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SWISS NEUTRALITY: RHETORIC AND RELEVANCE

The interpretation of Swiss neutrality is subject of a controversial debate between Swiss traditionalists and advocates of a more active foreign policy. The rhetorical omnipresence of neutrality in domestic politics obscures the fact that its relevance in foreign and security policy has strongly decreased. At the same time, it prevents a substantial discussion of the underlying irreconcilable visions of Switzerland's role in the world that are inhibiting the country's capacity to act. There is a need for a strategy process to both identify the core foreign and security policy interests of Switzerland and derive mandates for appropriate instruments.

Stefan Wermuth / Reuters

Support for neutrality continues to be unabated in Switzerland. In opinion polls, respondents express record levels of approval for the concept. In the annual study "Sicherheit 2007", 92 per cent of Swiss citizens were in favor of neutrality. The popularity of Swiss neutrality is also reflected in politics. After the Federal Council had made a conscious effort to put the issue on the backburner in the 1990s, it is the subject of widespread discussion again today. The question of whether a particular foreign-policy measure is compatible with neutrality is often given more attention than the question of whether that measure is in Switzerland's interests.

Popular though neutrality continues to be in Switzerland, the concrete meaning of its substance is controversial today. This became apparent during the Lebanon war in the summer of 2006. The controversy surrounding both Switzerland's official statements, some of which were critical of Israel, and the applicability of neutrality law to the conflict between Israel and Hizbollah demonstrated how divided the Federal Council and the parties are over the interpretation of neutrality. Diverging conceptions of "active" and "integral" neutrality collided, showing that neutrality has become a political slogan largely removed from the context of its military core, which is legally defined under international law. The debate over the correct interpretation of neutrality reflects more general differences concerning the future of Swiss foreign and security policy at large, which have become an impediment to the country's maneuverability in its external relations.

The Federal Council responded to the controversy by tasking the Foreign Ministry (EDA) with the publication of a new report on how neutrality should be applied. Initially, this move effectively defused the domestic debate. However, the report published in June 2007 is a typical compromise solution that cannot resolve the debate over what course to take in foreign policy and that does not touch on the basic question of the relevance of neutrality in an age of asymmetric threats.

Historic protective purpose

The history of Swiss neutrality is closely interwoven with the history of the European states and Switzerland's geographic location on the conflict-ridden demarcation line between France and the Habsburg Empire and Germany, respectively. Neutrality proved to be a successful security strategy for the small multi-ethnic state to abstain from the dynastic, confessional, and later nationalist wars in Europe and maintain its internal cohesion. Within the European balance of power of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Swiss neutrality was even recognized by the major powers as a stabilizing factor. Not least due to this circumstance, the country managed to avoid involvement in both world wars.

During the Cold War, the importance of neutrality's protective purpose was diminished, however. In the East-West antagonism, Switzerland clearly sided with the Western community of values. Its security, in turn, was closely linked to the nuclear deterrent force of the US and NATO. The fact that Switzerland continued to adhere

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to a security strategy determined by neutrality and autonomous defense can be explained by its specific experience of the Second World War. After the war, neutrality was associated with security to such an extent that it became an axiomatic cornerstone of Swiss foreign policy.

Policymakers contributed to the ideologization of neutrality in the post-war period by establishing the so-called Bindschedler Doctrine in 1954. Under this policy, Switzerland due to its neutrality could not join any non-universal political organizations such as the UN, could not participate in UN sanctions regimes, and could not take part in any economic union. The remarkable aspect of this extensive interpretation of neutrality was that the regulations were described as "the neutrality obligations of the permanently neutral", which put them close to neutrality law, even though they only constituted a redefinition of the national policy of neutrality.

Post-1989 polarization

After the end of the Cold War, the domestic consensus on foreign and security policy matters gave way to increasing polarization between advocates of openness and traditionalists. In its Report 93, the Federal Council reacted to the transformation on the international stage and the end of the division of Europe by reducing neutrality to its military core and identifying the alleviation of institutional participatory deficits as a main task of Swiss foreign policy. In doing so, it focused on accession to the UN and the EU. Against the background of new threats such as intra-state conflicts and refugee crises, it also postulated a paradigm shift in security policy from autonomy to cooperation. Overall, the Federal Council drafted a concept for a modern foreign policy that was to be oriented not towards political maxims, but towards problems and goals.

The envisaged reorientation of Swiss foreign and security policy met with resistance, however. This opposition was led by the conservative SVP party, whose rise to power as the strongest party today was aided by its advocacy of a foreign policy along the lines of the Bindschedler Doctrine. The traditionalists' struggle against a more open Switzerland met with some resonance in the population. The mentality of neutrality that had been accentuated by the historic experience of the Cold War lost only little of its force in the 1990s, despite the rapid changes in the strategic environment. As a result, Switzerland's departure to new horizons became bogged down halfway, a development that manifested itself in the bilateral track with the EU, the delay of the country's UN accession until 2002, and the reluctance concerning security-policy cooperation in an international framework.

Asymmetry, terrorism, and neutrality

Since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the asymmetric nature of the threat picture that was already emerging in the 1990s has become more acute. International terrorist movements such as al-Qaida and non-state national groups such as Hizbollah have become prominent actors in contemporary conflicts and are increasingly taking recourse to asymmetric tactics in their fights against states. As the Federal Office of Police noted in its report on domestic security for 2006, international terrorism is also a threat for Switzerland. The attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) made clear that Europe is not just a fallback space for militants, but also a target for attacks. The attempted bombings of trains in Germany have shown that terrorist targets include not only US allies in the occupation of Iraq. The report of the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution for 2006 stated that the Lebanese would-be suitcase bombers had been prompted to attempt the attacks by the debate over allegedly blasphemous caricatures published in Denmark.

In view of the continued denationalization and deterritorialization of current threats and risks, the importance of neutrality as a security strategy has been diminished further. There are no indications that neutrality offers efficient protection from extremist Muslim terrorism that is directed against Western values as well as against supposed Muslim apostates. This is a view that is shared by a majority of the Swiss population. According to the annual study "Security 2007", 60 per cent of respondents believe that the neutrality of a country is not a relevant factor for terrorists assessing possible targets of attacks. Moreover, neutrality, which is geared towards inter-state conflicts, cannot offer answers to other current threats such as the proliferation of mass casualty weapons, state failure, or organized crime either. Accordingly, the Hague Conventions of 1907, which specify the rights and duties of neutrals during inter-state wars, are only rarely applicable today, which is why they are hardly accorded observance in international law anymore. Finally, it is worth pointing out that Switzerland, due to its geography, benefits in many ways from the EU security community that surrounds it.

The fact that neutrality is more popular than ever is due primarily to its continuing identity function. Eighty per cent of the Swiss population today believe that neutrality is intrinsically linked to the conception of the Swiss Confederation. On top of that, the US-led global campaign against terrorism and the invasion of Iraq have prompted a desire among many Swiss citizens for increased distance from the US and the Euro-Atlantic security institutions.

"Integral neutrality": An old recipe for new threats

This distancing on the part of Switzerland is typical of the traditional reflex of a smaller party towards a greater one that is being viewed critically. It is notable, however, that right-wing conservative circles in Switzerland continue to suggest that a return to the isolationist neutrality policy of the post-war era would increase national security. While traditionalists do acknowledge that the threat picture has changed significantly since 1989, they are opposed to any adaptation of the foreign and security policy toolkit. They therefore reject security policy cooperation, military peace operations, EU accession, and involvement in conflicts with non-state actors, since they believe that all of these measures would threaten Swiss neutrality and security. Against the broad international consensus that the predominant risks and crises can only be dealt with cooperatively, they continue to regard a national unilateralist strategy as the best strategy for survival. However, according to the annual study, only a minority of the population believe that such an autonomous course is feasible for providing security.

The vehement rejection of EU accession by the traditionalists also dovetails with the interests of significant parts of the corporate sector. The latter have been afforded wide-ranging access to the EU market through bilateral treaties, and thus are able to better preserve their freedom of action better through non-membership in the Union. Even if many business leaders feel that "integral neutrality" goes too far, the congruence of interests concerning the matter of EU membership strengthens the resonance of the traditional neutrality discourse.

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"Active neutrality" as a competing model

The head of the Foreign Office, Micheline Calmy-Rey, has reacted to the continuing neutrality offensive of the traditionalists with a counter-model of "active neutrality". In this context, neutrality is used to legitimize an active foreign policy. Precisely because Switzerland is neutral, the argument goes, the country is predestined to be engaged in peace operations and in defending human rights and international law. Just as the axiom of solidarity was developed as an extension of neutrality in the post-war period – that is, solidarity was regarded as compensation for the disadvantages of standing on the sideline – neutrality is now conversely defined as a qualification for solidarity.

This reinterpretation of neutrality is motivated by two factors: First, the intention is to use the room for maneuver that was codified in the Report 93 document, but was never fully exploitable in practice due the dominant traditional discourse of neutrality. The strategy of not discussing the issue of neutrality backfired on the advocates of an open Switzerland in the 1990s; therefore, they now intend to leverage the undiminished emotional affinity to neutrality in order to strengthen the country's foreign policy capacity. "Active neutrality" thus implies not a conceptual correction of the Report 93, but a different political strategy. Secondly, neutrality is framed as a comparative advantage for Switzerland in the international competition of good offices. The concept of "active neutrality" deliberately leaves unanswered the question of how useful neutrality is in terms of security policy, and instead takes recourse to the alleged popularity of Swiss neutrality outside of Europe, which is seen as an asset in the context of active mediation services.

Although this strategy may be plausible in a short-term perspective, it does have long-term disadvantages. Once the battle for dominance in interpreting neutrality has been joined, there is the risk that Switzerland's freedom of action could be further diminished if the attempt to redefine neutrality as a paradigm for cooperative participation fails. Furthermore, the example of NATO member Norway demonstrates that successful mediation depends not so much on neutrality as on well-established contacts and sufficient resources. The involvement of both Norway and Switzerland as independent mediating actors in the Middle East is also due to their status as non-EU members, which allows them to pursue a limited niche policy.

Comparison of neutral / non-aligned states in Europe

	UN accession	EU accession	Troops in peace operations 2006	Of which in UN missions	Of which in other missions	Participation in EU battlegroups
Switzerland	2002	-	274	20	254	No
Austria	1955	1995	1,236	385	851	Yes
Sweden	1946	1995	945	186	759	Yes
Finnland	1955	1995	779	102	677	Yes
Ireland	1955	1973	676	387	289	Yes

Source: IISS Military Balance 2007

Towards a strategic culture?

Although neutrality is only mentioned in the Federal Constitution as an instrument, and although its function in terms of security policy has been significantly diminished, it is unlikely that its domestic popularity as an identifying feature for Switzerland will be lost anytime soon. It is to be expected that political representatives will continue to attempt to use neutrality as a label and a vehicle for their foreign and security policy agendas. The omnipresence of neutrality rhetoric is not in Switzerland's interests, however, and may have detrimental effects on security policy in particular. This became evident during the long-winded debates on a transformation of the armed forces commensurate with the threat picture and on the expansion of troops in peace operations, which is still very modest in international comparison.

Instead of becoming entangled in a futile struggle for the interpretation of "true" neutrality, policymakers should discuss the basic underlying differences concerning the disposition of foreign and security policy. What is required is a national strategy process that is decoupled from the concept of neutrality, and in which Switzerland could prioritize its foreign and security policy interests on the basis of a comprehensive threat analysis in order to derive mandates for appropriate instruments. Such an overall strategy would facilitate an improved coordination of Switzerland's security, foreign, and development policies, as well as better management of the interfaces between civilian and military instruments, and would result in a general increase of the country's capacity to act.

However, the Neutrality Report 07 indicates that Switzerland still faces a rocky road towards a strategic culture because of its political concordance system (presence of all major parties in the government) and the current degree of domestic polarization. While it maintains the conceptual tenets of the Report 93 and does not refer to either "integral" or "active" neutrality, the Neutrality Report 07 attempts a political balancing act between both of these concepts and emphasizes the usefulness of neutrality in a way that starkly distinguishes it from the Report 93. For example, it highlights the benefits of neutrality for Switzerland as a mediator and provider of humanitarian aid. It also appreciates the protective role of neutrality in interstate wars and refers to it as a "stabilizing and structuring factor for the international system". Furthermore, it indicates the possibility of a seat on the UN Security Council and the opportunities it would bring for a neutral Switzerland.

Many of these statements come across as axiomatic, however. The key question of the relevance of neutrality in view of today's increasing asymmetry of warfare and the transnational character of threats is not even mentioned. The report therefore offers no guidelines or impulses for Swiss foreign and security policy. On the contrary: The demand for "a certain equidistance in relations with the other states" may be based on neutrality considerations, but it is an obstacle to the political pursuit of the country's own interests.

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