Commentary # 10

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Austria’s Rethink: Neutrality No Longer Guarantees Security

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Austria's Rethink: Neutrality No Longer Guarantees Security

In a rare departure from Austria's long-standing strategic posture, Foreign Minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger has signaled a turning point in the country's approach to neutrality. In a recent interview with *Die Welt* (July 26, 2025), she stated bluntly: "Neutrality alone does not protect us." These words, coming from a sitting minister, reflect a broader shift in how Austria perceives its role in an increasingly volatile international landscape.

While Meinl-Reisinger is not advocating for NATO accession "with flying flags," she is calling for an open national debate—something that would have been politically unthinkable just a few years ago. Her message is clear: Austria must not cling to outdated assumptions in a world where Russian aggression, global instability, and hybrid threats make neutrality less of a shield and more of a myth.

The minister emphasised Austria's growing role within the EU's collective security efforts. Since joining the Union in 1995, the country's neutrality has become more flexible in practice, as evidenced by its participation in EU missions and contributions to European defense. Meinl-Reisinger's remarks reinforce a truth that many in Austria are reluctant to admit: the geopolitical environment has changed, and so must Austria's security doctrine.

The debate about Austria's neutrality is one that politicians have long approached with caution, often avoiding serious public discussion. This restraint largely stems from the fact that a substantial majority of Austrians remain deeply attached to their country's neutral status. Neutrality is not merely a policy preference; it has become a core part of Austria's national identity and self-image since World War II. Given this widespread public support, political leaders are understandably reluctant to broach the subject, especially during sensitive periods such as election campaigns.

Even the brutal war in Ukraine, which has starkly exposed Russia's aggressive ambitions and won Austria's sympathy for the Ukrainian people, has not substantially shifted public attitudes toward neutrality. While many Austrians view Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as a victim, few are willing to question or challenge Austria's longstanding neutral status. The complex realities of geopolitics have not yet overcome the historical and emotional attachment to neutrality that shapes political discourse and voter preferences.

This cautious stance means that, despite growing security concerns in Europe, Austria's political class remains hesitant to debate the future of the country's security policy openly. For most politicians, touching this "sacred cow" risks alienating voters and destabilising a deeply rooted consensus. The war in Ukraine has not changed this dynamic; instead, it has reinforced the political imperative to maintain neutrality as a unifying national principle.

The debate was prompted in part by Emil Brix, Director of the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna, who recently argued in an interview with ORF that Austria should consider joining a Western-oriented defence alliance—stating, *"We will not be able to avoid thinking about NATO membership in Austria."* His call adds intellectual weight to the evolving discussion and highlights that neutrality, once sacred, is no longer a strategic certainty.

In sharp contrast to the recent openness expressed by Foreign Minister Meinl-Reisinger, **former Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg (ÖVP)** has consistently reaffirmed Austria's commitment to neutrality as a constitutional cornerstone. Schallenberg has made clear that Austria has no aspiration to join NATO. While recognising the importance of increased cooperation with the Alliance in response to emerging security challenges, he insists that such cooperation does not imply a shift toward membership.

This divergence within Austria's political establishment reflects a broader reassessment of the country's strategic identity. Austria may not be ready to abandon neutrality today, but the mere fact that its highest diplomat is encouraging a national conversation about it is both significant and overdue. If the country wants to remain safe, sovereign, and serious about its European commitments, then neutrality can no longer be treated as untouchable dogma.

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