

# Does the “Sky Shield” protect Austria?

by General (retd.) DI Mag Günther Greindl,\* Austria



Günther Greindl.  
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*(CH-S) Günther Greindl's thoughts also affect Switzerland very directly. A new, multi-billion-dollar air defence system is to protect Europe from Russian missiles. But won't the neutral states of Switzerland and Austria only make themselves a target for attack? And wouldn't other systems*

*be sufficient and more compatible with neutrality? General Greindl's warnings for Austria are clear. The parallels with Switzerland cannot be overlooked. The editorial team's contribution on the topic of "Sky Shield and Switzerland" will follow next week.*

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By joining the “Sky Shield” initiative, the Austrian government has triggered a debate that touches on fundamental questions of security policy and neutrality. Pro-government security experts claim that Sky Shield is essential for our air defence because Austria cannot protect its airspace on its own. They say that for the first time, Austria will be able to combat missiles in the stratosphere. Opponents of the project believe that Sky Shield is incompatible with neutrality and of doubtful use. With such differing assessments, it is worth taking a closer look at the very expensive “Sky Shield” project.

## The Sky Shield

The “European Sky Shield Initiative” (ESSI) was launched by Germany in 2022. The initiative aims to strengthen NATO's existing air defence system, the “Integrated Air Defence System”, to repel Russian missile attacks. So far, 22 NATO

countries, as well as Austria and Switzerland, want to participate. France, Italy, Spain and Poland have not yet decided. France criticises the one-sided orientation towards US equipment and US technology. The US defence industry would be the undisputed profiteer. Europe would become permanently dependent on the USA. The fact that the neutral states of Austria and Switzerland are participating from the outset is probably due to the new security policy orientation of both governments, which envisages increased and closer cooperation with NATO.

## Austria's accession

The Austrian government, like the EU, is following NATO's assessment that since the war in Ukraine, Russia, once a strategic partner, is once again the eternal enemy of the Western world. The central argument is that the EU must therefore be made fit for war. Protecting the entire EU territory from Russian missile attacks is thus becoming an urgent task. Austria participates voluntarily, although a country with credible neutrality has a good chance of staying out of a war. If Austria defends its neutrality on land and in the air and prevents the use of its territory by warring parties, what reason would Russia have to attack neutral Austria with missiles?

The security situation would be quite different if Austria participated in ESSI. As a participant in Sky Shield, Austria is a legitimate target from the outset. This fear is countered by the fact that an additional declaration states that operational participation in missile defence is not intended. It is merely a matter of the joint procurement of equipment and training measures. Membership is therefore compatible with neutrality. This has also been confirmed by experts in international law.

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sions as part of the Austrian delegation, including as force commander of the UN Peacekeeping Forces in Syria, Kuwait and Cyprus. He subsequently also worked in military-related diplomatic roles. He is a founding member of the “Initiative Engagierte Neutralität” (Initiative Engaged Neutrality).”

It is difficult to accept this line of argument. Sky Shield is designed as a strategic defence system to intercept missiles in the stratosphere. This requires the purchase of *Patriot or Arrow 3* systems, which cost several billion euros. If Austria purchases these systems, it will inevitably become an operational participant in Sky Shield, since modern missiles can only be shot down if all defence systems are networked and under a single command.

Then, at the latest, clear answers to important questions are needed: At what altitude does Austria's sovereignty in its airspace end? Is shooting down missiles that fly over Austria outside the sovereignty zone covered by neutrality law? Is Austria possibly being drawn into a missile war that does not affect Austria at all? What risks remain despite Sky Shield? What other means would suffice to defend neutrality in airspace?

### **Maintaining neutrality**

The merger between the EU and NATO presents Austria with a difficult task, as the EU makes its security policy decisions in full agreement with NATO. In the joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation of January 2023, it states: "We advocate the greatest possible involvement of NATO allies that are not members of the EU in its initiatives. We advocate the greatest possible involvement of EU members that are not part of the Alliance in its initiatives."

If Austria does not want to completely abandon its constitutionally enshrined neutrality, it must organise its defence independently. Its geostrategic location in the middle of Europe favours Austria and opens realistic opportunities for it to stay out of wars. The greatest threat to our neutrality is the overflight of our territory or the transport of weapons of warring parties through Austria. The war in Ukraine has made it clear to us how important Austria is for NATO's supply lines. However, in the event of war, credible neutrality must prevent all warring parties from using our territory.

In the absence of modern equipment, Austria has so far been unable to effectively prevent a violation of our neutrality in the air. The decision to purchase the IRIS-T-SLM air defence missile system, which has a range of up to 40 kilometres, is a decisive step in closing this gap. In

the age of drones, the procurement of Skyranger anti-aircraft guns, with a range of 3,000 metres, is an important addition to air defence. In addition to the Eurofighters, this means that Austria has important means of defending its airspace against unauthorised overflights or protecting major events against terrorist attacks from the air. These procurements allow Austria to independently fulfil its obligations as a neutral state. Participation in the "Sky Shield" project is not necessary for this.

### **The return of the cold war**

Sky Shield follows the logic of the Cold War and marks the beginning of a new arms race. A cold war sets in motion a spiral of armament that causes disproportionate costs without increasing security. Each measure leads to a counter-measure, causing the arms race to accelerate. Mutual mistrust increases and the threat remains omnipresent despite all efforts.

A new arms race only serves the arms industry but is not in Europe's interest. What Europe needs is a return to diplomacy, to cooperative security and to arms control. The cancellation of the INF Treaty ("Intermediate Range Nuclear Force Treaty") did not come from Russia. It was Europe, which was too weak to prevent the cancellation of this treaty, which is so important for European security.

Today, the EU is once again on a geopolitical wrong track. It rules out negotiations because it is impossible to negotiate with "totalitarian and imperial Russia" until Russia abandons its imperial attitude. With this attitude, the policy of détente of the 1970s would not have been possible. At that time, arms control treaties were very successfully concluded with the totalitarian and imperial Soviet Union. The return of the Cold War benefits neither Ukraine nor Europe.

The founding idea of the EU was to transform the European continent of wars into a continent of peace. If the EU, under the influence of NATO, has forgotten this objective, would it not be a worthwhile task for Austria to use its neutrality for a committed peace policy? Arms control and confidence building instead of Sky Shield – that would be the way to peace!

*Source: <https://libratus.online/de/schuetzt-der-sky-shield-oesterreich>, 10 September 2024*

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*