



Geneva Institute of International Relations

SWISS' POSTURE IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICS: A BALANCED ACCOMMODATION

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The strategy of small neutral countries in today's complex balance of power configuration seeks strategic interdependence but not at the expense of national assets. Contemporary geopolitics, whatever the case study, event, or theatre of the event being assessed, refers to the post-2014 Russian operation in **Ukraine** to ensure the prevention of **NATO's** expansion in this country, specifically the Russian 2022 opened confrontation with **Ukraine**, which paved the way for **NATO's** deeper engagement in this confrontation. Countries on the side of **NATO**, **Russia**, or the neutral ones had to clarify their stance. Therefore, in the contemporary **NATO-Russia** opened confrontation, **Switzerland's** political administration, President, Foreign Minister, and **FSD** in Bern re-assessed its neutrality as a political policy by seeking greater security assurance. Neutrality granted **Switzerland** a trusted global position and confidence as a bridge-builder and that it would not be attacked. The reassessment of the country's posture shifted **Switzerland** closer to the **EU** and **NATO**, with even the establishment of a **NATO** permanent office in Geneva approved by the **Federal Council**, Foreign Minister, and President. The layers of public opinion, academia, and decision-making are divided between a loss of neutrality and whether **Switzerland** is taking such countermeasures to mitigate its sense of vulnerability. By military posture, **Switzerland** has no air or land incursions toward its borders; it stands in a peaceful neighboring environment. However, the **FSD** in Bern wants to look beyond the political limitations of neutrality and move towards a different structure of security and defense arrangements. The purpose of such policy can refer to an enhanced degree of deterrence, joining to the Swiss concept of total defense, or a new stance not to remain passive and neutral in case an **EU/NATO** country suffers an attack.

To improve the country's influence as an actor in international relations, **Switzerland** needs to solidify and maintain a trusted position with the major powers and a foresight to handle emerging global challenges. In 2022, **Ignazio Cassis** proposed the term 'cooperative neutrality' based on value-based cooperation with like-minded partners towards common countries and dialogue-based cooperation with all states towards finding a common path.¹ The presence of a **NATO** office in Geneva is based on claims that it does not violate the country's neutrality as it does not interfere in its relations with Bern but only makes International Geneva more complete.² There are three security centres of **NATO** in **Geneva** sponsored by Geneva and the **UN**. Moreover, the Report by the Commission for the Future of Security Policy, approved by Swiss President **Viola Amherd** on 29 August 2024, suggested a revised neutrality policy, and closer ties with **NATO**, causing alarm as it could mean a step towards a gradual abandonment of the neutrality policy.

Consequently, such a new nuance of Swiss neutrality has created tensions between security & foreign policy, the requirements of neutrality, and a deeper involvement in military alliances. To many distinguished scholars, after the Cold War, **NATO** turned from a defensive into an offensive alliance by undertaking many harmful actions against other countries. According to **GIPRI's**

¹ Carl Jauslin, Christine Graf, Leo Schaad, "Cooperative Neutrality," *Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy*, Bern, August 2022.

² NATO Geneva office 'will not violate Swiss neutrality' News, *Swissinfo*, October 25, 2024.

statement, “*We cannot associate ourselves with NATO without becoming accomplices in NATO’s crimes.*”³ Nevertheless, by August 2024, the Swiss government accepted to participate in the two PESCO missions – Military Mobility and Cyber Ranges Federation, which means a free military Schengen, free military support to **NATO**’s Supreme Command, and allowing **NATO** to deploy large forces in a short time in case of conflict in the Western flank.⁴ Such undertaken official policy has caused great concern among academics, scholars, and public opinion, for it possibly means a breach of neutrality and an irresponsible approach to the country’s security and defense policy.

The context of the Swiss’ geopolitical stance now is to navigate cautiously through the current geopolitics while maintaining its centuries-old neutrality, with its two central non-negotiable aims: not to have its sovereignty and territorial integrity violated and to maintain an independent Swiss policy-making. The changing international theatres are playing a part in such geopolitical stance not only for **Switzerland** and other small countries but even for the middle powers.

According to the views of the decision makers, **Alain Berset**, the former Swiss President in “Swiss in a fractured world,” claims that “*Switzerland is a land without a hidden agenda; it can serve as a platform for dialogue, mediation, and peace.*” In the **WEF** of 2023 in Davos, the Swiss foreign minister **Ignazio Cassis** approached the concept of “cooperative neutrality” to counter the voices who preferred neutrality in the case of the **Russia-Ukraine** war but took a position between the aggressor and the victim. The conservative side wants a strict adherence to neutrality and non-involvement in international wars, and this is according to a people’s initiative. But the liberal side keeps pushing for an active neutrality. The current Swiss President, **Viola Amherd**, claims that Swiss diplomacy abroad should propose new approaches to Swiss neutrality- not indifference but a participatory role in all sensitive world affairs. In the view of **Pascale Baeriswyl**, the head of the Swiss permanent mission in New York, **Switzerland** is European but independent. In such a scenario, **Switzerland** is faced with the questions of alignment and autonomy and how much space of maneuver or choice it can exert in its independent decisions. Can **Switzerland**’s neutrality resist pressure from the liberal side- **EU**, **NATO**, **US**, and other major powers?

In a Swiss Foreign Ministry Report (2019) titled ‘**Switzerland** in the World 2028’ and in all official strategy documents, the emphasis stands on independent decision-making, citizen-centered domestic and external approaches, and a country-centered foreign-defense policy accompanied by acquiring adequate weapons. The 2019 Swiss Foreign Policy Framework organized two levels, the highest of which was the executive level at the **Foreign Council** and one operational at the **Foreign Ministry**. There was also a Swiss Foreign Policy Strategy (2020-2023) published in January 2020, which articulated the crucial trends the country must deal with: globalization trend, democratic and market economy under pressure, nationalism as an essential component, maintaining trade, security, and values amidst great powers’ rivalries. In the strategic

³ Statement from GIPRI, *Swiss Standpoint*, 6 September, 2024.

⁴ ‘The federal council ignores the country’s neutrality: No to PESCO participation’ statement of the Swiss Peace Movement SFB, *Swiss Standpoint*, 6 September, 2024.

environment that **Switzerland** is facing, it prefers prudence and economic pragmatism, competent deterrence, and dialogue with all states while not belonging to a particular bloc. However, a new viewpoint of the Swiss stance by 2024 occurred when the Chief of Armament submitted a unilateral declaration of accession- Cooperative Agreement Framework Memorandum of Understanding- to the **European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI)** by April 2024. By October 2024, all the ESSI members had signed and accepted this document.⁵ According to this agreed Swiss-**ESSI** cooperation, there is coordination on ground-based air defense, and Switzerland can conduct individual project programs for short/long air defense. Also, **Switzerland** can withdraw if any **ESSI** member becomes a member of an international conflict. In the perceived threatened European security due to the war in **Ukraine**, **Switzerland** should not remain a free rider in the issue of European security. Therefore, it should become closer to the Western defense system.⁶ Internal differences of opinion need to be handled, for there is confusion and concern within the socio-political echelons of politics and the societal layers within the country. Also, the role of the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service is involved in articulating and analyzing the power of **Switzerland**'s diplomacy versus the ambitions and games of great- medium powers.

Neutrality in international affairs is a position that attracts pressure and coercion from the great powers and conflicting parties in **Switzerland** and other small countries. However, **Switzerland** and small countries prefer commitment to a peaceful world order. **Switzerland** and other small countries need to build strategic bilateral and trilateral relations or alliances according to the specific interests of the country, be they economic, defense, military, or any field. Multilateral institutions come with strength as well as a burden. In terms of alignment, **Switzerland** and small European countries are integrated into the economic security systems of the West. To pursue economic pragmatism and better security, **Switzerland** must find its strengths and significance in the brewing international order. In addition, Switzerland's approach of offering good offices, good bilateral relations, and economic relations with all countries is another nuance of its participatory role in world affairs. However, economics has been the main drive of Swiss relations with Western and non-Western sides of global affairs. **Carl Jauslin** recommends the creation of "*a coalition of Switzerland with other neutral states to initiate an international dialogue with other actors on the meaning and role of neutrality in a geopolitically polarized world.*"⁷ "Independence in the formation of foreign policy positions, cooperation in its implementation."⁸

In such a polarized world, the countries' national interests sometimes contradict the **US-EU** or **Russia-China** in varying degrees. Until the recent turbulence caused by the **Russia-**

⁵ Federal Council, The Portal of Swiss Government, "Switzerland signs declaration of accession to the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), Bern 18.10.2024..

⁶ Caroline de Gruyter, Switzerland Flirts with NATO, Analysis, *Foreign Policy*, 2022.

⁷ Carl Jauslin, Cristine Graf, Lea Schaad, "Cooperative Neutrality," Bern: 2022, p.11.

⁸ Ibid.,

Ukraine war (February 2022), **Switzerland** remained the only country that took a cooperative yet independent course with the **EU** and **NATO**. At this point, there are different voices at the level of decision-makers: some prefer cooperative and active neutrality regarding the partnerships with the **EU** and **NATO**. Others prefer the same independent neutrality course. Somehow, the Swiss' stance in joining the **EU** to sanction **Russia** and its membership in the **UNSC**- when a Security Council member initiates a war on another country such as **Russia**, the **US**, **Japan**, **Germany**, or the **UK**, will make it difficult for **Switzerland** to be a credible neutral country, and a trusted bridge-builder in the conflicts involving the great powers. With concrete mediation, **Switzerland** has offered a supportive contribution to **Kosovo**, **Syria**, and other Middle East conflicts. Regarding the case of the war in **Ukraine**, **Switzerland** has grown more cooperative with Europe as a shared responsibility to rebuild the Ukrainian economy and to protect its security. European security remains **Switzerland's** main priority, as its neighboring countries (**Germany**, **Italy**, **France**) are **EU**, **G7**, and **NATO** members. In the neighboring line, the Swiss bilateral relations with the **EU** and European countries gain weight compared to the other strategic priorities.

As the West seems to be in a new era of geopolitical rivalry, not only **Switzerland** but even the medium powers and other small states-aligned or neutral ones- are looking to steer this flow according to their interests. By 2024, **Switzerland** started to assess the impact on federal administration, civil society, academic layer, cantons, and municipalities regarding the Swiss strategy's foreign dealings with the **EU**, its neighboring countries, the **US**, **China**, **Russia**, **India**, **Turkey**, and other countries of significance. The geopolitical rivalries between these significant global powers come at a time when even these major powers are trying to work out their plans to deal with each other. Except for the **EU** and **US**, the other four powers do not accommodate their national interests and great power's assertiveness to the Western system. So, **Switzerland** needs to improve policy coordination with these powers through representatives who are experts in these areas-countries who are experts in these areas. While **Switzerland** wants to be on good terms with all these significant global powers without getting caught between their rivalries, good economic relations and a well-recognized, trusted offshore global financial account will continue to be the main drivers of this vector. Other medium powers, small countries, and international actors will tend to manipulate their significance according to their relations with these powers while avoiding costly retaliation.

Switzerland's national interests must consider **China's** growth, the **EU** partnership, closeness to the **US** as the leader of the Western camp, **Russia** as another great power with strength and decisiveness, and **India** and **Turkey** as two other emerging great powers regarding their capabilities and ambitions. While the **US** wants to prevent the emergence of a coalition that puts pressure on it, these other powers do not come to each other's orbit. Due to individual national interests, not all European countries collaborate on all coalition formations. With **China**, **Switzerland** looks for greater coherence in this bilateral affair in human rights, free trade agreements, world peace and security, sustainability, and digitalization. **Switzerland** renewed the

six-year free trade agreement with **China**, which was approved after the recent visit of Chinese Premier **Li Qiang** at the **World Economic Forum (WEF)** (2024) in Davos. But **China** remains skeptical about the Swiss' condemnation of the Chinese state-run detention camps on Uighur Muslims and other minorities in Xinjiang.⁹ **China's** ambassador in Bern warned **Switzerland** of the consequences if it were to adopt the **EU** sanctions on selected officials of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese organizations regarding its treatment of Uighur Muslims. **Switzerland** keeps opening many channels for dialogue with **China**. The Office of the **United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights** in Geneva, by September 2023, submitted a report with evidence of China's human rights violations against Uighurs. Still, **China** rejected it as an orchestrated show of Western anti-China forces. Regarding Taiwan, **Switzerland** does not recognize Taiwan, but it conducts relations with Taiwan through backstage relations. There are even Swiss proposals for a free trade agreement with Taiwan, but for **China**, a one-**China** state is the basis of relations with all countries.

The visit of Chinese Premier **Li Qiang** in January 2024 and the **WEF** conference in Davos contributed to bilateral **Switzerland-China** coherence with clearer objectives and measures. **Russia** and **Turkey** refused to join the recent **World Economic Forum** in Davos in January 2024. **Russia** because **Switzerland** joined the **EU** sanctions package for the war on **Ukraine**, and **Turkey** because it expected a stronger Swiss condemnation of the Israeli mass civilian casualties on the Palestinians after the **Hamas** attack on **Israel** on October 7. Regarding the ongoing **Israel-Palestine/Lebanon** war, **Switzerland**, throughout the year, condemned the Hamas attack on **Israel**. Recently, it condemned both the Hamas aggression of 7th October 2023, as well as the disproportionate use of Israeli force against civilians and infrastructure in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon, calling for a cease-fire.

Since 1815, through its internationally recognized neutrality, **Switzerland** has withstood pressure not to participate in international conflicts. Due to this reason, in the recent **Russia-Ukraine** war, **Switzerland** did not allow **NATO** overflights into its territory, for they were supplying weapons to **Ukraine**. It even refused **Germany** and **Finland** to give **Ukraine** tanks bought from **Switzerland**. **Sweden** and **Finland** renounced their neutrality after they announced joining **NATO** for lack of trust in **Russia's** intentions after the **Russia-Ukraine** war. **Switzerland** has consistently refused to join a military alliance. Nonetheless its, its closer collaboration with **NATO**, enhanced military ties with neighboring countries, and involvement in producing new F-35s with the US-based **Lockheed Martin** raise questions about its commitment to neutrality.

Since the end of the Cold War, global economics has been mainly used to determine geopolitics. But after the Crimean annexation in 2014, together with the fallouts of many other color revolutions of the post-Soviet space, Middle East, unsettled disputes, and proxy wars that determine the deterrence perimeter of the regional-global powers, geopolitics is standing above

⁹ "China's ambassador warns 'relations will suffer if Swiss adopt sanctions,'" *SWI Swissinfo*, November 6, 2022.

global economics. It will be so until the main powers approve the new contours of the international system. In such contemporary complex events between the transatlantic-Western Hemisphere vector and the non-Western one, **Switzerland's** neutrality (and other small states who want independence and a healthy democracy) struggles to find the country's response according to the specific needs of the different core countries that matter, to ensure a trusted efficient neutrality and independent national interests.

A better European cohesion is being promoted as a necessity, not to be seen as vulnerable or dubious by Western and non-Western partners. Reassessing neutrality's political and military dimensions has resulted in policymakers making different decisions according to contextual relevance. The Western side didn't want the Swiss position to remain ambiguous since all the other neutral European countries had already fully embraced **NATO's** security structural web. Constantly, **Switzerland** stood for an alignment with the Western view regarding human rights, democracy, and the rule of law but different from the other conflict-prone European countries. Until 2024, **Switzerland** stayed outside close to **NATO** and the **EU**. However, the key decision-makers of the moment decided to adapt to the external changes differently. The Federal Council's Neutrality Report (2022) claimed that 'the practice of neutrality established in 1993 and pursued since then still provides **Switzerland** with sufficient leeway to respond to events in Europe following the outbreak of the **Ukraine** war.' However, the current Foreign Minister and President of **Switzerland** embraced a new neutrality model by proposing two changes: the Neutrality Initiative and the Neutrality 21st Manifesto. The 21st Century Manifesto outlines a closer relationship with **NATO** and the **EU**, as outlined by a seven-member committee published in May 2024. This committee also recommends that Swiss neutrality not be articulated according to the **Hague Convention** of 1907 but according to independent and autonomous ways.¹⁰ Moreover, the War Material Act and the Embargo Act should be revised too. The Foreign Policy Initiative (2024-27) has officially proposed a greater share of responsibility in the European context and a global economic orientation policy.

It becomes paramount to prevent internal and international tensions from exerting pressure on the country's foreign and defense policy. Institutionally, **Switzerland** is not part of any of the global centers of power; it stands as a globally oriented and bridge-building actor in the international relations of the time. Regarding the powerful geopolitical clashes, **Switzerland** prefers not to be confronted with an either-or demand and does not play the major players' realpolitik interests against each other.¹¹ In polarized and fragmented global geopolitics, the Swiss role stands for freedom, international law, and human rights, condemns breaches of international law, and insists on freedom to position itself in a violent conflict among belligerent states. Non-military measures are the preferred tools of the Swiss cooperative participation with both the

¹⁰ Daniel Mockli, "The Swiss Neutrality Debate: An Overview," *Center for Security Studies*, ETH Zurich, October 2024.

¹¹ Foreign policy Strategy 2024-27" Federal Council.

Western and non-Western parts of the world, claiming clearly that Swiss independence ‘must be understood as the greatest possible degree of self-determination with respect to its own future and its freedom to act.’¹² It is also equally significant for a country’s security and decision-making process not to be influenced by violent methods.¹³ The Swiss initiative of ‘Safeguarding Neutrality’, which calls for the prevention of Swiss participation in the military-defense alliances, prevention of participation in military conflicts, and unilateral coercive measures, is taking place right now.¹⁴

The normalcy of post-Cold War is gone since the Crimean annexation by **Russia** in 2014. The insecurities, uncertainties, and crises that overlap between the interests of great powers continue to be designed at the expense of small, weak, and non-nuclear states. Neither a political nor a military choice can be imposed on nuclear powers. Therefore, all the small neutral states gradually shifted from the traditional concept of neutrality to the concept of partnership. How can a small state like **Switzerland** operate in situations caught between regional-great powers’ overlapping interests and clashes? Reliance on international law, credibility as a trusted mediator between the warring parties in any conflict, and peaceful European security policy remain the emphasis of Swiss posture in the current geostrategic scenarios. It offered to be impartial in managing the global great powers’ clashes and use its soil as a diplomatic meeting place between belligerents. It decided not to cut off trade and continue trade on an equal basis, even with belligerents involved in a conflict, and not to be involved in weapons transfer in conflict zones. Though pressured by specific global conflicts and issues, **Switzerland** has preferred reliance on independence as the best way to gain from the advantages of neutrality. At the same time, the competing rivalries need constant dialogue and clearer rules of conduct. As a new large-term political cycle is emerging, states are becoming more determined to be independent with autonomous national interests and balanced partnerships in large political unions or alliances with independent voices.

¹² Ibid, p.14.

¹³ Ralph Bosshard, “Dependence on foreign weapons systems Armed neutrality and the Swiss army,” *Swiss Standpoint*, 28 June, 2024.

¹⁴ Marita Brune-Koch, ‘From War to Peace Symposium of the initiative “Democracy and Fundamental Rights”’ *Swiss Standpoint*, 8 November, 2024.

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