Switzerland – From Splendid Isolation to Selected Cooperation

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Abstract: *For a small, landlocked country with a difficult geography and no natural resources to speak of, Switzerland has done remarkably well. Nevertheless, the Alpine republic faced some difficulties during the 1990s, even a crisis: Since the fall of the Iron Curtain its role as a neutral go-between was questioned. And as European integration was moving forward the Swiss found themselves quite isolated. As a result, Switzerland cautiously took steps towards international integration and joined the United Nations in 2002. But the country still abstains from joining the EU, disliking the idea of laws made in Brussels rather than in Bern. Therefore Switzerland found a compromise with the EU by negotiating bilateral agreements, including on security issues. Although Switzerland still prefers to go it alone, the country is looking for a replacement for its diminished political weight by adopting a new role of selected cooperation: providing assistance in the Balkans within the framework of the PfP and ESDP, and joining the Schengen/Dublin-Agreement etc. As a small, neutral country Switzerland traditionally wants to offer itself as a go-between in today's conflicts and tries to balance between keeping a low profile in its own foreign and security policy without losing even more ground and to provide space for "Good Offices". Up to now, the country has been quite successful in doing so.*

Key words: ***Cooperation, European Union, Good Offices, Identity, Neutrality, Security Policy, Switzerland***

Introduction

"We want Switzerland to be a small, but active country which is part of the world. We do not want a Switzerland with an inferiority complex, nor one with delusions of grandeur; what we want is a Switzerland that is able to face itself in the mirror, a Switzerland that is not afraid of change, a Switzerland that tries to put its idea of itself into effect in the face of today's problems and with today's means." (Burckhardt et al, 1955: 26)

Those words were spoken by Max Frisch, one of the leading thinkers on the Swiss nation and his compatriots, as the Cold War became constant reality and Switzerland began to find itself very comfortable in its isolated, neutral role as an intermediary between the blocs. Even 50 years ago Frisch could spot the core of Swiss identity that had (and has!) lasting influence on its policies, especially on its foreign and security policy: fluctuation between inferiority complex and thus fears of demise and feelings of superiority.

Small states like Switzerland are often characterized by "a deficit in influence and autonomy" (Goetschel, 1999: 19). To minimize the consequences of this lack of power and therefore to protect their territorial integrity and political independence they often chose neutrality as a security option (Karsh, 1988). So did Switzerland. And this was the right choice for hundreds of years, when the Swiss definition of "nation" as a voluntary association of people having the same political beliefs was questioned by its neighbours France and especially Germany. Because, according to Johann Gottfried Herder, a nation is characterized by its common language and "without its own language, a *Volk* is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms" (Herder, 1995: 93). That is why Germany constantly claimed the German-speaking parts of Switzerland to be part of the German Empire, as did its powerful opponent for influence in Europe, France, concerning the French-speaking cantons.

Regarded as being an "imperfect nation", as Max Weber put it, absolute and permanent neutrality therefore was the key to survival for Switzerland, situated in a region of belligerents in the age of nationalism. But times have changed: neither Germany nor France nor Italy challenge Swiss sovereignty any more. The European Union as a peace project is successful and there should be nothing to fear in Switzerland. But the Swiss are still loyal to neutrality, stay alliance-free and are not part of the European Union.

"For a small, landlocked country of seven million people with a difficult geography and no natural resources to speak of, Switzerland has done remarkably well … (The country) stands for direct democracy, fairness, stability, quality, meticulousness, punctuality, thrift, efficiency openness and all sorts of other desirable things" wrote "The Economist" in 2004. Why then should the Swiss adopt a new international role?

Switzerland never was unstable or poor. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, Switzerland faced some difficulties during the 1990s, even of a crisis: Since the fall of the Iron Curtain Switzerland's role as a neutral go-between was questioned. And as European integration was moving forward the Swiss found them quite isolated. Not that they had not enjoyed their splendid isolation before, but now they had to deal with the growing economic disadvantages and shortcomings in security because of not being part of the European Union or other alliances.

As a result, Switzerland slowly and cautiously took steps towards further international integration, and a small majority voted for joining the United Nations in 2002. Switzerland is now prepared to back UN actions but the country still abstains from joining the European Union. It distrusts the EU's centralising tendencies, and it dislikes the idea of laws made in Brussels rather than in Bern. Therefore Switzerland found compromise with the EU by negotiating a series of bilateral agreements also including security issues.

Although the Swiss still prefer to go it alone, the country is looking for a replacement for its diminished political weight and adopting a new, modern role: Today, Switzerland is providing assistance in the Balkans within the framework of Partnership for Peace and ESDP, joining the Schengen/Dublin-Agreement and giving support for

the "Geneva Accord", trying to find new ways of acting as an intermediary and to provide Good Offices to other countries. As a small, independent and neutral country Switzerland wants to offer itself as a trustworthy go-between for today's conflicts and tries to do the splits between the two sides of its oscillating identity: keeping a low profile in its own foreign and security policy without losing even more ground and to provide space for peace talks and other initiatives.

Up to now, the country is quite successful in doing so…

The Traditional Role: Intermediary & Good Offices

In taking a look at Swiss history and identity one can see how Switzerland has changed its attitude towards and role within the international community and it will even have to change in the years to come.

For more than a 100 years Switzerland was widely accepted as an intermediary because of its small size and – as supposed – limited political ambitions. No state or party to a conflict would have accused the Swiss of pursuing narrow political objectives, of engaging in power politics. Neutral Switzerland became the world's leading mediator between countries not on speaking terms and held a range of mandates in arbitration matters. Switzerland's policy became known as so-called "Good Offices" (Probst, 1989: 2). Those Good Offices trace back to the 19th century, when the first Swiss mediating role occurred in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian War. Although Switzerland's Good Offices had declined in significance since the establishment of the permanent International Court of Justice in 1922, the country still had 19 Good Offices mandates in 1984, but 11 in 1991, and has only 4 today (Shepard, 2005: 1).

As we can see, demand for Swiss diplomacy's Good Offices has fallen sharply since the end of the Cold War because the provision of Good Offices for conflict prevention and mediation has largely shifted to the United Nations. For this and many other reasons Switzerland is adopting a more active and cooperative, a more multilateral role.

But in doing so, first and foremost Switzerland has to deal with some key elements of its identity: the army and neutrality.

The Army, Neutrality, Identity and National Cohesion

Isolated territorial defence has become obsolete because Switzerland is surrounded by friends. Yet "the military remains a critical unifying sinew of the Swiss state" (van Heuven – Manning – Treverton, 1998: 6), and so does neutrality. Legally speaking, neutrality is only relevant to armed conflicts between states and not a basic obstacle to take part in European security policy. But huge parts of the Swiss population feel that any European security cooperation is against neutrality and therefore against "Swissness" itself. It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that Switzerland and neutrality are synonymous.

There is a peculiar linkage between Swiss identity and national security. "Switzerland is the only country in Europe where the idea of the nation-in-arms based on a citizen's militia has survived until today" (Haltiner, 2002: 2). That is why John McPhee concluded somewhat ironically: *"Switzerland does not have an army, Switzerland is an army!"* (McPhee, 1984: 6). The army and especially neutrality became a symbol of national identification because neutrality fulfils a double function, as Karl W. Haltiner explored: "Externally, Switzerland is one of the few countries in Europe to have avoided wars over the last 150 years. This assured the Swiss of their opinion that the existence of their small Alpine republic is guaranteed only because neutrality has become the constant basis of Swiss foreign and security policy. Internally, the dangers of fragmentation have additionally strengthened neutrality. In a nation linguistically segmented and divided by confessional and cultural differences, neutrality served as an important agent of national cohesion." (Haltiner, 2002: 4).

In Switzerland, neutrality has survived mainly as a set of beliefs, not as a set of functions, with regard to foreign affairs. There is some kind of fictional sense of neutrality that corresponds with Swiss identity. Permanent neutrality, meaning no membership in any alliance and no foreign troops on the territory, is still closely linked to prosperity and peaceful safety in people's minds.

But nowadays you do not have to be neutral to follow the peaceful path, even if you are small. In a changed and highly interdependent world peace has less and less to do with neutrality. The policy of "splendid isolation" seemed to guarantee security on a foreign basis as well as on a domestic level for many years. But with the end of the Cold War and intensified European integration some key values of Swiss foreign and security policy became obsolete. Neutrality is no longer the imperative it was for small nations during the 20th century. Given that the security environment is changing Switzerland will have to modify its attitudes and change its policy as well because neutrality is not sensible vis-à-vis terrorism or organized international crime.

A New Role: Security through Cooperation and a More Active Peace Facilitator

Switzerland's neutrality during the Cold War seemed sensible, especially with regard to its traditional role of an international third party mediator. But today it finds itself in the midst of a new Europe. a Post-Cold War redefinition of Swiss security policy was required (Gabriel – Fischer, 2003). But when it comes to neutrality, the doctrine *"Never change a winning horse"* is still very popular with the people. The country is adapting to European trends of new security and defence structures, but slowly and cautiously.

There are some Swiss national interests that make it easier to leave behind the old role and look out for a new one. Firstly, Switzerland is directly affected by international crises because it is one of the preferred destinations of people seeking protection and asylum. The country has realized that international cooperation can

reduce flows of refugees. Secondly, with reference to is its small size, Switzerland cannot provide the overall infrastructure for international security operations and can therefore choose a role fitting its profile and interests (Ogi, 2000). And third, highly important for Switzerland, the economic interest: The stability that Swiss business needs to flourish worldwide requires peace. By supporting peace operations Switzerland supports Swiss business. And participating in international activities facilitates important contacts and relationships in business affairs. Moreover, future participation in the Schengen agreement is added value for Swiss tourism because tourists travelling to Europe will not require a second visa for Switzerland. Tourist experts predict a significant increase in revenue as a result.

There are still some leftovers from the good old days, and Switzerland is still trying to play its traditional role as mediator. For example, Switzerland is giving financial and logistical support for the "Geneva Accord", an unofficial Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative brought into being in December 2003. But since the demand for Swiss Good Offices has fallen, a new more active "peace facilitator" role fills the gap together with the official strategy of "security through cooperation" presented in the Swiss "Security Policy Report 2000" (*Sicherheitspolitischer Bericht*, 2000).

The new role fits and is already working, as recent examples show: On 14 April 2005, the 12th contingent of "Swisscoy", consisting of 211 KFOR soldiers was sent to Kosovo to act as a peace facilitator. On 30 April 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding between Austria and Switzerland concerning cooperation in airspace security was signed – as much an example for "Security through Cooperation" as the majority vote for joining the European Union's Schengen/Dublin-Agreement on cooperation concerning justice and asylum on 5 June 2005. This marks an important step, a departure from the traditional status quo of a purely autonomous security and defence policy and is framed by the recent creation of three internationally oriented institutes working on security policy in Geneva: the Centre for Security Policy, the Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces and the Centre for Humanitarian Demining (Haltiner – Klein, 2002).

Much to our surprise we find that Switzerland is not excluding itself any more but cooperating on bilateral and multilateral levels. Switzerland has its reasons: The country undertook an in-depth review of its approach to security that resulted in a new threat analysis since the end of the Cold War, causing a development towards cooperative security. Revolutionary developments such as globalisation call for increased political coordination; the strategy of concentration on isolated territorial defence has become obsolete. That is why Switzerland is now implementing the guidelines of the Security Policy Report 2000 called "Security through Cooperation". Retaining the militia principle, Switzerland undertook army reforms with a clear Post-Cold War profile: Swiss forces have been successively reduced in size and professionalism has increased as have readiness and mobility. The objective was twofold: on the one hand, it is a matter of burden sharing to reduce the costs of an isolated security policy. As a consequence of the changed geopolitical situation the defence budget underwent significant step-

-by-step cuts. On the other hand, the back door allows cooperation without alliance membership. The contribution to international peace support and crisis management and European security policies on a pick-and-choose-basis enables Switzerland to minimize the negative aspects of neutrality and standing outside the European Union and other alliances by minding the importance of neutrality for Swiss identity at the same time. Furthermore, neutrality should not be confused with indifference towards the outside world.

Although Switzerland has participated in international peace-support operations since the 1960s a strict interpretation of neutrality confined its tasks in joint security ventures. Not until the 1990s, when Switzerland had to realize that isolation and absolute neutrality were not so promising anymore, the country slowly changed its foreign and security policy by diffidently opening to the world. That is why Switzerland joined the Partnership for Peace following Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE in 1996 and has been a member of the United Nations since 2002, which was hailed as a major step forward into the concert of nations and a commitment to its long-standing humanitarian tradition. Swiss military observers are active on a number of UN missions, from Georgia through former Yugoslavia to the Middle East and Congo. Switzerland has also been an associate member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO-PA) since May 1999 and provides a logistics and support unit as well as mechanized infantry of about 220 men and women to the Austrian "KFOR" contingent (Kosovo Force) called "Swisscoy" (Swiss Company), based in Camp Casablanca, Suva Reka, since September 1999.

Moreover, Switzerland is also cooperating at the level of the European Union.

Approaching Europe

After Swiss voters narrowly turned down the government's membership bid to the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992 because the union is perceived as falling short in democratic institutions that play a crucial role in Swiss self-conception, Switzerland chose the bilateral path by negotiating on specific interests and problems. The first set of bilateral treaties, mainly on trade, labour and transport issues, came into force in 2002. The second series, signed in October 2004, includes issues that affect Switzerland's new international role more than any other previous agreement: on 5 June 2005, a popular vote was held on Switzerland's participation in the Schengen/Dublin association agreements, two areas of great importance for Switzerland, namely cooperation in the fields of police and justice, asylum and migration.

In effect, after the approval of the association agreement by a small majority of 54.6 per cent, Switzerland will cede much control of its borders to the European Union. The Alpine republic finds it harder and harder to remain an island because terrorism and modern forms of international crime know no borders. The threats of the 21st century require better international information and warning networks (i.e. the Schengen Information System (SIS), the fingerprint database EURODAC) and

coordination with other states on asylum (van Heuven – Manning – Treverton, 1998: 6). Even cooperation between individual partner states is not sufficient to combat modern forms of crime, and broader networks are therefore required. This conflicts fundamentally with Switzerland's identity as an international maverick and demands rethinking.

If the Schengen/Dublin would have been rejected it would have been Switzerland that would have suffered as a result because it would have become more attractive as a destination for asylum seekers who have been expelled from the European Union (Haltiner, 2002: 7). Like both other associated states, Norway and Iceland, participation in Schengen/Dublin will give Switzerland no formal joint decision-making rights but a formal right of decision-shaping, i.e. Swiss experts will be able to participate in all relevant EU working groups.

Furthermore, the European Union is now (since the establishment of ESDP – European Security and Defence Policy in 1999) capable of carrying out a wide variety of peace missions both of a civilian and a military nature. In 2003 the EU started to put ESDP into practice and has developed tools for crisis management in Bosnia and Macedonia. Since these early beginnings, Switzerland has placed civilian police officers at the disposal of the EU police mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (called "EUPM") and in Macedonia (called "Proxima"). In order for Switzerland to take part in military peace-promotion activities, a UN or OSCE mandate is required because Swiss troops may not participate in military actions whose purpose is to impose peace. But participation in ESDP peace-facilitating missions means that Switzerland is implementing the guidelines of the Security Policy Report 2000 "Security through Cooperation" with the European Union as a partner.

Maybe this is an indication that even Switzerland is on a "European path". as Bideleux noticed already ten years ago for other neutral states: "(T)he declining strength of Austrian, Finnish and even Swedish neutrality after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War … played a major role in persuading them to join the EU for fear of being left "out in the cold'" (Bideleux, 1996: 292).

Conclusion

In addition to the above-quoted Max Frisch said: *"We want Switzerland to be a country that, although small, is alive and part of the world, not just a museum, a European spa, a retirement sanctuary, a passport bureaucracy, a vault, a crossroad of merchants and spies, or an idyll."* (Burckhardt – Frisch – Kutter, 1955: 29). It seems that 50 years later his wishes may come true. To put it somewhat cynically, Switzerland is still too well off to join the European Union and to become a full member of this part of the world. But the country is approaching Europe and the international community step-by-step after having realized that entire isolation is not so splendid anymore. Today, the Swiss are experiencing a gradual disenchantment with neutrality and the army as a stronghold of national identification. They have to look out for a new role to cope with this development.

Switzerland's new role in the world and especially in Europe today knows two ways: 1) Security through Cooperation as laid down in the Security Policy Report 2000, 2) supplemented by the Peace Facilitator role. The Confederacy finally joined the United Nations in 2002 and has already signed two Bilateral Agreements with the European Union. The first set of bilateral agreements on trade and labour issues came into force in 2002. a second set of nine treaties on security issues was signed last year. The most recent step was the approval of the Schengen/Dublin association agreement on 5 June 2005. In September 2005, there will be a vote on extending an accord on the free movement of people to the ten new member states – bringing Switzerland closer to the European Union little by little without renewing its membership bid that is still opposed by the majority (Swissinfo: 20.06.2005).

Moreover, Switzerland joined the Partnership for Peace in 1996, is an associated member to NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO-PA) since 1999, provides the "Swisscoy"-contingent for KFOR since 1999 as well, and participates in ESDP missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Macedonia since 2003. Additionally, providing Good Offices and a policy called "constructive exertion of influence", as recently outlined by foreign minister Micheline Calmy-Rey (NZZ: 22.05.2005), remain a Swiss foreign policy goal although Switzerland is no longer the automatic choice as go-between in conflicts as it was during the Cold War.

Despite the warily approval of a more active foreign and security policy by the Swiss public, surveys still reveal strong reservations concerning a more aggressive opening up of the country (Bennett et al, 2002). Switzerland surely is adapting to the changed world order and to European trends of security and defence structures, but slowly and cautiously because it's peculiar linkage between national identity and national security is an obstacle for changing roles more quickly.

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