SWITZERLAND AS A ‘Bystander’
OF HISTORY?
ON NEUTRALITY IN A TIME OF GLOBAL CRISES
AND GENOCIDAL WARS

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In Switzerland, and possibly elsewhere too, Swiss foreign policy is generally equated with neutrality. Though foreign policy is a more complex matter, almost all discussion about ‘neutrality’, certainly in the past, appears to have been predicated on the premise that this core concept is crucial to Switzerland’s existence as a political entity. This backdrop lends symbolic meaning to Ben Vautier’s statement at the entrance to the Swiss pavilion at the 1992 world Fair in Seville: ‘La Suisse n’existe pas’ – ‘Switzerland does not exist’. It provoked intense reactions because it was felt to be a dig at Switzerland’s marginal importance in the world.

Thoughts about neutrality in its intended function as a reliable means of peace and security policy are often associated with an outdated concept of war. The shape of war, however, has changed fundamentally in the course of the last hundred years. War – unlike the image evoked in discussions about neutrality – is no longer a contest between two opposing teams on a topographically defined field, with the neutral parties as bystanders convinced of their ability to play as well as the others.

Given the significance of the subject of ‘war’, I can present only a brief overview, emphasizing certain aspects. Today, the subject of neutrality is treated critically in its expression as the embodiment of Swiss mythology. As Claude Lévi-Strauss has asked: is the scientific pursuit of history really science, or are our attempts to describe history also caught up in the contemporary web of our own myths? If we do not want to remain there, we need to analyse a far longer time span than the period from 1933 to 1945. Neutrality is a suitable subject for this undertaking – this ambiguous concept has always shaped, but also blurred the history of Switzerland.

A consideration of the ‘bystander’ role demands detachment and reflection about complex relationships – and not reduction, as ‘neutrality’ elevated to the level of a Swiss ‘general concept’ suggests. What was Ben Vautier’s second, often forgotten, statement? At the exit of the paper tower in Seville stood: ‘Je pense donc je suis’ – ‘I think therefore I am swissing.’

MEANS TO AN END OR ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE OF STATE?
The Swiss conception of ‘neutrality’ is usually described in terms of both the law of neutrality and the policy of neutrality. This distinction is a consistent theme in the literature on this subject, notably as a topic of international law or political science:

- As law, neutrality is based on international conventions, viz. the Hague Conventions of 1907, that define the rights and duties of neutral and warring parties. The principles
of the Hague Conventions, themselves a result of the gradual codification of international legal practice since the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, have been added to since 1945.

- **As policy**, neutrality embraces certain fundamentals autonomously defined by Switzerland that lay down additional obligations and concessions to complement the rights and duties under international law. By exercising these norms and declarations independently, Switzerland aims to demonstrate that neutrality is a ‘special status’ not only in times of war but also in times of peace, and, through additional instruments, enhance the credibility of its policy.

The ‘principle’ of neutrality, this amalgam of elements of international law and foreign policy, is the culmination of a lengthy interactive process. Through the codification of international law and Switzerland’s definition of additional norms, certain principles emerged in the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries that established Switzerland’s ‘lasting’ neutrality. The Swiss understanding of neutrality includes four points.

The first is non-involvement in war. The neutral state may not aid any warring party with arms or military forces or allow a warring party to use its territory for military purposes. It is self-evident that this would also debar Switzerland from financing the war effort of a foreign power. Second, by arming itself, Switzerland wanted to express its readiness to defend its territory and prevent a foreign power from gaining access to its human, military and economic resources in any way that contravened its neutrality. Third, the prohibition on foreign alliances made it clear that Switzerland would not enter into any obligations that could violate the aforementioned principles of neutrality. However, this should not be interpreted as excluding Swiss interest in an alliance if it were attacked. Fourth, Switzerland would not unilaterally obstruct or encourage free trade with warring parties, but would limit such trade to the level normal in times of peace. This principle was intended as a response to the charge that a neutral state would be accused of operating as a centre of circumvention or as a war profiteer. In this respect, the assertion of neutrality on the basis of liberal democracy and free trade was restricted by a prohibition on government trade in military materiel and on the provision of credits for such trade.

To function as a means of promoting peace and security and preventing war, neutrality must involve three forces: the neutral state and the two warring powers, or, in times of peace, Switzerland and the global political environment that affects it. Indeed, this environment was the reason for adopting the additional factors of the Swiss special statue to help preserve the sovereignty of the state and enhance the credibility to this policy. These include beneficial services and humanitarian activities abroad, which also served to give Swiss foreign policy greater legitimacy in Switzerland itself. Two other factors that have gained significance since 1945 must be mentioned: availability and solidarity.

Dietrich Schindler, Daniel Thürer, Jürg Martin Gabriel and others, however, have established that in a ‘changed global environment’ neutrality is not held in the same esteem that it once was.\(^4\) They see the cause in changes in international law, which oscillates between normative demands and political realities.\(^5\) They also caution against seeking all answers to current questions in the general doctrine of neutrality.\(^6\) In my opinion, the current self-referential approach to the study of Swiss foreign policy will have to make room for a historical approach that includes in particular exogenous political and economic determinants as well as domestic factors. On the one hand, the rise of global markets and companies and the spread of knowledge and culture are codeterminants of events in the 20th century. On the other hand, the crises and wars