

Neutrality in Today's Geopolitically Contested World

Symposium on Neutrality

**Keynote Speech by
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Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both an honour and a pleasure for me to take part in this Symposium on Neutrality.

In these difficult times, particularly as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, people – not least from neutral countries – are asking, “is neutrality still relevant in today's world?”

Or is neutrality a concept that belongs in a museum of archaeology? Was the choice of this venue perhaps not a coincidence?

Neutrality is a concept that primarily has a foreign and security policy function: to contribute to the realisation of national objectives, in particular, the preservation of the existence of the neutral state under international law, the guarantee of its security and keeping it out of armed conflicts.

In my country – Switzerland, neutrality historically had different functions. After the defeat at the battle of Marignano against France and the Venetians over the control of Milan in Northern Italy, the old Swiss Confederacy decided to stop its expansionist foreign policy and start applying a de facto neutrality policy in 1515. But it was more than just a foreign policy. It was a mode of survival for the then-loose Swiss Confederacy. It helped Switzerland not to disintegrate when cantons did not need to intervene in the religious wars of Europe. It also helped to contain sending mercenaries to the big powers.

In 1815, neutrality was officially granted to Switzerland at the Congress of Vienna, as the Great Powers believed that the neutral status of Switzerland would bring more stability to Europe. This official neutral status preserved the territorial integrity of the country during the wars in the second half of the XIX century and two World Wars in the XX century. At the same time, as the Hague Conventions do not forbid the neutral states to trade with belligerent countries, it benefited Swiss economic stability.

If, during the Cold War, Switzerland's neutrality was considered to be integral, i.e., interpreted very conservatively, it adopted a paradigm shift in the early 90s. The Neutrality Report of 1993 set a totally different tone and allowed the country to move to “active neutrality”. This concept calls for more engagement of Switzerland in the international arena through taking part in peace operations, offering mediation services, also accessing the political bodies of the UN in 2002 and shouldering responsibility in international and regional organisations such as chairing the OSCE in 1996 during the Balkan wars or in 2014 during the crisis in and around Ukraine or holding a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In this concept, the neutrality policy is perceived as a tool for the implementation of security and foreign policy.

Having said so, the idea of neutrality has been so enshrined in our national identity that some would say it is in our DNA. So, it would probably be difficult to change, even if the Swiss government and parliament came to the conclusion that it is no longer useful.

As you can imagine, there is currently a lively debate in Switzerland about what neutrality as a security policy instrument means today, especially since my country aligned itself with the full EU sanctions package against Russia after 24 February 2022. There is clearly a sense that security cooperation with like-minded partners like the EU and NATO should be enhanced. This means privileging cooperation with like-minded partners. However, there is a fine line between strengthening inter-operability with neighbours and partners such as the EU and NATO and losing one's independence as a result of abiding by a collective defence clause.

One of the most contentious issues in my country today relates to how the government should respond to requests for the re-export of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine. Some argue that Switzerland needs to be pragmatic and act in solidarity with Ukraine against the clear aggressor. Others argue that Switzerland should be consistent: that you cannot have “neutrality a la carte”. I, therefore, look forward to the discussions that we will have here in order to compare notes with other neutral European countries such as Austria, Ireland and Malta.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in a polarised environment – like the one that we are living through – there are great pressures on neutral countries. I can tell you from experience that one is easily considered “pro-Russian” for simply keeping open channels of dialogue with Russian counterparts these days. And yet when I go to Moscow, it can be difficult to get some meetings because Switzerland is no longer considered neutral after adopting sanctions. This, at least, is the official Russian narrative. Its practice is interpreted very pragmatically depending on the real interests of conducting dialogue in a neutral space.

Nevertheless, there are advantages to neutrality, even in the current security environment.

Neutrality enables a certain degree of foreign policy flexibility – more so than countries that are members of rigid alliances. As a result, neutral countries often act as mediators, provide venues for negotiations, or act as bridge builders.

Neutral parties like the ICRC can provide vital humanitarian assistance.

One point that I want to stress is that neutrality has to be **credible**. As you may know, Switzerland has a proud tradition of armed neutrality. Our topography and military preparedness have made it hard to invade. It is worth noting that when looking back at history, almost no credibly neutral state has been attacked.

But let us be frank: neutrality is, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder beyond its legal rights and obligations. It is a relational concept. To be credible as a neutral country, a state must be seen as such by other actors in the international community. **If you are credibly neutral in times of peace, there is a greater chance that your neutrality will be respected in a time of war.** Too much zig-zagging undermines one’s image and, ultimately, foreign policy and national security.

This begs the question, beyond robust armed neutrality, what security assurances exist for neutral countries? Moldova, for example, is neutral. But what happens when that neutrality is violated? Some have suggested that Ukraine should be neutral. But how would this neutrality be guaranteed – especially after the fate of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum? Finland and Sweden have sought shelter from NATO. But what about security guarantees for neutral countries that choose not to become part of that alliance? Neutrality, at least in theory, seems like a policy option for countries that happen to be in between Russia and NATO or, even more generally, in between two major powers. But how would it work in practice?

In short, in the current security environment, discussions of neutrality are closely linked to those of security guarantees – a topic which we might want to explore in this symposium.

There is another issue that we might want to discuss here. What are the obligations of neutral EU countries in relation to a member state that is the victim of armed aggression, given article 42, paragraph 7 of the European Union? After all, according to the Treaty, other member states have an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power to any country that is attacked. This is in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations

Charter. I would be curious to hear how that article is interpreted in some of the countries represented here, such as Ireland and Austria.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Neutrality is in the spotlight more than at any time that I can recall. States are being encouraged to take sides.

Of course, we are not neutral in terms of values. Neutrality does not mean being indifferent or a passive observer. There is an interest – perhaps even an obligation – for neutral countries to stand up for principles that are being trampled on. Being legally neutral does not mean being disinterested. In wars of aggression like the one that we are witnessing in Ukraine, not getting involved militarily does not mean that a country is indifferent to what is going on.

A country – like Switzerland – that is permanently neutral can nevertheless express strong views in defence of international law. We have to! We cannot afford to be impartial about the violation of fundamental principles that results in threats to international peace and security. This is especially relevant for small countries. It is in our national self-interest to promote peace based on respect for international principles and commitments.

It is still possible to remain neutral in terms of foreign policy stance and actually contribute to European security and the global community in the following ways:

- Pro-actively propose dialogue and peace initiatives as well as promote arbitration frameworks;
- Provide good offices as mediators;
- It may also be time to have a fresh look at neutrality law and policy in the current global context – to show the advantages of neutrality at a time when it is under fire.

Think tanks in neutral countries can also play a key role: At the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, we provide a safe and informal space for inclusive dialogue among like-minded and non-like-minded stakeholders.

However, it is a shame that – unlike in the 1970s and 80s – neutral and non-aligned countries are not more coordinated in their activities. Neutrality does not mean that there can be no coordination or cooperation. Indeed, in the current polarised world, I would argue that we need more of it. Neutral and non-aligned countries can be “catalysts for cooperation” to seek common ground. As in the past, like for the Hague Conventions or Helsinki Final Act, they can be thought leaders in the development of international norms, principles and regulatory frameworks.

At least there are two neutral European countries in the Security Council at the moment (Switzerland and Malta). Perhaps this symposium can generate some ideas that can inspire policy to help reduce tensions in Europe.

Thank you for the invitation. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to a stimulating debate on a hot topic.