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BULLETIN D'INFORMATION

An outline of Swiss Foreign Policy

Speech delivered by Ambassador A. Weitnauer,
Secretary General of the Federal Political Department,
on the occasion of the visit of the Canadian Institute
of International Affairs to Switzerland
October 26, 1976

Berne, le 4 novembre 1976



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Should I be asked to give you a short answer to the question of what the principal objective of Swiss foreign policy is, I would say: to contribute, as far as its extremely limited power and influence go, to the maintenance of peace. In saying so, I have mentioned at the same time the single most important problem facing humanity if it is to survive on this earth. Needless to say, Switzerland is a peaceful nation and has been so for quite some time. This is indeed the only policy befitting a small country and, for that matter, the only policy proclaimed today by all members of the family of nations, large or small. There is undoubtedly a growing awareness on the part of absolutely everybody that the keeping of world peace is of paramount importance. This was not the case till fairly recently. Up to World War I - or even World War II - a successful war to achieve one's foreign policy aims was not excluded in the calculations of the great countries' leaders. War has, in our day, become a terrible risk for the mighty and the powerless alike. But this is another subject on which I shall not elaborate here.

The foundation of Switzerland's peaceful foreign policy has been for a long time and still is today her traditional neutrality. It had actually existed for almost three centuries before it was given legal confirmation at the Vienna Congress of 1815 by the great powers assembled there. They solemnly stated Swiss neutrality to be in the best interests of the whole of Europe. The neutrality of our country has been considered an institution of international public law ever since. It is now deeply rooted not only in its original European context but in the world at large. The policy of neutrality,

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based on this status, means that Switzerland conducts her foreign policy in peacetime in a way that is aimed at making the maintenance and universal recognition of Swiss neutrality in time of war a foregone conclusion.

Neutrality does not imply that Swiss foreign policy is inactive, quite the contrary. Our neutral position in the concert of nations is our most important asset and provides us with a solid basis for playing in the community of nations an active role with increasingly manifold aspects. The best known of these aspects is probably Switzerland's humanitarian activity. The International Red Cross Committee, with its seat in Geneva and entirely consisting of Swiss citizens is, no doubt, the most spectacular expression of this. Its role is to alleviate human sufferings wherever they exist, as a consequence of war or political upheavals. Such a role can only be played with success if the Red Cross carefully abstains - which it does - from taking sides in the underlying conflict.

In order to give these activities in the service of man the best possible foundation, Switzerland has repeatedly taken the initiative in the codification of humanitarian law. The last in a series of conferences on this topic is still part of the calendar of international meetings. After three long sessions we are quite determined that the fourth, to be held in the spring of next year, should be the last. New forms of armed conflict, unheard of in the past, having reared their ugly heads over the last few years, make this imperative and urgent.

Apart from the role played by the International Red Cross, the Swiss government has always let it be known that it is prepared to put at the disposal of the family of nations individual Swiss citizens who, for some reason, seem particularly qualified to render services as conciliators or mediators. Others direct inter-

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national bodies where a Swiss chairman is particularly well fitted to accomplish a difficult task. May I remind you that twice the United Nations - of which Switzerland is not a member - have called upon a Swiss to be their High Commissioner for Refugees. In quite another field, let me mention the GATT organization which has had a Swiss Director General for the last eight years. Switzerland's neutral status certainly makes it easier for our countrymen to perform such duties.

There was a time when Swiss foreign policy was just that and only that: "Neutrality and Solidarity", as it was called in a well-coined phrase. Switzerland as a country - or government - did not participate much in international life. On the other hand, neutrality provided an excellent shield for the most energetic performance of our economy abroad. The possibility of exporting a large part of our national product is - as you have certainly been told here before - the main source of our economic prosperity and stability. The services, as we call them - banking, insurance, reinsurance, transport, tourism etc. - considerably add to that same objective. And there is, of course, no neutrality in business. Our economy has developed its foreign markets wherever it could or liked, and the Swiss are to be found in all the four corners of the earth. This has been so for roughly one and a half centuries and will certainly remain so, very much to the Swiss government's satisfaction.

Still, the government considers it increasingly important that the face shown by Switzerland to the world should not be exclusively humanitarian and economic. Since we are living in just one world, we feel an enhanced responsibility for all that is going on in it, an obligation also to contribute, to the best of our ability, to the common welfare of mankind. Development cooperation - perhaps the greatest problem of international politics, together with environment protection and, obviously, keeping the peace - is of

such a character that Switzerland, a wealthy country, cannot neglect it. You may know of the particular difficulties we encounter when it comes to convincing our people that both official and private aid should be gradually increased. The Swiss is not by nature without an idealistic streak or unwilling to help. It is rather that he would like to know exactly where his money goes when it is spent on development aid. Our country is fundamentally poor, entirely lacking in raw materials, and has become what it is through the hard work of the Swiss people. This accounts for the rather thrifty approach to money which is typical of the Swiss. We feel it in our bones that every penny has to be earned and should be spent with care. That is why the preference of the Swiss population goes to bilateral technical aid. There we perform quite well, and there is practically no opposition to a systematic enlargement of our assistance programmes. On the other hand, a great educational effort is still required to persuade our public opinion that multilateral financial aid is just as important. Our people still have to recognize the phenomenon of total interdependence which characterizes life on this earth today. Steady progress, I feel sure, will be made over the coming years in this difficult field, too.

In this same context an important conference is taking place this year: the Conference on International Economic Cooperation in Paris. For the first time a fair sampling of industrial and developing countries are facing each other at the negotiating table. Canada and Switzerland are privileged to belong to the eight representatives of the developed North; Canada, on top of that, is providing the conference with one of the two co-chairmen. When I said "negotiating table" I was alluding to a rather recent development of the conference which at the beginning was meant to be a mere dialogue between the two parts of the world, aimed at a detailed analysis of the situation. Inevitably, and not to our surprise, the point of view of the 19 developing countries re-

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presented in Paris asserted itself, namely that no useful purpose would be served by merely analysing well-known facts. Only a bold leap forward, a determination on both sides to solve the existing problems, seems acceptable. In this process we are now engaged. We remain hopeful that the conference can be terminated as scheduled by the end of the year. As far as Switzerland is concerned, we in no way reject the instrument of negotiation as a means of narrowing the wide gap that still separates North and South. I for one am quite convinced that in the contest between pronouncement and negotiation, negotiation is the only constructive way to progress, provided - and this is obviously a most important proviso - the political will exists to achieve it.

Turning to another problem, of equally great interest to us: the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. As you know, this conference ended with the signing - in Helsinki - of a Final Act (a rather bulky document) on August 1st of last year. Throughout the deliberations, which extended over a period of two years, Switzerland took a very active part in them. Our role was twofold. On the one hand we could not hide - and had not the slightest intention of hiding - the fact that we are a Western-type democracy with all that implies. (By the way, had we tried, nobody would have believed us!) On the other hand, we fully lived up to our position as a neutral power in Europe and the Atlantic world (may I remind you that Canada and the United States also participated in the conference). We shared this role with the other three neutrals, Austria, Sweden and Finland, and, to some extent, with the non-aligned countries of Europe, Yugoslavia, Malta and Cyprus. This group of participants and in particular the neutrals excelled in their constructive and conciliatory spirit, evinced in the discussion of numerous important issues. Freedom of information is one of them, the reuniting of families is another. Switzerland put forward a plan all its own: a system for the peaceful settlement of international conflicts, a project that is going to be pursued further

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in 1978. More often than not, a proposal coming from Switzerland was more readily accepted for discussion by both NATO and Warsaw Pact members than if it had originated in one or the other of these camps. The active part played by the neutrals during the conference came somewhat as a surprise especially to the larger countries. For our context it should just be considered another aspect of our determination to activate our foreign policy. The same attitude will be adopted by Switzerland in the follow-up to the Helsinki Final Act. You may remember that a conference at high official level is going to be held in Belgrade next year in order to take stock of what has been achieved meantime and to look farther ahead. I think I am on safe ground in saying that the Helsinki document and all it stands for in wishful thinking as well as clear-cut facts is by now part and parcel of our foreign policy as a whole.

One might compare the group of the signatory countries of the Final Act of Helsinki to a kind of a United Nations "en miniature", limited to Canada, America and the European states. In dealing with the problems of this grouping we shall play our full part, whereas we remain outside - as I mentioned in passing - the United Nations proper. At first sight, it might seem surprising that Switzerland has kept away from the U.N. This is the more astonishing since the other European neutrals all belong to it and Austria in particular, whose neutrality was originally shaped according to the Swiss model, even provides the organization with its Secretary General. And let us not forget that the principal seat of the U.N. in Europe has been established in Geneva from the very beginning. The so far unhappy love story between the United Nations and Switzerland is - like most love stories - difficult for an outsider to understand. The principal reason for our staying away is our system of direct democracy. As on all important issues, the sovereign people of Switzerland will in the end have to decide the question of membership. Our government has felt throughout the last 30 years that if the problem were put to a vote the prospects would not be very promising. This has partly to do with the seemingly unpleasant image

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the United Nations Organization projects almost every day through the press and the other mass media. To the Swiss "man in the street" - if there is any such thing - the U.N. debates appear as a hypocritical haggling over short-sighted national interests without much disposition to seek the common good of mankind. Only too often it is forgotten that whatever the imperfections of the General Assembly, and however limited the power of the Security Council may be, the United Nations have given birth to a large number of specialised agencies doing useful work in all fields of human activity. Switzerland belongs to most of these agencies and cooperates fully with them. The point has to be driven home to our people that this is not enough, that if Switzerland really is to participate more and more in the shaping of the destinies of the world, we should also be present and active in the organization as such. There is a remnant of political isolationism left in Switzerland, a feeling that it is none of our business to meddle with the problems of other countries, their quarrels and sometimes their evil deeds. It is very much to be hoped that, as time goes by, the conviction that we are all in the same boat will grow in our country. Sooner or later, the great day of our complete adherence to the community of nations will come. Awaiting this moment, our observer mission in New York - which has its parallel in Geneva - is doing a splendid job in maintaining contacts with men as well as problems and keeping us informed about just everything. We are more integrated in the United Nations in actual fact than most of us assume.

A last word about Switzerland and Europe. Being located in the very centre of the old continent, Switzerland is, in a certain sense, the most European of all European countries. But it is at the same time one of the oldest nation states, together with Britain and France, whereas others - take Germany and Italy - are of rather recent origin. On top of all that, Switzerland has been, as I said, for a very long time the classical example of a neutral country. So it does not come as a surprise that, when the founding fathers of the Common Market created what is now usually called the European

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Community, Switzerland was unable to join in the common effort. The objectives of the Brussels organization were - and officially still are - political. What the member countries are after is to achieve political ends by economic means. Now, these political ends - the creation of supranational authorities and, finally, the constitution of the United States of Europe - would certainly, if implemented, go a long way to restoring to an important part of the European continent its former power and glory. But setting oneself a far-reaching aim is one thing, witnessing its prompt realization is another. As you know, despite most valuable efforts made by some quite excellent people over the last 25 years, things have not, so far, gone much beyond a systematic cooperation between the Six and then the Nine member countries of the Community within the strict limits of national sovereignty. Considerable - although, I think, unjustified - concern has been felt in Community circles during the last few years about the future of their enterprise.

So Switzerland continues, I feel, to be well served by her basic political philosophy, which has stood the test of time. Thanks to our good relations with the Brussels organization and its member countries - who are our trusted friends - a free trade arrangement covering the industrial field was concluded between them and us (and other outsiders) in 1972. And let us by no means forget that there is the Atlantic partnership, the cooperation between Western Europe on the one hand, Canada and the United States - with the addition, for all practical purposes, of Japan, Australia and New Zealand - on the other. Many of the most crucial problems of the Western world are dealt with effectively in this wider context. Just think of defence, monetary problems, energy, world trade, development assistance, environment protection etc. Switzerland feels quite at home in this Western family of nations, roughly corresponding to OECD. Defence obviously is for us a question apart. Not being a member of NATO, we maintain our own structure of military preparedness, with a militia type army, which is still one of

the largest armies in Europe.

But otherwise the fundamentals of our political situation demand not only that we entertain normal relations with all the countries of the world, but also, as far as the Western democracies are concerned, that we look overseas just as much as to Brussels. Our bilateral diplomacy, too, has been stepped up considerably over the last few years. In a world that tends to simplify all issues, for instance to equate Europe, when talking about the old continent, with just the Community and nothing else, it is important to us not to be overlooked and not to be forgotten. If we do not see to it ourselves, nobody will bother about it. All this has to do with the paramount objective of any foreign policy and thus of ours as well: the defence of our interests, which must be circumspect and effective if Switzerland is to remain a stronghold of peace and prosperity.

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