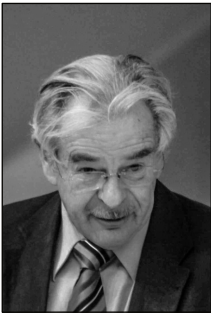


# Is Swiss neutrality immoral?

by Wolf Linder, Bern\*



Wolf Linder.  
(Picture ma)

*Voters will soon have to decide on the neutrality initiative: Should neutrality be enshrined in the Constitution? Should Switzerland support economic sanctions? Should peace efforts be strengthened? Does Switzerland want more neutrality or more NATO? Or should everything stay the same?*

*This article does not comment on the current debate. Instead, it addresses a question that is rarely discussed but preoccupies many voters: Is neutrality still morally justifiable in an age when wars are becoming rampant?*

*And: Given that so much violence is taking place, should we not take the “good” side? With my answer, I wish to avoid the current moralising, whilst encouraging readers to reflect.*

## Ethics of conviction or ethics of responsibility?

Following the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, many asked themselves: “Remaining neutral – that simply cannot be right. The powerful Russians are waging war against a small country and killing thousands of innocent people. We cannot stand by idly. We must take sides with the weak and forget about neutrality. That is our moral duty.”

This judgement reflected our sympathies and what our hearts are set on. But that is ethics of conviction: it guides action according to one’s own values and principles, whilst disregarding the consequences.

In the context of a policy of neutrality, however, ethics of conviction leads us astray. The most striking example of this is the First World War. At

that time, the German-speaking Swiss sympathised with the German Empire, whilst the Romans sympathised with the French “Grande Nation”. Had our country taken sides, we would likely have been drawn into the maelstrom of war.

Perhaps an internally divided Switzerland might even have lost its independence. Neutrality saved us from that.

This meant that both German-speaking Swiss and French-speaking Swiss had to set aside their personal sympathies and instead focus on the meaning and purpose of neutrality: to preserve the country’s independence peacefully and to refrain from taking sides in the war between neighbouring countries.

This foreign policy principle of non-violence and peace follows the ethics of responsibility: It is not about expressing sympathies, but rather about taking responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions, ensuring they are politically justifiable and reasonable to the best of one’s knowledge. The idea of peace both internally and externally is the ethical foundation of neutrality.

The Second World War also demonstrates that political reason and personal sympathies can conflict in the context of neutrality policy. At that time, the sympathies of the majority of the population lay with the Allies. Nevertheless, the government tried to remain neutral. The same applied during the Cold War: most people felt they belonged to the West, yet official foreign policy at the time followed the principle of neutrality – even towards the Soviet Union.

Of course, we all have our personal sympathies and antipathies. Yet, in terms of state policy, neutral Switzerland does not distinguish between “good” and “bad” states. The same ap-

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was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of St. Gallen.

Wolf Linder rejects any “flexibilisation” of neutrality. He therefore advocates enshrining neutrality in the Constitution. Linder is involved with ‘swissneutralitynow’ and is a *co-initiator of the appeal to the Left and the Greens: ‘Yes to the Neutrality Initiative!’* (Zeitgeschehen im Fokus, 17 January 2024, pages 14–16) to support the neutrality initiative backed by the SVP. Linder is a member of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland.

plies to the International Red Cross: only impartiality towards all states allows it to fulfil its humanitarian mission.

Former US President *Bush*, on the other hand, propagated the opposite with his “Axis of Evil”: “Whoever is *for* us is a good state; whoever stands *against* us belongs to the rogue states.” This division of the world into the “good” and the “bad” is the exact opposite of the peace-oriented concept of neutrality.

### Neutrality: The union of heart and mind

Our country has not taken part in any of the many European wars of the last 200 years. That did not, of course, mean passively watching the events of war unfold. Switzerland has always sought to mediate in inter-state conflicts. Its credible neutrality was the prerequisite for this. The list of “good offices” is long. The most important examples following the Second World War include:

- Monitoring the ceasefire between North and South Korea;
- The organisation of the Evian Conference, which heralded the end of the bloody colonial war between France and Algeria;
- The maintenance of diplomatic relations between the USA on the one hand, and Cuba and Iran on the other;
- Peace efforts in the conflict between Russia and Chechnya, as well as between Russia and Georgia;
- Initiatives within the OSCE under Switzerland’s chairmanship.

Alongside these diplomatic peace efforts, humanitarian actions are also worth mentioning. They began during the war of 1870, when Switzerland granted temporary safe haven in our country to 80,000 French soldiers fleeing the German army. This continued with the reception of war-affected children from numerous countries after the Second World War: 20,000 Hungarians in 1956 or around 100,000 refugees from Ukraine in 2022. Humanitarian actions are the best way to express personal sympathy and concern for the suffering of victims of violence.

In this way, neutrality can even combine the ethics of conviction with the ethics of responsibility – that is, heart and mind. This can be simplified into the following formula:

Yes, to humanitarian solidarity with the war victims on both sides, no, to political solidarity with the belligerent states!



*Preserving neutrality: Author Wolf Linder outside the Federal Parliament in Bern.*

*(Picture swissneutralitynow Neutrality Studies)*

### Neutrality – a tool for dishonest dealings?

An accusation that is heard regularly. In fact, it comes in three parts: firstly, it is deemed objectionable that neutral Switzerland maintains relations with all countries. Secondly, Switzerland even trades with violent regimes. Thirdly, neutrality serves to generate extra profits.

#### 1) *Swiss neutrality is something to be aspired to worldwide – why?*

The international community of states is engaged in global competition. Within this, every country tries to get the best deal for itself. Two institutions are supposed to ensure that this state egoism does not get out of hand. On the one hand, international competition frameworks such as the WTO seek to bind states to jointly agreed trade rules. On the other hand, the UN Charter of Peace applies worldwide and to all states, prohibiting both the threat of violence against another country and the use of violence against a state.

Yet the world order is far from perfect: we are now witnessing new wars and outbreaks of violence almost every day. And US President *Trump* has instigated an unpredictable trade war with his tariffs. At least both the WTO and the UN have sanctions in place to punish breaches of the rules. Nevertheless, it is a precarious order: at present, the rule of law all too often has to give way to the law of the strongest.

Two things, however, must be credited to this world order despite all its shortcomings: firstly, that it came into being at all and assigns the same rights and duties to every state. Secondly, that it recognises the diversity of the international community: a country may be organised as a democracy, an authoritarian state, a Christian or Islamic nation, or have a market or planned economy – every state has a seat and an equal vote in the UN General Assembly. Hu-

man rights are among the few universal obligations: however, they are understood differently in different societies – depending on the socio-economic services that states are able to finance.

*What does this mean for neutrality and its moral standing?* Today, neutrality applies not only to European states, but to all states.

In a war-torn world where today's friend can become tomorrow's enemy, the peaceful conduct and mediation principles of neutral states hold moral significance: an ethical relevance that demonstrates that, alongside alignment with one of the major power blocs and their potential for violence, there is another path: that of peaceful mediation rather than mutual threat.

It reminds us of a forgotten fact: unilateral security through military rearmament is a fallacy. Lasting security and peace only stand a chance if states take seriously and heed not only their own security but also the security needs of potential adversaries.

*2) Is trade with authoritarian regimes immoral?*

Is it justifiable to trade with authoritarian regimes? For instance, with Iran and its violent regime, or with China, which imprisons dissidents as enemies of the state? Here, critics are quick to level accusations of betraying Western values. "No," is the answer from the moralist of conviction, who, of course, gives no thought to the consequences. Those guided by a responsibility-based ethic ask a different question: to trade or not to trade – which has the better consequences for both parties?

The central question, however, is this: does neutrality encourage "immoral" business dealings? On the one hand, neutrality restricts our exports, as in the arms trade, for example. On the other hand, neutrality benefits Swiss trade relations in areas where other countries hold back for political reasons.

And in the export sectors that contribute to our prosperity, dubious business practices do indeed exist. Prominent examples are well known: for instance, in the commodities trade or the investments made by the former Credit Suisse in Mozambique. Such deals damage Switzerland's reputation and are rightly frowned upon because they contradict our notions of fair trade. But they have nothing to do with neutrality. Herein lies a fundamental error on the part of the critics: even

dishonest deals are primarily driven by profit. However, neutrality is not the cause of this; rather, it is loopholes in the laws governing the export economy or the greed of managers in individual companies that lead to such practices. Moreover, curbing unfair trade is not a matter for neutrality policy, but a task for our foreign trade policy.

The key question should be turned on its head: can anyone seriously claim that without Swiss neutrality there would be fewer unfair deals? The opposite is more plausible – they happen even without neutrality and do not become less frequent without it.

*3) Reconciliation with the South*

Europe's share of the world's population is still around 7 per cent today, whilst its economic output is roughly double that. The economic and political influence of non-European countries is growing. These countries criticise the current UN, the WTO and other institutions, claiming they are products of the West, created at the end of the colonial era. They argue that these institutions no longer reflect today's political and economic realities.

Resistance to the global competitive order is growing on the part of the BRICS states and many countries of the South. Changes are being demanded. The main points of the accusation of unfair trade policy are: forced or premature opening up to global free trade, the transfer of high profits, and a lack of consideration for the development interests of poor states and their populations.

Swiss foreign trade policy resembles that of other Western countries in many respects. It cannot entirely escape such criticism and will have to take it seriously.

But what role does neutrality play in this? It is difficult to say whether and to what extent Switzerland serves as a safe haven for oligarchs' funds from developing countries. However, it is not neutrality but banking secrecy that is relevant here. The situation is different in the environmental sphere. It is undeniable that companies are outsourcing activities prohibited under Swiss law to developing countries with non-existent or lax legislation. Admittedly, it is primarily the responsibility of the governments of the countries concerned to prevent the plundering of their natural resources. However, Switzerland bears a share of the responsibility. And here, things are in flux: The Corporate *Responsibility*

*Initiative* demands that large corporations adhere to due diligence regarding human rights and environmental protection, that a supervisory body monitors compliance, and that companies found at fault must pay for the damage caused. This is reminiscent of the peace principle of neutrality, which states: “*Neminem laedere*”, meaning “do no harm”.

Realistically, it is likely not neutrality but the growing economic and political power of developing nations that will bring about such changes: fair economic relations that enable a country’s autonomous development and a balance between North and South.

However, Switzerland is not starting from scratch: its development cooperation, albeit with modest success, has earned a reputation over the decades for implementing projects on the basis of equal partnership. Another example: our country’s good trade relations with China date back to 1950. At that time, neutral Switzerland was almost the first Western country to establish diplomatic relations with communist China. Naturally, Switzerland has brought its own views – on human rights, for instance – to the table in economic negotiations. *Immoral?* More likely not; rather, a point to note: neutrality is apt to encourage fostering the necessary respect for the social order of others than the dogmatic defence of “Western values”.

### **Neutrality, too, yields to the pressure of power**

I have attempted to show that many claims regarding the immorality of neutrality do not stand up to closer scrutiny. That does not mean, however, that every aspect of Swiss foreign policy and foreign trade policy is morally justifiable. That would be a naïve claim, for in practice, politics cannot satisfy the standards of impartiality and balance alone. In its impact assessment, policy considers a multitude of other criteria, some of which conflict with neutrality or even violate it. The most important reason for the violation of its principles are situations in which Switzerland has to choose between neutrality and economic and political disadvantages.

The most prominent example is the Second World War. Surrounded by the Axis powers, Switzerland committed breaches of neutrality: for instance, through the transit and export of arms to the Axis powers, in the gold trade with the German Reich, or in the turning away of Jewish refugees at the border, etc. Subsequent gen-

erations have judged such events more harshly than the politicians and the population who experienced and had to endure the threats of the Nazi era.

Less well known are the *CoCom agreements* from the 1950s, during the first Cold War. At that time, the US government demanded that Switzerland and the other Western European states contractually refrain from any export of war-related goods to the communist-ruled Eastern bloc countries. Switzerland refused at the time on grounds of its policy of neutrality.

However, as its defiance during the Cold War would likely have been met with economic isolation, the government was prepared to seek a diplomatic solution: it refrained from this aspect of trade with the East, though not through a formal treaty, but via an informal and confidential agreement that was not included in the official collection of laws. Formally, neutrality was preserved; in practice, however, this was not the case.

However different the two situations may be, they do point to something in common: neutrality can clash with more powerful interests. The power of a small state has its limits. If it wishes to avoid open confrontation, its only option is to manoeuvre as skilfully as possible.

Today, geopolitics is becoming a game of blocs between the US/EU, Russia, China, India and other states: all are striving for political and economic influence in “their” region. Switzerland is also affected by this: it will have to decide on its rapprochement with the EU and NATO. This is putting neutrality under massive pressure.

Many of the Federal Council’s foreign policy statements can no longer be interpreted as reflecting a policy of neutrality, but rather as declarations of allegiance to the Atlantic Alliance.

Furthermore, the Federal Council assesses current events in places such as Russia or Ukraine, Iran or Israel using very different standards – certainly no longer those of neutrality. This is legitimate if the government wishes to lead Switzerland into the geopolitical sphere of influence of the US, the EU and NATO: a conceivable option in terms of *realpolitik*, provided the electorate also wishes this.

It is, of course, dishonest to continue claiming that Switzerland is neutral.

To morally condemn this merely as a falsehood would be too simplistic. For the contradiction between words and deeds has consequences for neutrality: it loses credibility.

The answer to the question of whether Swiss neutrality is immoral: no. But one thing is certain: it is currently becoming increasingly implausible.

Source: <https://sichtweisenschweiz.ch/gesellschaft/ist-die-schweizerische-neutralitaet-unmoralisch/>, 11 March 2026.  
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