

Is NATO Enough? Slovenia's Blind Spot and the Path to Autonomy Between Strategic Redundancy and Neutrality

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This study assesses Slovenia's security strategy through the lens of its NATO membership, with particular focus on whether continued alignment with NATO remains the most appropriate option. By examining official strategic documents, academic literature and case studies of neutral European countries, it highlights the lack of contingency planning outside the NATO framework. The analysis considers the legal, political, and geographical dimensions of security guarantees, the risks of entanglement in allied conflicts, and the potential benefits of a more autonomous strategic position. Against the backdrop of a broader reconfiguration of transatlantic relations and ongoing debates on the EU's strategic autonomy, the article identifies both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of Slovenia's current approach by exploring possible scenarios ranging from maintaining the status quo to pursuing neutrality. The findings suggest the need to actively consider 'Plan B' options and to invest in strategic redundancy within an increasingly unpredictable global landscape, with the aim of safeguarding national interests. This argument is relevant not only for Slovenia but also for other countries in comparable geopolitical situations, such as the Czech Republic and North Macedonia.

Key Words: Slovenia grand strategy, NATO, neutrality, strategic redundancy, PESCO, defence



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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary, rapidly changing global geopolitical landscape is challenging the validity of long-standing equilibria established at the beginning of the 1990s. The 2008 financial crisis and the rise of BRICS, alongside China's consolidation as the 'global warehouse,' marked the end of the unipolar Pax Americana (Qiao et al. 2024; Korybko 2021).

[78] In such evolving geopolitical environment, characterised by rising tensions between the incumbent superpower and its competitors, small states such as Slovenia face increasingly complex strategic decisions regarding their security and foreign policy orientation (Mazarr et al. 2022; Lampret and Grilj 2019).

When Slovenia joined NATO in 2004, it sought not only security assurances and stronger political integration into the Western democratic sphere, but also an opportunity to contribute effectively to international security (Šteiner 2019; Osterman 2019). NATO membership promised stability and integration into Western institutional frameworks, and achieving this goal required adjustments to Slovenia's defence strategy, aligning it with collective security commitments (Lampret and Grilj 2019; Osterman 2019; Šteiner 2019).

However, in light of the evolving geopolitical situation, the cohesion and effectiveness of the NATO alliance have increasingly been called into question. Internal tensions, diverging national interests, and ongoing debates about rebalancing burden-sharing and financial responsibilities have tested Alliance unity (Mazarr et al. 2022; Duggal 2025). Meanwhile, as the US has increasingly pivoted towards challenges in the the Indo-Pacific, many smaller European allies have begun to question the long-term viability of collective defence. These concerns were further amplified during the Trump presidency by statements from senior officials that cast doubt on the automatic invocation of Article 5 (Kaynak 2023; Mazarr et al. 2022).

Neutrality has emerged as one of the strategic options that Slovenia might consider in light of current international developments. Austria and Switzerland are often cited as examples of neutral states that have maintained political stability, economic prosperity, and independent defence capabilities outside major military alliances. Both countries have navigated geopolitical challenges effectively, sustaining constructive diplomatic relations across geopolitical divides and leveraging their neutrality as a platform for mediation and dialogue (Andrej 2010; Müller 2019).

Given Slovenia's position in Europe, particularly its geographic location and historical context as one of the southernmost provinces of Habsburg Cisleithania, and later as part of Yugoslavia's non-aligned movement, neutrality could be regarded as a viable option deserving consideration. Nevertheless, comparisons with Switzerland and Austria, particularly regarding their deterrence capabilities, must be un-



derstood as the outcome of long-term defence restructuring process rather than the immediate result of a political decision.

Slovenia is situated at the crossroads of Central Europe, the Western Balkans, and the northern Mediterranean. It lies on NATO's south-eastern flank and is surrounded by NATO member states, with the exception of neutral Austria. As a member of both the EU and NATO, Slovenia is deeply embedded in the Euro-Atlantic institutional framework. From a geographical perspective, it is not located on the immediate frontline of any potential conflict involving a non-NATO state. Its EU membership and participation in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) position it within the core of Western strategic infrastructure and security networks, without necessarily relying solely on its formal status within NATO.

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In terms of EU security cooperation, 3SI projects (such as regional initiatives involving Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy, or projects along Slovenia's segment of the EU's external border) are indirectly linked to NATO structures and objectives. While formally framed as instruments of regional development, these projects also function, from a dual-use perspective, as platforms supporting NATO logistical operations and the advancement of US strategic interests in Eastern Europe (Juri 2024).

This raises a fundamental question: does Slovenia require full NATO membership to safeguard its strategic interests, or does its current position within the Alliance already suffice for its security needs? This article examines a range of options from geostrategic, security, economic, and diplomatic perspectives, including the possibility of full neutrality (Čehovin 2019; Kožljak 2019). It begins with a methodological outline, followed by an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of both NATO membership and neutrality, and concludes with strategic recommendations for Slovenia's future posture.

METHODOLOGY

This research is grounded in a non-numerical, qualitative comparative analysis focused on the examination and interpretation of relevant geopolitical and diplomatic data. It emphasises strategic orientation, policy choices, and normative frameworks in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

To assess the range of possibilities arising from different strategic decisions concerning Slovenia's continued NATO membership, a sce-

[80] nario development methodology is employed. Four possible scenarios are explored: (1) continued full alignment with NATO, (2) remaining within the NATO treaty while withdrawing from the integrated command and control structure, (3) a shift towards neutrality within the EU, and (4) the adoption of a hybrid strategy based on EU strategic autonomy.

The analysis draws on both primary and secondary discourse. Primary sources include NATO strategic documents, Slovenian government policies, and materials from public debate, while secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed academic articles, think-tank reports, and policy analyses. These are used to assess both the current political situation and the broader political discourse.

From a theoretical perspective, Neoclassical Realism informs the evaluation of Slovenia's external alignments, providing the analytical lens through which strategic decisions are assessed. Social Constructivism serves as the interpretative framework for analysing primary policy documents, while Liberalism contributes to the evaluation of the political and ideological rationale underpinning Slovenia's membership of NATO and the EU.

The author maintains academic neutrality by presenting both pro-NATO and pro-neutrality positions in a balanced, evidence-based manner. However, as one of the aims of this research is to introduce strategic alternatives to the predominantly mono-doctrinal approach characterising current geopolitical and geostrategic discourse in Slovenia, greater emphasis is placed on exploring these alternative perspectives.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Since joining NATO in 2004, Slovenia has shaped its security strategy by committing fully to integration across all dimensions of the Alliance. It has developed its capabilities within a framework of comprehensive institutional and operational alignment with NATO. This alignment has resulted in a high degree of doctrinal dependence, whereby NATO membership appears not merely as a strategic choice, but as a fixed and largely unquestioned premise.

The Absence of a Plan B for Slovenia's Security Strategy

This is particularly evident in Slovenia's national strategic documents, which consistently reflect a mono-doctrinal orientation and a lack of contingency planning. The Defence Strategy of the Republic of Slove-



nia, adopted in 2024, explicitly states that Slovenia intends to ensure its defence and security ‘through involvement in the NATO collective defence system and the EU Common Security and Defence Policy’ (Vlada Republike Slovenije 2024a, 2), without reference to alternative options. In effect, this is presented as the sole framework for the country’s defence policy. A similar position is articulated in the 2024 Military Strategy, which states that the ‘Slovenian Armed Forces fulfil their mission primarily through the implementation of the country’s obligations within NATO and the EU’ (Vlada Republike Slovenije 2024b, 5).

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This pattern is consistent across other key security and defence documents, including the White Paper on Defence (Ministrstvo za obrambo 2020), the earlier National Resolution on the Strategy for National Security (Državni zbor 2019) and even the most recent Strategy for the Development of the Defence Industry 2025 (Vlada Republike Slovenije 2025). None of these documents addresses neutrality, conditional alliances, or bilateral defence agreements outside NATO, nor do they include feasibility studies or scenario analyses concerning a potential weakening of the Alliance. Likewise, they do not consider fallback options. This omission represents a structural blind spot in Slovenia’s strategic thinking on national defence.

Neutrality as a strategic option is largely excluded from policy consideration, and related discussions remain marginal within Slovenian security discourse; perspectives such as Juvan’s proposals on cooperative security are rare (Juvan and Csanyi 2025). There is limited evidence of genuinely original strategic thinking, and most contributions remain confined to scenarios that assume continued reliance on NATO’s security guarantees.

This doctrinal uniformity entails significant risks. The issue is not Slovenia’s participation in NATO per se, but rather the absence of mechanisms for strategic reassessment or policy diversification. By comparison, Austria’s federal government regularly publishes security assessments that examine neutrality as both a principle and a policy (Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung 2020), while Switzerland periodically reviews its armed neutrality strategy through parliamentary debate and public consultation (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft 2021).

Given Slovenia’s geopolitical position at the intersection of Central Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Adriatic region, conditions that could favour flexible, multi-vector diplomacy or layered security strate-

gies, it is notable that the country has not instituted regular reviews of its strategic posture. Instead, it has consolidated a relatively rigid and doctrinal policy framework in which NATO is positioned not only as a current partner, but as a permanent strategic condition.

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Legal and Political Limits of NATO Guarantees (Articles 4 and 5)

Slovenia's mono-doctrinal strategic paradigm, in which NATO is assumed to be inevitable, perpetual, and without alternatives, reflects a deficit in strategic imagination and foresight. As a small state in an increasingly unstable and fragmented international system, Slovenia risks exposing itself to long-term vulnerabilities by failing to consider – even hypothetically – the implications of NATO inaction or a decline in its deterrent credibility. Instead, Slovenia's strategic planning rests on the assumption that NATO will remain reliable, despite growing indications that this expectation may be weakening. From a legal perspective, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty does not mandate automatic action by all NATO members: it entails a political commitment rather than a binding legal obligation. 'In other words, Article 5 does not commit member states to deploy military assets if an ally is attacked. It only commits them to some form of response' (Riedenstein 2024), allowing each state to determine the nature of its assistance. This does not necessarily imply military intervention, and each ally retains discretion over the measures it deems appropriate (Drummond 2025).

No Contingency Planning for NATO Failure or US Disengagement

US leaders have publicly questioned the scope of their commitment under Article 5, thereby undermining the credibility of NATO's collective defence guarantee. For instance, in congressional hearings and public statements, officials have indicated that responses to an attack on a NATO ally would be determined on a 'case-by-case' basis rather than triggered automatically (Franke 2018).

Moreover, NATO is experiencing a gradual erosion of its founding political identity, as internal developments challenge its shared values. Established during the Cold War as a community of (predominantly) liberal democracies bound by common principles, the Alliance is increasingly affected by internal political shifts, particularly in the United States. The growing influence of nationalist and authoritarian-leaning currents in US politics has raised questions about Washington's



commitment to liberal-democratic norms. Should the Alliance's most powerful member diverge from its own stated democratic principles, NATO risks losing a key source of legitimacy and cohesion – namely, its identity as not only a military alliance but also a political community grounded in a shared worldview. For smaller member states such as Slovenia, this could mean that continued participation is justified less by shared values and more by pragmatic security considerations, thereby weakening the Alliance's normative cohesion. [83]

Slovenia's security planning, predicated on the assumption that NATO will remain cohesive and fully capable, is therefore less robust today than at the time of its accession. NATO's effectiveness relies heavily on the leading role of the US, which provides a substantial share of high-end capabilities that give the Alliance its strategic advantage, including long-range transport, advanced intelligence and surveillance systems, missile defence, satellite coverage, military-grade global positioning systems, and nuclear deterrence (Barry et al. 2025; Burilkov and Wolff 2025). Without US contributions, NATO's capacity to function as a credible deterrent would be significantly reduced. Estimates suggest that replacing US military capabilities within NATO would cost approximately €300 billion over a decade, and even with coordinated EU efforts, such a transition would take 10–15 years (Biscop 2018), creating a prolonged and potentially vulnerable period for the Alliance's deterrence posture.

For Slovenia, this is a concrete rather than abstract concern. The country's armed forces are structured primarily for participation in alliance operations rather than for autonomous defence. Airspace control, advanced command systems, transport capabilities, and much of the intelligence and surveillance infrastructure, similar to those of many small and medium-sized allies, are heavily dependent on NATO partners (Cassidy 2003; Kotnik 2024). In a scenario in which Washington were to withdraw from the region, European states might attempt to reallocate their forces and sustain a credible deterrence posture. However, in the short term, Slovenia would lack the capacity to secure its airspace or mount a substantial defence in the event of a security crisis.

It is therefore reasonable to consider the possibility of a significant reorientation of US security priorities, particularly in light of Washington's increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific and its potential reluctance to remain deeply engaged in European defence. A NATO without the US

would not simply represent a reduced version of the current Alliance, it would constitute a fundamentally different structure with diminished capabilities, imposing greater burdens on European governments and introducing additional uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of collective defence.

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For a small state such as Slovenia, this scenario underscores the risks inherent in reliance on a single strategic framework without a contingency plan. As Juvan and Csanyi (2025) argue, small European countries must combine collective defence with elements of cooperative security and credible self-reliance. Such an approach would require the development of capabilities that are relevant both to alliance commitments and to national defence, thereby ensuring sovereignty and strategic credibility in a changing security environment.

The conclusion is clear: if NATO's US pillar weakens, Slovenia's current security model will be exposed. The absence of contingency planning for such a development constitutes a broader structural deficiency in its grand strategy.

NATO's Lack of Protection against Intra-Alliance Aggression

Slovenia's lack of strategic alternatives is also evident in relation to protection against security threats originating from neighbouring states. Although often cited as the cornerstone of NATO's deterrence doctrine, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is limited both in scope and in binding force. It applies only to armed attacks 'against one or more [allies] in Europe or North America' and is triggered exclusively in the event of an external attack (NATO 1949). The Article states that: 'An armed attack against one or more of them shall be considered an attack against them all,' yet the treaty contains no provisions addressing aggression, coercion, or territorial disputes between member states.

This limitation is inherent to NATO's original design, as it was established in the context of confrontation with the Soviet Union and its allies, thus conceived as a collective deterrence mechanism and not a dispute resolution platform between allies (Kaplan 2004). It provides no formal mechanisms for managing intra-alliance conflicts, including potential military confrontations (Simm 1999). As Schake (2017) observes, 'NATO is not a police force among allies; it is a shield against external attack.' This structural constraint has significant implications for states with unresolved bilateral issues within the Alliance. From this perspective, Slovenia benefits from NATO protection only in relation to Austria, its sole non-NATO neighbour. However, given Austria's neu-



tral status and EU membership, this scenario appears highly unlikely. With regard to Slovenia's other neighbours (Italy, Hungary and Croatia), its security does not derive from Alliance guarantees, but rather from a shared diplomatic and institutional framework within the European context.

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The case of Croatia is particularly illustrative, as the maritime border dispute in the Gulf of Piran highlights the limitations of NATO's protective framework. In 2017, the Permanent Court of Arbitration awarded Slovenia access to international waters via a maritime corridor, thereby affirming its sovereignty and strategic maritime access. Although the ruling was final and binding, Croatia has declined to implement it (Radio Free Europe 2017). This case demonstrates that, despite NATO's overarching security umbrella, bilateral disputes among member states may persist unresolved, as the Alliance lacks internal mechanisms for conflict resolution.

Slovenia's Peculiar Geographic Position

From a geographical standpoint, Slovenia occupies a distinctive position on Europe's strategic map. It is bordered by NATO member states – Italy, Hungary, and Croatia – while also sharing a frontier with neutral Austria (Blaubach 2019). Austria's experience demonstrates that being geographically surrounded by alliance members does not, in itself, preclude neutrality; on the contrary, it can facilitate it. Such a position allows for neutrality while still benefiting from indirect NATO protection, as any external threat (other than from another NATO member, for which the Alliance provides no treaty-based protection) would require passage through NATO territory, thereby likely triggering a NATO response. On this basis, Slovenia could, in theory, benefit from a comparable protective buffer even without formal NATO membership.

Only a limited number of small European states occupy a comparable position, being directly or indirectly surrounded by NATO countries: Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Bosnia, Kosovo, and several microstates can be excluded due to limited sovereignty or scale (Yannis 2022). Following this logic, Among the remaining five countries in a similar geolocation as Slovenia (Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Serbia and North Macedonia), three maintain a position of neutrality: Switzerland, Austria, and Serbia. This pattern suggests that geographical encirclement

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FIGURE 1 Slovenia is Directly or Indirectly Encircled by NATO Member States
(based on <https://www.mapchart.net>)

by NATO does not necessitate membership; rather, it may permit alternative strategic arrangements.

Overlooking neutrality as an option disregards Slovenia's geographical advantages and existing precedents. As Simonet (2025) observes in the Austrian case, neutrality is not only constitutionally embedded but also geographically viable due to Austria's position within a region fully surrounded by NATO member states, thereby benefiting indirectly from the Alliance's security environment. No comparable line of reasoning is evident in Slovenia's official security discourse, which omits consideration of a plausible strategic alternative aligned with its geographical context.

Entanglement Risks and Nuclear Targeting Considerations

A further dimension of NATO dependence, often underexamined in Slovenia's strategic debate, concerns the risk of involvement in con-





FIGURE 2 NATO Member States and Countries Directly or Indirectly Encircled by NATO (based on <https://www.mapchart.net>)

licts with limited direct relevance to national interests. Alliance commitments, by their nature, entail participation in collective action even when the immediate geographical or political stakes are peripheral. In practice, this could involve Slovenian participation in a crisis in the Baltic region, where its own security would not be directly threatened, but where alliance solidarity would necessitate some level of engagement. A similar dynamic could arise in the event of tensions in the Western Balkans involving Croatia. As a NATO member, Slovenia's capacity to act as a mediator or to maintain neutrality in such scenarios would be constrained. By contrast, a formally neutral posture could allow greater flexibility to avoid direct military involvement and to prioritise diplomatic initiatives, as seen in the approaches of Austria and Switzerland in comparable situations (Müller 2019; Blaubach 2019).

NATO membership also shapes how a state is perceived within the strategic calculations of potential adversaries. Within the Alliance's col-

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lective deterrence framework, all member territories are treated as integral components of its defensive space. Consequently, in the event of a high-intensity NATO–Russia conflict, Slovenian infrastructure, command facilities, and critical assets would likely be incorporated into adversarial military planning. This extends to nuclear targeting doctrines, where even smaller member states may be included in strike considerations due to their role in supporting or enabling allied operations (Hans and Norris 2016). While no status can entirely insulate a European country from the effects of major-power conflict, a neutral Slovenia could present a less prominent target within such escalation dynamics, potentially reducing the likelihood of being prioritised.

Slovenia's Lack of Independent Military Capabilities

The Slovenian Armed Forces (Slovenska vojska) currently comprise approximately 7,300 personnel, of whom around 6,000 are on active duty. These forces are not structured for autonomous national defence but are instead fully integrated into NATO's multinational framework. This is a deliberate outcome of Alliance planning and force-structuring concepts that prioritise interoperability over sovereign capability (Ruiz Palmer 2016), thereby limiting Slovenia's ability to operate as an independent defence force. Key domains such as logistics, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance, air defence, and higher-level command and control remain dependent on NATO structures and lack the capacity for autonomous operation. Slovenia's air defence is effectively outsourced to other NATO member states through the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System. In practice, Slovenian airspace is monitored via the 16th Control and Reporting Centre, while actual air policing is conducted by Italian Eurofighter Typhoons or Hungarian JAS-39 Gripens (Slovenska vojska 2024).

This arrangement implies that Slovenia will continue to invest substantial resources, likely to increase under NATO's new defence spending commitments, into military structures over which it exercises only partial operational autonomy. By design, the Framework Nations Concept encourages smaller allies to specialise and integrate rather than to maintain redundant national capabilities (Major and Molling 2014). While this model may enhance efficiency within NATO, it also deepens strategic dependency and leaves Slovenia without a fully autonomous combat capability, creating a significant vulnerability should alliance support be delayed or reduced.



Shaping Slovenia's Geopolitical Grand Strategy

Slovenia's strategic orientation has been overwhelmingly centred on integration into NATO and the EU, to the extent that these institutions have come to be treated as embodiments of the broader 'Euro-Atlantic political, economic, security and cultural environment' (Ministrstvo za obrambo 2020, 10). This focus has become so pronounced that Slovenia increasingly appears to conflate participation in collective security and defence mechanisms (primarily NATO and the EU) with the very essence of its national security strategy. In effect, integration into collective Euro-Atlantic structures has become not merely a means, but the central organising principle of Slovenia's strategic outlook. As stated in the White Paper on Defence, the 'development of the defence system will be based on two important assumptions, namely that the efforts of the entire state and society are necessary for a properly organized and prepared national defence of the Republic of Slovenia and that the national defence of the Republic of Slovenia is closely linked to collective defence within NATO and mutual assistance within the European Union' (Ministrstvo za obrambo 2020, 7). In practice, however, the first dimension (broad societal participation in national defence) appears to have been largely neglected, as the armed forces remain organised primarily as a relatively small professional force. Slovenia's active military personnel account for approximately 0.35% of the total population, compared with 0.54% in France, 0.42% in Hungary, and 0.50% in Croatia (The Global Economy 2021). By contrast, integration into NATO military structures and participation into EU defence initiatives have been pursued comprehensively.

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The language of official strategic documents suggests that Slovenia risks confusing the instruments used to pursue its geopolitical grand strategy, namely, participation in collective defence mechanisms, with the grand strategy itself. A grand strategy should be concise and coherent, providing a clear and coherent framework for state action without prescribing excessive detail, thereby allowing flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances. It should focus on core strategic objectives and follow a logical step-by-step approach that directs policy efficiently while avoiding unnecessary complexity and the diffusion of effort. Simplicity in grand strategy design promotes coherence, consistency, and balance (proportionality) amid increasing geopolitical complexity (Henke 2025).

From this perspective, Slovenia's geopolitical grand strategy should

rest on two mutually reinforcing pillars: external embeddedness and internal resilience.

[90] Externally, Slovenia's security should be based on an increasingly active participation in regional and European political processes, positioning itself as a constructive actor in addressing global challenges. This could include adopting elements of Italy's diplomatic approach, which seeks to maintain constructive relations with the broadest possible range of international actors – effectively pursuing a strategy of being 'friends with everyone' (De Lucia Lumeno 2024, 38–46). Slovenia's location at the intersection of Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean positions it both as a transit country and as a potential mediation hub connecting global and regional actors, businesses, institutions, and development models in the interests of stability and economic growth (Kožljak 2019; Juri 2025). The greater Slovenia's perceived value as a bridge between political, economic, and cultural spheres, the higher the opportunity cost for any actor contemplating destabilisation. At the same time, Slovenia should cultivate a broad network of strategic partnerships extending beyond NATO and the EU. It should seek to create shared interests with major global actors regarding stability in Slovenia, thereby fostering a situation in which instability would become too costly for any external power to encourage or exploit (Degterev 2019; Kaynak 2023). Within this framework, Slovenia would position itself as a strong advocate of international law and the strengthening of global norms, recognising that it cannot rely solely on military power to secure its sovereignty. Although international law may appear weakened in the current geopolitical climate, it nonetheless remains strategically relevant.

These partnerships, however, cannot replace the capacity to act autonomously during the initial phase of a crisis. Developing such capacity requires an efficient, transparent state, trusted by its citizens, supported by a robust social contract that reinforces public confidence (Müller 2019). In this regard, Switzerland's model of armed neutrality, supported by universal conscription, a substantial reserve system, and extensive civil defence infrastructure, demonstrates how deterrence and resilience can be embedded within society itself. The broader Swiss principle of societal participation in national defence, including reserve forces, civil protection networks, and basic preparedness training, could be adapted to the Slovenian context even without fully replicating Swiss neutrality (Dreyer and Jesse 2014).



By combining external diplomatic and economic relevance with strong internal institutional and societal resilience, Slovenia could reduce its dependence on any single alliance while strengthening its credibility as a sovereign security actor. NATO and EU integration would remain important strategic instruments, but they would be treated as means rather than ends in themselves. Such a reframing would move beyond the current tendency to equate Alliance membership with the entirety of national security policy. A genuine grand strategy would instead define Slovenia's security interests independently and then determine which alliances, partnerships, and domestic capabilities are best suited to advancing those interests in an increasingly multipolar and fluid international environment (Mazarr et al. 2022). [91]

DISCUSSION: POSSIBLE GEOPOLITICAL SCENARIOS AHEAD

On the basis of the grand framework outlined above, it is now possible to identify four possible future scenarios through which Slovenia could pursue its strategic objectives. In this way, grand strategy remains the overarching reference point, while the alternative paths available to the country can be evaluated comparatively using a SWOT-based analytical approach.

Scenario 1: Full NATO Alignment (Status Quo)

Remaining fully integrated within NATO's political and military structures would represent continuity with Slovenia's current geopolitical orientation, reflecting the strategic trajectory established upon accession to the Alliance in 2004. Under this scenario, Slovenia would preserve its present role and position within NATO's integrated command system, planning mechanisms, and multinational operations. The Slovenian Armed Forces would continue to be developed primarily in accordance with Alliance requirements, emphasising specialised contributions and interoperability rather than broad-based, autonomous territorial defence capabilities.

The principal advantage of this scenario lies in its continuity and predictability, as it builds upon an already established strategic framework. It also enables burden-sharing and greater operational efficiency through economies of scale. Slovenia would retain access to advanced intelligence and surveillance systems, as well as large-scale military exercises that it could not realistically conduct independently. Moreover,

[92] integration within NATO enhances resilience against hybrid threats and cyberattacks, which transcend conventional geographical boundaries. Membership provides access to advanced expertise, intelligence-sharing networks, and operational standards that strengthen the preparedness of Slovenia's national forces.

Politically, continued deep integration within NATO signals reliability and alignment with leading allies, reinforcing Slovenia's standing within both the Euro-Atlantic and EU institutional environments. Membership also ensures participation in NATO decision-making processes, granting Slovenia representation within the Alliance's political structures.

At the same time, this scenario ties Slovenia to the broader structural weaknesses/vulnerabilities affecting the Alliance. The country's armed forces would remain configured primarily for interoperability rather than strategic autonomy or self-sufficiency. Critical capabilities, including air policing or strategic transport, would continue to depend heavily on allied support. Such dependence may remain manageable as long as NATO functions cohesively and effectively; however, should alliance cohesion weaken, Slovenia's short-term capacity for autonomous defence could become severely constrained.

As discussed previously, concerns regarding the long-term cohesion of the Alliance have become increasingly relevant. NATO's operational effectiveness remains strongly dependent on the United States, which provides many of the Alliance's most advanced and strategically important capabilities, including long-range transport and, most importantly, nuclear deterrence. A reduction in Washington's commitment to European defence would place significant strain on NATO's overall credibility and operational capacity. Even with substantial European efforts, replacing core US capabilities would likely require many years (Barry et al. 2025; Biscop 2018). For Slovenia, whose defence architecture is deeply integrated into NATO systems, such a transition period could create considerable strategic uncertainty.

Another important consideration concerns the constraints that deep NATO integration may impose on Slovenia's diplomatic flexibility. On many contentious international security issues, Slovenia's positions tend to align closely with Alliance's consensus, reducing its ability to pursue an independent mediating role or a more flexible foreign policy posture that might better support the broader objectives of its grand strategy.



TABLE 1 Scenario 1 SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Access to NATO's full spectrum of collective defence capabilities, including advanced ISR, strategic lift, and air/missile defence.	High dependence on Alliance capabilities, with limited autonomous defence options.	Access to joint training, technology-sharing, and multinational procurement programmes.	Possible erosion of US commitment to NATO, creating a major capability gap. Rising geopolitical tensions within the Alliance, leading to divergent priorities or fragmented responses.
Political credibility and influence as a reliable ally within the Euro-Atlantic framework.	National armed forces structured primarily for NATO interoperability rather than independent territorial defence.	Potential for leadership roles in niche capabilities or regional initiatives within NATO.	Increased defence spending targets could place pressure on public finances.
Predictable defence planning through established NATO processes and standards.	Significant long-term budget commitments to meet NATO capability targets.	Increased deterrence value through participation in forward deployments and high-readiness forces.	Vulnerability to operational disruptions if NATO's integrated systems are weakened or politicised.
Shared operational burden in multinational missions, increasing efficiency through economies of scale.	Limited ability to act fully independently on the global stage or fully exploit the potential of Slovenian diplomacy.	Leveraging NATO membership to strengthen bilateral ties with key allies beyond the defence sphere.	Risk of entanglement in conflicts that are not directly aligned with Slovenia's national interest.

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From a resource perspective, maintaining full integration within NATO structures is also likely to require steadily increasing defence expenditure, draining resources from other national priorities. Growing pressure within the Alliance to raise military spending towards or beyond 5% of GDP could place a substantial burden on Slovenia's public finances, particularly if additional commitments emerge in areas such as cyber defence, space-related capabilities, or high-readiness forces. The opportunity costs associated with such expenditure are especially significant for a small state whose long-term stability also depends

on maintaining a strong social contract and broad public support.

[94] The status quo therefore provides Slovenia with security through participation in NATO's collective military framework, but at the expense of a significant degree of strategic autonomy. This model remains viable so long as the wider NATO structure continues to function effectively and cohesively, with sustained commitment among its members to solidarity the liberal-democratic principles upon which it was founded.

In relation to the grand strategic priorities identified earlier, this scenario offers clear advantages in terms of external embeddedness, as it firmly anchors Slovenia within the Euro-Atlantic community, providing visibility, participation in decision-making structures, and access to advanced security and defence capabilities.

However, this same alignment limits Slovenia's scope for developing deeper strategic relations with other partners, including emerging powers associated with BRICS. The scenario therefore facilitates deeper integration with one geopolitical bloc, while simultaneously narrowing opportunities for broader geopolitical flexibility and diversified international engagement.

The principal weakness of this scenario lies in the area of internal national resilience. By integrating its armed forces almost entirely within NATO's military structure, Slovenia risks diminishing its capacity for autonomous national defence and reducing its ability to respond independently to crises affecting its own territory. In circumstances where NATO support were delayed, or constrained (particularly in a scenario involving reduced US engagement), Slovenia's ability to act autonomously during the critical initial phase of a crisis would be limited. Furthermore, the sustained diversion of resources towards military expansion could come at the expense of other dimensions of the social contract, potentially weakening public trust, societal cohesion, and long-term resilience.

Scenario 2: NATO Treaty Membership Without Integration in the Military Command Structure

Under this scenario, Slovenia would remain a member of NATO as a political ally and continue to be bound by the North Atlantic Treaty, while withdrawing from the Alliance's integrated military command system. This arrangement would not be unprecedented. France pursued a similar model between 1966 and 2009, maintaining political membership



in NATO while operating outside the integrated command system. The objective would be to preserve participation in political consultations – with access to Article 4 and 5 consultations, joint decision-making, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms – while regaining greater national control over the deployment and use of Slovenian armed forces.

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For Slovenia, the appeal of this approach lies in two principal areas. First, it would reduce the likelihood of automatic involvement in NATO-led operations that bear limited relevance to Slovenia's direct security interests. Second, it would compel the country to develop more autonomous operational planning, logistics chains and air defence – areas that currently rely heavily on Alliance infrastructure. Operating outside the integrated command framework would mean that any Slovenian military deployment would first and foremost require an explicit national political decision, even if later coordinated with NATO operations. Slovenia could still choose to outsource certain capabilities, but this would be done through bilateral agreements that could be more easily tailored and managed in line with its own needs and priorities. The drawback is that Slovenia's influence within NATO's planning structures would diminish. Although it would retain a voice on political matters, it would no longer participate fully in detailed operational planning. Moreover, some allies might interpret such a move as a weakening of Slovenia's commitment to the Alliance.

Recent discussions surrounding the prospect of a 'NATO without the US' make this scenario even more complex. As noted earlier, Europe would face considerable difficulties in compensating for the absence of the United States – not only financially but also in terms of military capabilities. In such a context, operating outside the integrated command structure might ultimately represent less of a change than it appears today, particularly if NATO were to become more fragmented or increasingly centred on European leadership. Slovenia could use such a shift to strengthen its participation in EU-led defence initiatives, including Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Strategic Compass, and projects coordinated through the European Defence Agency, while still maintaining formal ties with NATO.

This is clearly a compromise scenario: it allows Slovenia to retain NATO as a political and legal framework while placing greater responsibility, autonomy, and burden for territorial defence back onto the state itself. Whether such a trade-off is worthwhile depends on the value Slovenia places on operational sovereignty compared with the conve-

TABLE 2 Scenario 2 SWOT Analysis

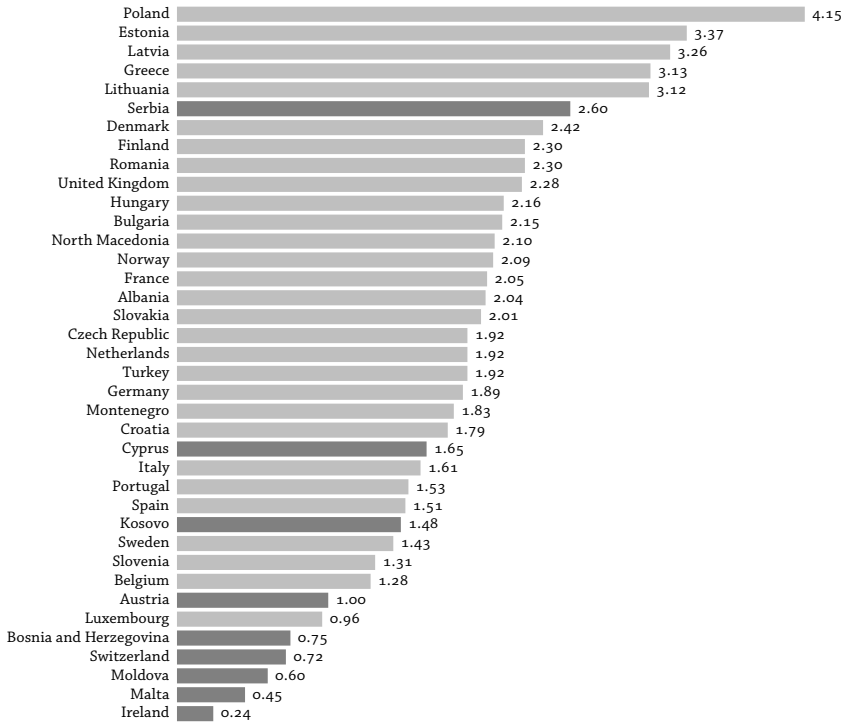
[96]

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Retains NATO's political umbrella while giving Slovenia greater control over military deployments.	Reduced role in NATO operational planning and force posture debates.	Development of bilateral and regional defence ties independent of NATO's command structure.	In a major NATO–Russia confrontation, Slovenia could still become a target while benefiting from weaker integrated defence coverage.
Forces development of national capabilities, not just niche contributions.	Possible concerns among allies about Slovenia's level of commitment.	Military forces could be tailored more closely to Slovenia's geography and security needs.	If the US role in NATO diminishes, European allies may press strongly for reintegration.
Reduces the 'automatic' connection to operations unrelated to Slovenia.	Risk of slower NATO response during a crisis.	Opportunity to strengthen domestic political oversight of defence policy.	Pressure from frontline allies could generate political friction.
Could facilitate a later transition towards stronger EU-centred security co-operation.	Higher initial costs associated with restructuring the armed forces and developing capabilities currently provided through NATO structures.	Greater diplomatic flexibility and opportunities to develop broader partnerships with non-Western actors, including BRICS countries.	

nience – and perceived credibility – of remaining fully integrated within the Alliance's military structures.

Viewed through the lens of grand strategy, this model enables Slovenia to remain politically and legally within the Alliance while recovering a greater degree of autonomy. In terms of external embeddedness, the approach preserves the diplomatic and deterrent benefits associated with NATO membership, signalling that Slovenia remains part of the Euro-Atlantic framework without being fully tied to operational integration that could draw it into conflicts unrelated to its national interests. It would also provide greater diplomatic flexibility, allowing Slovenia to be perceived less as a subordinate partner of the major Western powers.





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FIGURE 3 Defence Spending As a Percentage of GDP in NATO (Light) and Non-NATO Countries (Dark), 2024 (based on data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>)

From the perspective of internal resilience, partial disengagement from NATO's command structure could allow parts of the armed forces to be redirected towards national priorities, including territorial defence, domestic logistical capabilities, and civil protection systems. This would align more closely with the objective of developing a whole-of-society approach to defence, in which citizens play a more active role in national security and preparedness.

Financially, the viability of this arrangement would depend largely on the priorities established within Slovenia's defence strategy. It would provide greater flexibility to allocate resources towards diplomacy, thereby strengthening the country's broader 'security-through-partnership' approach, although it would also require initial substantial investment in restructuring the armed forces. While neutral countries such as Austria, Switzerland, and Ireland maintain credible defence sys-

[98] tems with relatively modest budgets, their operational independence is the result of decades of gradual investment in logistics, intelligence, air defence, and command and control capabilities. It is therefore likely that military expenditure would rise during the first five years compared with current levels. Given NATO's recently adopted 5% spending benchmark (NATO 2025), however, this increase could resemble the additional expenditure already expected within the Alliance framework. The key difference is that this approach would grant Slovenia greater autonomy in determining the structure and priorities of its defence policy. Drawing on the experience of other European neutral states, Slovenia could subsequently reduce military expenditure over the medium to long term and redirect resources towards programmes aimed at strengthening domestic resilience and reinforcing the social contract (figure 3).

Strategically, Scenario 2 offers a more balanced relationship between external alignments and internal capabilities. However, it would require careful diplomacy to avoid perceptions of diminishing commitment to Alliance solidarity, as well as significant initial investment to compensate for capabilities currently provided through NATO structures. Over time, these costs could decline, potentially allowing for lower levels of military expenditure in the medium to long term.

Scenario 3: Fostering Neutrality within the EU

Adopting neutrality within the framework of the EU would involve formally leaving NATO while remaining firmly integrated into the European Union's political and economic structures. Slovenia would continue participating in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), PESCO, civilian crisis-management mechanisms, and selective military missions, but without being bound by NATO's collective defence obligations. Austria and Ireland already demonstrate that such an arrangement is compatible with EU membership.

Slovenia also benefits from being directly or indirectly surrounded by NATO member states, much like Austria and Switzerland, providing a degree of indirect protection against territorial invasion even outside the formal NATO framework. Limited cooperation with NATO could continue through arrangements such as an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme, enabling selective cooperation in areas of mutual benefit, including cybersecurity (NATO 2024).

The greatest challenge associated with this scenario would be the



transition itself. Withdrawal from NATO would likely prove politically divisive, both domestically and internationally, and would require considerable political resolve. NATO member states might seek to obstruct such a transition through diplomatic pressure or other forms of political influence aimed at shaping domestic political dynamics within allied countries (Colibășanu 2025; Goodman 2025). Political leaders might also hesitate to pursue such a course due to fears of political repercussions, as illustrated by historical examples such as Italy's experience following the Sigonella crisis in 1985 (Brownfeld and Baino 2025). Some commentators have even linked Bettino Craxi's later political downfall to his foreign policy positions during that period, in relation to his role as the main scapegoat in the 1992 corruption scandal 'Mani Pulite' (Palma 2025).

[99]

Leaving aside the political dimension, the principal strategic challenge would be replacing NATO's security guarantees with a combination of EU solidarity, regional cooperation, and enhanced national defence capabilities. As previously noted, Slovenia's geographical position already provides a degree of indirect protection in many conventional conflict scenarios. Nevertheless, this 'NATO encirclement' cannot substitute entirely for credible deterrence. A neutral Slovenia would therefore need to support its position with meaningful investments in territorial defence, cyber resilience, and civil protection.

At a time when questions regarding the credibility of long-term US commitment to European security are increasingly debated, and when leading European figures have described the Alliance as 'brain dead' (Baranowski et al. 2020) or without 'any reason to exist' (Stole and Ionta 2025), it is conceivable that alternative security arrangements could, in some circumstances, prove no less reliable than current NATO security guarantees. Slovenia's existing security framework may therefore already be subject to uncertainty, making it theoretically replaceable through a combination of EU-level political commitments and extensive diplomatic engagement. From the perspective of international relations, neutrality would also provide Slovenia of conflict involving NATO states (such as heightened tensions between Russia and the Baltic states or renewed instability in the Western Balkans) Slovenia could position itself more credibly as a mediator rather than as a direct participant. Such a role could strengthen its value as a diplomatic bridge between differing political and economic systems. Within the broader framework of Slovenia's proposed grand strategy, neutrality

TABLE 3 Scenario 3 SWOT Analysis

[100]	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
	Greater foreign policy flexibility and reduced risk of involvement in external conflicts.	Loss of NATO's immediate collective deterrence guarantee.	Possibility of modelling neutrality on successful European examples (Austria, Switzerland).	A fragmented European security environment could make neutrality more difficult to sustain.
	Potential to serve as a trusted mediator in regional and international disputes.	Risk of being perceived as weakening Euro-Atlantic solidarity.	Development of strong bilateral defence agreements and EU-based security arrangements that could potentially prove more reliable than uncertain NATO security guarantees.	Political pressure from NATO neighbours and possible forms of political or economic retaliation intended to discourage withdrawal or encourage reintegration.
	Lower likelihood of being targeted in NATO–Russia nuclear escalation scenarios.	Requires substantial initial increases in defence expenditure and military restructuring.	Expansion of Slovenia's role in multi-lateral mediation and peacebuilding.	Reduced US engagement in NATO could weaken overall European deterrence and increase overall instability.
	Strengthens domestic defence culture and societal resilience.	Higher short-term costs related to developing capabilities currently covered by NATO structures.	Greater diplomatic flexibility and broader opportunities for partnerships with non-Western actors, including BRICS countries.	
	Indirect NATO protection resulting from direct or indirect encirclement by NATO member states.		Potential to free resources in the medium and long term through lower defence expenditure.	

appears particularly compatible with both strategic pillars identified earlier. It would allow Slovenia to expand its role as a diplomatic intermediary, supported through regional initiatives and bilateral partnerships extending beyond the NATO–EU axis. Such an approach could increase the political and economic costs for any external actor seeking to



destabilise Slovenia. While the country would relinquish deep integration within NATO, it would gain greater freedom to cultivate diversified international relationships and to strengthen its diplomatic presence through a more ambitious and active foreign policy network. In this context, Slovenia's strategic value would derive increasingly from its usefulness as a facilitator, intermediary, and stable regional actor. [101]

From the standpoint of internal resilience, neutrality – following elements of the Swiss and Austrian models – would require investment in national defence capabilities, civilian preparedness, and the continuity of government institutions in times of crisis. Such an approach could strengthen public trust and societal ownership of national defence by framing security not merely as a specialised military matter, but as a broader civic responsibility embedded within society as a whole, rather than confined to a professional military structure integrated into a larger, supranational system.

By shifting emphasis away from dependence on military alliances and towards a more balanced combination of diplomatic engagement and strategic self-sufficiency, neutrality could emerge as a more sustainable and coherent long-term grand strategy for Slovenia.

Scenario 4: Hybrid Strategic Autonomy through EU-Led Structures

Even if Scenario 3 represents a plausible option for implementing the principles of Slovenia's proposed grand strategy, concerns among political leaders about bearing responsibility for the consequences, combined with the perception that such a transition would be impossible under strong external pressure, make this option politically unlikely. A fourth, hybrid scenario may therefore appear more feasible for Slovenia. Under this model, Slovenia would remain a NATO member while gradually orienting its defence policy more strongly towards the EU's strategic autonomy agenda. The country would participate less actively in certain NATO-related processes while becoming more deeply involved in PESCO projects, cooperation with other Member States within the framework of the European Defence Agency, and initiatives guided by the EU's Strategic Compass. NATO would continue to provide the basic framework of collective security, whereas the EU would increasingly become the principal channel for defence planning, joint procurement, and related defence policies.

Initially, this approach might resemble a modified version of Scenario 1, but over time the distinction would become more visible, par-

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ticularly in terms of defence investments and planned spending. Scenario 4 would also reduce some of the uncertainty linked to future US involvement in NATO and European security. As referred to above, the US would remain part of the Alliance, although potentially with a different strategic focus and level of engagement. Since 2022, EU-led defence integration has accelerated through increased joint procurement, stronger logistical coordination, and the development of multinational rapid-response capabilities (Blockmans et al. 2022). Slovenia could position itself as a consistent supporter of this process, seeking to maximise its influence within emerging European defence structures while ensuring that its own strategic interests are adequately represented.

The principal weakness of this scenario is that EU defence integration remains incomplete. In the event of a major conflict today, NATO, supported by US military capabilities, still provides substantially greater hard-power capacity than existing EU structures. As a result, hybrid strategic autonomy therefore risks creating a form of ‘dual dependency’: Slovenia could become less fully integrated within NATO while the EU itself may not yet possess sufficient strategic maturity to provide fully autonomous defence and security capabilities. Nevertheless, over the medium term, this model could prove increasingly viable as Europe’s defence identity matures.

This form of hybrid strategic autonomy also aligns closely with the two pillars of Slovenia’s proposed grand strategy. Through active participation in both NATO and EU defence frameworks, Slovenia could avoid excessive dependence on a single security structure while strengthening its external embeddedness. At the same time, it would deepen relations with EU member states that strongly advocate greater European strategic autonomy, particularly France and Germany, while maintaining constructive ties with more Atlanticist NATO members. This approach would also allow Slovenia to align itself more closely with the EU’s emphasis on International Law.

From the perspective of internal resilience, EU defence initiatives, particularly within the framework of PESCO, could also support the development of capabilities beneficial to Slovenia’s national defence. Slovenia could therefore maintain interoperability with NATO while simultaneously strengthening more autonomous capacities in areas such as logistics, cyber defence, and rapid troop deployment.

This approach does not require the political step of leaving NATO, yet it gradually shifts Slovenia towards a defence posture that is more



TABLE 4 Scenario 4 SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Balances NATO security guarantees with growing EU defence integration.	Risk of limited influence in NATO if Slovenia is perceived as shifting towards EU-centred defence structures.	Opportunity to shape EU defence policy in ways that reflect the interests of smaller states.	If the US reduces or withdraws its role in NATO, Europe could continue facing capability shortfalls for many years.
Reduces long-term vulnerability to changes in US strategic priorities.	EU military integration remains incomplete and lacks certain advanced capabilities.	Potential first-mover advantages in EU defence-industrial projects.	EU defence integration could stagnate, leaving Slovenia without a sufficiently robust alternative to NATO.
Access to EU defence funding, joint projects, and industrial cooperation.	Requires careful diplomatic management to avoid alienating either NATO or EU partners.	Opportunity to develop parallel capabilities usable in both NATO and EU operations.	Possible duplication of effort and increased costs if NATO and EU planning diverge significantly.
Positions Slovenia as a bridge between Euro-Atlantic and EU-centred security structures.			

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self-reliant and less dependent on US military power, thereby increasing resilience in a scenario where NATO operates with reduced American involvement.

CONCLUSION

Since becoming a NATO member in 2004, Slovenia has pursued a security policy based almost entirely on integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, with NATO membership at its core and EU defence cooperation treated as a complementary dimension. Over time, this integration has increasingly been regarded not merely as a strategic instrument, but as the very foundation, and in many respects the defining feature, of Slovenia's geopolitical grand strategy (Ministrstvo za obrambo 2020, 10; Government of Slovenia 2024, 2). This has led Slovenian policymakers to conflate strategic instruments with grand strategy itself, limiting their ability to adopt a broader perspective and to evaluate alternative approaches for advancing the country's

geopolitical priorities. Decisions such as joining a political and military alliance like NATO are clearly not reversible overnight, but neither are they necessarily permanent or immutable. Excessive doctrinal rigidity exposes Slovenia to two principal risks: over-dependence on a single alliance framework and vulnerability to strategic shocks, such as reduced US engagement or crises within the Alliance itself (Franke 2018; Ruiz Palmer 2016; Barry et al. 2025).

Geographically, Slovenia's position offers strategic possibilities that remain largely absent from official discourse. Situated between Central Europe, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Pannonian plain, and surrounded by NATO member states and neutral Austria, Slovenia possesses both diplomatic relevance and a degree of indirect strategic protection that could continue to function, to some extent, even outside the Alliance framework (Blaubach 2019).

Comparative analysis of Austria's constitutionally grounded neutrality (Robert Lansing Institute 2025) and Switzerland's model of armed self-reliance (Müller 2019) demonstrates that neutrality does not necessarily imply isolation; rather, it can provide greater strategic flexibility. Neutrality may function as a strategic instrument that enhances diplomatic manoeuvrability, reduces the risk of entanglement in external conflicts, and limit exposure to strategic targeting in the event of a NATO-Russia confrontation, while still maintaining credible deterrence through robust domestic defence capabilities.

A strategy of full NATO integration also carries inherent risks. First, it may involve Slovenia in conflicts peripheral to its core national interests, such as confrontation between Russia and the Baltic states or renewed instability in the Balkans involving Croatia. Second, Slovenia's current position increases its likelihood of its inclusion within the military and potentially even nuclear planning of potential adversaries.

Furthermore, this strategic model requires Slovenia to sustain military expenditure while still lacking genuinely autonomous defence capabilities. Through deep integration into NATO structures, the country obtained collective defence assurances which anyway remain wilfully vague (Riedenstein 2024), while simultaneously reducing its operational independence. This dependency, reinforced through the Framework Nations Concept, means that even with increased defence spending Slovenia would continue to exercise only limited operational autonomy (Catlin et al. 2025; Zandee and Stoetman 2022).

When assessed against the proposed grand strategy based on two



pillars, namely external embeddedness through diplomacy and partnerships, and internal resilience, the current status quo performs unevenly in several key areas. NATO membership partially fulfils the external embeddedness dimension by linking Slovenia to a powerful alliance network, yet it simultaneously constrains diplomatic flexibility and limits opportunities to broaden the spectrum of international partnerships. It also weakens the internal resilience dimension by discouraging the development of a more self-reliant defence posture and by failing to integrate national defence more deeply into society as a whole.

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Alternatives such as neutrality within an EU framework or a hybrid model of EU-led strategic autonomy could provide a more balanced combination of these two pillars. Such approaches would allow Slovenia to maintain close regional and European ties while simultaneously investing in autonomous capabilities, civil defence, and public trust in state institutions, the very elements that contribute to the resilience of countries such as Switzerland in times of security crisis (Degtrev 2019; Dreyer and Jesse 2014; Mazarr et al. 2022).

The scenario analysis presented in this article allows several conclusions applicable not only to Slovenia but also to countries in comparable geopolitical circumstances. Although no two situations are identical and not all findings can be directly transferred, parallels can nevertheless be drawn with states such as the Czech Republic and North Macedonia.

In this context, smaller NATO member states could adopt several conceptual innovations to better address the shortcomings identified above. First, they could pursue strategic redundancy: the deliberate development of overlapping resources and reserve capabilities intended to maintain operational continuity in the event of disruption or strategic failure, broadly comparable to the concept of systemic resilience (Frank 2022). This would involve investing not only in Euro-Atlantic structures, but also in bilateral partnerships and domestic capabilities, thereby ensuring that the weakening of one pillar would not compromise the entire security framework, as may occur under an excessively mono-doctrinal approach.

Second, such states could make more active use of geographic leverage in diplomacy, treating their position in Central Europe or the Balkans as a strategic asset when negotiating reciprocal security arrangements with both NATO and non-NATO partners.

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An even more ambitious, though politically more demanding, option would be the development of conditional neutrality as a flexible policy instrument applicable to specific crisis scenarios, allowing states to avoid direct entanglement while preserving interoperability with NATO structures (Gärtner 2023).

All these elements should be embedded within a broader defence-oriented social contract linking public preparedness, institutional trust, disaster-response capabilities, effective governance, and transparent fiscal management, particularly in relation to military expenditure.

These principles also point to the need to institutionalise regular strategic reviews through legislation requiring periodic assessments of national security policy, modelled on Switzerland's Security Policy Report (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft 2021).

The possibility of developing joint defence policies, training cooperation, and intelligence-sharing arrangements with partner countries such as Austria, Switzerland, Ireland, or Turkey remains a promising and interesting option. Significant investment in dual-use infrastructure could enhance military readiness while also strengthening civilian sectors, not only through broader economic development but also by improving state capabilities in areas such as civil protection systems, military support for civilian medical evacuation, and cybersecurity. The development of a territorial defence component, potentially including compulsory basic defence training for all citizens, could further strengthen mobilisation capacity. Finally, it remains essential to recognise the importance of scenario-based planning for at least three non-NATO contingencies: NATO collapse or US withdrawal, NATO paralysis during a crisis, and intra-alliance conflict involving a neighbouring state.

In a rapidly changing strategic environment – characterised by debates over US retrenchment, uncertainty regarding NATO cohesion without American leadership, and the return of great-power competition, a rigid mono-alliance doctrine may itself become a strategic vulnerability. Excessive doctrinal loyalty to existing structures is unlikely to serve Slovenia effectively in the event of a serious crisis within NATO.

Slovenia's long-term security will depend less on the formal fact of NATO membership than on its ability to adapt, diversify, and develop credible forms of self-reliance. A genuine grand strategy must define national interests independently and then assess the full range of



strategic options in order to determine the most appropriate combination of policies, without conflating strategic instruments with identity itself. Slovenia has the potential to move beyond a narrowly mono-doctrinal outlook, not merely as a participant in Euro-Atlantic structures, but as a small state capable of shaping its own security future [107] by leveraging its geography, diplomacy, and societal resilience in an increasingly multipolar international system.

DISCLOSURES

This article made use of large language models, specifically ChatGPT 5, for language review and stylistic refinement of individual paragraphs. The substantive content of the article was written by the author, and no section constitutes direct output of any generative AI tool. No financial or non-financial conflicts of interest arose from the conduct or direct application of this research.

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