



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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THE USES AND ABUSES OF NEUTRALITY A Compromised, Pragmatic, And Selective Strategy Tool

Neutrality After 1989: New Paths in the Post-Cold War World. Edited by Na-man Karl-Thomas Habtom. Bristol, UK: E-International Relations, 2024, 134 pages. <https://www.e-ir.info/publication/neutrality-after-1989-new-paths-in-the-post-cold-war-world/>

The issue of neutrality has never been more important than at the present historical moment when world politics is dominated by major powers. This question has become more serious than ever, especially in the context of the recent situation in the Middle East, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the U.S.-China rivalry. Finland and Sweden—long considered the best examples of neutrality and non-alignment—have now become part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), while states like India, Vietnam, and even the Gulf states are finding it difficult to side with, or isolate themselves from, one side in the conflict. In this context, *Neutrality After 1989: New Paths in the Post-Cold War World*,

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edited by Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom, comes as a timely and well-written book consisting of eight chapters that examine how neutrality has adapted itself in a changing world, how it has persisted, and in some cases how it has failed.

The fundamental question for all states is, “How can a country remain neutral in a world that forces you to choose a side?” The book’s introduction provides a clear theoretical basis for the topic. The editor argues that neutrality does not simply mean sitting back and staying away from wars—it is a “complex and dynamic phenomenon” that can take many forms: from dynamic to non-dynamic, from permanent to temporary, and from legally defined neutrality to informal military non-alignment (p.1). The editor’s main case is that the end of the Cold War did not eliminate neutrality, rather that the return of multipolarity has revived it in new forms. This idea is well-reasoned throughout the book.

In his chapter, Pascal Lottaz makes his point with a comparative study of two states that appear similar in terms of foreign policy but are fundamentally very different. Austria’s neutrality was born of defeat and the need for a new national identity after the Nazi era. In contrast, Switzerland’s neutrality is rooted in a mythological tradition connected to the Battle of Marignano of 1515, which the Swiss government continued to regularly recount in its official publications until 2022 (p.12). Lottaz identifies a “dogmatic split” here: on the one hand, the hardline Swiss “Bindschedler doctrine,” a rigid interpretation of Swiss neutrality coined by Professor Rudolf Bindschedler for the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and, on the other, the more internationally active Austrian “Verdross approach” coined by Austrian international lawyer Alfred Verdross that refers to a universalistic, natural, law-informed philosophy of international law that emphasizes the existence of a community of states bound by moral-legal norms, rather than just

by their own consent. It is this difference that explains why public support for neutrality in Switzerland consistently hovers between 80 and 97 percent, while Austria's commitment, while strong, is more conditional (p. 11).

Authored by Eric Noreen and Roxanna Sjostedt, Chapter 2 shows the fallacy of Sweden's neutrality in an effective way. The authors argue that Sweden, although not officially part of any bloc, was in practice deeply involved in Western security networks—for instance, sending its forces to Afghanistan under NATO command, joining NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program, and maintaining close defense ties with Washington. Their central argument is blunt: Sweden was never truly neutral but pursued a policy of being "officially non-aligned but ready to serve Western interests" (p. 22). Therefore, Sweden's application to join NATO in 2022 was not a sudden change but a formal acknowledgement of a strategic reality that had existed for a long time.

Other European countries, including Finland have a limited relationship with neutrality. Unlike Sweden, Finland's non-alignment was shaped by a 1948 friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, which made neutrality a "compromise" and "necessity" of time rather than a free choice (p. 36). Finland followed through cautiously—joining the Nordic Council, entering the European Union in 1995, and purchasing 64 American F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets in 1992—demonstrating its true security priorities long before it formally declared them (p. 44). Finland's 188-to-8 parliamentary vote for NATO membership in 2022 was the end of decades of tacit Western alignment (p. 47). Geography, history, and realist thinking combined to make neutrality ultimately flawed and unsustainable for Helsinki.

Furthermore, Ireland has been insisting on its need to maintain its non-alignment against the pressure of the European Union, NATO,

and even political elites in Ireland. In 2001 and 2008, the Irish people voted down the Nice and Lisbon Treaties, respectively, partly because of the issues of neutrality. In the fourth chapter, Karen Devine demonstrates that Ireland is not only neutral in foreign policy but also has an Irish national identity that defines itself through anti-imperialism and British colonialism. The Irish involvement in UN peacekeeping, disarmament diplomacy, as well as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons all add up to a consistent vision of a foreign policy. Irish neutrality, as Devine puts the case, has managed to hold on since it is not state policy but a democratic belief that the Irish people cherish (p. 52).

Pragmatic Neutrality and “Selective Neutrality”

Nguyen Khac Giang’s chapter on Vietnam is of the utmost importance to security analysts in the Asia-Pacific. Vietnam’s ‘bamboo diplomacy,’ a foreign policy strategy of prioritizing national interest via flexibility and adaptability, has enabled Hanoi to maintain military ties with Russia, expand trade with China, normalize relations with the United States, and remain a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the World Trade Organization (p. 80). This balancing act is striking. However, Giang is very clear about the growing pressures of factors limiting the scope for Hanoi to test its neutral strategy, such as China’s ambition in the South China Sea, the complications in arms procurement for Vietnam due to the Russia-Ukraine war, and the growing rivalry between the United States and China (p. 81). Vietnam offers a viable model of pragmatic neutrality for developing countries, although it is now heavily under pressure.

The chapter by Liudmila Samarskaia is a surprising element in the book. Israel is not usually credited with neutrality, yet the author



shows that Israel has practiced “selective neutrality,” whereby it has maintained profitable relations with both Russia and China, while keeping deep ties with Washington for its primary security (p.94). This chapter traces how the Israeli-Russian relationship evolved from Cold War hostility to an attentive partnership founded on shared concerns about Iran and extremism in the region (p. 101). A limitation of this chapter is its timing: it was written before the October 2023 Gaza war, which has significantly changed Israel’s position internationally. Nevertheless, it makes an analytical case that “electoral neutrality”—the principle that electoral management bodies, state institutions, and civil servants must remain impartial, non-partisan, and objective throughout the electoral process—is a weapon that can also be used by America’s allies.

Barrett and Sherwood conclude the book by offering a comprehensive review of Oman’s foreign policy. They reject the term “neutral” for Oman as an overly simplistic definition and instead propose the concept of “partisan non-intervention” to describe Muscat’s behavior under Sultan Qaboos (p. 110). Oman’s mediatory role is not ideological; it is a matter of state survival and strategic interest. During the 2017–2021 boycott of Qatar, Oman kept its ports open to Qatar, allowed Qatari LNG to pass through its sea lanes, and opened its airspace to Qatar Airways, acts of overt partisan support disguised as neutrality (p. 115). The authors also show that Oman’s “Ibadi” Islamic heritage—visible in moderation, tolerance, and a focus on community consensus over dynastic rule—has been used as a constitutional justification for non-intervention, providing religious and internal protection for these purely practical decisions (p. 116).

The book’s strength is its comparative breadth as Habtom brings together case studies from Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia

that show how states use neutrality in certain ways to protect their interests. The authors consistently demonstrate that neutrality is not a fixed morality but a strategic tool shaped by history, geography, and power. However, there are some notable gaps in the book. i.e., the lack of India's balancing policy (hedging) between Russia, the United States, and China, as is the need for a deeper theoretical engagement with the literature on hedging and non-alignment. Some chapters are more descriptive than analytical, and the chapter on Israel is overtaken by the events of October 2023. Despite these shortcomings, the book succeeds in its primary objective to demonstrate that neutrality is alive, evolving, and indispensable for understanding contemporary international relations.

The book is relevant to the recent developments in geopolitics because neutrality lies at the center of the most important strategic issues of the time, especially for small and middle powers trying to find their place in a fragmented international system. The book provides a broad analytical perspective needed to understand how states resist great power pressure while preserving their independence.

Note on the Reviewer

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Rights Cost of U.S. Border Enforcement Post-9/11,” <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17259974>. He has published the Op-ed articles, “Multi-alignment Approach and India’s Iran Dilemma?” <https://strafasia.com/multi-alignment-approach-and-indias-iran-dilemma/>; and “Trump’s Intentions Behind the Thailand–Cambodia Ceasefire: A Bid for “President of Peace” —and the Nobel,” <https://yris.yira.org/column/trumps-intentions-behind-the-thailand-cambodia-ceasefire-a-bid-for-president-of-peace-and-the-nobel/>.