Switzerland and the Challenges of Globalisation

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Much has been written or said on the subject of globalisation since the advent of new technologies enabled the development of information superhighways, bringing people closer in a way hitherto unknown in the history of humanity.

To mention the challenges that await Switzerland and its citizens is to touch upon, discuss and raise doubts about facts or even myths and it is difficult to bring such a discussion to a satisfactory conclusion. The exercise Switzerland was forced to carry out to resolve the problem of the unclaimed Jewish assets revealed how difficult it is to analyse the past, especially when this is communicated to us by our predecessors: honest and conscientious people who are convinced they acted in the interest of future generations.

To question myths is therefore a delicate matter. It is even more so today because time seems to fly ever faster and there is less and less of it available for reflection and the development of ideas.

In 1989, when I joined the Board of Swissair as a young man of 40. I was told that ‘Joining the board of Swissair is somewhat like joining a religious order; you are now entering the realms of mythology – Swiss mythology. There are three icons in this country the Matterhorn, the Knie circus and Swissair! Woe betide those who question them: as such historical monuments, they reign majestically, unassailable, unquestionable.’

Just for the record, the person in question recommended that, in view of my very young age, I should not take the floor during the four years of my first term in office – a question of becoming acquainted with the mysteries of this strange religion, namely the supervision of a historic monument! I did not really follow his advice but I am still on the board, which in 10 years has been slimmed down from 32 to nine members. For me this reduction is very symbolic and it brings me the subject of this chapter – the challenges facing Switzerland and how we should tackle them.

Without rewriting history, I would like to return to a date that I see as the turning point for Switzerland, after which everything changed course towards a new world – one for which Switzerland was totally unprepared. The date was
9 November 1989. The place was Berlin. The event was the tearing down of the Berlin Wall.

Why do I consider this date to be so geopolitically crucial for Switzerland and its future? At the risk of appearing to historians as simplistic and reductionist, I think that postwar Switzerland has suffered the after-effects of the way the world was organised at Yalta. At that point the world became bipolar and was set on course for a cold war between two superpowers that neutralised each other for more than 45 years as each had the nuclear means to destroy the other.

For more than four decades the US and the Soviet empire confronted each other, and their confrontations by and large took place in Switzerland, whose political neutrality was accepted by both parties and allowed it to play host to this politico-diplomatic seesaw. During this time our gift, as Swiss, was to act as mediator between these sworn enemies, with their diametrically opposed values and visions of the world.

Following the star wars initiative by President Reagan, the Soviet empire was incapable of finding the economic means to continue the technological race and was therefore obliged to lay down its arms and accept the end of its dominance over half the world. Since then Pax Americana has reigned supreme. The world is no longer bipolar and it will take generations for China to rival American power, despite the fact that it has given human kind many of its greatest inventions. As for Europe, it is still in the cradle.

The biggest challenge facing Switzerland can be illustrated by paraphrasing a graffiti written on walls in Prague when the Russian tanks rolled into the city: 'Wake up, Lenin – they’ve gone mad!' In our case it is 'Wake up, Switzerland – the world is changing!'

So let us take a look at the challenges facing us. I shall deal with the main ones, those that seem to me to be the most essential. I do not claim to have solutions for them, but I shall try to provide some food for thought.

The first challenge is to abandon Swiss neutrality. At one time this concept was as much wanted by Swiss citizens as it was desired by external forces, and as long as it was really useful both domestically and externally it worked extremely well. However we have to face the fact that it is no longer useful today. Switzerland's procrastination over the war in Kosovo is a good example of the extent to which the Swiss idea of neutrality (which is, moreover, an armed neutrality) has become completely out of touch with the reality of what is needed.

What is worse, it might cause Switzerland to be seen as selfish if it carries on standing on the sidelines and shows a lack of solidarity with the events surrounding it. Switzerland has to recognize that the world has become unipolar. It must enter the ring and take an active political and diplomatic part in the adventures of the world of which it is a part. It can no longer be just a spectator, content to offer an umpire's advice to fighters who do not really care. This means joining both the UN and NATO, which should rapidly become an organisation serving Europe and not the US.