

TRANSFORMATION OF NEUTRALITY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the transformation of neutrality in contemporary international relations with the aim of re-examining its traditional understanding as a fixed legal status and its theoretical reconceptualization as a process-based strategic construct manifested through foreign policy practice. Starting from the assumption that the erosion of the border between war and peace, the growth of hybrid threats and increased competition between great powers have fundamentally changed the security environment, the research seeks to explain how states adapt neutrality as a process of strategic positioning in order to preserve security, sovereignty and strategic space for maneuver. The methodological approach is based on qualitative analysis that combines conceptual analysis of theoretical approaches to neutrality, comparative reasoning and selected case studies of European and global examples. Special attention is paid to a comparative consideration of different models of neutrality, including examples of adaptation within formally defined legal neutrality, functional and active manifestations of process-based neutrality, and examples of its abandonment in conditions of increasing perceived threats. The research results show that contemporary neutrality no longer functions as a passive absence of positioning, but as a continuous process of strategic adaptation, that combines selective inclusion in international institutions, risk management and the preservation of political flexibility. The analysis indicates that the transformation of neutrality is shaped by three interrelated factors: structural changes in the international system after the Cold War, geopolitical shocks and the growing influence of internal political and social dynamics on foreign policy decisions. It is concluded that neutrality does not disappear as a relevant concept, but rather undergoes a process of strategic reconceptualization in the direction of functional and active manifestations of process-based neutrality. Based on the findings, the paper recommends that neutrality be viewed in scientific and political analyses as an instrument of uncertainty management and strategic flexibility of small and medium-sized states in a multipolar system. Additionally, the results point to the need to develop analytical frameworks that bridge legal, security, and strategic approaches, in order to better understand the behavior of states that seek to avoid exclusive security choices. The paper contributes to broader debates in the field of international relations and security studies by conceptualizing neutrality as a process of strategic adaptation in conditions of systemic uncertainty.

Keywords: neutrality, transformation of neutrality, strategic adaptation, small and medium-sized states, multipolar order

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CONCEPT AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF NEUTRALITY

In contemporary international relations, neutrality increasingly faces structural pressures created by systemic uncertainty, intensified great power competition, and the gradual blurring of the distinction between war and peace. Although neutrality has long been viewed as a fixed legal status within international law, new geopolitical developments reveal its limitations as a static concept.

This article argues that neutrality should no longer be understood as a fixed legal category, but rather as a process-based strategic construct manifested through foreign policy practice in conditions of systemic uncertainty in conditions of systemic uncertainty. Rather than categorizing states as neutral or non-neutral, the analysis focuses on the ways in which neutrality is continuously negotiated, recalibrated, and used as an instrument of risk management and strategic positioning.

In the classical sense, neutrality implies a legally and politically grounded status of a state that refrains from participating in armed conflicts, does not provide military support to belligerents, and prevents the use of its territory for war purposes (Bothe, 2015). This concept is codified in international law, primarily through the Hague Conventions of 1907, which define the rights and obligations of neutral states in land and naval warfare (Hague Convention (XIII) Concerning the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War, 1907).

During the Cold War, neutrality functioned in a relatively stable bipolar system. A clear division into two opposing blocs allowed neutral states to position themselves “between” them, with the tacit tolerance of the great powers, as long as such a position did not threaten the basic balance of power (Karsh, 1988). In this context, neutrality functioned as an institutionalized, long-term and relatively stable legal status, based on the assumption that restraint and distance are sufficient conditions for security. The

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fundamental question is no longer, whether neutrality is disappearing, but rather how it is changing and adapting to contemporary conditions. This paper is dedicated to this very issue.

The central thesis of the paper is that neutrality in contemporary international relations is not disappearing as a relevant analytical category, but is undergoing a profound transformation from a legally codified and relatively static status to a dynamic, contextually conditioned process of strategic adaptation. In the conditions of a multipolar order, hybrid threats and institutional interconnectedness, neutrality is less and less the absence of a position. It is increasingly becoming a form of active risk management and the preservation of the room for maneuver of small and medium-sized states.

From the methodological point of view, the paper is based on a qualitative research approach that combines conceptual analysis, comparative method and case study elements. The starting point is a critical analysis of theoretical and legal interpretations of neutrality in contemporary academic literature, with the aim of identifying key patterns of transformation of this concept after the Cold War. Conceptual analysis is used to clarify the difference between neutrality as a legal status and neutrality as a strategic process. The comparative approach is applied through a comparative analysis of different models of neutrality in Europe, with a special focus on the Scandinavian countries of Sweden and Finland as examples of abandoning neutrality, and Switzerland and Austria as examples of adaptation within a formal neutral framework. The case study allows these examples not to be treated as isolated cases, but as empirical illustrations of broader structural and systemic trends. The methodology is primarily analytical, without normative pretensions, with a focus on understanding how states use neutrality as a risk management instrument in conditions of contemporary international uncertainty.

The paper is theoretically positioned at the intersection of realist approaches, small state theory, and the literature on coordination and hedging strategies, drawing on classical realist discussions of balancing and alliance strategies in international relations (Walt, 1987). Starting from the realist assumption that the international system is shaped by power relations and structural uncertainty, neutrality is analyzed as a process of strategic adaptation aimed at preserving security, sovereignty and strategic room for maneuver and preserving the room for maneuver of small and medium-sized states in conditions of great power competition. In line with the insights of small-state theory and the multi-actor deterrence of small states, neutrality is interpreted as a form of active strategic positioning within a process-based framework, rather than passive abstention from alignment (Pavić & Beriša, 2026). At the same time, the work relies on the approach of strategic pragmatism, which emphasizes the adaptive combination of cooperation, distance, and selective integration in order to achieve national interests (Pavić & Beriša, 2025). In this context, neutrality is conceptualized as a process that partially overlaps with hedging strategies, i.e. risk management in conditions of multipolarity. Methodologically, comparative cases were chosen with the intention of analytical contrast: Sweden and Finland represent examples of abandoning traditional neutrality due to the growth of security threats, while Switzerland and Austria illustrate a model of adaptation within a formally maintained neutral framework, which allows for the analysis of different paths of transformation of neutrality in the contemporary strategic environment. In this sense, the transformation of neutrality does not represent the abandonment of the concept, but its evolution towards hedging strategies and strategic flexibility, which constitute the operational form of contemporary neutrality.

2. THE CHARACTER OF NEUTRALITY: FROM THE COLD WAR TOWARDS A NEW MULTIPOLAR WORLD

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War, many heralded the “end of neutrality” as a relevant policy. However, the concept has not disappeared, but has transformed and adapted to new geopolitical realities. Rather than simply avoiding bloc conflict, neutrality is increasingly expressed through strategic flexibility as a mode of process-based adaptation in relation to new great powers such as the United States, the Russian Federation, and the People’s Republic of China (Habtom-Desta, 2024). Perhaps the most significant characteristic of contemporary neutrality can be considered through the vision of transformation from status to process. The end of the bipolar order also conditioned the transformation of the meaning of neutrality. As contemporary authors state, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the single superpower, neutrality was often viewed as an archaic concept in public and professional discourse. However, as contemporary literature shows, neutrality does not emerge exclusively from a bipolar systemic structure; it can also be reinterpreted in the triad of unipolarity and multipolarity, which indicates that its role is conditioned by broader changes in the international order, and not only by the structure of the bloc conflict (Habtom-Desta, 2024). In the absence of a stable bipolar order, neutrality can no longer rely on external “external structural conditions of stability” but requires continuous adaptation. Contemporary authors therefore increasingly treat neutrality as a

process-based construct, rather than a static state, as a series of decisions made in relation to specific crises, actors and interests.

Another significant characteristic of contemporary neutrality is reflected in the erosion of the classical legal regime. Contemporary literature increasingly indicates that the legal regime of neutrality, based on the Hague Conventions, no longer fully corresponds to the nature of contemporary conflicts. As James Upcher points out, contemporary crises are characterized by forms of indirect engagement, i.e. sanctions, cyber operations and information wars that evade the classical categories of war and peace (Upcher, 2020). In such a context, neutrality loses its character as a clearly defined legal status and increasingly becomes the subject of political and strategic interpretation.

The third characteristic of contemporary neutrality can be seen through functional and active neutrality. The examples of Switzerland and Austria show that it is possible to maintain the formal status of neutrality, while simultaneously adapting its content. As Lesia Dorosh points out, contemporary neutrality does not imply political passivity, but selective engagement in accordance with the assessment of national interests and normative obligations (Dorosh, 2022). In this sense, neutrality is transformed into a functional instrument of foreign policy, rather than a dogmatic position. In theoretical terms, contemporary neutrality is increasingly approaching the concepts of hedging (a strategy of risk management through combined positioning) and strategic flexibility. As Jürgen Haacke argues, states seek to avoid exclusive security choices and instead combine different forms of cooperation and distance (Haacke, 2019).

The analysis of the evolution of contemporary neutrality indicates that traditional theoretical models that treat neutrality as a stable legal status are no longer sufficient to explain the behavior of states in the post-bipolar system. Contemporary practice shows that neutrality is gradually transforming into a strategic process that combines elements of alignment, selective integration, and risk management, approaching the concepts of hedging and strategic flexibility. Theoretically, this implies a shift in analysis from the question of "is a state neutral" to the question of "how does a state operationally use neutrality". This understanding allows for the integration of realist, institutional and constructivist approaches into a single analytical framework, in which neutrality becomes a dynamic instrument of foreign policy action of small and medium-sized states in conditions of systemic uncertainty.

3. TRANSFORMATION OF NEUTRALITY

In this chapter, we will try to explain how neutrality is being transformed in contemporary international relations through the prism of the previously mentioned "characteristic features" of contemporary neutrality. The transformation of neutrality is not only a European phenomenon, which implies that it must be considered and studied on a global scale. In Asian and other regions, traditions of neutrality and non-alignment (including different forms of non-aligned strategies) have their roots and new forms of reactions to Great American, Chinese or regional imperial maneuvers. The authors have tried to explain the transformation of neutrality through factors such as the end of bipolarity, major geopolitical changes, changes in domestic politics in individual states, through modern strategic approaches, and finally through institutional action.

However, before we begin to consider the above-mentioned factors, we will consider one significant trend that relates to the growing influence of domestic political factors on the policy of neutrality. Decisions to abandon or adapt neutrality are no longer the exclusive domain of security elites. Public opinion, media narratives, and democratic legitimation play an increasingly important role, especially in times of crisis (Baum & Potter, 2008). The moral dimension of contemporary conflicts and the high media visibility of suffering contribute to political pressure to reexamine neutral positions. In this way, neutrality becomes not only a strategic process-based construct but also a socially mediated process, conditioned by internal political dynamics and perceptions of legitimacy.

The transformation of neutrality in the work is analytically decomposed into three interrelated dimensions: structural, strategic, and institutional.

3.1. Loss of bipolar "protective clarity"

The first significant trend is the disappearance of the bipolar structure of international relations. In the post-Cold War period, the international system has become multipolar, fragmented, and marked by asymmetric and hybrid conflicts. In such an environment, neutrality no longer implies a clear and unambiguous "standing aside." Neutral states increasingly face political and economic pressures to take a stand in international crises, whether through sanctions packages, joint declarations, or institutional commitments.

As Andreas Nishikawa-Pacher and Pascal Lottaz point out, the concept of neutrality after the Cold War has lost its clear point of reference and has become the subject of continuous political

interpretation (Nishikawa-Pacher & Lottaz, 2025). Contemporary expert discourse from 2025 confirms this transformation, emphasizing that neutrality is no longer a passive legal status, but a dynamic process-based construct of managing foreign policy relations in conditions of increased uncertainty (GCN, 2025).

3.2. Geopolitical shocks as catalysts for change

Another significant trend in the transformation of neutrality concerns the role of major geopolitical crises as catalysts for strategic change. The war in Ukraine represents a key “stress test” for European neutral states, demonstrating the limitations of traditional reliance on individual neutrality in conditions of high threat perception. The decisions of Sweden and Finland to join NATO after a long period of neutrality indicate that neutrality is no longer understood as an absolute security guarantee, but as a strategy whose sustainability depends on the specific security environment (Ojanen, 2023). These decisions stemmed primarily from a rational assessment of security risks, with the logic of collective defense taking precedence over the traditional policy of distance. The case of the Nordic countries has broader analytical significance, as it shows that geopolitical shocks can lead to a reassessment of neutrality as a risk management strategy for small and medium-sized states as a whole.

3.3. Adaptation instead of abandonment: the “soft transformation” of neutrality

Unlike the Scandinavian countries that decided to formally abandon the policy of neutrality and join collective security alliances, some European countries have opted for adaptation rather than a formal abandonment of neutrality. Switzerland and Austria are examples of the so-called “soft transformation” of neutrality: while formally maintaining their neutral status, they are significantly adjusting their foreign and security policies in line with new international frameworks and security challenges. In Switzerland, the modern interpretation of neutrality includes practical adaptations to international challenges and partnership-based ways of acting in security and economic matters, which shows that neutrality is no longer just a static legal status but a dynamic political choice (Chernyavskiy, 2024). Analyses of Austrian politics point out that after the Cold War, by joining the European Union and through alignment with the common foreign and security policy, Austria is working to adapt neutrality to the new conditions of international politics (Popławski, 2020). At the same time, broader studies show how neutral European states use integration and security mechanisms to secure their status and contribute to solving global issues, without formally joining military alliances.

This adaptation is reflected through various mechanisms: active participation in international diplomatic and security initiatives, selective participation in EU sanctions packages and joint statements, as well as the development of capabilities for the defense and protection of national interests without formally joining military alliances. Such adaptation indicates a shift towards the concept of “active” or “functional” neutrality, where neutrality is no longer just a legal or symbolic status, but a dynamic and practical instrument of risk management. Contemporary expert discourse, including the 2025 recommendations, emphasizes that neutrality in this model implies selective engagement based on an assessment of national interests, international obligations and normative principles, as well as on the possibilities of maximizing room for maneuver in a multipolar and fragmented international system. In this sense, neutrality is no longer seen as a passive status, but as a strategic alternative that allows a state to participate in international processes without fully fitting into dominant military or political blocs.

3.4. Transformation of neutrality: legal, strategic and institutional aspects

The transformation of neutrality in the 21st century involves moving from a classical static legal status to a dynamic, context-dependent process of strategic positioning. From a legal perspective, traditional neutrality laws, based on the 1907 Hague Conventions, no longer correspond to the complexity of contemporary conflicts. As a recent analysis of the concept of neutrality highlights, states are increasingly faced with forms of indirect engagement, such as sanctions, cyber and information attacks, that evade classical war-peace categories and create the need for new interpretations of legal obligations (Berchev, 2025). In this sense, the legal framework of neutrality becomes increasingly flexible in its interpretation and application, which adapts to the dynamics of international institutions and political crises.

Strategically, modern neutrality is no longer just about avoiding conflict. It involves actively managing risks and maximizing the room for maneuver in a multipolar order. Concepts such as hedging, multi-vector foreign policy and selective integration show that neutrality can be a means of achieving strategic flexibility without formally joining military alliances (Nishikawa-Pacher & Lottaz, 2025). The examples of Switzerland and Austria illustrate this strategy: although they formally maintain a neutral status, they practically participate in international initiatives, sanctions packages and regional security cooperation, which allows them to adapt to global security challenges without abandoning formal neutrality (Stöcklin, 2024).

The institutional-political aspect of the transformation is reflected in the porosity of neutrality in the context of integration and multilateral partnerships. Membership in the European Union, the Partnership

for Peace, and acceptance of collective security arrangements condition the traditional neutral status, transforming it into a continuously “bias-managed neutrality” (Parish, 2025). This adaptation suggests that modern neutrality involves simultaneously preserving formal status and actively positioning itself in international systems, which is an example of functional and pragmatic transformation in the context of global uncertainty.

On the other hand, neutrality is used as an instrument of risk management, maneuver space and strategic flexibility. Ultimately, through institutions, formal status remains, but is realistically integrated into international organizations, collective defenses and multilateral partnerships. Thus, modern neutrality is no longer a static or dogmatic concept, but a dynamic and contextually conditioned process, which allows small and medium-sized states to simultaneously maintain their sovereignty and respond to complex geopolitical challenges.

3.5. Neutrality as strategic flexibility and policy evolution

Modern neutrality is increasingly approaching concepts such as hedging, multi-vector foreign policy and selective integration. Instead of a clear commitment to or against alliances, states seek to maximize their room for maneuver in conditions of uncertainty. In this sense, neutrality can be understood as a risk management strategy, rather than a permanent absence of a position. As Haacke points out, neutrality in modern conditions is a dynamic process of adaptation, not a fixed norm (Haacke, 2019).

The evolution of domestic politics and the experience of states such as Switzerland and Austria imply adaptation within the framework of neutrality. Namely, both Switzerland and Austria have retained their formal neutral status, but have adapted their foreign policy course to current circumstances. Switzerland supported sanctions against Russia, which was implemented in practice as part of a pacifist position, but which has caused controversy over what “neutrality” really means today in a situation of total war in Europe (Allen, 2022). These states are also developing an active role in multilateral security initiatives and regional cooperation, whereby neutrality takes the form of “active non-participation” in conflicts, but not isolation.

3.6. The institutional “porosity” of neutrality

Traditional neutrality, without military alliances, is increasingly “porous” through economic and political integration, such as the EU or other partnerships. Other neutral actors are opting for humanitarian participation and collective security agreements, as well as informal international partners (Mařátková, 2017). This shows that states no longer see neutrality simply as the absence of alliances, but as the ability to “fit” various security and diplomatic mechanisms into their foreign policy arsenal.

The strong institutionalization of international relations is another factor in the transformation of neutrality. Membership in the European Union, participation in the Partnership for Peace, and acceptance of common sanctions packages create political obligations that fundamentally change the content of neutrality, even when it remains formally in force (Genini, 2025).

As Geoffrey Pridham notes, neutrality within the EU is becoming a “porous” category, conditioned by common policies and institutional mechanisms (Pridham, 2008). This process does not necessarily mean the loss of sovereignty, but it indicates the transformation of neutrality from an absolute to a relative category.

4. CONCLUSION: FROM STATUS TO PROCESS

What distinguishes contemporary neutrality is a clear distinction: neutrality is not an anachronism, but a process-based form of strategic adaptation for small and medium-sized states in conditions of multipolarity and structural uncertainty. The transformation of neutrality is not limited to Europe. In Asia and other regions, traditions of neutrality and non-participation (including variants of nonalignment) are taking on new forms in response to greater American, Chinese or regional imperial maneuvers, demonstrating the global relevance of the phenomenon.

However, it is not disappearing, but is transforming into a flexible, context-dependent strategy. Contemporary neutrality is less and less a permanent status and more and more a dynamic process of managing risks and preserving strategic maneuver space. In this sense, neutrality is no longer the absence of a position, but a deliberate and adaptive form of positioning in a complex and unstable international environment.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is reflected in the conceptualization of neutrality as a process-based strategy of a dynamic and contextually conditioned form of foreign policy and security positioning. In contrast to traditional approaches that treat neutrality as a fixed legal status or a binary category (neutral – non-neutral state), this paper shows that contemporary neutrality functions as a continuous process of decision-making in conditions of structural uncertainty.

Thus understood, neutrality approaches the concepts of strategic flexibility, hedging and risk management, but retains its specificity through the formal-legal and symbolic dimension. The theoretical significance of this approach is reflected in overcoming the normative debate on the “justification” of neutrality and moving it into an analytical framework that allows for a better understanding of the behavior of small and medium-sized states in a multipolar international system. This understanding of neutrality extends the existing literature on small states by showing that neutrality is no longer an alternative to alignment, but a specific form of adaptive alignment in conditions of multipolarity. Contemporary neutrality represents a process of managing uncertainty, rather than a condition of non-alignment.

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