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'TIME TO STEP OUT OF AN UNCOMFORTABLE GREY ZONE'

Switzerland: not so neutral now?

Switzerland prides itself on its neutrality, but the war in Ukraine has raised tough questions. On issues from sanctions to arms shipments, it's revealing the cracks in the Swiss consensus.

BY ANGÉLIQUE MOUNIER-KUHN

THE whole Swiss nation watched expectantly when Geneva, overrun with journalists and security services, rolled out the red carpet for the US and Russian presidents on 16 June 2021. This first one-to-one meeting between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin took place in an atmosphere of escalating tension, amid sanctions and tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions. Switzerland was playing neutral host to the leaders of the world's two largest nuclear powers in the hope of restarting dialogue. The precedent in Swiss people's minds was the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit in November 1985; the negotiating cycle which eventually led to the end of the cold war had also begun on the shores of Lake Geneva.

Thirty-five years later, the Swiss wanted to believe the 'spirit of Geneva' could deliver another miracle. The country was already anticipating the reputational benefit it would derive from this momentous day. 'This meeting is good for Switzerland's credibility in the world: a small neutral state that inspires trust and combines strong democracy and social stability,' foreign minister Ignazio Cassis of the Liberals (FDP) told the press. 'Little Switzerland, theatre of great politics,' announced the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Zurich's leading conservative newspaper.

We know what happened next. The attempt at dialogue failed. After several sessions in Geneva, a final meeting scheduled for 24 February 2022 between US secretary of state Antony Blinken and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov was called off at the last minute when Russia invaded Ukraine, an offensive Bern immediately condemned as a 'flagrant violation of international law'.

No one knows what neutrality is exactly and everyone, in Switzerland and beyond, interprets it in their own way. They don't understand the extent to which it's a determining factor of national identity

By disrupting European equilibrium, the war has isolated Switzerland, a country that sets great store by its openness to the world. The issue of neutrality – on which there was hitherto consensus – has become a subject of public debate. Abroad, the credibility claimed by Cassis, who has since become Swiss president, has turned to incomprehension among Bern's partners. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, Switzerland's federal council, its highest executive authority on which the main political parties are represented, has inadvertently antagonised many people.

Those most attached to the principle of neutrality accuse the Swiss government of a sell-out by endorsing, after initial hesitation, all the sanction packages the EU has imposed on Russia. In retaliation, Russia, with which Switzerland previously enjoyed good relations, especially economic ones, put it on its list of 'hostile countries', which includes all sanction-backing states.

Meanwhile others, both at home and abroad, have accused Bern of shying away from pursuing Russian assets and, above all, of obstructing European support for Ukraine's war effort by applying a very narrow definition of its neutrality. While there was never any question of Switzerland itself delivering weapons to the battlefield, Bern has refused to grant permission for several European countries – including Germany, Denmark and Spain – to ship material purchased from Swiss arms manufacturers to the conflict zone.

Difficulty of being impartial

Deeply divided, parliamentarians have already debated the issue of re-export of Swiss weapons by third-party states several times. Such exports are prohibited under the Federal Act on War Materiel (WMA), when 'the country of destination is involved in an internal or international armed conflict' (1). The federal council has also cited the fifth Hague Convention, which states that 'Every measure of restriction or prohibition taken by a neutral Power ... must be impartially applied by it to both belligerents' (2). Germany, which is demanding the freedom to re-export Swiss-made ammunition for the anti-aircraft guns it supplied to Ukraine, has reacted furiously: 'Neutrality is no longer an option. To be neutral is to take the aggressor's side,' German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, of the Green Party, said at the Munich Security Conference in February.

Having had its certainties challenged by worried citizens, a disunited political class and neighbours who want to force its hand, Switzerland is having to reconsider what its neutrality means and its place in the new geopolitical order. The moment seems propitious, though; 21 years after joining the United Nations, Switzerland got a seat on the Security Council for the first time in January 2023, where it will serve a two-year term as a non-permanent member. It held the presidency this May.

'The debate our country's having is healthy and democratic,' says Micheline Calmy-Rey, who was the (Socialist) foreign minister and served as president twice between 2007 and 2011. 'It's especially interesting because, unusually, it's about foreign policy, not a domestic political issue. It's a strength to be able to discuss these questions openly.'

'The main problem is that no one knows what neutrality is exactly and everyone, in Switzerland and beyond, interprets it in their own way,' says Sacha Zala, director of the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre and president of the Swiss Historical

Society. ‘Abroad, they don’t understand the extent to which it’s a determining factor of national identity,’ he says.

In the first world war, Switzerland was split between its German-speaking regions, whose sympathies inclined towards Germany, and its French-speaking part, which favoured France. ‘Neutrality was necessary as the lowest common denominator. After the war, it became essential for neutralising internal conflicts and eventually acquired quasi-religious status,’ says Zala.

From the Congress of Vienna

There’s proof of this attachment in the latest annual security study, ‘Sicherheit 2023’, from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, which notes that 91% of Swiss believe their country ‘should maintain its neutrality’ (89% in 2021, 97% in 2020). In the same study, 75% of Swiss consider sanctions against Russia to be compatible with neutrality, and 55% (up 10% on 2021) express support for closer ties with NATO.

Legend has it that Swiss neutrality dates back to the French defeat of Swiss mercenaries at Marignano in 1515. However, it was the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that really shaped it. European powers, keen to draw a line under the era of revolutions and the Napoleonic wars, decided Switzerland should be perpetually neutral and undertook to guarantee its territorial integrity and inviolability. The aim was to make it a buffer zone between Austria and France. The 1907 Hague Conventions codified the right to neutrality, which Switzerland ratified in 1910. The world has changed since then, but this aspect of international law has remained largely the same.

The right to neutrality, which is rudimentary and limited to times of war, requires the neutral state to refrain from participating in international armed conflict and from favouring belligerents by providing troops or weapons, or allowing the use of its territory. The neutral state is also obliged to defend its borders, hence the need to maintain an army. Switzerland has developed a flourishing arms industry, and its army, built on the principles of a militia (in which citizens engage in the service of the nation), can currently draw on 150,000 rapidly mobilisable soldiers. At the height of the cold war, Switzerland considered acquiring nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantee of its status, but instead signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1970.

‘This policy of neutrality has evolved’

‘The complexity of Swiss neutrality stems from the distinction that emerged in the 1920s between the very succinct *right* to neutrality and the *policy* of neutrality,’ says Sacha Zala. ‘This distinction has provided significant room for manoeuvre, essentially enabling Switzerland – like all neutral states – to do what it likes.’ So a host of adjectives have been used to qualify Swiss neutrality, depending on the context: perpetual, armed, differential, integral, strict, active, cooperative.

‘I applied this policy of neutrality. It’s hard to explain,’ Calmy-Rey acknowledges. ‘It’s never been a static concept. It’s evolved and is now based on international law and international

cooperation, relying much less on isolationist strategies than in the past. Renouncing the use of military force is also a value that makes us prioritise prevention, the power of influence and dialogue,' she says.

Under the auspices of Switzerland's neutrality policy, negotiations between France and the National Liberation Front (FLN) led to the signing of the Évian Accords and Algerian independence in 1962. During Calmy-Rey's time in office, Swiss mediation facilitated Russia's joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which was opposed by Georgia. Switzerland also helped negotiate the release of many hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and played a key dialogue-building role between the guerrillas and Bogotá. Bern helped Turkey and Armenia normalise their relations, though the Zurich Protocols (2009), which are again under discussion, have remained unimplemented. More recently, in 2019 Mozambique asked Switzerland to negotiate peace between two opposing parties, the FRELIMO and RENAMO.

Through its good offices, Switzerland also has extensive experience of protecting power mandates: it has represented the interests of the US in Iran since 1979 and Russia in Georgia, and vice versa, since 2009. Promoting peace has also involved the Swiss army taking part in international operations in a dozen countries, mainly in the Balkans (Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Africa. However, at a time when crisis hotspots are becoming more numerous, the erosion of multilateralism poses a major problem for the Swiss policy approach, according to Calmy-Rey. 'It's no longer as effective,' she admits.

In Switzerland, amid all the discord, the Swiss People's Party (UDC), a nationalist, sovereigntist rightwing party that represents more than a quarter of the electorate, is making its voice heard: 'If we go back to the origin of the word neutrality, "neuter" in Latin means "neither one thing nor the other". No matter how you twist the concept, implementing sanctions, as in the case of Russia, is de facto taking sides,' insists Jean-Luc Addor, a UDC deputy in the national council, the Swiss parliament's lower house. He thinks 'the only question that arises is that of Switzerland's interest. And Switzerland has no interest in getting directly or indirectly involved in a conflict between Russia and the US. This isn't Switzerland's war.'

Saniya Ameti, a rising figure on the national political scene and co-president of Operation Libero, a young liberal and pro-European political movement, believes, however, that Switzerland is undermining its credibility and weakening its security over the 'neutrality myth'. 'Neutrality isn't an end, it's a tool that can only function in an international order based on the rule of law. There can be no neutrality when a member of the UN Security Council such as Russia blatantly violates the order that guarantees the security of countries like Switzerland,' says Ameti, who also represents the Green Liberal Party (which is separate from the 'traditional' Greens) on Zurich city council.

Former ambassador Raymond Loretan, onetime secretary-general of the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP/PDC), which has since merged with the Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (BDP/PBD) and become The Centre, puts it bluntly: 'Switzerland needs to pick a side. If it wants to be neutral, it must be much more consistent and reach out to Russia as visibly as it has done to Ukraine.' Since the outbreak of the war, Bern has had several well-publicised contacts with Kyiv, but none with Moscow. Loretan says, 'If Switzerland wants to be European, then it [should deepen] its collaboration with the EU and NATO. It's time for Switzerland to

step out of this uncomfortable grey zone, which is impossible for the international community to read.’

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(1) Federal Law on War Materiel of 13 December 1996.

(2) Article 9 of the 1907 Hague Convention (V), ‘Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land’.

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