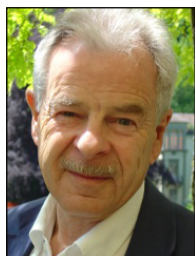


Neutrality is a principle of foreign policy, not an emotional commitment

Neutrality initiative: arguments instead of slogans

by Prof. Dr em. Wolf Linder*



Wolf Linder.
(Picture ma)

No sooner had the popular initiative “for a neutral, cosmopolitan and humanitarian Switzerland” been submitted than the mainstream media launched a chorus of condemnation, dubbing it “Blocher initiative” or “Putin initiative”. The aim was to discredit the popular initiative

from the outset and stifle any objective discussion.

As a political scientist and citizen, this outrages me. Throughout my career, I have told my students: “In Switzerland, the most important national issues are regulated by the Federal Constitution. They are decided by the voters after an earnest and objective discussion.”

This should also apply to a popular initiative that concerns one of the most important political issues in Switzerland: the future of our country’s neutrality. It is a non-partisan issue. I support the neutrality initiative for reasons that should appeal not only to conservatives, but also to liberals, left-wingers and Greens.

Why neutrality belongs in the constitution

For decades, Swiss neutrality was something so self-evident that it was hardly ever discussed. “Switzerland is neutral” was something every child learned. But now many people have little idea what that means. Neither children nor voters.

Even individual members of the Federal Council seem to have little understanding of neutrality. Otherwise, Federal Councillor Cassis would not have been able to adopt all the EU sanctions against Russia word for word after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in spring 2022 and at the same time declare that we remain neutral. The



foreign reaction was swift. Both US President *Biden* and Russian President *Putin* declared in rare agreement that Switzerland is no longer a neutral country.

At the *Bürgenstock Conference*, *Zelensky* was courted as a guest, while *Putin* was not invited. Recently, some military officials have been seriously preparing a concept for a Swiss detachment with helicopters for missions abroad.

Neutrality, I ask: who still believes in it today?

Against relativising and watering down neutrality

It is not enough for us to believe in neutrality ourselves. Neutrality must above all be credible to the outside world. Unfortunately, the Federal Council has squandered some of this credibility over the past three years. That is why the popular initiative wants to enshrine neutrality and its basic principles in the Constitution.

The initiative aims to enshrine our neutrality in the Federal Constitution as a fundamental principle of foreign policy, both internally and externally. This will remove it to a certain extent from the short-term thinking of politicians and individual Federal Councillors. Above all, however, it will strengthen a credible and reliable foreign policy. This will also protect it against external pressure, such as we are currently experiencing.

I think this is good and sensible.

Not a matter of the heart, but a principle of foreign policy

Some people have obviously forgotten what it means to be neutral. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, many citizens and seasoned politicians cried out in indignation: “How can we

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remain neutral when a large country invades a small country? How can we still talk about neutrality when Russia is committing a crime under international law and turning thousands of innocent Ukrainians into war victims?”

The outrage was widespread and stifled any objective discussion. The sympathy is understandable. But neutrality is not a matter of sympathy or emotion; it is a fundamental principle of foreign policy. It means that Switzerland remains independent, does not participate in wars and helps to resolve violent conflicts by peaceful means.

It is not personal morality and concern, but the idea of peace that is the ethical foundation of neutrality.

Neutrality also serves to preserve internal unity among the people. This is what the writer *Carl Spitteler* taught us in his speech “Our Swiss Standpoint” more than 100 years ago.¹

At that time, when the First World War broke out in 1914, the sympathies of the German-speaking Swiss lay with the German Empire. The hearts of the French-speaking Swiss, on the other hand, beat with the French. Spitteler appealed for these one-sided sympathies to be set aside. For if German-speaking Swiss and French-speaking Swiss followed the voice of their hearts, Switzerland would be divided, and neutrality would come to an end. What is more, a divided Switzerland could be drawn into the war. Spitteler therefore called for Switzerland to maintain its own independent and neutral position.

In times of war, neutral countries remain impartial towards the warring parties. Switzerland attempted to do this during the First and Second World Wars and again during the Cold War – not always successfully, but nevertheless. Of course, we all have our personal sympathies and antipathies, but in terms of state policy, neutral Switzerland does not distinguish between “good” and “bad” states.

Former US President Bush, on the other hand, did just that with his “axis of evil”: “Those who are with us are good states, those who are against us are rogue states.” This division of the world into “good” and “bad” is the opposite of neutrality.

The ICRC as an example

Impartiality is also upheld by the *International Committee of the Red Cross*. Without maintaining an equal distance from all parties to a con-



ICRC building in Geneva. Swiss neutrality grants the ICRC the trust and acceptance of all parties involved in a conflict. (Picture ma)

flict – both “good” and “bad” – it would be unable to fulfil its humanitarian tasks. As the ICRC demonstrates, impartiality does not mean indifference to world affairs. Despite its neutrality, Switzerland has made significant contributions in the humanitarian field. This began in 1871 with the admission of 80,000 defeated soldiers from the *Bourbaki* army in the Jura region and continued with the admission of war refugees during the world wars, from Hungary in 1956 and now with 70,000 refugees from Ukraine.

Humanitarian aid and the political wisdom of neutrality are therefore not mutually exclusive. Heart and mind, the moral convictions of humanitarian aid and the ethical responsibility of neutrality and peace are not opposites. They complement each other. This can be summed up in a simple formula: yes, to solidarity with the victims of war on *both* sides, but no to solidarity with one side in a war.

More NATO is not compatible with neutrality

Our relationship with NATO will be a hot topic in the referendum campaign. The geopolitical situation is uncertain. European countries are arming themselves, including Switzerland. Many people think we should place ourselves under NATO’s protective shield. I think that’s a bad idea.

Firstly, this protective shield does not come free of charge. As a member of NATO, we would have alliance obligations instead of neutrality. Article 5 of the NATO Charter requires that, in the event of an “armed attack” on a NATO country, the other states shall take “measures, including the use of armed force”, which they deem “necessary”. This would of course also apply to our country.

Secondly, NATO is no longer merely a defensive alliance. In Afghanistan, Serbia and Libya,

NATO waged wars or participated in them – in some cases even in violation of international law and without any NATO country having been attacked. NATO has become the military arm of the United States, serving to secure the dominance of the West and its economic interests.

You may think that's either a good thing or a bad thing. But one thing cannot be denied: NATO intervenes with military means far beyond its borders, far beyond the borders of Europe. And it considers this justified: "Our security is not only defended in the Hindu Kush, but also", said the then German Defence Minister *Peter Struck* in 2004. But instead of security and democracy, these interventions left behind political chaos and additional streams of refugees to Europe.

Should our children and grandchildren one day take part in such adventures?

"Linder is painting a picture of doom and gloom", NATO supporters will say. "We don't want to become a member of NATO; we just want to cooperate with the alliance on technical matters". That sounds reasonable at first, and it has long been the case with fighter pilots, air-space security and many other military areas.

Where are the limits? In joint manoeuvres, joint command structures, troop contingents for NATO?

Where are the red lines that are incompatible with neutrality?

We could end up like we did with the EU: we are not a member, but we comply with Brussels' rules and expectations more faithfully than many EU members. Our authorities could well interpret a case of alliance with NATO as a marching order for Swiss troop contingents, citing an extraordinary situation and a "flexible" neutrality.

But the honest answer is that we cannot have both NATO *and* neutrality. We must make a choice, even if it is difficult: NATO or neutrality.

Questionable boom in sanctions

Heads are also hot on sanctions. Sanctions are unilateral coercive measures taken by a state, a group of states or the UN against another state. Sanctions are becoming increasingly common, with some now talking about a veritable "sanctionitis".

Many of these sanctions violate international law and are illegal punitive measures taken by the powerful against the weak.

The neutrality initiative demands that Switzerland only participate in sanctions that have been

decided by the UN. The reason is simple. Although they are "only" imposed by the Security Council and not by the General Assembly, UN sanctions are the only ones that can claim the legitimacy of a global organisation and are binding on the entire international community.

This contrasts with the EU sanctions against Russia, which are controversial in other parts of the world.

As a member of the UN, Switzerland is required by international law to adopt non-military UN sanctions.

In the case of non-military coercive measures taken by other states or the EU, Switzerland takes measures to prevent these states from circumventing them via Switzerland. Switzerland does not expand trade with a warring party so that it cannot be accused of profiting from war.

Some argue that waiving sanctions would restrict Switzerland's foreign policy leeway. But the opposite is true. Switzerland is currently participating in 27 sanctions. Only 14 of these were decided by the UN. The Federal Council would not be required to support the 13 other sanctions packages adopted by the EU. Switzerland would remain free under international law to take its own measures. This would increase Switzerland's freedom in trade policy. There can be no question of foreign policy being gagged.

On the contrary, as the example of Iran shows: the US has imposed sanctions on Iran that Switzerland does not support.

There are also fundamental arguments against many sanctions:

- They do not affect the governments at fault, but rather the people, especially the poorest sections of the population.
- The affected population shows solidarity with the sanctioned government.
- Sanctions prolong the conflict.
- Sanctions very rarely lead to regime change.

The problem can be illustrated by the example of Cuba. Because the US disapproves of its small neighbour's regime, it has been boycotting Cuba with comprehensive sanctions for over 60 years. Nevertheless, the regime is still in power. Despite impoverishment, there has been no popular uprising against the regime to date. Rather, the sanctions serve to maintain the power of the government, which can blame the US for poverty and shortages. The conflict between the US and Cuba remains unresolved because no negoti-

ations for a peaceful coexistence between the two parties are taking place.

In short, sanctions follow the logic of war, not the logic of peace.

Peace efforts in the spirit of neutrality

According to the text of the initiative, Switzerland's neutrality should explicitly serve to maintain and promote peace. Switzerland is available as a mediator. This is more than just a pious wish. Switzerland has initiated, organised or conducted a whole series of mediation activities on behalf of international organisations, particularly after the Second World War. Here are a few examples:

- The Swiss/Swedish mission to monitor the ceasefire between North and South Korea (since 1953).
- The organisation of the Evian Peace Conference, which brought France and Algeria to the negotiating table and led to the end of one of the bloodiest colonial wars (1962).
- Mediation between Russia and Chechnya (1997ff).
- The investigation report on the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia commissioned by the EU Council of Ministers. The Swiss report is one of the few that has been accepted by both parties to the conflict.
- The Minsk Agreements (2014/15).
- The many initiatives in the OSCE, before and during the term of office of Swiss Secretary General Ambassador *Greminger* (2017 to 2020).

Furthermore, Geneva has developed into a centre of international diplomacy. Switzerland is the depositary state for around 80 international agreements, compared with 20 for Germany.

These are achievements of Swiss diplomacy that are little noticed or often downplayed today. Of course, many peace efforts have been unsuccessful. But making peace is a demanding art. Its success depends on the willingness of the parties to make peace.

However, it also requires the credible impartiality of the mediators. Switzerland is not the only actor capable of conducting peace negotiations. But thanks to its neutrality, Swiss representatives have often enjoyed greater trust than others

in treating both sides of a conflict impartially and equally.

Neutrality must apply globally

But are all these considerations still valid in a time of geopolitical upheaval, with new power blocs emerging in China and India, the BRICS countries and, in the distant future, Africa? Europe will no longer be the centre of the world – neither economically nor politically. Our neutrality must also be credible to China, India and all southern countries. And it must be credible to countries with different religions or to non-democracies, where two-thirds of the world's population currently live. In other words, our neutrality will have to prove itself globally in the future.

The UN Charter, which calls on all states to renounce war and the threat of force, must remain our guiding principle. If Switzerland wants to contribute to world peace in the future, it must stand up against violations of UN peace law, and that means violations by *all* sides.

Such neutrality is challenging and may be politically inconvenient. But there are also obvious economic advantages, for example if we do not take sides in the trade war between the US and China. It is not national egoism if a fair foreign trade policy also takes the interests of non-Western states and developing countries seriously. There needs to be a balance between the rich and poor worlds, without which there can be no lasting peace in the world.

Swiss neutrality and its commitment to the reliable foundations of international law not only serve its own security and internal peace. They can also make a modest contribution to a more peaceful world.

However, Swiss neutrality only has a future if it remains credible and reliable beyond Europe. Anchoring it in the Federal Constitution can only be advantageous.

Source: <https://www.infosperber.ch/politik/schweiz/neutralitaetsinitiative-argumente-statt-parolen/>, 16 May 2025

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://swiss-standpoint.ch/why-swiss-standpoint.html>
The full text of Carl Spitteler's speech, held in Zurich on 14 December 1914, is available here in PDF format to download. [Spitteler_e_20200930.pdf](#)