

About Swiss Neutrality

Neutrality by the day

by Olivier Delacretaz,* Lausanne



Olivier Delacretaz
(Picture pma)

On 19 March 2021, the Swiss government published the report entitled “China Strategy 2021-2024”. This report criticises the democratic inadequacy of China, in particular the persecution of its ethnic minorities. Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis threatens to adopt a “more robust” attitude if China does not behave

better. This somewhat ridiculous interference in Chinese internal affairs is certainly not the work of a neutral state.

The report also reveals our inability to imagine that there are “values” in the world that are different from those of the modern West, differences that give us all the more reason to be neutral.

On 28 February 2022, Switzerland joined the European Union’s sanctions against Russia. However, if Switzerland, as a sovereign state, can legitimately take any measure with respect to a foreign state in accordance with its own interests, its explicit support to a set of measures decided by an alliance of third states goes beyond the limits of neutrality. Federal jurists may well demonstrate the contrary, but it is not primarily a question of law. Swiss neutrality is worth nothing if it does not also exist in the minds of other governments.

However, the Swiss cabinet has not given up on everything. Thus, according to Swiss law, we cannot sell military equipment to countries at war, either directly or through a third country. We have so far refused to allow Germany, Denmark and Spain to deliver Swiss ammunition to Ukraine, despite the moral pressure exerted by the states concerned, by Ukraine, NATO, the members of the European Union and the international press. On the other hand, Germany has given up resistance and no longer forbids Poland to deliver Leopard tanks to Mr. Zelensky.

* Olivier Delacretaz is a graphic designer, former president of the “Ligue vaudoise” and regular contributor to the Vaud newspaper “La Nation”.

On 28 January 2022, the editorialist of the Vaud newspaper *La Nation* urged the Swiss cabinet to drop its candidacy to join the UN Security Council. He did so in the name of neutrality’s long-term specification, and in the name of freedom that strict neutrality enables us to have special relations with the world’s states. The Swiss cabinet, which has been trying for years to get a foothold in the holy of holies, still clings to this position. And on 9 June 2022, the UN General Assembly voted for Switzerland to become a member of the UN Security Council for two years.

On 15 May 2022, two neutral states, Sweden and Finland, applied for membership in the *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* (NATO). Some see this as a sign that traditional neutrality will soon disappear. But Swiss neutrality differs from that of these two states. It has an internal political function, which is to prevent the cantons from splitting up over foreign policy issues. Neutrality is vitally necessary for Switzerland, more so than for Sweden or Finland.

Additional pressure on neutrality is the proposal of some to use Russian funds frozen in Switzerland to help rebuild Ukraine. On 4 July 2022, Mr. Cassis declared at the Lugano summit on the subject of reconstruction that this was out of the question, because “the right to private property is paramount”.

At the *World Economic Forum* in Davos in January, he was less adamant: “Switzerland currently lacks the legal framework for confiscating frozen funds. But this framework can be changed”. Changing the law to give in to external pressure and to circumvent a “fundamental right” is a step in the wrong direction.

On 12 January, in New York, the Swiss President, Mr. Cassis, gave his speech as a new member of the Council. He called for peace, security, cooperation and respect for fundamental rights and procedures throughout the world. He condemned the serious violations of International Law, the application of which must be strengthened, and recalled that the principles of the Charter “had been violated blatantly in the case of the Russian military aggression against

Ukraine". You can't be more compliant than that! In the evening, Mr. Cassis was on Swiss television. Mr. *Philippe Revaz* asked him: "The Russian ambassador was sitting right next to you. How did he react to your speech?" Mr. Cassis replied that he "was used to it", a way of saying that his speech had no other motive than to affirm our smooth immersion into the UN.

We do not blame Mr. Cassis for the platitudes of his speech. Had he been ten times more intelligent and energetic, he could not have said anything else: the UN framework almost imposes a conformist language.

The global viewpoint of the UN leaves no room for politics, understood as the long-term management of a historical and territorial community. The UN spirit politically sterilises our small country by forcing it to adopt a perspective it can't grasp. The only genuine political discourse of Switzerland would be that of its own neutrality. It cannot propose it at the UN, under the threat of being accused of navel-gazing. As for the powerful, they maybe speaking of the "values" dear to Mr. Cassis, while conducting their own policies according to their own interests.

On 23 January the Swiss daily "*24 heures*" ran the following headline: "Swiss neutrality under attack on three fronts". These are the three sensitive issues to which the Federal Council is still resisting: the delivery of ammunition to the Ukraine, the unfreezing of Russian assets and participation in the EU sanctions against China for its behaviour towards the Uighurs, which Switzerland is reluctant to apply, despite its "China Strategy" report. It is equally reluctant, for reasons of neutrality and good offices, to apply the EU sanctions against Iran.

In a moral war, neutrality is considered disgraceful by the states involved, but also by a part of our citizens. The Swiss cabinet must be aware of this, do what it has to do, and not stop claiming and explaining its policy. In the long run, it is better to be a troublemaker than to be despised.

Moreover, no one is the least bit grateful when we give in on neutrality, not the EU, not NATO, not Ukraine, not the press: these people are only interested in what we could dismantle next.

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