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Research Article

Can Neutrality Restore Ukraine?

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Abstract: This article seeks to understand neutrality through the experiences of postwar Finland and Austria, endeavoring to use these states' experiences as a prism through which to analyze neutrality's utility as a postwar option for Ukraine. A historical assessment of the characteristics of imposed neutrality in postwar Finland and Austria helps analyze Russia's vision of neutrality. The experiences of select postconflict states may also provide models for a neutral postwar Ukraine. A credibly armed Ukraine capable of deterring Russian aggression could survive as a neutral state. However, the necessity of Ukraine's continued Western alignment to counter Russian aggression complicates the promise of Ukrainian neutrality as a means to achieve a ceasefire. Security guarantees are required for Ukraine to bridge the gap between a ceasefire and a sustainable, non-imposed neutrality. Ukraine's inability to immediately realize a legitimately neutral status at the conclusion of hostilities ensures that a neutral Ukraine remains aspirational – with an important distinction. Whereas neutrality might offer a means to peaceful statehood for Ukraine, neutrality is a mechanism for the Russian Federation's dismemberment of the Ukrainian nation-state.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Finland, Austria, World War II, Finlandisation, great powers.

Introduction

A military-driven end to Russia's war in Ukraine appears increasingly unachievable in the near term. The conflict continues to pose significant challenges to Russia, Ukraine, and their respective allies and partners. The Russian military's failure to deliver a rapid victory has resulted in a protracted war in which neither

belligerent appears capable of delivering a decisive blow.¹ Including annexed Crimea, as of August 2025, Russia had seized 120,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory, including approximately 4,000 square kilometers in 2025 – land Ukraine’s armed forces are unlikely to recover by force of arms.² The addition of Democratic People’s Republic of Korea forces to the conflict, as well as former President Biden’s approval of Ukrainian use of Army Tactical Missile System strikes against targets inside Russia, are further indications of a widening and deepening of the war. How Russia and Ukraine reconcile the hardened realities of the conflict and their respective war aims is of great and growing concern to their respective citizens and the international community.

President Putin’s offers for peace negotiations challenged any illusion that Russian policy would accept a truly sovereign Ukraine.³ In terms of territory, Putin’s demands include the acceptance of Russia’s annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts, to include non-Russian-occupied ground, including two regional capitals, as well as recognition of Russia’s sovereignty over Crimea. Additionally, in 2024, he insisted on pro-Russian changes to the Ukrainian constitution, limitations on the size of Ukraine’s armed forces and the origin, quality, and type of its arms, and Ukraine’s *permanent non-alignment and neutrality* – including Ukraine’s inability to enter bilateral agreements without Russian permission and a Russian role as a guarantor of Ukrainian sovereignty. These demands represented a significant Russian departure from the 2022 peace talks, during which Ukraine communicated a willingness to address supposed Russian concerns, if not comply with many of Russia’s demands. Putin’s attitude towards Ukraine is not unlike past Soviet demands of smaller neighboring states.⁴

Although a result of military defeats that Ukraine has not experienced, Finland and Austria offer examples from which to consider neutrality as a mechanism to secure post-war Ukrainian independence. The Soviets defeated both nations during the Second World War, the Finns as co-belligerents of Nazi Germany

¹ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, May 2023), 165-167.

² CNN Staff, Natalie Croker, Byron Manley, Tim Lister, and the CNN Data and Graphics Team, “The Turning Points in Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *CNN*, September 30, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/09/europe/russia-territory-control-ukraine-shift-dg/>; Center for Preventive Action, “War in Ukraine,” *Council on Foreign Relations – Global Conflict Tracker*, May 12, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>; and John Haltiwanger, “How Much of Ukraine Does Russia Control?” *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/18/ukraine-war-battlefield-russia-donbas/>.

³ Ivan Nechepurenko and Paul Sonne, “Putin Makes Cease-Fire Offer with Sweeping Demands on Ukraine’s Territory,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/06/14/world/europe/russia-ukraine-putin-cease-fire.html.

⁴ Anton Troianovski and Michael Swartz, “The Sticking Points That Kept Russia and Ukraine Apart,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/06/15/world/europe/ukraine-russia-peace-negotiations.html>.

and the Austrians as a part of the Greater German Reich. Stalin's death precipitated a shift in Soviet foreign policy and the departure of foreign soldiers from Finland and Austria. Each ultimately emerged as an independent, neutral, non-aligned state by 1955.⁵ Finland had once been part of the Russian Empire. Similarly, Austria bordered the Soviet sphere of influence, and the Soviets, as part of the broader Allied occupation, occupied the eastern portion of the country. Despite their belligerent roles in the war and their geographic importance to the Soviet Union, both nations ultimately achieved complete sovereignty.

Finland's and Austria's paths to neutrality suggest a lasting peace is achievable in Russia's war against Ukraine. Finland's care to recognize and satisfy the Soviet Union's so-called "legitimate" defensive concerns (also known as Finland's "Reassurance Policy") and Austria's demonstrated patience during a ten-year occupation provide models for addressing traditional Russian insecurity.⁶ However, Stalin's expressed respect for the Finns' defense of their homeland and the Soviet acceptance of a non-communist democratically elected government in November 1945 certainly differ from Putin's 2024 demands for peace negotiations.⁷ For instance, the current Russian position fails to acknowledge the Soviet-Finnish security treaty, which ensured that Finland would defend itself against any invasion through its territory toward the Soviet Union. Instead, Putin appears to prefer the perception that he can hold the Ukrainian nation and identity at risk of annihilation.⁸

Aimed at destroying the Ukrainian state at its outset, Russia's war against Ukraine has instead reinforced Ukrainian unity and identity.⁹ It is hard to imagine Ukrainians accepting a shared Russian identity after the conclusion of hostilities. Neutrality might offer Ukraine the space to reset its relationship with its larger, historically insecure, and irredentist neighbor while also justifying a capable modern defense force. More importantly, a wisely conceived Russian-imposed neutrality might have provided the buffer zone from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that Russia once largely enjoyed – and lost following Finnish and Swedish accession to the alliance in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Finnish and Austrian journeys to neutrality offer windows into un-

⁵ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria, 1945–1955* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 13-17; and Max Jakobson, "Finland in the New Europe," *The Washington Papers* 175 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1998), 66.

⁶ Tomas Ries, *Cold Will: The Defence of Finland* (London / Washington: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 228-229, and Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 53.

⁷ Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 47, and Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria*, 32.

⁸ Adam Hochschild, "Why Putin Made Peace With the Soviets' Archenemies: Revisiting Russia's Brutal Civil War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 7, 2022, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/11/russian-historian-books-civil-war-ukraine-invasion/671533/.

⁹ Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 165.

derstanding how neutrality can serve as a bridge for threatened states' sovereignty when facing revisionist powers, in this case, Russia. Whether these historical examples can provide a basis for peace in Ukraine and what military assurances Ukraine needs to succeed as an independent state are of great importance to Western policymakers. In Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's view, Ukraine's accession to NATO—or even his proposed acquisition of a nuclear capability—is necessary for Ukraine's survival.¹⁰

Few publications concisely outline and inform the reader about the events that shaped postwar Finland and Austria alongside one another. Fewer still consider these states' experiences informative for the existential crisis Ukraine faces today; those that do fail to draw a connection between Russia's ability to absorb high rates of battlefield casualties and the West's ability to guarantee Ukraine's neutrality through deterrence.¹¹ This article analyzes Ukraine's neutrality options and then makes recommendations for Ukrainian and U.S. policymakers with respect to the viability of a sovereign and neutral Ukrainian state, if such a status is possible at all.

Why Neutrality?

The rationale for state neutrality is rooted in the desire for state survival and the maintenance of independence.¹² Although the concept of state neutrality predates the twentieth century, the Hague Conventions of 1907 (specifically Convention V) provide the basic definitions and conditions for state neutrality.¹³ Referencing long-standing customary international law, the Law of Neutrality under the United Nations Charter, and acknowledging the neutrality-specific international treaties that predated the Second World War, the U.S. Department of Defense Law of War Manual defines the Law of Neutrality as:

... prescrib(ing) the legal relationship between belligerent States and neutral States. The law of neutrality regulates relations between: (1) belligerent States, vessels, aircraft, and persons; and (2) neutral States, vessels, aircraft,

¹⁰ Jenny Gross and Constant Méheut, "Zelenky Tries to Sell His 'Victory Plan' to European Leaders," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/17/world/europe/zelensky-eu-victory-plan.html>.

¹¹ Roy Allison, "Russia, Ukraine and State Survival through Neutrality," *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (November 2022): 1849-1872, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia230>.

¹² Gustav Däniker, "Swiss Security Policy in a Changing Environment," in *The European Neutrals in the 1990s: New Challenges and Opportunities*, Austrian Institute for International Affairs Series, ed. Hanspeter Neuhold (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 5.

¹³ International Humanitarian Law Databases, "Convention (V) respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land, The Hague, 18 October 1907, Article 2," accessed November 3, 2024, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/assets/treaties/200-IHL-20-EN.pdf>.

and persons. Under the law of neutrality, these categories of belligerents and neutrals have corresponding rights, duties, and liabilities.¹⁴

Ultimately, a state's neutrality is the sum of the "measures... it takes of its own accord to ensure the clarity and credibility of its permanent neutrality."¹⁵ Although not required, formal declarations of neutrality by States in wartime are traditionally made to communicate a neutral status vis-à-vis a conflict.¹⁶ A key consideration for a State's credible neutrality is the implied requirement that the State must possess both the "will and the capacity for self-defense."¹⁷

The Law of Neutrality aims to "immunize neutrals from the effects of armed conflict" while limiting the ability of said states to materially aid one side of the conflict. Neutral states' "non-participation" and "impartiality" are essential during a conflict.¹⁸ The territory of neutral states is inviolable and, under Article V of the Geneva Conventions, neutrals are obligated to prevent attacks on belligerent states from their territory.¹⁹ Credible neutrality, permanent or during wartime, requires the sustainment of such assurances to the state's neighbors. To successfully do so, neutral states must have "the will to stay out of wars," a "favorable geostrategic situation," and capable defense forces.²⁰ Ultimately, a state must be capable of simultaneously maintaining a military capability that adequately deters, or at least dissuades, aggression by a hostile power, but not so threatening or capable as to provoke an armed attack.²¹ Lastly, neutrality as a mechanism to maintain the national identity and independence of a state bordering a major power generally requires the endorsement of the larger neighbor(s). The post-war Soviet Union was inclined to accept only sovereign neutral states within its sphere of influence that it considered geostrategically peripheral, while endeavoring to subordinate countries it viewed as "pivotal" both politically and ideologically.²² Russia clearly considers Ukraine a pivotal state; Ukraine's independence appears provocation enough to trigger Russian attacks. A neutral Ukraine would

¹⁴ Office of General Counsel, US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Law of War Manual*, June 2015, updated July 2023, 960, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF>.

¹⁵ Mission of Switzerland to the European Union, "The Neutrality and the Sanctions of Switzerland," accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/missions/mission-eu-brussels/en/home/key-issues/neutralitaet-der-schweiz.html>.

¹⁶ Office of General Counsel, Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Law of War Manual*, 964.

¹⁷ Neuhold, ed., *The European Neutrals in the 1990s*.

¹⁸ Michael N. Schmitt, "'Strict' versus 'Qualified,' Neutrality," The Lieber Institute, March 22, 2023, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/strict-versus-qualified-neutrality>.

¹⁹ Schmitt, "'Strict' versus 'Qualified' Neutrality;" and Däniker, "Swiss Security Policy in a Changing Environment," 6.

²⁰ Däniker, "Swiss Security Policy in a Changing Environment," 7.

²¹ Däniker, "Swiss Security Policy in a Changing Environment," 9.

²² Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 50.

have two additional large neighbors, NATO and the European Union – the credibility of any declared Ukrainian neutrality would be as important to these supra-national organizations as to Russia.

Imposed neutrality challenges the concept of state neutrality. The rationale for the adoption of neutrality under threat is characterized first and foremost by the risk of a loss of domestic political independence. As with a state's adoption of strict neutrality to maintain its independence and sovereignty, acceptance of imposed neutrality seeks the same outcome – at the potential cost of an independent foreign policy and domestic political freedom of action. In the latter half of the twentieth century, this political adaptation of sovereignty became known as “Finlandisation.”²³ For Ukraine's negotiations with Russia, Permanent (or Strict) Neutrality, Non-Alignment, and Selective Neutrality are possible foreign policy neutrality options.

Imposed Neutrality – Austria and Finland

Finland and Finlandisation

Imposed neutrality, as demonstrated by the national realities faced by defeated Austria and Finland at the conclusion of the Second World War, presents a distinct challenge to the concept of state neutrality. At its core, the motivation to adopt imposed neutrality mirrors that of other forms of neutrality: state survival. In instances of imposed neutrality, the state cedes aspects of its sovereignty upon adoption and must delicately navigate its relationship with the imposing power. State sovereignty over its foreign policy, including internal political considerations, is limited. Moreover, the importance of maintaining the credibility of neutrality is magnified. In the postwar geostrategic environment, both states pursued and accepted imposed neutrality and non-alignment as a basis to maintain (in Finland's case) and regain (in Austria's example) independence.

Although Finland had proven itself capable of resisting Soviet aggression through the Winter (1939–1940) and Continuation (1941–1944) wars, its military lacked the capacity to indefinitely defend against a determined Soviet attack. When, in the summer of 1944, it became clear that Germany would soon lose the war, Finland sought a separate peace with the Soviet Union. When explaining Finland's decision to conclude hostilities with the Soviet Union, Marshal Mannerheim wrote to Hitler that even defeated “Germany will live on,” but that his “small Finnish nation” risked “exile or extermination” if it failed to act.²⁴ Finland maintained its independence in exchange for evicting the armed forces of its former Nazi-German allies from Finnish territory; the ceding of approximately eleven percent of its territory, including the city of Viipuri (today's Russian city

²³ Tuomas Forsberg and Matti Pesu, “The ‘Finlandisation’ of Finland: The Ideal Type, the Historical Model, and the Lessons Learnt,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 473–495, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1196069>.

²⁴ Henrik O. Lunde, *Finland's War of Choice: The Troubled German-Finnish Coalition in World War II* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2011), 318.

of Vyborg); and the subsequent resettlement of 425,000 Finnish citizens from Karelia. Finland also accepted a long-term Soviet lease of the Porkkala naval base and limitations on its postwar armed forces.²⁵ Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin himself reportedly told U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill that “any nation that fought with such courage for its independence deserved consideration.”²⁶

The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, signed in 1948, formed the basis of the Finnish-Soviet relationship and committed the Finns to resist any attack against the Soviet Union that crossed Finnish territory.²⁷ Now firmly within the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, its German ally annihilated, and its ties with the West severed, Finland’s prewar security architecture was destroyed. Nonetheless, its resistance to Soviet aggression (and perhaps the restraint Finnish forces demonstrated in not pressing into Soviet territory beyond what was necessary for defensive purposes early in the Continuation War) gained the Finnish state Stalin’s respect. The country remained unoccupied and its political system unaltered.²⁸ Moreover, although the Finnish-Soviet treaty committed Finland to security guarantees with the Soviet Union, these were limited to an obligation to defend Finnish territory from foreign incursions – entirely compatible with the defensive obligations of a neutral state.²⁹

From 1946 to 1956, Finland’s first postwar president, Juho K. Paasikivi, pursued a foreign policy “premised on the belief that Soviet interest in Finland was strategic, not ideological.”³⁰ Efforts to assuage Soviet security concerns included Finland declining to join the Marshall Plan in 1947. Paasikivi’s avoidance of joining the Warsaw Pact in 1954 and the subsequent Soviet withdrawal of forces from Porkkala in January 1956 enabled Finland to legitimately claim its neutral state status.³¹ Indeed, General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev was the first foreign leader to call Finland a neutral state.³²

²⁵ T. Michael Ruddy, “‘The Road to Nowhere’: Finland’s Place in U.S. Cold War Policy,” in *Charting an Independent Course: Finland’s Place in the Cold War and in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. T. Michael Ruddy (New York, NY: Regina Books, 1998), 173; and James Ford Cooper, *On the Finland Watch: An American Diplomat in Finland During the Cold War* (New York, NY: Regina Books, 2000), 42.

²⁶ Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 47.

²⁷ Forsberg and Pesu, “The ‘Finlandisation’ of Finland: The Ideal Type,” 477.

²⁸ Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 50.

²⁹ Charles Silva, “If Finland Weren’t Finland, Would Sweden be Finland? The Finland Argument as a Rationale for Swedish Neutrality in the Early Cold War,” in *Charting an Independent Course: Finland’s Place in the Cold War*, 141.

³⁰ Ruddy, “‘The Road to Nowhere,’” 173.

³¹ Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 54, 64-65, and John Vloyantes, “Finland,” in *Europe’s Neutral and Nonaligned States: Between NATO and the Warsaw Pact*, ed. S. Victor Papocosma and Mark R. Rubin (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1998), 145-146.

³² Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 68.

From the end of Soviet military base leases in 1955 through the end of the Cold War, the Finnish state ensured its neutrality remained credible. While the elasticity of Finnish neutrality varied throughout the nation's relationship with the Soviet Union, Finland successfully maintained friendly relations with its larger neighbor while retaining economic and cultural relationships with the West.³³ Still, Soviet interference in Finnish affairs, including the "Nightfrost" in 1958 and the "Note Crisis" in 1961, challenged Finnish sovereignty and aroused Western concern over what came to be known as Finlandisation – the "process by which a democratic nation living in the shadow of a militarily powerful totalitarian state gradually submits to the domination of its neighbor and finally loses its internal freedom."³⁴ Ultimately, successive Finnish governments endeavored to project predictability in behavior, committing to policies that demonstrated Finland's status as a "reliable neighbor."³⁵ In doing so, Finland gradually deepened ties with the West while neutrality provided a "basis for stability and order" in its relationship with the Soviet Union.³⁶

Austrian Occupation and Imposed Neutrality

Unlike Finland, Austria suffered a complete defeat as part of the Greater German Reich and endured a ten-year occupation by the Allied powers. It formally assumed neutral status via a Federal Constitutional Act within a day of the last occupation soldier leaving Austrian territory. Austria's acceptance of Soviet-required neutrality ensured its independence as a non-partitioned, unified nation. Importantly, and in contrast to Finland's strategy of carefully balancing its East-West relationships, Austria considered itself a full-fledged member of the West.³⁷

Other key differences between Finland and Austria stand out. First, in the Moscow Declaration of 1943, the Great Powers declared Austria "the first free state to fall to Hitlerite aggression."³⁸ As such, Austria was not subject to war reparations. Nonetheless, the four powers—the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France—occupied Austria.³⁹ Unlike under the German Control Agreement, the Austrian civil administration was functional before Austria's Allied Commission.⁴⁰ With Soviet support (initially), Austria formed a provisional coalition government as the war in Europe concluded, elections were held in November 1945, and by July 1946, the Austrian government regained substantive

³³ Robert W. Matson, "Finlandization: A Retrospective," in *Charting an Independent Course: Finland's Place in the Cold War*, 199.

³⁴ Jakobson, *Finland in the New Europe*, 84-85.

³⁵ Cooper, *On the Finland Watch: An American Diplomat in Finland*, 45.

³⁶ Matson, "Finlandization: A Retrospective," 151-155.

³⁷ Joan Johnson-Freese, "Austria," in *Europe's Neutral and Nonaligned States*, 161-163.

³⁸ Yale Law School, The Avalon Project, "The Moscow Conference, October 1943," accessed November 22, 2024, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/moscow.asp>.

³⁹ Johnson-Freese, "Austria," 161.

⁴⁰ Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria*, 31.

control of its constitution. Austria aimed to regain sovereignty as an undivided state – a goal shared by the Allied powers. Informed by the events of the Anschluss, the Allies remained committed to ensuring an Austria strong enough to preclude any vulnerability to a repeat of 1938. The British commitment of 30,000 soldiers in the country's south to defend against challenges to Austria's territorial integrity by Yugoslav partisans is indicative of the importance the Allies placed on Austria surviving its postwar occupation intact.⁴¹

What the United States, Great Britain, and France had assumed would be a brief postwar occupation stretched into a decade-long endeavor, initially driven by Soviet concerns over the treatment of a belligerent that had fought alongside Germany through the end of the war (implying a Soviet intent to extract in-kind reparations), then slowed by the onset of the Cold War, and ultimately concluded with Stalin's death and the rise of Khrushchev. The United States provided over \$200 million in aid annually and, despite the risk of assistance flowing through Austria to the Soviet Union, included Austria in the Marshall Plan. On average, each Austrian received \$132 in Marshall Plan aid, far more than Germans received.⁴² The sustained provision of these levels of aid by the United States was only politically feasible following the 1948 crises in Berlin and Prague.⁴³ The United States, after initial reluctance to commit to a robust, long-term occupation, ultimately assumed the preponderance of the Western powers' occupation "boots on the ground."⁴⁴

The Austrian State Treaty's signature followed a decade of negotiations. In that time, Austrian domestic support for neutrality grew, the Eisenhower administration softened on a Swiss armed-neutrality model for Austria, Soviet policy failed to prevent German rearmament, and the productivity of Soviet extraction of oil and economic goods from Austria declined. The treaty was signed by the occupying powers on May 15, 1955, in Vienna.⁴⁵ The Soviet Union, feeling secure behind its Eastern European "socialist fortress against Western hostility," accepted a neutral Austria. That acceptance overlapped with the Soviet withdrawal from its naval base in Porkkala, Finland, and was in line with efforts to generally

⁴¹ Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria*, 31-37.

⁴² Adjusted for inflation, \$132 in 1950 is equivalent to approximately \$1,725 in 2024. The \$106 billion the United States had provided to Ukraine as of September 27, 2024, is equivalent to approximately \$2,718 per Ukrainian. See: Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "Here's How Much Aid the United States Has Sent Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations, September 27, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-us-aid-going-ukraine#>.

⁴³ Günter Bischof, "Allied Plans and Policies for the Occupation of Austria, 1938-1955," in *Austria in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rolf Steininger, Günter Bischof, and Michael Gehler (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 178-179.

⁴⁴ Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria*, 36.

⁴⁵ Günter, "Allied Plans and Policies for Occupation of Austria, 1938-1955;" Michael Gehler and Wolfram Kaiser, "Austria and Europe, 1923-2000: A Study in Ambivalence," in *Austria in the Twentieth Century*, 184, 185, 302; and Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria*, 152, 159.

improve relations with nonaligned states, including Yugoslavia.⁴⁶ It also divided NATO's north and south flanks, with Switzerland and Austria forming a geographic obstacle.⁴⁷

Austrian neutrality was chosen as the only option to regain sovereignty. Austria's choice of neutrality reflected the prioritization of "territorial integrity" over integration with the West and, therefore, was imposed.⁴⁸ On October 25, 1955, the last occupying soldier departed Austria, and the following day, parliament passed the Act on Austria's Neutrality. Austrian neutrality is permanent and active; Austria joined the United Nations shortly after regaining independence. Unlike Switzerland, Austria's neutrality has no international guarantee. Austria has not sought such recognition, preserving its ability to interpret its neutrality without outside interference. In the context of the Cold War East-West conflict, Austria considered itself "militarily neutral," not "ideologically neutral." Finally, armed neutrality in Austria's case meant that it maintained a military force capable of imposing an "invasion and occupation cost for hostile forces transiting Austrian territory."⁴⁹

Like Finland and Ukraine, Austria's geographic location during the Cold War necessitated a focus on sustaining stability and peace. Finland, reacting to Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has abandoned its long-standing neutrality and joined NATO. Adopting neutrality to achieve sovereignty, particularly during a long-standing occupation, made sense for Austria in 1955, as did the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance and the eventual policy of neutrality for Finland in the postwar environment. In both instances, democratically elected governments chose neutrality to minimize foreign (specifically Soviet) interference in domestic affairs. What's more, both states' permanent neutrality was recognized by the Soviet Union. Still, Austria's reliance on *de facto* NATO protection—indeed, Austrian political leaders structured their state's armed neutrality on this premise—continues today, further highlighting the decline of neutrality's utility.⁵⁰ Contemporary Finland's abandonment of neutrality and accession to NATO further calls into question the value of state neutrality in today's Russian-led East-West conflict.

Moldova: A Neutrality Failure

Moldova offers a more contemporary example of a State seeking neutrality as a means to limit Russian influence. Today, Moldova is located at the intersection

⁴⁶ Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria*, 52-155.

⁴⁷ Johnson-Freese, "Austria," 166.

⁴⁸ Gehler and Kaiser, "Austria and Europe, 1923–2000," 302-303.

⁴⁹ Johnson-Freese, "Austria," 164-165, 171-172.

⁵⁰ Gehler and Kaiser, "Austria and Europe, 1923–2000," 302; and Franz-Stefan Gady, "Why Neutrality Is Obsolete in the 21st Century," *Foreign Policy*, April 4, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/04/finland-sweden-nato-neutral-austria-ireland-switzerland-russia-war/>.

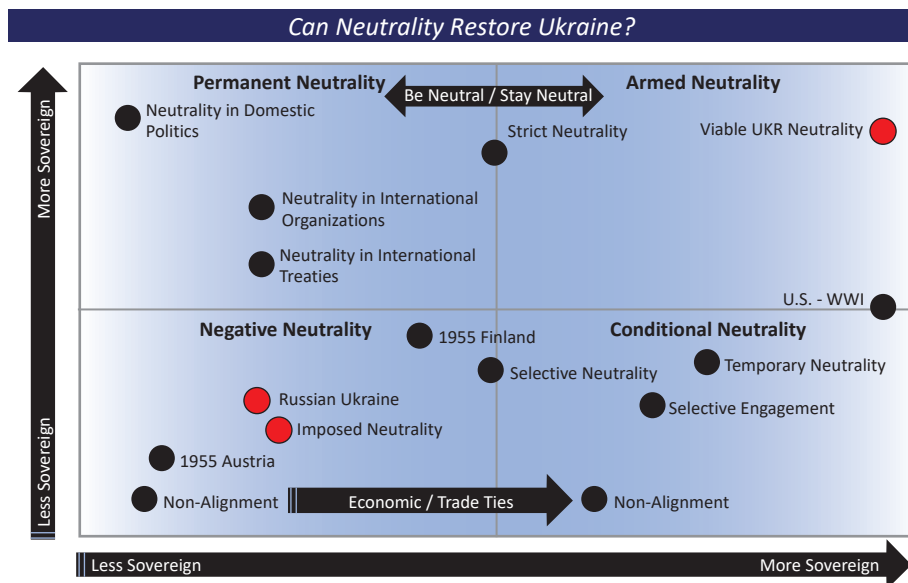


Figure 1: Types of State Neutrality.

of the great powers' zones of influence.⁵¹ Moldova's independence in the early 1990s was complicated by Russian encouragement and military support for Moldova's economically important separatist Transnistria region. Hoping to assuage Russian concerns regarding Western influence in Moldova, the Moldovan constitution committed the country to permanent neutrality. Instead of providing a pathway for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Transnistria, neutrality paralyzed Moldovan foreign policy. Despite Moldova's declared neutrality and Russia's repeated promises to redeploy its forces from Transnistria, Russian troops remain. As a result, Moldovan voters approved constitutional changes to permit the State's accession to the European Union in October 2024, signaling Moldova's acceptance that strict and permanent neutrality has failed to ensure Moldovan sovereignty.⁵²

Moldova's situation highlights two major pitfalls of permanent neutrality. First, it clearly demonstrates that neutrality without the guarantee or acknowledgment of a major power or similarly capable alliance limits its utility in maintaining territorial or political sovereignty. Second, the adoption of neutrality must be compatible with a State's strategic security context. If neutrality cannot achieve a State's desired security end state, it may instead lead to security dilemmas. Moldova provides a model of neutrality that Ukraine must avoid.

⁵¹ Laura Kirvelytė, "Moldova's Security Strategy: The Problem of Permanent Neutrality," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 8, no. 1 (2010), 165-167, <https://doi.org/10.47459/lasr.2010.8.7>.

⁵² Sarah Rainsford and Laura Gozzi, "Moldova Says 'Yes' to pro-EU Constitutional Changes by Tiny Margin," *BBC News*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wnr5qdx70>.

Putin Demands “Neutrality”

In the summer of 2021, Putin published his article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” claiming Russians and Ukrainians as “one people – a single whole... descendants of Ancient Rus,” and concluding with assertions that Ukraine could be “a tool in someone else’s hands to fight against us.”⁵³ Coupled with Putin’s assertion immediately prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine—that Ukraine lacks “authentic statehood”—his claims provide a basis from which to comprehend Russian demands to end the war it started in 2022.⁵⁴

Putin’s 2024 demands included formal recognition that Crimea is part of Russia; the ceding of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblasts; the designation of Russian as an official language of Ukraine; non-membership in NATO; “denazification”; demilitarization; and a series of additional restrictions on internal Ukrainian matters. Finally, Russia insists on a postwar Ukraine as a permanently neutral state, with European Union membership potentially acceptable.⁵⁵

The Russian position on the June 2024 proposed peace treaty included key elements with respect to its vision of a permanently, *militarily* neutral Ukraine – diplomatically, economically, and ideologically oriented toward Russia while still allowing for the possibility of Ukrainian Western economic alignment via European Union membership (Russia’s position attempts to blend aspects of several types of neutrality; see Figure 1). The guarantors of Ukrainian neutrality would include not just the United States, Great Britain, and France, but also Russia and China. Any of those parties could veto collective intervention on behalf of Ukraine if attacked, making the treaty’s guarantee of Ukraine’s neutrality of little use.

Coupled with limitations on Ukrainian defensive capabilities—including restricting the size of its armed forces and long-range fires—Ukraine would find itself unable to dissuade or deter Russian aggression. Putin’s vision for a postwar Ukraine is not a neutral state. Instead, his vision appears to rely on contemporary Moldova, not Finland, as an effective model for Russian domination of a geographically and politically reduced state.

As Putin’s basis for peace is rooted in a revisionist view of Ukrainian nationhood, the West must consider how its acceptance of Russian proposals complicates the defense of Baltic NATO member states. The 1945 Bohlen-Robinson Report hints—and George F. Kennan drives the point home in his 1946 *Long Tele-*

⁵³ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵⁴ Sinéad Baker, “Putin Denies Planning to Revive the Russian Empire after Declaring that Ukraine Is Not a Real Country and Sending Troops There,” *Business Insider*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-denies-reviving-russian-empire-says-ukraine-not-real-country-2022-2>.

⁵⁵ Anton Troianovski, Adam Entous, and Michael Schwartz, “Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever. But in 2022 They Were Talking,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/06/15/world/europe/ukraine-russia-ceasefire-deal.html>.

Only in this land which had never known a friendly neighbor or indeed any tolerant equilibrium of separate powers, either internal or international, could a doctrine thrive which viewed economic conflicts of society as insoluble by peaceful means ...

... [T]hey found justification for their instinctive fear of outside world, for the dictatorship without which they did not know how to rule, for cruelties they did not dare not to inflict, for sacrifice they felt bound to demand.

Excerpt from George F. Kennan's February 22, 1946, "Long Telegram" on the postwar Soviet Outlook ⁵⁶

gram—that force was necessary to maintain power in Russia, and that foreign dangers were needed to justify the use of such force.⁵⁷ Putin needs external threats to stay in power, like the Soviet and tsarist regimes that preceded him. In this context, it is unlikely that Putin would fail to use Western influence, let alone a physical presence in Ukraine, as a pretext to continue attacking Ukrainian sovereignty. Russia's goal is a "truly neutral buffer" free of any Western presence.⁵⁸ During the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign, then Vice President-elect Vance's vision for peace in Ukraine excluded NATO membership but included a heavily fortified demilitarized zone separating Russian and Ukrainian forces, and acknowledged the extensive defensive requirements needed by an independent and neutral Ukraine.⁵⁹

Russia's proven willingness to absorb high numbers of casualties—historically in Finland and now in contemporary Ukraine—reinforces how essential the ability to inflict high costs on invading forces is for smaller states in Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence. Even then, Russia's "resource approach" to its own citizens complicates any deterrence force design; Putin appears willing to sacrifice a million Russians to gain millions more in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ George F. Kennan, "The Long Telegram [original], from George Kennan in Moscow to the Secretary of State, February 22, 1946," National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21042-long-telegram-original>, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.

⁵⁷ Charles E. Bohlen and Geroid T. Robinson, "The Bohlen-Robinson Report," *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 389-399, 395, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1977.tb00249.x>; Kennan, "The Long Telegram," 6; John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (United Kingdom: Penguin Publishing Group, 2012), 251.

⁵⁸ Vladimir Frolov, "Betting on the Summit: Will Russia and the United States Be Able to End the Conflict in Ukraine?" *Forbes*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya/530973-stavka-na-sammit-smogut-li-rossia-i-ssa-zaversit-konflikt-na-ukraine>. — in Russian

⁵⁹ Maegan Vazquez and Karen DeYoung, "Vance Says Trump's Plan to End War in Ukraine Could Include Creating a Demilitarized Zone," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/09/12/vance-trump-ukraine-russia-war-plan/>.

⁶⁰ Sergei Medvedev, *A War Made in Russia* (Polity Press, July 2023), 140.

Under these circumstances, Ukraine's acceptance of imposed neutrality, particularly in the context of additional Russian demands, would trade limited relief from wartime conditions for an unsustainably high-risk security dilemma not unlike that faced by Moldova and, at worst, that which greeted Estonia in 1940. Moreover, Ukraine's amended 2019 constitution "enshrined" the pursuit of NATO and EU membership, as well as the "irreversibility" of Ukraine's Western course.⁶¹ At a minimum, the Kremlin's demands have to be viewed as intended to provide a basis for continued erosion of Ukrainian sovereignty as much as they are intended to suggest the basis for a lasting peace. As such, only a capably armed Ukraine can accept—and survive—neutrality.

Can Neutrality Liberate Ukraine? Alignment Options and National Models for Postwar Ukraine

Considered against Russia's imperially driven demands for a neutral Ukraine, and in light of the postwar experiences of Finland and Austria, the viability of neutrality as a component of any long-term peace plan appears unlikely. Four national models for a viable, independent postwar Ukraine can also be considered.⁶²

South Korea (ROK) Model

In terms of structure, the Korean model closely matches the Vance and Putin models for a postwar settlement, in that an internationally monitored, fortified, and manned demilitarized zone along Ukraine's eastern frontier with Russia is envisioned to ensure the end of the conflict. The envisioned requirement for foreign forces in Ukraine's east precludes Ukraine from achieving a truly neutral status – particularly so if those forces are Western- or Russian-aligned. This model also assumes security guarantees from a nuclear-capable ally, underscoring that it cannot support a neutral Ukraine. As even a capably armed Ukraine without a large Western footprint appears unacceptable from the Russian perspective on peace negotiations, this model complicates the signing of a peace agreement, even if it could maintain peace once implemented.

West German Model

The West German model proposes a fragmented Ukraine, in which Western Ukraine joins NATO as West Germany did in the 1950s. This model incorporates

⁶¹ Victoriia Lapa and Justin Frosini, "Would Ukraine Breach Its Own Constitution If It Dropped Its NATO Bid?" *Verfassungsblog*, February 18, 2022, <https://verfassungsblog.de/would-ukraine-breach-its-own-constitution-if-it-dropped-its-nato-bid/>; and "Ukraine President Signs Constitutional Amendment on NATO, EU Membership," *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, February 19, 2019, www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-president-signs-constitutional-amendment-on-nato-eu-membership/29779430.html.

⁶² Graeme P. Herd, "Russia's War Against Ukraine: Is 2025 the Year of Peace?" in *Munich Security Conference 2025*, Special Edition of Europäische Sicherheit & Technik, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/MSC_Sonderheft_V6.pdf.

Ukrainian security interests into NATO, effectively subordinating them and inherently inducing stability in Russo-Ukrainian relations. The great-power negotiations that delayed postwar Austrian independence were drawn out largely to avoid this scenario for Austria, in part to preclude the risk of a weakened Austrian state or rump states susceptible to integration into a future reunified Germany.

Israel

This model is derived from President Zelenskyy's perspective that the Swiss model of neutrality remains aspirational for Ukraine. However, Zelenskyy envisions a Ukraine more akin to Israel—wholly aligned with Western security organizations and supported by a universally militarily trained and armed population. This vision is achievable without NATO membership, likely through bilateral security agreements with European partners. How Ukraine might attain the security status enjoyed by Israel as an ambiguously nuclear-capable state is less clear.⁶³

Nuclear Ukraine

The nuclear-armed Ukraine model recognizes that a deterrence strategy toward Russia requires a punishment capability. A sovereign nuclear option is also far more economically palatable, reducing Ukraine's projected requirement for an enormous post-war defense force. Although a nuclear Ukraine might provide the basis for a viable neutral state, the risk of nuclear proliferation satisfies neither the West's nor Russia's desired end state in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, this option could prove useful in forcing a clear articulation of Russia's vision for an independent Ukraine.

Postwar Finland and Austria: Trading Sovereignty for Time

The acceptance of any imposed neutrality status by Ukraine will likely be part of a strategy that acknowledges the necessity of peacefully maintaining a new status quo until geopolitical conditions improve for Ukraine. Following a peace agreement, Ukraine's accession to the European Union is likely essential for its economic viability and reconstruction. Regime change in Russia offers the best opportunity for Ukraine to reclaim lost territories not recovered prior to the end of this conflict (Finland failed to do so after the Soviet Union's collapse under different circumstances). Ukraine's acceptance of neutrality could be contingent on the departure of Russian forces from certain Russian-administered regions; neither Austria nor Finland formally declared neutrality until occupying forces departed their respective territories.

Neutrality is only viable if Ukraine can capably defend itself and deter further Russian aggression. For Russia, Ukrainian neutrality serves Russian interests only if it mitigates Western influence in Ukraine, complicates NATO's defense of its

⁶³ Maya Carlin, "Big Question: How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Israel Have?" *The National Interest*, October 27, 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/big-question-how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-israel-have-207073>.

eastern flank, and provides a political, defensive, and ideological buffer zone for Russia. Finnish and Austrian neutrality fulfilled those roles as peripheral neutral states, but they had not endured long-term Russian aggression prior to assuming their neutral identities. Instead of disincentivizing further escalation by Russia, the Finlandisation of Ukraine could end both the country's democratic and European aspirations.⁶⁴ The Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Treaty ensured that Finland was capable of defending its own interests while remaining responsive to Russian interests in the region. In comparison, Russian insistence on a weakened and vulnerable Ukraine precludes Ukrainian acceptance of neutrality and increases the likelihood of Ukraine's integration into the West. In this sense, neutrality serves little role in the preservation of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Conclusion: Neutrality Cannot Restore Ukraine

As experienced by Austria and Finland, the acceptance of imposed neutrality enabled both states to maintain enough sovereignty to bridge the period of Soviet primacy in Eastern Europe following the end of the Second World War. Each endured a ten-year presence of foreign armed forces on its soil, and Finland absorbed the resettlement of tens of thousands of its citizens from its ceded eastern territories. Both also benefited from an East-West ideological struggle that, at least in the 1950s, encouraged pragmatic approaches to Austrian and Finnish sovereignty. In comparison, today, Putin's anti-imperial message rings hollow.

Permanent neutrality and non-alignment functioned differently in Austria and Finland, but in both cases helped preserve sovereignty. Russia's vision for a neutral Ukraine shares some superficial similarities with 1950s Austria and Finland, but not functional ones. For Russia, a neutral Ukraine is weak enough to be subsumed, by force or by the mere threat of force. Moreover, a disarmed, neutral Ukraine is a nation-state abandoned by its American and European partners. Unlike the Finns, who ceded territory and evacuated citizens into their new borders in the late 1940s, a defeated Ukraine is more likely to experience a mass westward exodus of citizens fleeing demonstrated Russian brutality. Russia's primary war aim—ostensibly the “end of Ukraine”—is the most significant, and perhaps the only, consideration that matters.⁶⁵ Credible Ukrainian neutrality lacks the support of its large Russian neighbor, challenging the utility of comparisons to Austria and Finland. Like Finland in 1939, Ukraine has inflicted massive damage on its Russian invaders, maintained its independence, and provided its political leadership leverage in a negotiated settlement.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Minna Ålander, “Why Finland Thinks Finlandization Is a Bad Idea for Ukraine,” The Atlantic Council, December 12, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraine-alert/why-finland-thinks-finlandization-is-a-bad-idea-for-ukraine/>.

⁶⁵ Robert Kagan, “Trump Is Facing a Catastrophic Defeat in Ukraine,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 7, 2025, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/01/trump-putin-ukraine-russia-war/681228/.

⁶⁶ Ries, *Cold Will: The Defence of Finland*, 168-169.

Ukraine has proven its willingness and capacity for self-defense. Given the opportunity, Ukrainian neutrality or military non-alignment might have served Russian, Ukrainian, and Euro-Atlantic security interests. Perhaps, coupled with a Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Treaty-like mechanism that reassured Russia's stated security concerns with Ukrainian commitments to defend against any attack aimed at Russia through Ukrainian territory, Ukraine could have politically defended armed neutrality to its citizens.

While it may be true that "armed neutrality for Ukraine is NATO's least poor option," Russia's vision for a post-war Ukraine is incompatible with the elements necessary to construct a sovereign neutral state – armed or otherwise.⁶⁷ As a result, a credibly sovereign and neutral Ukraine must be equipped sufficiently for its own defense. Practically speaking, this vision of a neutral Ukraine would necessarily be Western-oriented, likely excluded from NATO but included in the European Union to facilitate continued economic and military assistance. In short, a credibly neutral Ukraine requires Western (presumably European, as of February 2025) security guarantees and assistance to bridge the period between a ceasefire and the sustainable self-defense capability necessary for neutrality. This one-sided support challenges conventional understandings of neutrality and non-alignment.

This line of reasoning highlights the risks a "constructive" West incurs when negotiating with itself: any phased ceasefire, armistice, or peace-through-neutrality agreement discounts—if not outright ignores—Russia's clearly stated aims to subjugate Ukraine. The war may be as useful in justifying Putin's internal control of Russia as it is in furthering Russia's imperial aspirations that simultaneously challenge the rules-based international order.⁶⁸ Whereas Ukraine is willing to assume a neutral status to maintain its independence, the Russian Federation sees neutrality as a means to place Ukraine in a "strategic purgatory."⁶⁹ Following a ceasefire, armistice, or peace agreement, the utility of even a credibly neutral Ukraine may ultimately lie only in providing a window of time for national recovery and an improved international security environment. As the West assesses its vision for a satisfactory and achievable outcome, it must accept that neutrality, as proposed by Putin's Russia, risks sacrificing Ukraine for a false peace that can only lead to further bloodshed.

⁶⁷ Jennifer Kavanagh and Christopher McCallion, "Armed Neutrality for Ukraine Is NATO's Least Poor Option," *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/02/armed-neutrality-for-ukraine-is-natos-least-poor-option/>.

⁶⁸ Frolov, "Betting on the Summit: Will Russia and the United States Be Able to End the Conflict in Ukraine?"

⁶⁹ Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, The Marshall Papers (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 74.

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