

New Book – Neutrality After 1989: New Paths in the Post-Cold War World

Written by Naman Habtom-Desta

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NAMAN HABTOM-DESTA, JUL 9 2024

This is an excerpt from *Neutrality After 1989: New Paths in the Post-Cold War World*, edited by Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the world's sole superpower, neutrality was seen by many as a relic of the Cold War. However, the arrival of rising powers on the scene and the gradual shift towards multipolarity as countries like Russia and China assert their influence and challenge the US-dominated international order has in turn revived neutrality in its various forms. This book begins with a range of chapters examining the 'old neutrals' of Europe via contemporary Austrian and Swiss neutrality, the decline and end of Swedish and Finnish neutrality, and the resilience of Irish neutrality. Later chapters deal with the emergence of 'new neutrals' via examinations of Vietnamese 'bamboo diplomacy,' Israel's efforts to balance its relations with Washington and Moscow, and Oman's non-interventionist foreign policy. As the range of chapters show, the role of neutrality – and its perception or misperceptions – remain vital in understanding contemporary geopolitics and international relations.

In the popular imagination, neutrality is understood as a policy of refraining from joining wars and/or preferring not to choose one bloc or another. This perception, particularly in Western countries, is heavily informed by the experiences of the Second World War (1939–45) and the subsequent Cold War (1947–91), especially as it manifested itself in Europe. In reality, neutrality is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. It ranges from 'active' to 'passive' forms, permanent to non-permanent, as well as various shades that technically are not neutrality but often grouped with it, such as military non-alignment.

The end of the Cold War, and the emergence of the prospect of American unipolarity, led countries around the world to reconsider what neutrality meant, as well as its necessity. For some, this meant a diminished significance and a gradual abandonment of the idea, since neutrality had previously been underpinned by a bipolar world that no longer existed. Following the start of the full-scale Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022, the non-aligned (yet often still incorrectly called 'neutral') Sweden and Finland applied to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – and later completed their accessions – signalling yet another decline in neutrality's role in the twenty-first century.

However, the story of neutrality is not limited to Europe. This is especially true in the post-Cold War era. While the 1990s and the 2000s represented US (and broader Western) hegemony, the 2010s and 2020s have been marked by a growing multipolarity. As the number of rising powers increases, the desire to hedge and refrain from aligning fully with one great power has grown. As a result, while Western observers often remark on the irrelevance and/or death of neutrality, the story is very different elsewhere. This book hopes to illuminate this ongoing development. It seeks to illustrate that neutrality's rise and fall is occurring simultaneously for a plethora of different reasons. In discussing neutrality, this book adopts a wide definition to reflect the broad range of experiences that the countries covered have had and their unique approaches to international affairs.

In the first chapter, Pascal Lottaz examines Switzerland and Austria, the archetypes of neutrality. Despite being externally perceived as similar Alpine neutral states, Lottaz demonstrates that these similarities are in fact superficial.

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The differences lie both in their histories as well as the underlying philosophies that guide their policies, which in turn continues to affect the way the two understand their own neutrality. In the second chapter, Erik Noreen and Roxanna Sjöstedt look at Sweden. For decades, the country was seen as the quintessential neutral state that was still engaged in global issues. Even after formally abandoning neutrality as it joined the European Union (EU), the Nordic country pursued a policy of non-alignment. Despite this, as Noreen and Sjöstedt show, Sweden remained a militarily active country, deploying around the world with NATO. The chapter explains how Sweden moved closer to NATO while still officially non-aligned.

In the third chapter, Jussi Pakkasvirta and Hanna Tuominen look at another Nordic neutral, Finland. Following the end of the Cold War, Finnish conceptions of neutrality underwent a major transformation, leading first to Finnish membership in the EU, subsequently to military missions with NATO, and ultimately to NATO membership. Their chapter tracks and analyses this three-decade evolution. The book's fourth chapter by Karen Devine focuses on Ireland, which has resisted the post-Cold War European trend of military deneutralization. Instead, the country has shown a remarkable resilience and attachment to neutrality despite significant, and growing, pressure from political elites both within and beyond Ireland.

In the second half of the book, in chapters five, six and seven, we leave Europe to see the different ways neutrality is used globally. In his chapter on Vietnam, Nguyen Khac Giang explains how the southeast Asian nation carries out its 'bamboo diplomacy' as it seeks to balance its relationships with the United States and China while simultaneously seeking out an independent foreign policy. Israel forms the focus of Liudmila Samarskaia's chapter. Despite being widely seen as an American ally, the Israeli government has at times taken its own path. This has been particularly true in recent years as it seeks to balance its relationship with Washington, Moscow and Beijing in the pursuit of its own national security interests – thereby carrying out a policy of selective neutrality. Another country associated with neutrality, sometimes called 'the Switzerland of the Middle East', is Oman. In the final chapter of the book, Roby Barrett and Leah Sherwood claim that this perception is incorrect and that Muscat is in fact a partisan non-interventionist. This policy, the authors argue, is in contrast to genuine neutral states and amounts to a *realpolitik* approach that has enabled the country to play the role of a mediator while advancing its own interests.

The countries examined in this volume were selected due to their wide range in interpreting neutrality. They illustrate the fact that neutrality, as interpreted internally or externally, is never a simple or straightforward policy but instead the synthesis of national interests, historical and contemporary circumstances, and domestic and foreign policy realities. As a result, to understand what neutrality is or is not requires a broader view of global developments. By better comprehending these nuances, readers – whether motivated by personal interest, academic research, or policymaking responsibilities – will appreciate that states that practice neutrality and its derivatives do not fit into simple categories, but instead are adapted and perceived by their own traditions and ongoing challenges.

By focusing on the post-Cold War era, this volume seeks to reassert the current relevance of neutrality as a conceptual framework in both international relations and domestic politics. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the supposed 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989), neutrality has in large part been relegated either to history books or viewed as an unconventional quirk/ leftover from the Cold War. However, this volume, adding to the works of others, such as Lottaz et al. (2022), illustrates that neutrality – and the imperative to understand its dynamism – remains as important as ever. Neutrality is not simply the product of bipolarity, as the Cold War period may suggest, but can in fact emerge during periods of unipolarity or multipolarity. Additionally, due to the relative uncommonness – albeit not as rare as perhaps popularly imagined – the various manifestations of neutrality are often unique. This requires research into the different forms it takes, or why it is abandoned, which this volume hopes to contribute to.

Neutrality, both as a concept and as a phenomenon, is alive and well. Understanding it, as the chapters in this book seek to do, is crucial as multipolarity becomes a growing force in world affairs. In a world ordered as such, neutrality, in its various forms, will likely continue to be a tool used by various states and recognising it as such helps us comprehend the world both as it exists today and how it may exist tomorrow.

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Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom is a doctoral student at the Faculty of History, University of Cambridge. Previously, he has been a visiting researcher at the Swedish Defence University, Université libre de Bruxelles, and Stockholm University's Hans Blix Centre. His research focuses on contemporary European military and diplomatic history with a special focus on Sweden. His research interests also include neutrality, foreign fighters, and nuclear weapons policy. He has published articles in *Scandinavian Journal of History* and the *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* and has written on international affairs and security policy for *War on the Rocks*, *Lawfare*, and *Responsible Statecraft* among others.