

Blog. SCHWEIZERISCHES NATIONAL MUSEUM. MUSEE NATIONAL SUISSE. E. MUSEO NAZIONALE SVIZZERO. MUSEUM NAZIONALE SVIZZERO.



Gathering of neutrals. From left to right: Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger, Finland's Elisabeth Rehn, Austria's Werner Fasslabend and Sweden's Anders Björck at the Bernerhof in Bern. Swiss National Museum / ASL.

Parting company the neutral way

At the end of the Cold War, the concept of neutrality lost something of its relevance. This in turn led, at the beginning of the 1990s, to the breakup of the grouping that had brought together Europe's four neutral nations: Switzerland, Sweden, Austria and Finland.



Thomas Bürgisser →
Thomas Bürgisser is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre.

They may all be smiling nicely for the camera, but their coming together actually marked the end of a decades-long relationship. At the beginning of October 1992, Finland's defence minister Elisabeth Rehn and her Swedish and Austrian counterparts Anders Björck and Werner Fasslabend had made their way to Bern at the invitation of Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger, the then head of the *Federal Military Department*, for informal discussions. Amazingly enough, given the high level of contact maintained between Europe's four neutral states during the Cold War, this was the first occasion on which the ministers in charge of security policy had actually gathered for a meeting. However, this first-ever rendezvous was to feel more like a parting of the ways. Villiger reported back to his colleagues on the Federal Council that "the predominant outcome of the meeting was a clear realisation that neutrality is no longer seen by the four participating states as a common basis for political action."



Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger, pictured in 1990. ETH Library Zurich

Although the erstwhile partners insisted that they still shared certain common interests, nevertheless, as Villiger gravely observed, "the absolute determination, especially of the Nordic participants, to preserve full freedom of action on the issue of neutrality does not in any way indicate that the common interests are very deeply rooted". Villiger summarised the positions by stating that Sweden frankly no longer considered itself to be neutral, and that: "while Austria and Finland may not formally distance themselves from neutrality, they will place less and less emphasis on it." He believed that their main objective was to ensure, no matter what, "that their neutrality did not have an adverse impact on the nature of their relationship with the European Union". So, that's what parting company the neutral way sounds like.

It goes without saying that this alliance of Europe's four neutral nations had never been a cosy *ménage à quatre*. The individual members were too different for that to be the case. Having come through the two world wars unscathed, in the Cold War period Switzerland viewed permanent, armed neutrality as the key to ensuring the country's independence, as a bond that held the nation together and as the ideal way to cement its standing as a 'special case' in international relations. At the same time, Switzerland's economy remained a fully integrated part of the western system.

Finland's neutrality, on the other hand, was rooted in the 1948 Agreement of Friendship with its mighty neighbour the USSR, which afforded the government in Helsinki comparative freedom of action during the East-West conflict. Nevertheless, "Finlandisation" was seen by many as synonymous with 'restricted sovereignty'. Austria's permanent neutrality had also been imposed on the young republic by the Soviet Union, in the Moscow Memorandum of 1955 – and it was explicitly required to adopt a form of neutrality that followed the Swiss model. Vienna thus became a neutral benchmark for Bern (although one it looked down on), and, when it came to choosing where to locate the headquarters of international organisations, even a serious rival to Geneva.



A birds eye view of the UN headquarters in Geneva, 1954. ETH Library Zurich

Lastly, Sweden, which, like the Swiss Confederation, could look back on a long tradition of neutrality, and which had shared the mandate for supervising the armistice in Korea with Switzerland since 1953. It was Switzerland's most important point of reference, one might almost say its *alter ego*. For decades, Swiss diplomats had cast an eye towards Stockholm when confronted with issues in the international political arena that could be classified as sensitive in terms of the policy of neutrality – frequently with the aim of ensuring that Bern could come up with a less activist, more discreet and thus even more neutral approach.

It cannot be denied that the guardians of Helvetic neutrality within the Department of Foreign Affairs felt a certain sense of satisfaction with the Department of Foreign Affairs was perceived, even by third-world countries as "the most neutral of the neutrals". In the eyes of the Swiss, then as now, only Switzerland could be truly regarded as neutral, even if that neutrality remained a vague concept that had consistently been put to very flexible use over the years in foreign policy practice.

From the outset, one common factor shared by Europe's four neutral states (and distinguishing them from Ireland, another neutral nation) was their geostrategic position between NATO and the *Warsaw Pact*, the two military alliances. Together with non-aligned Yugoslavia, they exercised a security policy buffer function on the flanks of mainland Europe. Their neutral position garnered them all a larger than usual amount of attention on the international stage. From the 1970s onwards, the *Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe* ushered in a new phase of cooperation between the neutrals, with the 'CSCE process' acting as a forum for dialogue between East and West. Cooperation between the Swiss, Swedish, Austrian and Finnish delegations flourished both in the run up to and in the wake of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975; they were able to mediate between the US and Soviet blocs in decisive phases of the negotiations, and to propose solutions. They joined together with the non-bloc states Yugoslavia, Cyprus and Malta to establish the *Neutral and Non-Aligned States (N+N)* grouping as a prominent player within a pan-European policy of rapprochement.



The Swiss and Swedish mission in Korea, 1953. YouTube

These discreet mediation efforts which had flourished so successfully within the narrow confines of the Cold War were deprived of any basis from 1989 onwards following the end of the conflict between East and West. All of a sudden, the signs were pointing towards a pan-European unification movement. Neutral buffers and mediators were no longer sought-after now that everyone seemed to be pulling in the same direction. And so, all four neutral states subjected their foreign and security policy priorities to a fundamental rethink.

Up until the 'Wende', the transformative period following the fall of the 'Iron Curtain', Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Finland had also enjoyed close economic ties as members of the *European Free Trade Association (EFTA)*. Vienna, followed shortly by Stockholm and Helsinki, sought to accede to the EU, which was forging ahead with the economic and political unification of all Europe. They now viewed the project of establishing a European Economic Area as an umbrella for the EFTA and the EU as no more than a transitional solution. A good two months after the security policy meeting of the four neutrals in Bern, the Swiss electorate rejected the EEA Agreement in a referendum on 6 December 1992. This dealt a hard blow to the Federal Council, which had already announced EU membership as a strategic goal of Switzerland in October 1991, and to its policy of integration. Meanwhile, Austria, Sweden and Finland would all go on to join the European Union by 1995 – while *nota bene* avowedly remaining neutral.



In 1992, the EEA referendum divided the Swiss electorate. Swiss National Museum / ASL.

The EEA 'no' vote necessitated a rethink of Switzerland's policy on Europe. But, at the same time, the people's verdict did nothing to change the need to reposition the country in security policy terms. The CSCE, the organisation on which everyone – not just Europe's neutral nations – had once pinned their hopes, proved largely ineffective as a regulatory instrument in the post-Cold War period. "For this reason, our partner countries Sweden, Finland and Austria are seeking rapprochement with NATO and the WEU," the military alliance of the EU states, wrote Federal Councillor Villiger to Federal President René Felber shortly after the fateful referendum. Accordingly, the Swiss Defence Minister found that "we too are required to take such a security policy step" in order to "avoid becoming isolated in relation to security policy." Villiger warned that "the fight against modern long-range weapons and carrier systems could soon exceed the technical and political capabilities of a small state." The idea that the country would be able to defend itself in a conflict using only its own military forces appeared increasingly illusory. "Even a neutral state must be allowed to make the necessary arrangements to guarantee its safety." Although it was too early at that stage "to speculate about the nature of such arrangements, consideration should nevertheless be given in good time to preparing the political terrain for such a step".

For about thirty years, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and Austria had little need to seriously consider a closer association beyond the NATO initiative of the loose "Partnership for Peace" (which also included, for example, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine). Their conceptions of neutrality bobbed along, each in its own way. It was not until the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine that the four countries again had to deal fundamentally with the question of neutrality. The different answers show how much they have drifted apart since the separation.

Joint research

This text is the product of a collaboration between the Swiss National Museum (SNM) and the Forschungsstelle Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz (Dodis), the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland research centre. The SNM is researching images relating to Switzerland's foreign policy in the archives of the agency Actualités Suisses Lausanne (ASL), and Dodis puts these photographs in context using the official source material. The files on the year 1992 were published on the internet database Dodis in January 2023. The documents cited in the text are available online.

Published on: 03.10.2023

More of: 20th / 21st century Politics Article All categories