Swiss Neutrality

The Anatomy of Succes

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The concept of Swiss neutrality is almost as old as the country itself and has now been infused within Switzerland's national identity. Due to unique historical and geographical circumstances, it became one of the most well-known symbols of international relations, a highly desirable model for others but one that is almost impossible to replicate. To understand how Swiss neutrality emerged as such a lasting concept, we need to identify first the stages of its historical development, then the distinct components which have allowed it to become successful and remain so for such a long time. These components (armed deterrence, systemic benefits, and the recognition of neutrality as a norm) have so far ensured the survival of Swiss neutrality and provided a near-perfect recipe for others who seek to establish such status for themselves – a notion that is becoming increasingly relevant as the Russo-Ukrainian war wages on.

Swiss neutrality is regarded as the 'gold standard' in international affairs, although Switzerland is both the most successful model and the least achievable exception among the few states which have attempted to establish effective diplomatic impartiality. Most of these countries have sought neutrality during (and because of) the unstable decades of the twentieth century, whereas in the case of Switzerland it has a long-standing historical tradition, deep-rooted in the consciousness of all European states. This – along with a number of well-designed diplomatic and security features – is the secret of its unique success. The following chapters will briefly examine the historical process behind the establishment of Swiss neutrality, then provide an overlook of the most important factors needed to uphold it, drawing subsequent conclusions on whether it could be considered a model for the 21st century – a question that is becoming increasingly relevant as the war between Ukraine and Russia will have to come to an end eventually.

A long-standing tradition

Switzerland's military neutrality has a long historical tradition, which is even surprising given the medieval confederacy's well-known expansionist policies and renowned fighting prowess of its mercenaries. Yet, certain geographical, diplomatic and pragmatic reasons led the rich trade union of Alpine states to gradually choose impartiality in the conflicts of their neighbours from the 16th century onward, and later to establish the world's most famous neutral country. The evolution of Swiss neutrality coincides with the development of Switzerland itself and can be divided into three major periods, briefly outlined below.

Neutrality established (1516-1815)

Switzerland began as a small trading union of three cantons, established in the late 13th century, which immediately launched aggressive expansionist wars and skirmishes on nearby areas, gradually carving out its territory within the Holy Roman Empire. It gained *de facto* independence in 1499, and *de iure* in 1648.

The history of Swiss neutrality, on the other hand, dates back to the Battle of Marignano (1515), taking place between France and the Swiss Confederacy during the War of the Holy League, and the subsequent *Treaty of Fribourg*, signed in 1516. Although the battle ended with a decisive French victory, both sides suffered major casualties, and thus France sought to create a generous and lasting peace. Therefore, a so-called "eternal clause" (called "Perpetual Peace") was included in the treaty, under which both nations pledged never to take up arms against each other, nor to support each other's enemies. Even if this treaty prevented the Swiss to wage war only on France in the future, Switzerland – as a whole – never went to war with foreign powers again, effectively establishing a policy of unilateral military neutrality.[1]

The next major step in the direction of international recognition came with the end of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), during which the Swiss cantons remained neutral and did not allow passage for the troops of either of the sides. By then, a great political and ideological split between the Catholic and Protestant cantons had started to develop, and they all understood that neutrality is the only way to preserve the Confederacy. The *Treaty of Westphalia* in 1648, therefore, came with international recognition of Swiss independence, and from that moment all great powers started to consider Switzerland as a *de facto* neutral state.[2]

Still, this could not be considered neutrality under international law, and Switzerland was indeed invaded once more, by Napoleon's forces in 1798, briefly replacing the Swiss Confederacy with a French satellite state, the Helvetic Republic (1798-1803). After the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the Confederacy, one provision of the *Treaty of Paris* in 1814 reaffirmed the Swiss neutrality, just ahead of the hallmark international recognition a year later, at the Congress of Vienna.[3]

Neutrality recognized (1815-1914)

The great powers of Europe gathered at the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) not only to restore their territorial boundaries with the passing of the Napoleonic Wars but also to solidify the continent's *status quo* by designing a rule-based international system that would keep Europe's power-structure in balance and prevent large-scale wars and revolutions in the future. The established "congressional" system of international politics lasted a hundred years until the outbreak of the First World War, thus the Congress is considered the cradle of modern international diplomacy. In this regard, the provisions agreed upon were not only concerned with the faith of the belligerent powers but also touched upon a number of smaller issues deemed imperative for European stability and the success of the envisaged system. One of these issues was Swiss neutrality.

Learning from the lessons of the Napoleonic Wars, the concert of great powers decided that Switzerland – because of its geographical position – would serve best as a neutral buffer zone, and agreed not to violate its neutrality in the future. This first recognition of Swiss neutrality under international law, however, did not emerge from explicit Swiss demands, but because the power structure of the time required it, although their long-held practice of unilateral impartiality greatly contributed to the notion. In any case, since 1815, Switzerland has been officially neutral, the first nation in the world to achieve this status.[4]

Neutrality, on the other hand, did not prevent the Swiss cantons to go to war with each other. In late 1847, a civil war (the Sonderbud War) broke out between the Protestant and largely German-speaking cantons that wanted more centralisation, against an alliance of Catholic, Francophone cantons that wanted to preserve their almost complete independence. The war ended with Protestant victory, which resulted in the birth of modern Switzerland as a federal state, instead of a loose confederacy.[5] The leaders of the new country understood that the religious and ethnic cleavages between the certain cantons could destabilize Switzerland again in the future – especially during times of neighbouring conflicts – therefore, when the Swiss Federal Constitution was written in 1848, it included military neutrality as an instrument of safeguarding the country's independence.[6] From then on, Swiss neutrality was not only recognised by the international community, but it also became an integral part of Swiss statehood.

Neutrality upheld (post-1914)

The 20th century proved to be particularly challenging for Swiss neutrality, but it managed to rise to the dire times it found itself in. One major component which has undergone a massive development during the world wars was Switzerland's defensive capability and its willingness to stand up to any invasion.

At the beginning of the First World War (1914-1918), Switzerland had an army of 250,000 troops, almost all of whom were deployed along the borders when the war broke out. This relatively sizeable and highly organised Swiss army was taken into consideration (along with the country's difficult topography) when the German leadership decided to go through Belgium rather than Switzerland, as per the original Schlieffen plan. Thus, by effective deterrence, Switzerland was able to uphold its neutrality during the entire length of the war.[7]

The success of Swiss neutrality during the war called for its reaffirmation in the post-war international order as well. The freshly formed League of Nations (interwar precursor of the UN) not only recognised Switzerland as neutral under the 1907 Hague Convention[*], but also elevated Swiss neutrality onto a symbolic level in international affairs by establishing its headquarters in the Swiss city of Geneva.[8] Thus, Swiss neutrality, as a concept, had overgrown being just an instrument of protecting Switzerland's sovereignty and the country became a neutral ground and safe haven for all of Europe in times of conflict.

The Second World War went down similarly in the case of Switzerland, as the country, yet again, managed to stay out of it by a massive mobilisation of some 600,000 troops, which – by being familiar with the mountainous terrain – could have supposedly fended off an army thrice its size. Furthermore, the Swiss not only significantly increased the costs of a possible foreign invasion for any outside power (i.e. Germany), but kept promising harsh retaliation in case it ever happened, all while maintaining trade relations with Berlin – a move that has been deemed controversial after the war.[9] Nonetheless, all of these elements contributed to Switzerland remaining the only peaceful island in the middle of the German-controlled, totalitarian sea that was Europe at the time.

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[*]*Convention (V) respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land*. The Hague, 18 October 1907.

Since then, Switzerland has been expanding the symbolic nature of its neutrality in international affairs. One of the four major UN offices is located in Geneva, while the country hosts the headquarters of a number of other international organisations, such as the World Economic Forum as well as the International Red Cross and numerous humanitarian bodies, with Geneva itself often dubbed the "humanitarian capital of the world".

The recipe for success

Switzerland's outstanding success in maintaining its neutral status and keeping outside powers from violating it stands on a number of different factors and policies. According to Dreyer and Jesse[10], these sets of factors can be separated into three distinct categories which perfectly complement each other in contributing to the success of Swiss neutrality. Two of the three main components are part of a classic "stick and carrot" strategy: armed deterrence and economic incentives – described by Karsh[11] as *negative* and *positive* neutrality – as well as the third category in form of the benefits of historical recognition of neutrality as a *norm*.

Negative neutrality: the cost of violation

The negative component of neutrality encompasses all of the factors which together provide effective military deterrence against any foreign violation of a country's neutral status. In short, it's a collection of formal and informal defence policies which are put into place to maximise the cost of foreign invasions.

In the case of Switzerland, negative neutrality itself is comprised of two components: materialistic factors (actual military capability) and – since historical data proves that a strong military alone does not necessarily equals to effective deterring power – non-materialistic social or cognitive factors (the country's

resolve and determination to defend itself). The former is present in form of the elaborate defensive technologies deployed along the highly trained military personnel of the Swiss army, while the latter is part of the unofficial defence policies of proliferating a national resistance culture and the idea of armed citizen militias.[12]

For a country of 8.6 million people, Switzerland keeps a formidable armed force even in peacetime. In 2021, it had almost 19,500 active military personnel (85% of which are conscripts, as military service is mandatory for males above the age of 20), and if we add the reserve personnel, the total size of its army stood at 143,000, the world's 18th biggest per capita.[13] On top of this, the sizeable and well-trained army was complemented by an elaborate system of "self-sabotage": during the Cold War, Switzerland literally undermined all entry points along its borders – be it bridges, tunnels, major roads – ready to come down at a push of a button, effectively sealing off the country from invaders to give the Swiss time to prepare armed resistance. Furthermore, camouflaged fortifications, machine-gun nests, tank traps, and underground bunkers were constructed all over the country. By 1990, the number of public and secret defensive structures surpassed 30,000, not including the bunkers which could house the entire population plus 10% - something that no other country has ever achieved.[14] By now, the larger part of this infrastructure had been decommissioned or turned into public spaces, but the framework is still there if the need would ever arise.

The other component, as mentioned above, is the proliferation of military resistance as part of the Swiss national culture. Shooting is one of Switzerland's national sports, clubs and competitions even for children have been commonplace throughout Switzerland since the middle of the 19th century. Furthermore, in the Swiss collective narratives, marksmanship has been elevated onto a level of the highest national virtues – reinforced by the legend of William Tell, which played a crucial role in defining the Swiss marksman as a defender of

family and country.[15] Therefore, the widespread knowledge of firearm use and the willingness to defend the country among the general population, along with one of the world's most liberal gun control policies (it is estimated that there are around 3.4 million civilian-owned firearms in the country, which at 41 guns per 100 people is the second-largest ownership per capita in Europe)[16], effectively allows Switzerland to expand its armed forces – by the use of ad-hoc but trained local militias – significantly in case of a foreign invasion.

Positive neutrality: the benefits of adherence

Respecting Switzerland's neutral status comes with a collection of system-wide goods and benefits in terms of political, economic and diplomatic relations as well. This so-called "positive neutrality" is meant to complement the negative side (armed deterrence) to provide further guarantees for the success of the policy. So, *positive* in this sense means that it is beneficial for all outside belligerent powers in times of war and peace alike.[17]

Before the 20th century, Switzerland's positive neutrality primarily manifested in two ways. One is that the country became sort of a sanctuary for foreign intellectuals, reformists, freedom fighters, and radicals who fled their homelands for political reasons. The second is that it started to deliberately seek to give home for international organisations (such as the Red Cross in 1863, and later the League of Nations) which also found it helpful to rely on an impartial state for running global operations.

During the world wars, however, these collective benefits were significantly expanded and elevated onto the level of national strategy. Especially during the Second World War, Switzerland maintained a meticulously crafted neutral stance in its trade relations: it not only allowed trade between Axis powers to flow through its territory but it also made sure its own trading volume remains the same with both Axis and Allied powers. Switzerland also became a valuable

meeting and communication ground for all belligerents. The Swiss provided humanitarian assistance for all parties and protected their legal representatives in need while safeguarding their wealth within their famously secure banks.[18]

It is no surprise, therefore, that with the arrival of the countless international organisations, diplomats and other government representatives, Switzerland also became the playground of the world's most powerful intelligence agencies. Foreign governments have been using the safety of Swiss neutrality for running covert intelligence operations since the 18th century, with the scope of this activity growing substantially during and after the Second World War.[19] This led the Swiss officials to periodically question their own role in preventing others from conducting such activities on Swiss soil, but the logic of positive neutrality generally prevailed. The Swiss' own federal intelligence service, the FIS, while being vigilant in terms of possibly dangerous elements operating in the country, deliberately chooses to engage them only if the foreign actors in question are deemed to pose danger to the integrity of Swiss statehood itself. In the cases of foreign agencies spying on each other, Switzerland puts on a largely ambivalent posture, in other words, "counter-espionage is not its top priority".[20]

All of these contributed massively to the fact that in view of the foreign powers, the benefits of sustaining Swiss neutrality gradually outgrew those of a potential invasion, and that after the war Switzerland continued to become one of the most esteemed global hubs of international organisations.

Recognition of neutrality as the norm

The third and final component, just as vital as the other two, is that through a set of unique historical circumstances Switzerland managed to turn its neutrality into a widely recognised *norm*. In fact, the Swiss model is the one that has defined neutrality itself as a viable concept in international relations, adding its own national character to it (in form of sovereigntism and self-determination), creating

essentially the *culture* of neutrality. But, in order for a policy to become a norm, it needs to be founded in both domestic and foreign frameworks; Switzerland not only needs to see itself as neutral but it needs to be seen as one by the international system as well.[21]

Moreover, the two factors – domestic and foreign – in the successful creation of this norm need to be developed in unison to be able to support each other. Take Belgium's example, since similarly to Switzerland, its geography has turned it into a buffer zone, which naturally warrants a neutral strategy. But even though Belgium's neutrality was recognised by the foreign powers, it was violated during both world wars because it lacked the domestic component: neutrality as a historical norm manifested in both armed deterrence capabilities and a culture of military resistance. This policy — carefully developed together with the widening international recognition — is what made Swiss neutrality so successful, and it is why it will continue to survive for another long period as well. The foundations of the foreign and domestically established norm of Switzerland's neutrality are almost unimaginable to shake by now, as Swiss neutrality is no longer just a policy, it has become a lasting symbol.

Conclusions

In the history of international relations Swiss neutrality is nothing short of an outstanding phenomenon. Due to unique geographical and historical circumstances, it was able to take roots as early as five centuries ago and continued to develop into a systematic and lasting policy, widely recognised throughout the world. The fates of similar states in history show us that such enterprises rarely succeed, let alone survive more than a century, yet Switzerland was able to consolidate and expand its neutral status.

The history of Swiss neutrality can be separated into three stages. The first, from the early 16th to 19th centuries, was about the confederacy unilaterally establishing a policy of military neutrality and gradually laying down the diplomatic and political framework needed to keep others from invading, carefully balancing between the empires of early modern Europe. The second, between the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the beginning of the First World War (1914), awarded the previous Swiss efforts by granting international recognition of its neutral status within the newly established *status quo* of the Great Powers of the 19th century. Finally, during the third stage, which lasts until today, Swiss neutrality has been reaffirmed as part of the international legal system and it continued to grow into a well-known and reliable brand, which gives home for (and at the same time, is reinforced by) a large number of international organisations and fora.

Likewise, the secret of this success lies in three distinct components supporting each other. The first is the so-called "negative neutrality", which seeks to present any outside power with effective armed deterrence – in form of a formidable army, ingenious defensive measures, and the proliferation of military resistance as part of the national culture. The second, complementing armed deterrence is "positive neutrality" which encompasses a set of economic and diplomatic incentives offered to be enjoyed by all foreign powers equally. These benefits include equal trading opportunities for all sides, safe meeting and diplomatic hubs, humanitarian assistance and legal protection of refugees and representatives to name but a few. The third component is the brand of Swiss neutrality itself: it has become a norm in both the world of international relations and inside the country as well. Swiss neutrality is more than just a policy, it is a national symbol of Switzerland, unalienable from the country both in the minds of foreign leaders and Swiss citizens.

Thus, Swiss neutrality presents the ultimate conundrum. It is both the most desirable model similar countries could easily aspire to establish, and both a unique phenomenon that is next to impossible to replicate.

On a side note - Ukraine

This uniqueness is why Ukraine – which at the time of writing may consider neutrality – has small chance to assume such a strong and lasting neutral status as Switzerland once did. For instance, it obviously lacks the historical tradition of neutrality and all the benefits that come with it, including establishing neutrality as the norm inside and outside the country. Secondly, to present credible armed deterrence is hardly imaginable in the near future, with its military being in war with Russia at the moment and it is steadily losing resources. The third component, system-wide benefits can hardly be applied to Ukraine either, but maybe this is where the international community needs to start. The possible recognition of Ukraine's neutral status after the war could be followed by establishing the headquarters of a number of international organisations (such as the OSCE, for instance), which would elevate the country's diplomatic importance between the West and Russia. But for now, all is speculative. Nonetheless, after all the conclusions of the Swiss case have been examined, one thing is certain. Even to begin replicating such a unique model in the case of Ukraine would take the efforts of the whole international community, as one country cannot establish such a status alone anymore.

There is also another development the recent Ukraine-Russia war brought into the context of Swiss neutrality. On 28 February, the Swiss federal government announced that the country will impose the same sanctions Brussels did days before on Russia. Switzerland's sanctions include complete trade and travel ban on certain firms and individuals close to President Putin and the freezing of Swiss-stored assets of the Russian oligarchy.[22] The announcement comes as a shock,

considering that even Nazi Germany could enjoy all the benefits of neutral Switzerland, albeit it represented a more immediate threat against the Swiss than President Putin does at the moment. Still, this move stands an unprecedented deviation from the long-held neutral tradition of Switzerland and thus may be a signal of changing times.

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