

# EPIS **BASICS:**

## LOOKING AT THE CONCEPT OF NEUTRALITY

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In EPIS Basics, our authors explain basic knowledge of international foreign affairs and security policies. This encompasses basic theories, organisations and events. This series is presented in depth here in the magazine. You can also find other smaller contributions on our Instagram page

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### **Maximilian Arnold**

Maximilian Arnold is currently in his third year of the BA in International Affairs at the University of St. Gallen (HSG). His main area of interest is security policy, with a particular focus on Swiss neutrality and its relevance in the evolving European security landscape.



Switzerland is famous for its banking, its watchmaking, its chocolate - and its neutrality. Unlike Sweden and Finland, which recently abandoned neutrality to join NATO in response to the war in Ukraine, Switzerland continues to maintain neutrality as a central pillar of its foreign policy, as it has for centuries. While the concept of neutrality may seem straightforward at first glance, its nuances are more complex. This article unpacks five important differentiations within the concept of neutrality.

## **Neutrality Law vs. Neutrality Policy**

One of the most crucial distinctions when talking about neutrality, is that between neutrality law and neutrality policy. The law of neutrality is recognised under international law and, has been codified in the Hague Conventions since 1907 and is applied in the event of an international armed conflict. Neutrality policy encompasses all measures that a neutral state in war, or a permanently neutral state in peace, takes at its own discretion beyond its obligations under neutrality law. These measures are intended to ensure the effectiveness and credibility of a state's neutrality.

## **Occasional vs. Permanent Neutrality**

Neutrality can be either occasional or permanent. Occasional neutrality occurs when a state decides to remain neutral in a particular conflict without a long-term commitment to avoid all future wars. In contrast, permanent neutrality is when a state commits itself to a neutral stance indefinitely. This concept emerged in the early 19th century with the Congress of Vienna (1815), where Switzerland's permanent neutrality was enshrined in treaty documents.

## **Integral vs. Differential Neutrality**

Another important distinction within neutrality is between integral and differential neutrality. Integral neutrality refers to a state that attempts to remain impartial toward all conflict parties in all dimensions, including economic, military, and ideological impartiality. Differential neutrality, on the other hand, allows for certain forms of engagement, such as economic sanctions, while avoiding direct military involvement.

## **Armed vs. Unarmed Neutrality**

Another common distinction is between armed and unarmed neutrality. Armed neutrality refers to a state that maintains military forces while pledging not to take sides in conflicts unless attacked. In addition to Switzerland, Sweden and Finland practised a policy of armed neutrality before joining NATO. Conversely, unarmed neutral states, such as Costa Rica, the Vatican, or Lichtenstein, do not maintain military forces capable of defending against violations of their neutrality.

## **Maritime vs. Territorial Neutrality**

Neutrality in international law also distinguishes between maritime and territorial aspects. Maritime neutrality has long been important, as control of sea routes has been crucial to trade and military operations throughout history. In times of war, neutral states often insisted on the right to trade freely, even with belligerent states. Territorial neutrality, on the other hand, refers to a neutral state's obligations regarding its land and airspace.

Although there is a great deal more to the concept of neutrality, these five distinctions serve to illustrate the multifaceted nature of neutrality. They also provide a clearer understanding of how neutrality functions in international affairs and serve as a basis for further discussion of its evolving meaning and practical applications in different states.