

How Jawaharlal Nehru facilitated the emergence of a 'neutral' Austria

by Sanjana Suchdev, New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Austria on Tuesday, becoming the first Indian Prime Minister since Indira Gandhi in 1983 to visit the country in central Europe.

Ahead of Prime Minister *Narendra Modi's* visit to Austria,¹ the Congress Tuesday (July 9) recalled the "key role" *Jawaharlal Nehru*, India's first prime minister, played in "the emergence of a sovereign and neutral Austria".

Jairam Ramesh, Congress general secretary in-charge of communications, said the Republic of Austria was established fully only on October 26, 1955, and one person critical to this becoming a reality was the man "Mr. Modi loves to hate and defame".²

Ramesh spoke about the writings of noted Austrian academic Dr *Hans Köchler* which talk about Nehru's role in the rise of Austria "after a decade of occupation by the victorious World War II powers".

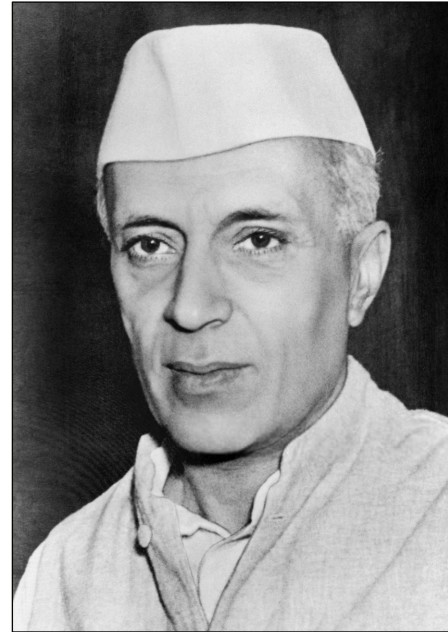
What was the link between Jawaharlal Nehru and Austria?

After World War II, Austria was divided up into four zones, and occupied by the victorious Allied Powers – the United States, the erstwhile Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and France.

However, Austria wanted to be a sovereign country. By remaining neutral, Austria hoped to foster relations with both Western and Eastern bloc countries, and play a unique role in international diplomacy.

But its location – right in the middle of Capitalist Western Europe and Communist Eastern Europe – left it vulnerable to becoming a Cold War flashpoint. Both the Soviets and the West had intentions of bringing Austria under their umbrella.

This is where Nehru enters the picture. Köchler wrote in *Austria, Neutrality and Non-Alignment* (2021) about how in August 1952, the Political Director of Austria's Foreign Ministry came to New Delhi to meet Nehru, who assured him of India's readiness to sound out the Soviets on Austria's aspirations. That year, India was



Jawaharlal Nehru was the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.
(Photo wikipedia)

among the few countries that supported Austria's appeal at the United Nations General Assembly for the end of Allied occupation, and restoration of sovereignty.

On June 2, 1953, Austrian Foreign Minister *Karl Gruber* and Nehru attended the coronation of *Elizabeth II*, and according to media reports, the next morning, they met in London. At a second meeting, on June 20, Köchler wrote, Gruber asked for Nehru's help with the Soviet government in the deadlocked negotiations on the treaty between Austria and the four Allied Powers. He reportedly conveyed that his government was ready to offer "guarantees against Austrian participation in military alliances", an important aspect of its neutrality that Gruber stressed on later too.

In his book *The Political Settlement After the Second World War* (1972), British historian Sir *John Wheeler-Bennett* wrote that Nehru's role as "diplomatic mediator" introduced "an entirely new factor into the Austrian treaty discussions".

Köchler quoted a report in the Austrian daily *Neues Österreich* on June 21, 1953, that said: "Prime Minister Nehru [...] is without a doubt the only personality in international politics whose

'good offices' can be effective in supporting Austria in her efforts towards the realization of the State Treaty."

In his 1976 memoirs, Gruber wrote about Nehru's role in reaching the treaty.

In May 1955, what was to be known as the "Bürgenstock Initiative" became the foundation for the successful conclusion of the treaty. *Bruno Kreisky*, at the time Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office, and later Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Austria, stated at the time in Volume 1 of his Book *'Reden'*:

"So ist der Name Nehru für immer mit der Geschichte unserer Neutralität verbunden (Thus, the name of Nehru will forever be connected with the history of our neutrality)."

In June 1955, PM Nehru paid a State visit to Austria, roughly one month after it had gained full independence through the conclusion of the State Treaty. Nehru's was the first State visit of a foreign leader to newly independent Austria.

Does Austria continue with its neutral status?

While Austria is strictly bound by the neutrality enshrined in its Constitution, specifically Article 9a, which declares that Austria will not join military alliances and will not allow foreign military bases on its territory, an incompatibility with the said status and an alignment towards the West have been evident since the end of the Cold War in 1991.

In 1995, Austria joined the European Union as well as NATO's 'Partnership for Peace'.

Post 9/11, Austria's cooperation with Western-led counterterrorism and security initiatives has deepened. In 2001, its Parliament adopted a law authorising the Defense Ministry to allow

the transit and temporary presence of foreign forces through or on Austrian territory – a provision that has been used frequently by NATO forces. Moreover, in recent years, Austria has seen major political shifts towards leaders and parties more inclined towards the West.

In 2010, its Parliament amended the neutrality law of 1955, inserting an Article into the Constitution allowing for active participation in military operations within the framework of Austria's EU membership.

However, Austria is one of the three countries in the EU who are still officially neutral, along with Ireland and Malta.

Commenting on "a constant erosion of the country's neutrality in favor of Western-centered realpolitik", Köchler wrote:

"Thus, it is not surprising that Austrian officialdom since the end of the Kreisky era has been almost completely silent about Prime Minister Nehru's historical role as facilitator, and mediator, in the negotiations with the Soviet Union on the conclusion of the State Treaty."

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-history/how-nehru-facilitated-the-emergence-of-a-neutral-austria-9444516/>, 11 July 2024

¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/pm-modi-austria-visit-live-updates-9443681/>

² (Edit. CH-S) On Modi's position in the controversy over Nehru's role, there is an article in the "New Indian Express", 5 February 2024, which refers to a speech by Modi in parliament: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Feb/05/pm-modi-quotes-speeches-by-nehru-indira-says-congress-leaders-had-no-faith-in-indians> and «The New Economic Times», 6. Februar 2024: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/pm-modi-speaks-on-nehru-and-indiras-views-on-indians-what-nehru-and-indira-really-said-in-their-speeches/articleshow/107434888.cms?from=mdr>