

Wissenschaftliche Fasung

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NEW FEATURES OF SWISS FOREIGN POLICY

To an expert in international politics, Switzerland must seem, at first sight, an uninteresting country. It is small, it is peaceful, there is no inflation, no unemployment and there are no communists (or hardly any). It is - so they say - the epitome of cleanliness and orderliness, and its democratic institutions are deemed a model of their kind although one which, for many reasons, is unfortunately not exportable. So why bother about Switzerland's foreign policy?

Seen in this light, to look into the intricacies of Swiss political life, to try to discover its secret workings, to explore more closely what Switzerland lives by and where the country is going, must indeed appear a waste of precious time. But this is, at best, only half the truth. There should be many good reasons for not simply ignoring the world's oldest republic. Undertaking to learn a bit more about it is not only intellectually stimulating, it also provides the attentive observer with a better insight into the role which a small but politically stable and economically healthy country can play in the present-day world. This is true in the case of Switzerland for yet another reason, since its foreign policy is evolving, shows some new features and appears altogether more dynamic than not so very long ago.

It seems appropriate, before elaborating on these novel tendencies, to recall some fundamental data about Switzerland. The country covers 15,941 square miles and has a population of roughly six million. It is a federal state, with



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a constitution somewhat similar to that of the United States of America, comprising 25 cantons and the same number of cantonal parliaments and governments, with, as its crowning glory, a federal government and a bi-cameral federal parliament consisting of the National Council and the Council of States, the equivalent (with reservations) of the US House of Representatives and the Senate.

A policy of neutrality has been practised by Switzerland for approximately four and a half centuries. This seemed the best course for a country where four languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh) are spoken and two main creeds (Protestant and Catholic) professed, and which is, at the same time, located in the mountainous centre of Europe, surrounded by powerful neighbours. The country's leaders showed wisdom in adopting this policy, at the beginning of the 16th century, and the great European powers enlightened self-interest in respecting it ever since (the only exception being Switzerland's involvement in the wars of the Napoleonic period).

What had been simply a political fact of life developed, as the years went by, into a legal status. The Vienna Congress of 1815 - a real landmark in Swiss history - solemnly declared Switzerland's neutrality as being in the best interest of the whole of Europe. Since then, and particularly as a consequence of the two world wars, Swiss neutrality has been well anchored in the world at large. As far as the United States are concerned, the Swiss government likes to quote a communication it received from the American government at the end of the Korean war in 1953 on the implementation of the armistice agreement in which Switzerland still takes part as a member of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission. The relevant text reads as follows:

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"The Government of the United States sympathizes with the desire of the Government of Switzerland to maintain policies of neutrality and impartiality. It is indeed because of these known policies that Switzerland was among the first countries to be considered for a role in the implementation of a Korean armistice. In the exercise of any functions which the Government of Switzerland may assume pursuant to the Korean armistice agreement, the Government of the United States would expect Switzerland to act entirely in accord with the untrammelled dictates of its own judgement. It would not expect Switzerland to act as a representative of any party or point of view, but as an impartial, neutral agency faithfully carrying out the functions which it will have undertaken."

Switzerland's neutrality is always referred to as being a permanent and armed neutrality. It is permanent because of its long standing, its recognition by everybody and the determination of the Swiss people to uphold it; it is armed because Switzerland has never ceased to maintain a tradition - which goes back to 1291, when the Confederation was founded - of providing for its own defence through a militia-type army. This has been considered, for a long time and not by the Swiss alone, as the best guarantee of the country's freedom. It was with obvious admiration that Niccolò Machiavelli wrote in his masterpiece "Il Principe" in 1513: "Son liberissimi gli Svizzeri ed armatissimi." Today Switzerland still has one of the largest armies in Europe. About one fifth of the federal budget is regularly spent on national defence.

A permanent and armed neutrality is not only a source of strength, but also a means of action. As a policy it is calculable and predictable. One knows exactly where Switzerland



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stands and one also knows that its fundamental political attitude is immutable. Switzerland feels that it is mostly owing to its armed neutrality that it was spared the horrors and devastations of the Thirty Years War in the 17th century, as well as of the two world wars of our day.

On this foundation could be built what might be called the traditional Swiss foreign policy, summed up in the telling phrase "neutrality and solidarity". The stronghold of neutrality gave birth, in other words, to world-wide activity in the humanitarian field. The International Committee of the Red Cross, established in Geneva and consisting exclusively of Swiss citizens, is perhaps the best example of this activity. The Red Cross Committee carefully avoids taking sides in any conflict where its intervention is necessary, its only aim being to alleviate human suffering of all kinds.

Another example of the action-oriented Swiss foreign policy is the constant availability of Switzerland as a country, as well as of individual Swiss citizens, to render services to the community of nations where a neutral country seems, more often than not, the obvious choice. When the last world war was approaching its climax, Switzerland was entrusted with the representation of the interests of 45 countries which had broken off diplomatic relations or were at war with one another. Today, in a relatively peaceful world, Switzerland is still in charge of twelve such missions, the representation of American interests in Cuba being both the oldest (going back to 1961) and the most famous. Swiss experts have repeatedly been called upon to perform important duties for the world community. So two Swiss ambassadors (Lindt and Schnyder) in succession performed the task of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Many other such examples could be mentioned.

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Besides neutrality, another equally important source of strength and means of action is the country's role in the economic and financial sphere. Switzerland is competing with Britain for the rank of the second largest financial power in the world after the United States. It is the eleventh trading nation, with its part in this field also steadily progressing. Switzerland's foreign trade represents about 50% of that of the Soviet Union in absolute figures. It is obvious that Switzerland's activities in industry, trade, banking, insurance, re-insurance, transport etc. have greatly enhanced the country's traditional policy of neutrality and are, at the same time, dependent on the unquestionable and unassailable maintenance of this policy. Neutrality does not, of course, exist in business, and the Swiss free market economy has extended its ramifications all over the world. On the other hand, the Swiss business community are keenly aware that the neutrality of the Swiss state is extremely valuable to them and their world-wide activities.

It comes as no surprise that Swiss economic interests have led the way in the entry of Swiss foreign policy into new spheres of international life. Trade agreements in the past were exclusively bilateral, and a whole network of such agreements had been built up over more than a century between Switzerland and its main trading partners. The new post-1945-era of multi-lateral agreements as well as the establishment of numerous international economic organizations was approached by the Swiss with care and caution. The first crossroads was reached when Switzerland had to decide whether to join the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). It was to be set up in Paris in 1948 with, as its main first task, the distribution of Marshall Aid to rebuild the European economies after the war. It was meant to be at the same time the starting point of a progressive liberalization of intra-European trade. Faced with the question of membership, neutral Switzerland was at first



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very hesitant. Wasn't there a danger of undermining the country's paramount foreign policy principle: neutrality? After careful pondering over all the aspects involved, Switzerland decided in favour of membership. But owing to the Swiss, the OEEC convention contains an article 14, famous at the time, stating that a member country is not bound by decisions in which it has not taken part - a safety valve for preserving Swiss neutrality intact.

In retrospect, these hesitations seem over-cautious and Switzerland has since then joined many other economic organizations without much previous soul-searching: the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) etc. That it should have stayed out of the European Community in Brussels shows, on the other hand, that Switzerland's political attitude has remained as clear-cut and unmistakable as ever. The political objectives of that organization have, indeed, remained unchanged, i.e. the establishment of the United States of Europe through a progressive extension of supranational authorities within the Community. Despite the sympathy felt in Switzerland for this great aim of restoring to the old continent some of its former power and glory, despite, too, the gap existing between this ambitious objective and present-day reality which obviously falls far short of it, Switzerland has kept within the clearly drawn lines of its policy. It was surely a great success, however, that industrial free trade agreements were concluded in 1972 between the Community of Nine and the - mostly neutral - Western European outsiders, including Switzerland. It was an achievement in the best traditions of European statesmanship.

Through Switzerland's joining international economic associations, the world became acquainted with the figure of the Swiss official negotiator who presented a hitherto unfamiliar



picture of his country. One learned to take Switzerland into account as a state and as an economic power and to recognize in the views presented by the Swiss government original and sometimes useful contributions to joint thought and action. But the reverse was also true. The Swiss government and its representatives learned a lot from this experience and grew more accustomed to the subtleties of international cooperation. It was like the rising of a curtain for Switzerland in the theatre of international diplomacy. Apart from that, the last thirty years will go down in history as a period crammed with momentous events in Switzerland's economic policy.

Thus the stage was set for a policy not only of "neutrality and solidarity" but of "neutrality and participation" in other fields as well. Simultaneously with the intensive activity of Switzerland's economic diplomacy, the country joined a large number of the United Nations specialized agencies, including WHO, UNESCO, FAO and CERN. There, too, the Swiss representatives had to learn their job as international negotiators and could, on the other hand, give these organizations the benefit of whatever talents the country may be able to muster in the various sectors. That with all this Switzerland should not be a member of the United Nations proper appears to be an anachronism. It requires an explanation which will be given later.

Two recent events have shown that Switzerland is now well prepared to play its full part in certain international gatherings of a purely or predominantly political character. The first of these is the Conference on European Security and Cooperation, held in Helsinki and Geneva from 1973 to 1975, ending with the signing of the Helsinki Final Act on August 1st, 1975; the second is the Conference on International Economic Cooperation, held in Paris in 1976 and 1977.



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The European Security Conference, in which all European countries (except Albania) as well as the United States and Canada participated, clearly showed what a country like Switzerland can do in a political context, not despite its neutrality, but because of it. To many people's surprise, the neutral countries (Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland) were among the most active of all the participants. The Swiss delegation repeatedly played the role of mediator when agreement on difficult problems had to be reached between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact group of countries. Certain individual aspects, such as the texts on family reunions and freedom of information, show the particular care the Swiss delegates devoted to these chapters. Quite obviously, Switzerland could not - nor did it want to - hide the fact that despite its neutral status it is a Western-style democracy, and it behaved as such at the conference. Nevertheless, time and again proposals coming from the Swiss and the other neutrals were more easily accepted by the other side than if the discussion had been merely a block to block affair.

As is well known, the Helsinki Final Act provides the starting point for an ongoing process of intra-European co-operation. The follow-up conference in Belgrade is being held this autumn. The very existence of the Helsinki document has greatly contributed to the extremely lively dialogue between East and West that has preceded the Belgrade conference. If the new American administration has set the pace in this process, particularly as far as human rights are concerned, the neutrals have not remained inactive either. Three meetings were held by them in Helsinki, Vienna and Berne, and another - in Belgrade - between the neutrals and the so-called non-aligned countries (Yugoslavia, Malta and Cyprus). Extensive bilateral talks were held between Switzerland and almost all the signatories. The Council of Europe's efforts to promote repeated contacts on this matter between its member countries have also proved useful.



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At the beginning of the Security Conference, Switzerland had introduced into the debate a proposal of its own, a draft agreement on a system of peaceful settlement of disputes through arbitration. It could not be expected that this proposal would be successful at a stroke. But the conference did not reject it either. It decided that Switzerland should invite the signatory states of the Helsinki Final Act to a special meeting to be held after the conclusion of the Belgrade conference. This initiative may appear unrealistic to many countries, especially the great powers. There is no doubt, however, that if the world is one day to reach the haven of permanent peace and security, a system for dealing with the remaining international problems such as that proposed by Switzerland will be indispensable. Before this possibly far distant objective is achieved the Swiss proposal may be considered a modest contribution to the process of "détente" to which, as everybody agrees, there is no alternative.

As for the second event, the Conference on International Economic Cooperation (CIEC), its substance was certainly economic, its significance, however, highly political. If there is an East-West problem with manifold aspects, the North-South problem, meaning development cooperation, yields nothing to it in weight and consequence. The dialogue between North and South has gained considerable momentum since the energy crisis, set off in late 1973, led to a confrontation between the industrial countries on the one hand and the whole of the developing world, oil producers and non-oil producers, on the other. The industrial Western world now has to face a twofold challenge: to fight inflation, recession and unemployment at home, and at the same time to give increasing satisfaction to the developing countries. This was the situation prevailing at the conference of eight industrial and nineteen developing countries which, at the invitation of the French President, met for the first time, at ministerial level, in December 1975 and was terminated at the same level in early June 1977.



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One of the difficult questions to be solved, at the very start, was how to compose the delegation from the industrial world. The participation of the European Community (counting as one), of the United States and of Japan being a matter of course, the smaller industrial nations to be included had to be carefully selected. It may be indicative of the growing attention paid to Switzerland in the international world that its participation did not give rise to much discussion. Moreover, the Swiss government showed great interest in being included. The conference was seen by the Swiss policy-makers as a further occasion to make the country's voice heard and its real weight felt in a framework both economic and political. If the Conference's achievements left the participants with mixed feelings, Switzerland, like other industrial countries, has surely derived from this experience a more realistic insight into the driving forces to be reckoned with in this difficult field.

As elsewhere, at this conference Switzerland had to recognize again that there are limits to its weight and influence. It must accept that a particular responsibility rests with the large countries of this world (although some of them may not necessarily excel in political stability or economic prosperity). So it would never have occurred to the Swiss government to seek participation in Rambouillet-style summit meetings, the last of which was held in London early in May of this year. A clear recognition of the extent of its own strength is an indispensable prerequisite of a country's usefulness in international affairs. But there is quite a difference between overplaying one's hand and not playing it at all.

There is yet another reason why Swiss foreign policy had to become more active. The concept of "Europe" - meaning Western Europe - is increasingly equated, especially by the United States, with just the Community of the Nine (who might soon become the



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Ten or the Twelve). To emphasize that there is another Europe - just as democratic and not without power - is a necessity. That is why Switzerland has joined in the efforts to step up the activities of the Council of Europe, which embraces both the Nine and the non-Nine. That is also why Swiss diplomacy is about systematically to extend bilateral contacts with a number of key countries.

Switzerland is not a member of the United Nations Organization. To explain its absence from a body which is by now almost universal brings up what might be called the challenge of direct democracy.

Switzerland's political system is unique in the world inasmuch as all decisions of fundamental importance are taken by the people, who are rightly referred to by the Swiss as the "sovereign". Unlike America, the Swiss system of checks and balances opposes government and parliament to the people. The rights of the people find their expression in two ways: the referendum and the initiative. The word "referendum" in Swiss constitutional language means that any law proposed by government and accepted by parliament has to be submitted to a popular vote if 30,000 citizens or more ask for this. The "initiative", on the other hand, is a request made by a minimum of 50,000 citizens for a change in the constitution, which again requires a popular vote. As far as Switzerland's international relations are concerned, the relevant provisions of the constitution have been revised recently with a view to making the people's role even more important. With respect to international treaties and agreements a distinction is made between two categories. A popular vote is optional where either a minimum of 30,000 citizens ask for it or where parliament decides that the treaty in question requires the people's assent. If, however, the treaty provides for Switzerland's accession to an organization of



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collective security or a supranational community, a popular vote is compulsory. The experts agree that on the basis of these new provisions - the United Nations being an organization of collective security - consent to accession by the sovereign Swiss people is indispensable.

Over the last ten years the Swiss government has addressed three reports to parliament about the relationship between Switzerland and the United Nations. The last was published at the beginning of July this year, giving it as the government's opinion that joining the United Nations would be in the country's interest. As far as parliament is concerned, it may be assumed that a majority in favour of membership can be found in both chambers. The crux of the matter is the attitude of the people. Government and parliament do not consider it wise to submit a problem of such importance to a popular vote when rejection is almost a foregone conclusion. Although the matter may be re-submitted to a popular vote at any time, the psychological situation in the case of a negative result would be rather worse than before, so that it seems preferable to wait for a more appropriate time.

But why is it, then, that the Swiss people would, at the present moment, in all probability vote against Switzerland's membership of the United Nations? This has to do with the organization's unfavourable image. According to repeated and reliable soundings of Swiss public opinion, there is a deeply rooted impression that the United Nations are a mere talking shop, which intensifies international conflicts rather than solving them, is most of the time not seeking the truth, but indulging in partisan polemics, costs a lot of money and so on. Who would deny that some of these observations are not entirely without foundation? On the other hand, one may ask whether the opponents to entry are giving their proper weight to the many good things unquestionably done by the organization.



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Contrary to what might be assumed, neutrality is no longer a consideration in this context. It was the determining factor for Switzerland's staying out when the United Nations was founded in 1945. But, since then, experience has shown that United Nations membership of other neutrals - Sweden, Finland, Austria - has not rendered their neutrality less credible or prevented them from contributing their fair share to the organization's work. Austria has even provided it with its present Secretary General. The application of Chapter VII of the UN Charter on sanctions is effectively blocked by the veto power of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. So Switzerland would probably not make repeated recognition of Swiss neutrality a condition of Swiss accession, taking it for granted that nobody could possibly contest the country's special status, which has become an institution of international public law.

The future outlook in this intricate matter is quite uncertain. It may be that a new generation of Swiss will think differently. It may also be that the United Nations themselves will develop into something less controversial. In the meantime Switzerland will have to live with the anomaly of not being able to participate in shaping the policies of an organization which, imperfect though it may be, cannot be dispensed with in the modern world.

The wisdom of maintaining direct democracy, however, is not questioned in Switzerland. It is and remains the fundamental political philosophy of the country, felt as an unrivalled corrective of government action. Although at times it makes Switzerland, especially in the domestic field, an extremely difficult country to run, it is an absolute guaranty for majority rule in all essential matters. So it contributes to keeping the country's political life in good repair.



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It may be said in conclusion that present-day Swiss foreign policy finds itself in a state of creative tension. As far as its foundation, neutrality, is concerned, it has stood the test of time and the Swiss undoubtedly feel that it will serve them well in the future, too. But the imperatives of defending Swiss interests in a world of rapid change and growing interdependence are asserting themselves with increasing vigour. It is a thought-provoking question, for the Swiss and their foreign friends and partners alike, how it will in the end be possible to preserve the country of Switzerland, with all it stands for, and still bring to bear its full potential in the community of nations.

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*Der Schweizerische Botschafter*

Washington, 27. Juni 1977

Lieber Herr Weitnauer,

Die Sendung mit Ihrem Aufsatz über "New Features on Swiss Foreign Policy" ist am vergangenen Freitag via Kurier gut hier eingetroffen, und ich habe Ihren Text, mitsamt den Zeilen an William Bundy, heute, Montag, 27. Juni, sogleich an diesen weitergeleitet. Wie Sie sehen werden (Beilage), tat ich es meinerseits mit einem Begleitbrief, um Mr. Bundy ausdrücklich an unser Telefongespräch von Ende April zu erinnern und gleichzeitig die Bitte nach Benachrichtigung anzubringen, sobald Ihr Artikel zum Abdruck in "Foreign Affairs" freigegeben würde. Ich werde Sie dann unverzüglich informieren.

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Herr Botschafter Dr. Albert Weitnauer  
Generalsekretär des Eidgenössischen  
Politischen Departements  
Bern



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Persönlich finde ich - wenn Sie mir das Urteil erlauben - Ihren Aufsatz meisterhaft, ein Kabinettstück, dessen Abdruck den "Foreign Affairs" gut anstehen würde und namentlich auch für das Verständnis unserer aussenpolitischen Bestrebungen in den massgebenden amerikanischen Kreisen von ganz besonderem Wert sein wird. Ich gedenke, mich - Ihr Einverständnis voraussetzend - an Ihren Ausführungen bei sich bietender Gelegenheit auch selbst zu inspirieren.

Meine Frau dankt für Ihre guten Wünsche und erwidert sie bestens. Auch von mir sehr herzlich,

1 Beilage