and outline development. In all cases, the final decisions regarding content, structure, and academic argumentation were made solely by me. The AI was used strictly as a supportive tool and did not generate original research content or conclusions.