

# The dwindling importance of Swiss neutrality in the international context – practical experiences of a former Swiss ambassador

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## Abstract

With President Trump's embrace of Putin's autocratic oligarchy, abandoning the sovereignty of the entire territory of Ukraine as enshrined in international law and tolerating Russian aggression despite the prohibition of violence in the UN Charter, the need to move away from Switzerland's traditional neutrality has once again accelerated decisively. The stages of the departure from traditional neutrality in the context of contemporary Swiss diplomacy since the 1975 Helsinki Conference are traced through personal experience. International acceptance of traditional Swiss neutrality no longer exists today.

Neutrality, supposedly anchored in the DNA of the Swiss people, is a purely domestic political issue with no bearing on the conduct of Swiss foreign policy.

## 1. Introduction

'Everything has already been said about neutrality'. This was the reaction of my doctoral supervisor at the University of Zurich, Professor of International Law Dietrich Schindler Jr., a good 50 years ago, when I told him of my desire to write a dissertation on a topic related to neutrality. Fortunately, it turned out that there was hardly any German literature on the practice of Swedish and Finnish neutrality, which allowed me to write a corresponding doctoral thesis, which was published by the Swiss Society for Foreign Policy.<sup>1</sup> Even then, everything had already been said about neutrality in Europe. Nevertheless, much of what was thus already known has been repeated endlessly, not least in Swiss and other official statements

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1 *Daniel Woker*, *Die Skandinavischen Neutralen, Prinzip und Praxis der finnischen und der schwedischen Neutralität* (The Scandinavian Neutrals: Principle and Practice of

– currently only Austrian ones. The following account by a Swiss diplomat shows that classic Swiss neutrality has continued to die out in the reality of international politics and can now be laid to rest once and for all.

## 2. The neutral countries in the CSCE

While still a diplomatic trainee and thanks to kind older colleagues in the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in an international conference (CSCE, Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, since 1990 the OSCE) where neutrality still played a certain role in practical diplomacy. At that time, the N+N group (Neutrals and Non-aligneds) acted as a kind of bridge, which concerned one – and only one – aspect of the first review conference of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, held in Belgrade in 1976/77. The N+N were tasked with drawing up the conference programme each week in order to avoid blockages between the two blocs at the time, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, at an early stage of the proceedings.

This function was purely formal and did not concern the actual substance of the conference, which for the Western side primarily concerned human rights and for the Soviet bloc the codification in international law of the balance of power as it had been created in Europe by the Second World War. The Western neutrals – Austria, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland, with their smaller partner Liechtenstein – felt free to introduce provisions on individual freedom, such as the Swiss proposal for freedom of expression in the media. These provisions are still part of the Helsinki Final Act today. Among the non-aligned countries, the former Yugoslavia under Tito was lukewarm towards such provisions, while Ceausescu's Romania was resolutely opposed. Therefore the N+N was a purely formal alliance with no common basis for the substance of the conference. For me, this was the first clear lesson that ideological neutrality in post-war Europe neither existed nor was sought in any way. If such an N+N group, created to make the conference mechanics work, had not existed at the time, this bridging function would have been assigned to another 'neutral' party.<sup>2</sup>

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Finnish and Swedish Neutrality), Volume 5 in the series published by the Swiss Society for Foreign Policy, Paul Haupt, 1976.

2 More on N+N in: Hans-Jörg Renk, *Der Weg der Schweiz nach Helsinki*, Paul Haupt, 1996, and

This also shows the absurdity of the Russian accusation that 'Switzerland has abandoned its neutrality' when Bern in 2022 adopted the EU sanctions against the Putin regime because of the aggression against Ukraine. The corresponding accusation by AM Sergei Lavrov – whom I later met and got to know personally – shows that 'neutrality' often only exists for an international actor as long as it serves his interests.

### 3. CoCom and neutrality

'Everything verbal, nothing in writing.' That was the instruction from Bern during the Cold War to the economic section of the Swiss embassy in Washington, which had to inform the American administration about the export of potentially sensitive technology by Swiss companies to customers in the Soviet bloc. Within the then Federal Office for Foreign Economic Affairs, de facto the Swiss Ministry of Trade, where I was seconded from the Foreign Ministry for four years, this was no secret, but it was unknown to the wider public.

The CoCom (*Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls*) was a committee of NATO countries plus Japan set up to prevent exports to the then adversary, the Warsaw Pact, which could have helped it with its military. Switzerland participated informally but comprehensively by submitting relevant exports, which were subject to state approval, to the American control authorities for review. This took place in an oral presentation by the head of the economic section at our embassy in Washington. De facto, this constituted cooperation between 'neutral Switzerland' and NATO. To do so was sensible in terms of foreign policy – otherwise US measures would have been threatened – and was also in Switzerland's own interests, as the American nuclear umbrella, the most important Western defence against Soviet expansionist ambitions, stretched across the whole of Western Europe.

For me, this was the second clear lesson that even back then, neutrality was only one possible means among many to an end – maintaining the country's position in an uncertain world – and could never be the goal of all foreign policy. In this particular case, neutrality was simply not the appropriate means.

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'Die N+N in der KSZE-Folgekonferenz in Belgrad', internal document, available in DODIS, Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland.

#### 4. At the UN, inside and yet outside, 1978-82.

*All states, not only member states*, the mantra of all Swiss diplomats at the UN mission in the context of drafting UN resolutions, repeated *ad nauseam* until Switzerland's final accession to the world organisation in 2002, still echoes in my ears. During a fascinating multilateral assignment in New York, I was actually working in the economic and development section where neutrality played no direct role. The decisive factor was who paid how much to the UN's multilateral development agencies. Switzerland was in a respectable position in this regard and was treated like any other representative of comparable Western donor countries.

Indirectly, however, neutrality did play a role in Switzerland's special status within the UN at the time – it was the only country that was not a member and therefore had to sit on a side bench in the plenary hall alongside the PLO and the Vatican. When the UN started in 1946, Switzerland decided not to join 'for the time being', in contrast to the other European neutral countries, especially Sweden, which had gone through the Second World War in a situation quite comparable to that of Switzerland. The decision taken in Bern at the time, incomprehensible to those born after the Second World War, was primarily justified on the grounds of Swiss neutrality. It was probably more of a fig leaf for a foreign policy that wanted to avoid complications at all costs and continue to trade with everyone.

*Pour la petite histoire::* the then head of the economic department at the Soviet UN mission, later to become a long serving Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, was constantly undecided about which side he should play for in an informal football match South vs North organised by the Tunisian and Swiss representative - as a non-member, you do what you can to stay popular with your diplomatic colleagues. As a tactically skilled and talented midfielder, Lavrov ultimately joined his colleagues from the Global South on the other side of the pitch. Had I known then what became obvious after 2022 at the latest, I might have once missed the ball and kicked his shin instead.

#### 5. Swedish neutrality sui generis

The shots fired by Olof Palme's murderer had barely faded away when I joined the embassy in Stockholm in 1986 as its number 2 diplomat. To this day, it is not known with certainty who the assassin was and why the prime minister was shot. However, this charismatic politician's support for what

he saw as oppressed peoples may have played a role. Sweden, personified by Palme, was particularly well known worldwide as a pioneer in Western protests against the Vietnam War. This was the opposite of neutrality, but what Palme saw as morally justified partisanship for North Vietnam, *the underdog* battered by imperial America.

Palme's close companion, the long-standing State Secretary Pierre Schori – son of Swiss immigrants to Sweden – once hosted the short-lived annual meeting of the four neutral state secretaries in the foreign ministries of Finland, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland in the wake of their cooperation within the CSCE. Those meetings highlighted how 'neutrality' was interpreted differently in the four countries. Schori was very clear on this point. There was no binding law of neutrality; for him, neutrality policy meant a foreign policy committed to Swedish interests and values. I remember him saying that it was more accurate to describe Sweden as 'non-aligned' rather than neutral.

*Encore pour la petite histoire:* On the occasion of the aforementioned meeting in Stockholm, which included a joint visit to the sauna after the diplomatic work was done, I saw two European presidents *au naturel*: Martti Ahtisaari of Finland and Thomas Klestil of Austria, both of whom were then state secretaries in the foreign ministry and were later elected as the highest representatives of their countries.

## 6. European turning point 1989/90

"The Wall has come down". Once again, I was fortunate in my career, as the events after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, symbolising the implosion of the Soviet empire, was the focus of my daily work as deputy head of the then First Department (Europe and North America) at the Foreign Ministry in Bern from 1989-93.

In contrast to the geopolitical situation as I write these lines – symbolized by Trump's betrayal of Ukraine and thus the international rehabilitation of Putin – a hopeful era began at that time, in which states based on Western fundamental values and international law seemed to be emerging victorious. It was of course noted with horror that in the year of Eastern Europe's liberation, 1989, the state massacre in Tiananmen Square marked China's fateful and – as is now obvious – permanent departure from the idea of a ruler-based state of free citizens. But the slaughter of its own people by the still Maoist-influenced Communist Party was seen more as the aftermath of

Far Eastern despotism than as a *blueprint* for the suppression of opposition by future autocrats.

All foreign policy options, even for Switzerland, which remained officially neutral, were supposedly open, including accession to the then European Community (EC). After the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact, NATO seemed to have lost its enemy. Klaus Jacobi, then State Secretary in the Swiss Foreign Ministry, created an internal working group with the telling title *Eurovision*, which was to map out Switzerland's path to Europe, including possible positions as a member of the EC.

After thorough internal debate, the other three neutral countries took the turning point of 1989/90 as an opportunity to join the European unification project, first the EC and then the EU. Switzerland did not, but we were closer to the goal of full participation in the future of our home continent than is often portrayed now. Of course, the double majority in citizens referenda required for such a fundamental decision – the approval of both an absolute majority of voters and a majority of the cantons – was a high hurdle. However, that alone was not decisive; rather, it was the large amount of campaign money spent on counter-propaganda by national conservatives that led to a narrowly negative result in the main test for membership, the vote on the EEA (European Economic Area) in 1992.

Although people in Switzerland, often complacently referred to internally as the oldest republic, do not like to hear it, money thus plays an important role in referenda such as the one on the EEA. While the proponents in government, business, academia and culture remained discreet for a long time, the opponents deployed their concentrated financial power early and intensively. They did so with two central propaganda lies that are still used today by those who, in truth, worship conservative nationalism and/or fear the regulatory power of European authorities: First that Swiss neutrality would have to be abandoned in the event of accession to the EU and second that Brussels represented the 'modern Habsburgs' against which the old Swiss Confederation fought medieval battles. That the first argument did not correspond to the facts and the second seemed slightly ridiculous – the Habsburgs were originally Swiss and Austria was not even a EU member at time of the referendum – was lost in the barrage of counter-propaganda. My personal lesson from this probably worst foreign policy mistake during my time as a Swiss diplomat has been burned into my memory as an example of how shamelessly the argument of neutrality can be abused.

## 7. Economically important to our neighbour, but not politically

'Would you like to be my first employee?' was the question I was asked at the beginning of 1993 by the newly appointed Swiss ambassador to France. From my time at the CSCE, I got on well with Edouard Brunner, who was widely recognised as a top Swiss diplomat. So I immediately accepted.

This was made even easier for me as the last period of my stay in Bern was overshadowed by the crisis surrounding the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the civil wars there, caused initially by Serbian, and later also by Croatian nationalism. At that time, Switzerland was practically a frontline state in this first major armed conflict in Europe since the Second World War, as a result of an extraordinarily high number of guest workers from many parts of Yugoslavia. Neutrality in this conflict was not an option in the face of flagrant aggression and violations of international law. As a non-member of the EU and NATO, it was necessary to do at least what was possible for us to prevent an endless conflict from being carried into Switzerland by members of hostile factions from the former Yugoslavia. Then, as now, I am convinced that the swiftest possible international recognition of the states emerging from the break-up of Yugoslavia was necessary in order to establish a clear basis for international law to permit intervention. This was the only way to refute the accusation of 'interference in internal affairs' levelled by the Serbian aggressors and helped to uphold the principle of the right to self-determination of all people, so solemnly anchored in the context of 'Helsinki'. However, this corresponded by no means to the views of those colleagues in the Foreign Ministry who believed that Switzerland should, as usual, exercise restraint at all costs. They saw the recognition policy I was formulating at a technical level by virtue of my position in the Ministry as a betrayal of the traditional neutral cause. The resulting internal animosity was one of my most disappointing professional experiences and left deep scars that continued to affect my career.

This made my appointment, first as economic counsellor and soon afterwards as minister and Deputy Head at the embassy in Paris, all the more welcome. Alongside cultural, neighbourly and historical ties, economic and financial affairs form the great link between official Switzerland and the 'Grande Nation'. Traditionally, the Number 2 at this Embassy is also tasked with looking after the large Swiss expatriate community in France. This sometimes required 'neutrality' in order to defuse conflicts therein.

As far as big politics were concerned neutral Switzerland simply played no role in this classic Western capital. Again, as a non-member of the

EU and NATO, Swiss diplomats are a *quantité négligeable* for the *Quai d'Orsay*, the French Foreign Ministry. Without the obligation to consult and of information dissemination provided to the embassies of all members of these two organisations, we were received, if at all, only out of courtesy. However, not so Ambassador Edouard Brunner, thanks his additional role as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the Middle East from 1991 to 1993, as the direct successor to the legendary Swede Gunnar Jarring, and for Georgia and thus also Ossetia from 1993 to 1995. He was a sought-after discussion partner at the *Quai*. That makes me think of an informal remark by a successor to Brunner as Swiss ambassador in Paris. He once confided to me that he sometimes was a bit bored in this bilateral posting, as he had previously served as the central point of contact during Switzerland's first presidency of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) when it was still a hotspot for European security.

What remained here was the realisation that the neutral observer is kept away from the important work within organisations such as the EU and NATO. Organisations that determine the fate of all European states, including the neutral ones.

#### 8. 'Geneva' as a substitute for neutral non-participation, 1996-98

For a good 100 years, international Geneva has served Switzerland as proof that neutrality does not exclusively mean standing on the sidelines and lacking commitment to the good international cause. When it became apparent in the 1990s that NATO would not disappear, but would transform itself into a transatlantic body for continent-wide security, with Yeltsin's Russia also interested, Switzerland seized the opportunity to join NATO's *Partnership for Peace*. This took the form, among other things, of the three Geneva Centres, where I took up an exciting but difficult task as the founding director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) with my first ambassadorial title. Difficult because local representatives of international Geneva saw GCSP not so much as an expression of Switzerland's increasingly active policy of neutrality, but as a natural manifestation of Geneva as the diplomatic Rome, and did not consider it appropriate to have a representative of the distant federal capital as an expression of Swiss neutrality.

Exciting because in the capitals of the most important countries represented on the GCSP's board of trustees, such as Washington and Bonn – at that time, this ministry was not yet divided into two departments in Bonn



and Berlin – I was given recognition for this first step towards NATO and away from the traditional neutrality of Switzerland.

At this point, praise is due to the then Swiss Defence Minister 'Dörf' Ogi. With his visionary commitment to a more active role for Switzerland in European security. He was then already an erratic block in his party, which today, with its exclusively nationalist interpretation of neutrality, opposes any Swiss involvement on the European stage.

For the countries participating in the GCSP, it was Geneva's location and not Swiss neutrality that was of decisive importance. Here, they maintained large representations with accommodation facilities for representatives from countries without hard Western currencies. Here, they could count on their civil servants, who had been sent to the Centre for further training, to take courses with direct practical relevance to international diplomacy. I will never forget an informal meeting with lively discussions between course participants at the GCSP, who at that time came mainly from Western defence ministries, and a group of North Koreans invited to Geneva by a third party to learn about multilateral diplomacy. A meeting that could hardly have taken place anywhere else but Geneva. Not even in New York, where events within the framework of the UN are more political and therefore more in the spotlight than in Calvin's city.

Swiss neutrality may have played a certain role in the choice of Geneva as the seat of the League of Nations in the aftermath of the 'Great War' of 1914-18. The Hague Conventions of 1907, based on a 19th-century understanding of neutrality, were still fresh, even if they had by no means been negotiated with particularly Switzerland in mind. It is often forgotten that in the interwar period, Belgium declared itself to be just as neutral as Switzerland. In Brussels, as in Bern, neutrality was seen primarily as a means of avoiding being caught up in a Franco-German conflict. Since the end of the Second World War, hostility between these two European big powers has, as is well known, been transformed into the opposite, with Berlin and Paris becoming the central driving force in Europe. A byproduct to this fundamental shift is that Switzerland had lost its former main reason for neutrality, namely to maintain close contacts and sympathies based on language and mentality across national borders.

My professional work in Geneva, also in view of the countless organisations and structures for international mediation located there, was a direct lesson in what makes the city so attractive as a place for international cooperation. It is its tradition, its infrastructure and the presence of practically all the countries in the world, not Switzerland's neutral status.

9. Beautiful, rich and discreet Switzerland, not neutral Switzerland, as a role model

My next posting in Kuwait and, at the same time in Bahrain and Qatar from 1989 to 2002, a first as a bilateral ambassador, was marked by the ongoing threat to the Arabian Peninsula from Saddam Hussein's Iraq. What later became obvious was by no means clear at the time. Even after his devastating defeat and withdrawal from illegally occupied Kuwait some 10 years earlier, Saddam continued to be seen as a latent threat, possibly still armed with weapons of mass destruction. In bilateral relations with Kuwait, neutrality was not an issue, Switzerland was and still is seen as a summer retreat and banking centre for wealthy princely families and their supporters in the Gulf countries.

Over the next four years as ambassador to Singapore, sometimes referred to at the time as the 'Switzerland of Asia', this changed, at least officially. After gaining independence in 1963 and its involuntary separation from Malaysia in 1965, the small city-state felt particularly threatened by its large neighbour Indonesia, whose leader Sukarno had repeatedly made disparaging remarks about this '*small red dot*' on the map in the middle of the Malay Archipelago. Rapid rearmament in line with the principle of armed neutrality thus became a priority for the young state. Switzerland was often cited as an official role model at the time. This was justified in terms of the development of an efficient banking system, but not in the area of security policy. From the outset, Israel was Singapore's key partner in equipping and developing its impressive military power. Out of consideration for its immediate international environment, characterised by its Islamic neighbours Indonesia and Malaysia, which still have no official relations with the Jewish state, the security advisers from Israel were referred to as 'Mexicans' in Singapore.

Even in Singapore's wider environment, there was no question of security policy neutrality, e.g. between the US and China. Thanks to its highly developed infrastructure, including a blue-water port built early on that can accommodate aircraft carriers, Singapore serves as a *de facto* American base in the middle of Southeast Asia, with important centres of the US navy located throughout the larger region. It remains to be seen how this will change in light of the current upheavals in international alliances due to a possible *super deal* between Trump and Xi Jinping.

## 10. Australia

Representatives of traditional Swiss neutrality sometimes say that it may be called into question in Europe, but not in the wider international arena, where Switzerland's respective reputation supposedly remains intact. The opposite is true. The further away from Europe, the more indifferent political actors become towards Swiss neutrality.

As a representative of Switzerland in Australia from 2008 to 2012, I experienced this first-hand. Our country was and is well known there as an economic player and research centre with global appeal, and also as the former home of many immigrants who brought their expertise and work ethic to their new home on the fifth continent, but not as a political discussion partner. When Australian politicians want to find out about Europe, consider possible cooperation of a political or, if necessary, military nature, but also the role that Australia could play within the European single market, Canberra turns to NATO and EU member states, including the European diplomats sent out by Brussels.

In Switzerland some politicians argue that the country's official representatives abroad should consequently work twice as hard to obtain the necessary information and establish important contacts. No need to worry, Swiss diplomats usually do. In my case, this meant establishing an informal club of 'other Europeans' to secure access to important information and key figures. Initially together with my Norwegian colleague - the UK still being in the EU - and later with the involvement of the Turkish ambassador, we achieved our goal of being heard and gaining access. But this happened later and at a lower level than the group of EU diplomats, who met regularly with the Foreign Minister. This may not have any serious consequences in the short term, but it certainly does in the longer term. Switzerland was and is simply regarded as a political *quantité négligable* in Australia. At best, its neutrality was of interest to a lone history professor at one of Australia's major universities. And even then, it was research centred on the field of *non-alignment* in the Indo-Pacific region, of some interest there as a position between China and the US. This ofcourse is in line with the different historical, geopolitical and ideological background in this area of the world, very different from classic Swiss-style neutrality.

## 11. Neutrality as dogma

In 2025, neutrality is once again at the centre of security policy discussions in Switzerland. It took Russia's aggression against Ukraine and now its betrayal by a new American administration, for the *raison d'être* of neutrality to finally be raised again. It had long been fossilised into a rigid untouchable dogma that shall not be touched.

This corresponded to my experience when, shortly after leaving the Foreign Ministry in 2012, I was asked by the Center for Security Studies, CSS at ETH Zurich to write an article on neutrality for its annual report. No longer bound by an official interpretation, I made a few suggestions for an adaptation of Swiss foreign policy. Away from the unshakeable dogma that routinely accompanies official Swiss statements on international crises and conflicts, such as 'Switzerland as a neutral country [...]', or defensively '[...] as a neutral country, Switzerland cannot [...]' or tentatively '[...] which has to be compatible with Swiss neutrality'. My draft text to the CSS came back promptly with so many corrections that it appeared to express pretty much the opposite of what was actually meant originally. When I responded that I could not take responsibility for this heavily revised text, I got an oral response, thoroughly polite, even apologetic, that it was impossible for the Center to print the original text. What remained unsaid was that the institution is funded directly by the Swiss Ministry of Defence – not a usual practice at Swiss universities.

Until the turning point following Putin's aggression against Ukraine and its de facto approval by President Trump, Switzerland was spared a real test of its neutrality, which is still officially based on 19th-century international norms, the Hague Conventions of 1907. This changed when Russia initiated the annexation of Ukraine in flagrant violation of international law.

## 12. Ukraine and Trump – the definitive end of neutrality

The waves of outrage in the public and political spheres over Russia's actions against Ukraine, exacerbated by obvious war crimes committed by both the highest leadership and the foot soldiers of the invading army, ran high after the beginning of the Russian aggression and it still do. Just as high in Switzerland as in other Western countries. Future historians will have to find out why Bern waited a few days following the Russian assault against Kiev before official Switzerland joined the European Union's sanctions.

Since then, official Switzerland has backpedaled, taking small steps away from what turned out to be no really sincere departure from traditional neutrality. Respective examples span a wide range of areas where Switzerland, as a country committed to highest democratic and human rights standards, has shirked its responsibilities by invoking 'neutrality'. These range from not allowing other states to decide freely on the use of war material long since sold from Swiss production to the refusal of swift and thorough freezing of Russian state assets and those of sanctioned Russian citizens. These shortcomings are discussed in detail elsewhere in this book. With the American embrace of Putin's autocratic oligarchy by Trump and his government, the need for a far-reaching departure from Switzerland's traditional neutrality has once again accelerated decisively.

Not because Russian troops could suddenly appear on the Rhine river, thereby rendering our neutrality obsolete anyway, but because Switzerland must stand up for European, and thus also for Ukrainian defense lest we put our values into question and betray our closest partner countries in Europe. Compared to this, the Hague Conventions of 1907, based on wars in the 19th century, are now an irrelevant historical relic. They have also long been superseded by subsequent international law, such as the UN Charter. The often-invoked 'neutrality' that is said to be anchored in the DNA of the Swiss people is a purely domestic political issue with no bearing on the conduct of Swiss foreign policy.

### *Bibliography*

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