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AIES-Alpbach Security Track Report

Moment of Truth for Austria

by Christoph Schwarz
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Introduction

The European Forum Alpbach 2024 (EFA24) took place under the theme *Moment of Truth* – a guiding principle that could not be more pertinent for Austria and its foreign, security, and defence policies. The ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, now in its third year, has fundamentally reshaped the European security landscape. Consequentially, the questions Austria must confront regarding the future orientation of its foreign and security policy within the broader framework of European and international relations must be equally fundamental. In light of these developments, persisting with the status quo no longer seems a feasible course of action.

This year, the European Forum Alpbach once again served as a venue where these very questions were explored – critically and with an open mind. To what extent will Austria embrace European solidarity when unity is essential in the face of existential challenges? What role and relevance does neutrality hold in a largely united Europe, which now, more than ever before in its young history, is compelled to defend itself against revisionist forces? How should one respond to the growing rivalry between global and regional powers, which threatens the international rules-based order and en-

dangers multilateralism, indispensable for managing diverse crises such as climate change?

The aim of EFA24 was certainly not to provide definitive answers to these and many other questions, especially given their complexity and multifaceted nature. However, the Forum offered important stimuli for thought, which will be highlighted and brought to public attention through this three-part AIES Comment series. To kick things off, *Moment of Truth for Austria* will touch upon the themes most

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relevant for Austria’s security and foreign policy interests. Subsequently, the chapters *Moment of Truth for Europe* as well as *Moment of Truth for the World* will deal with more European as well as global security issues respectively.

Let Others Wage War for You, Thou, Happy Austria, Stay Neutral?

With the war in Ukraine dominating many discussions at the Forum Alpbach – both on and off the stage – Austria’s role in the EU’s efforts to safeguard Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty became a frequent point of contention. Austria – so

the argument goes – has not sufficiently supported Ukraine in its existential struggle for survival. By adhering to an outdated concept of neutrality, as Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, former Member of the European Parliament, argued, Austria had effectively shifted the burden of supporting Ukraine onto its fellow EU members, avoiding direct involvement in the more challenging aspects of assistance. When examining this argument more closely, it becomes evident that there is merit to the claim, as Austria’s legal adjustments have

indeed allowed it to participate in EU security frameworks while still maintaining its constitutional stance of neutrality.

Since its accession to the European Union in 1995 and through subsequent treaty reforms, Austria has laid the legal groundwork to reconcile its constitutional neutrality with the principle of European solidarity. While this process necessitated a certain level of legal and conceptual adaptability, it allowed Austria to fully engage in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The introduction of Article 23(j) into the Austrian Constitution provided the legal basis for this alignment, effectively allowing for the suspension of Austrian neutrality within the framework of CFSP.¹ As a result, Austria may participate in the Petersberg tasks, contribute militarily to collective defence

under Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union, as well as be actively involved in initiatives such as the European Peace Facility, the European Defence Agency, the European Defence Fund, and PESCO, among others. In other words, any constitutional constraints on Austria's participation in the Common Foreign and Security Policy have been removed. Increased support for Ukraine – including military support – is a political decision, not a legal one. Therefore, one must look beyond the legal realities if Austria's behaviour in the context of the support for Ukraine is to be understood.

A significant challenge arises in the form of public opinion. The issue being that the Austrian public has been largely uninformed about the legal and political evolution of the country's neutrality. Over time, neutrality has been somewhat depoliticised, possibly due to shifts in the international system and Austria's changing role within it. At the same time, Austria has become increasingly integrated into the EU's foreign, security, and defence structures. This has created a paradox: Austria has officially committed to the principle of solidarity within the EU and the Common Foreign and Security Policy, yet a significant portion of the population continues to adhere to a concept of neutrality which is shaped by Austria's role as a buffer state during the Cold War. A time when the geopolitical realities in which Austria was embedded allowed a policy of active neutrality – positioned between, rather than

within, the two power blocs – to flourish. In political science terms, Austria now adheres to a form of "differential" (as in selective) neutrality, while much of the public holds onto an "integral" (as in holistic) understanding of neutrality.

This discrepancy significantly constrains Austria's political manoeuvrability in both international and, more specifically, European relations. Initiatives aligned with Austria's constitutional framework and its commitments under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy are often perceived by the public as violations of neutrality. The war in Ukraine offers a clear il-

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lustration of this, whether through discussions on demining, arms shipments, or the training of Ukrainian troops. Although such actions would have been constitutionally permissible, they were politically unfeasible due to potential public backlash. The most pressing challenge, however, would arise in the event of a high-intensity mutual defence scenario, for which Austrian society presumably remains widely unprepared. Data from the University of Innsbruck highlights a stark asymmetry in the Austrian public's understanding of European solidarity: while 70% of the population expects support from other EU member states in the event of

a military attack on Austria, only 14% believe Austria should reciprocate in such circumstances.² This attitude, far from reflecting genuine solidarity, conveys an impression of self-interest. In contrast, a survey conducted last year by the AIES among Austrian experts in the military, diplomacy, and academia revealed that more than 80% supported Austrian military assistance in a mutual defence scenario.³ This clear contrast highlights the divergence between the more flexible, pragmatic interpretation of neutrality held by professionals in these fields and the more rigid, traditional understanding embraced by the public.

In summary, neutrality has played a pivotal role in shaping Austrian identity and state-building after the Second World War, and it remains deeply valued by the public in matters of foreign and security policy. However, the core issue we now face is that the Austrian public has not been adequately engaged in the process by which neutrality – particularly in the context of European integration – has diminished in relevance and become significantly constrained within the EU framework over the past two decades. To address this challenge, Austria must engage in a potentially uncomfortable but essential debate on how to reconcile its neutrality with being rooted in a united Europe. These remarks were not intended to advocate for a change in Austria's approach to Ukraine. Rather, they sought to raise the point that going forward, Austria,

as a society, needs more internal clarity on what it is willing to commit when EU interests – which are inherently Austrian interests – are at stake. As elaborated, this is not a question of what Austria can do legally, but what Austria wants to commit to politically. In neutral Ireland, as emphasised by former Foreign Minister and EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, this critical debate is already underway. It is due time for Austria to embark on a similar path. With the climate in international relations continuing to deteriorate, particularly in the arc of instability surrounding Europe, moments of truth may be just around the corner.

Better Safe Than Sorry: Time to Get Serious About European Strategic Sovereignty

Another prominent theme at EFA24 was how Europe could safeguard its interests and security in an increasingly unstable world – one potential path forward being the pursuit of strategic autonomy. The concept of European strategic autonomy, which emerged in discussions on security and defence at the 1998 French-British summit in Saint-Malo, has grown to cover many areas of EU policy. It can be understood in three main ways: narrowly, as the EU's ability to act militarily on its own; broadly, as reducing reliance on external powers in key strategic areas; and more generally, as Europe's ability to set its own goals and achieve them. Carl Bildt, Co-Chair of the European

Council on Foreign Relations, emphasised the urgency of strengthening European self-reliance, stating that especially the Russian invasion of Ukraine has exposed Europe's vulnerabilities. However, this should not imply an isolationist or protectionist approach. As Nikolaus Marschik, Secretary General at the Austrian Federal Ministry for International and European Affairs, noted, pursuing greater autonomy must not contradict the EU's foundational principle of multilateralism and cooperation, which remains central to Europe's identity. Rather than aiming for complete independence, strategic autonomy seeks an optimal level of self-reliance

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that varies depending on the policy area. Importantly, it is not about rejecting international cooperation, but about strengthening the EU's ability to work with others by developing its own capabilities. To achieve true European strategic autonomy, a shared understanding of objectives and decisive political choices regarding priorities and resources are crucial. Arancha González Laya, Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs, emphasised that economic strength must be the foremost priority, serving as the foundation upon which the EU can assert itself more effectively in global affairs.

From an Austrian perspective, the growing emphasis on European strategic autonomy, particularly in securing supply chains and reducing external dependencies, is especially relevant. As a country heavily reliant on international trade and integrated energy networks, Austria faces the challenge of balancing economic efficiency with the need to reduce vulnerabilities in critical sectors, especially energy. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian weaponisation of energy supply chains have highlighted the risks of overdependence on external actors. Austria must now navigate the trade-offs between reshoring or near-shoring production and supply while maintaining competitiveness, especially considering its smaller fiscal capacity compared to larger EU member states. As the EU rethinks its industrial strategy to enhance resilience and autonomy, Austria will need to assess its role in this transformation and how best to align its national policies with broader EU objectives. For Austria, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has underscored that decoupling, particularly in the energy sector, is no longer merely a strategic option but a political necessity, as observed by Secretary General Marschik.

In the realm of security and defence, strategic autonomy has become increasingly crucial for Europe in light of external threats, such as Russia's aggression, an increasingly assertive China, and deepening uncertainties in the transatlantic relationship, particularly regarding the

U.S. commitment as Europe's security guarantor. As Carl Bildt pointed out, Europe is now more dependent on the United States for security than it has been in the last 30 years. With the U.S. repeatedly signalling a potential shift in its focus away from European security, starting with Obama's "Pivot to Asia" in 2011, it has become clear that the EU must enhance its ability to act independently in defence and security matters.

However, achieving strategic autonomy is not solely the responsibility of the EU as an institution; it requires concerted action from all member states. For a non-aligned country like Austria, whose primary security and defence framework is the EU rather than NATO, the stakes are particularly high. Austria has a vested interest in the development of a robust European defence capability, as its security is closely tied to the EU's ability to protect its members and respond effectively to external threats. For Austria, strategic autonomy represents a path to ensuring its own security while contributing to Europe's collective resilience. Member states, including Austria, must commit to building the necessary capacities, both militarily and economically, to support a more autonomous Europe. This means increasing defence spending where it matters, enhancing cooperation on joint defence projects and procurement, and strengthening critical infrastructure. Without active and concerted participation from all EU members, including

non-NATO states like Austria, Europe's strategic autonomy will remain an aspiration, leaving the continent vulnerable in a world of growing geopolitical uncertainty. With a second Trump presidency looming, Austria, together with its European partners, may soon face moments of truth for European strategic autonomy.

The Three Seas Initiative: An empty promise?

A potential piece to the puzzle of advancing European strategic autonomy are different regional cooperation frameworks, which have the potential to strengthen the European Union as a whole.

For Austria, strategic autonomy represents a path to ensuring its own security while contributing to Europe's collective resilience.

One such framework, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), was intensely discussed at the European Forum Alpbach 2024, in a panel focusing on its role in enhancing regional security and economic cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. Since its inception in 2015, the 3SI – founded by Poland and Croatia – has aimed to bolster infrastructure, energy security, and digital connectivity among its 12 EU member states, including Austria, located between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. While the initiative has spurred significant discussion on regional growth, its full potential remains

challenged by various geopolitical, economic, and institutional issues.

One key theme that emerged during the panel was the geopolitical complexity surrounding the initiative. Matej Hittner, President of the Centre for Public Policy and Economic Analysis, pointed out that the 3SI finds itself embedded in the complexities of great power competition. The Three Seas Initiative had always been caught between larger geopolitical forces, particularly the influence of Russia and the strategic interests of the United States, Hittner observed. For many members, particularly Poland, the 3SI represented an opportunity to counterbalance Russian influence in the region, while leveraging U.S. support.

However, the panel also noted that the initiative faces internal challenges, particularly regarding its institutional framework. Laurynas Vaiciunas, CEO of the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe, highlighted the absence of a formalised structure as a key weakness. Without a permanent secretariat or dedicated institution, the initiative risks losing continuity and momentum across changing political administrations. Vaiciunas emphasised that without a clear institutional structure, it is difficult to maintain momentum across changing political landscapes, which affects the ability of member states to pursue long-term projects.

Additionally, the panel touched on the issue of foreign interference and its growing threat to the region. Lesia Ogryzko, Director at the Sahaidachnyi Security Center, warned about the risks of reliance on external powers like China, whose investments in regional infrastructure could come with geopolitical strings attached. The Three Seas region was increasingly susceptible to Chinese investments, especially in infrastructure projects, Ogryzko noted. To avoid the geopolitical risks that come with these investments, she highlighted the need to prioritise European-led initiatives.

On the security front, panelists were cautious about the 3SI's capacity to act as a genuine security pillar for the region. Ogryzko, reflecting on Ukraine's perspective, emphasised that the only viable security option for Ukraine was NATO, rather than the 3SI. While the initiative could enhance energy security and infrastructure resilience, it was not equipped to handle military threats, leaving countries like Ukraine to look to other formats for security.

For Austria, involvement in the Three Seas Initiative reflects both its geostrategic positioning in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and its self-perception as a bridge-builder within the EU. By enhancing energy, transportation, and communication networks in CEE, the 3SI offers Austria an influential platform to further its geopolitical and economic interests in the region. With its established multilateral

presence in Vienna, Austria can act as a critical multiplier within the 3SI, fostering cooperation with third-party countries and international organisations that can amplify the Initiative's impact.

While Austria has long capitalised on East-West linkages, the 3SI presents an opportunity for Vienna to pivot toward supporting North-South infrastructure and energy connectivity – a shift

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urgently needed in light of ongoing European security concerns following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Strategically, Austria could reinforce its bridge-building role by facilitating greater alignment between 3SI countries and the broader EU agenda, notably supporting Ukraine and Moldova in their European integration paths. By doing so, Austria would not only promote regional stability but also strengthen EU cohesion in its eastern flank.

Austria's engagement with the 3SI Investment Fund (3SIIF) is essential, given the Initiative's goal of mobilising substantial investment to bridge infrastructure gaps between CEE and Western Europe. Active Austrian investment and political support within the 3SIIF would position Vienna as a leading advocate for

regional development, while enabling Austria to benefit from emerging CEE markets and reduce its heavy dependence on Russian energy imports.

Austria's approach to the 3SI reflects a pragmatic balance, recognising both the Initiative's regional benefits and its limitations. While Austria supports the 3SI's infrastructure and energy goals, it prioritises alignment with EU policies, particularly given concerns over funding constraints and inconsistent political commitment among members. Nevertheless, the 3SI's potential to strengthen ties with Ukraine and Moldova underscores its growing strategic relevance, positioning it as a critical framework for European integration and stability – objectives that should resonate with Austria's interest in supporting regional resilience amidst heightened geopolitical tensions.

Conclusion

Austria stands at a pivotal moment, where its role in both regional and global security is undergoing significant transformation. This report synthesises insights from the European Forum Alpbach 2024, highlighting Austria's unique position amid the pressing need for collective European responses to existential challenges in a more fragmented global order. Each section delves into Austria's security challenges as well as opportunities – whether balancing its policy of neutrality with a commitment to European solidarity or mitigating dependencies

within contested global networks of trade, energy, and security.

Austria's dedication to neutrality, a fundamental aspect of its national identity, must evolve to address the collective security demands of a Europe facing both internal and external pressures. Frameworks such as the Three Seas Initiative and renewed approaches to strategic sovereignty are not mere policy shifts

but essential steps for Austria to strengthen its position within a resilient, unified Europe. This moment calls for Austria to align its national interests with broader European objectives. By re-evaluating its role within the region, Austria can affirm its relevance and contribution in an increasingly uncertain world, demonstrating that neutrality today requires an active, strategic commitment to a secure and cohesive Europe.

About the Author

Christoph Schwarz, MSc., is a Research Fellow at the Austria Institute for European and Security Policy and his research focuses on various issues of Austrian and European foreign and security policy. In his current research focus, he examines the changing role and significance of neutrality in the 21st century, particularly in relation to Austria in the context of European integration and contemporary dynamics in international relations.

¹ Jandl, G. (2022) „Neutralität Wozu?“, AIES-Kommentar, Nr. 3/2022.

² Senn, M. (2024) „Eine Debatte über Österreichs Neutralität: Warum sie notwendig ist und wie sie geführt werden sollte“, Austrian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 53.

³ Schwarz, C. and Urosevic, A. (2023) „Österreichs Neutralität – Rolle und Optionen in einer sich verändernden Weltordnung“, AIES-Studie.

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Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau
Tel. +43 (1) 3583080
office@aies.at | www.aies.at
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