

On Swiss Neutrality

A plea for a neutrality of the prudent

by Verena Tobler-Linder,* Switzerland



Verena Tobler-Linder
(Photo Kernkultur.ch)

(Editor.) *In connection with the war in Ukraine, Swiss neutrality has come under serious pressure: should we or should we not support unilateral coercive measures by the EU and the USA, should we or should we not be allowed to deliver ammunition and weapons to a war zone, are unilateral statements by individual*

members of the Federal Council already a breach of neutrality or not? These and other questions are currently the subject of controversial debate in our country.

In December 2022, a popular federal initiative was launched to “Preserve Swiss neutrality”. Among other things, it aims to enshrine perpetual armed neutrality in the constitution and demands that Switzerland uses its neutrality for the prevention and resolution of conflicts and its commitment as a mediator.

Verena Tobler-Linder has given extensive thought to these questions which shed light on Switzerland’s position in world affairs. We are pleased to be able to publish her contribution in a series of articles on Swiss neutrality. The article has been slightly shortened and will be published in two parts.

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Part 1 –

Some preliminary considerations on neutrality

In a first reaction to the war in Ukraine, Federal Councillor *Ignazio Cassis*, together with the three women in the Federal Council, discarded traditional Swiss neutrality. However, it had been un-

der threat for some time for a variety of reasons. Here are just a few of them:

- There had been criticism of neutrality since World War II: the economic ties with the axis powers gave rise to the suspicion that Switzerland was a war profiteer.
- Switzerland has changed a lot since 1945: the boundless global economy has brought our country new dependencies and an excess of complexity. A hullabaloo, often overwhelming not only the parties and the electorate, but sometimes also the state.

The population has almost doubled as a result of immigration: multi-cultural and globalised, the proportion of “new Swiss” in the electorate is increasing rapidly. Many are now, directly or indirectly, connected to foreign countries and now hold two or even more passports.

- The parties are fragmented. Old and new leftists do not get along: the former are critical of the system, the latter, depending on the case, oriented towards individual-centred sensibility or sensitivity. Greens and Green Liberals are in competition, but want to continue growing just as much as the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), old and neoliberals, *the former nationally territorially positioned, the latter interested in hyper globalisation.*
- Last but not least: in the past, political offices were connected and tied to structures and thus to an ethics of responsibility; today they are often interpreted as personal roles ... *and then coloured accordingly by an ethics of opinion or celebrated with public attention.*

What to do in such a tricky situation?

First of all, what we do not need at all is “group think”.¹

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“Group think” already emerged in the Corona crisis: it arises when people are afraid or uncertain. Seeing things with a black-and-white mindset and stereotypical thinking get the upper hand, one’s own group is idealised, those who think differently and foreigners are demonised; there is only the either-or. *These are patterns of experience and behaviour that are associated with distortions of reality and lead to serious wrong decisions.*

Instead, a basic consensus is urgently needed

A basic consensus on the key institutions of state policy, and in Switzerland these include both: neutrality and direct democracy.

“Direct democracy” gives voters the opportunity to decide directly and independently on important laws and issues. Both require knowledge and expertise, but also a special relationship of the citizens to their state and to their fellow citizens.

For direct democracy only remains alive on the basis of “political fairness”.

This includes:

- the duty to engage in factual debate,
- the courage to debate with each other across party lines and controversially,
- the respect for all, including political opponents.

This is the ground on which direct democracy can continue to function in the future and our country can survive in the long term in a world full of contradictions and ambivalences.

With this in mind, I would like to reflect on “Swiss neutrality”. I will not focus on its rules and implications of state policy, but rather on the aspect of neutrality which brings prudence to our country.

The popular federal initiative “Preserving Swiss Neutrality”

“Neutrality” – an impartial stance in international conflicts – involves Switzerland’s relationship to itself and to the rest of the world: not only to Europe and the West, but to that much larger “rest of the world” whose importance and numerical weight is rapidly increasing.

Because Switzerland’s traditional neutrality is currently threatened from both within and outside, former Federal Councillor *Christoph Blocher* has launched an initiative. However, the neutrality initiative was conceived by a cross-party group in such a way that Mr. Blocher had to

come out of his comfort zone – very much so. He is to be warmly congratulated on this venture.

In terms of the traditional neutrality, the concept of armed neutrality should be preserved. Switzerland participates neither in wars nor in non-military coercive measures, nor does it join any military alliances. However, in full compliance with the UN, it supports the sanctions imposed by the UN.

The popular initiative – a future-oriented opportunity for our country

It states:

“Switzerland shall use its neutrality for the prevention and resolution of conflicts and offers its services as a mediator.” (Art. 54a, para.4)

This clause is a blessing! – It is *so important that it deserves constitutional status.* There are two reasons:

For one, on this basis the *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)* can continue to do its work:

- to support victims on both sides of a war,
- to alleviate the plight of refugees,
- to protect people all over the world from arbitrary state action.

Furthermore, however, this clause goes far beyond that: with it official Switzerland is obliged to actively engage itself for peace because the integral neutrality that enables the ICRC to carry out its work, cannot do this. Therefore, in future, our country is to create and offer conflict-resolution and peace making institutions, while its “state bearers” are bound to an office which they must fulfil in accordance with the constitution and on an ethical basis of responsibility. This will, hopefully enable the Swiss population to once again show the prudence indispensable for successful coexistence!

“Neutrality of the prudent”

Based on this new understanding of neutrality, Switzerland will become a country open to the world: a state in which the Federal Council, the authorities and the citizens will in future be able to learn not only what they themselves, *but also what others need* in order to ensure a common and peaceful survival on our planet.

I have christened this new offspring “Neutrality of the prudent”.

Prudence is what our small country needs, it is what the Federal Council, the federal authorities

and the electorate need, if both direct democracy and internal peace are to be preserved in Switzerland. However, the big world also needs prudence, if humanity is to survive on a socially and ecologically sustainable basis in the future in the East and West, as well as in the North and South.

But what does prudence mean?

According to *Wikipedia*, it is a reflective calmness maintaining sufficient reasoning in difficult situations so that rash and ill-considered decisions and actions are not taken. While prudence refers to the rational points, calmness focusing on the emotional aspect: an inner calm, *despite hullabaloo and ambivalences!*

At the same time, the new neutrality clause eliminates the danger that Switzerland omits does to act at all out of sheer prudence. On the contrary, *Switzerland is acting* but not belligerently! Its political office-holders are bound by an ethics of responsibility, oriented towards balance, committed to services that prevent and help to resolve conflicts.

In the following, I want to emphasise the assertion that both, the big world and tiny Switzerland, are dependent on prudence with an outward view and an inward view, into Switzerland.

A view beyond the fences of our nation state

Why is the big world – more than ever – dependent on prudence?

“Earth for all”,² the follow-up to “The Limits to Growth, a Report of the Club of Rome on the State of Humanity”, written by *Donella* and *Denis Meadows* in 1972, fifty years ago. It lists five problems that require an extraordinary turnaround to solve them.

Here, I will only mention the two most urgent ones:³ firstly, the climatic and ecological threat in the form of global warming and declining biodiversity; secondly, the social threat of the enormous imbalances between rich and poor. Both problems are dramatically interlinked.

We are stuck in a vicious circle of growing inequality, social tensions, social breakdowns and wars. It is true that tiny Switzerland cannot save the big world but *what our country can do is to contribute to a successful course of events.*

It is a fact that wars within and between states make it impossible to work on ecological and social sustainability. Wars have the exact opposite effect, at least in the short and medium term. The Ukraine war is just one of many ex-

amples. Preventing and resolving conflicts is therefore more urgent than ever. Therefore, this is precisely what Switzerland’s neutrality initiative enshrines into its constitution.

In short: the world needs more prudence and Switzerland can contribute to that!

But why does prudence require that Switzerland should *not* join NATO?

A Switzerland that is open to the world does not side with the major Western powers. Anyone who is sufficiently sober to take a *close look*, knows that the USA and other NATO states have been waging wars for decades. The USA alone has intervened militarily 251 times since 1991,⁴ often in violation of International Law and always with serious damage to the local people and their environment. Representing a horrible dictum: these are wars being increasingly waged in the name of human rights or Western values and morals, although they are often about access to resources.

It cannot go on like this: enough is enough!

On the basis of the neutrality initiative with its prudence clause, Switzerland’s official representatives will in future have a constitutional mandate to fulfil with regard to the wider world:

- *They must ensure that conflicts can be understood, prevented and mediated.*
- *They have to intervene in a non-partisan or all-partisan way, a great and wonderful challenge!*

In the future, Switzerland and its official representatives will take sides for peace and reconciliation.

¹ “Group Think” was introduced in decision research by Janis (1971) to explain the occurrence of inappropriate and erroneous decisions in groups. <https://dorsch.hogrefe.com/stichwort/gruppendenken>

² Sandrine Dixson-Declève et al.: “Earth for All: A survival guide for our planet. The new report to the Club of Rome”. Oekom Verlag 2022. ISBN 978-3-96238-387-9

³ The other three turnarounds, according to “Earth for All”, are: women’s empowerment; a food system that is healthy for people and ecosystems; the use of clean energy.

⁴ Congressional Research Service: Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2022. Updated 8 March 2022. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R42738.pdf>

The second part of this contribution will be published in our next newsletter (No. 10)

Part 2 – Swiss neutrality and immigration

Part 3 – Neutrality or interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries