Switzerland's good offices in the light of history : a noble tradition

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A noble tradition

The original purpose of good offices was mediation by a neutral third party to end an armed conflict. But the policy has now taken a much wider dimension and today implies prior resolution of differences between nations which could lead to armed conflict.

This seems a good moment to go back a little into the modern history of Switzerland since the present federal state was set up in 1848.

What are good offices?

First, a word on the meaning of good offices. What is the classic sense of the expression in international law? Good offices are attempts by non-participating third parties to mediate (without losing their neutrality) between parties to a conflict and if possible to bring it to an end. Today, however, the expression has taken on a much wider dimension. It includes a wide variety of measures, initiatives and other attempts to restore peace between parties about to break off diplomatic relations, as well as sorting out differences between states which

could lead to war. It also applies to non-military problems which could lead to armed conflict if left unsolved.

Switzerland possesses all the prerequisites for this mediation role. The fact that it has often been able to provide good offices (right back into the last

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century) is also in part due to the principle of permanent armed neutrality which is anchored in the constitution. This has made the Swiss Confederation an element of stability and continuity which has engendered confidence throughout the world. Other advantages are its geographical situation at the heart of Europe and a tradition of solving domestic conflicts peacefully in order to ensure national unity.

Everyone's favourite mediator

The International Committee of the Red Cross was established in Geneva in 1863, and in 1872 Switzerland acted as mediator between the United States and Great Britain in the famous case of the Alabama claims, in which the British had allowed the armed steamship Alabama to prey on northern shipping under the flag of the Confederacy during the civil war (1861–65). Great Britain was found guilty and had to pay a substantial indemnity to the United States. Switzerland was in growing demand as a mediator right up to the First World War. And at the end of that conflict the League of Nations was established in Geneva (1919). At the final session of the League in 1946, it was decided to set up the United Nations Organisation, with headquarters in New York and a European Office in Geneva.

The history of good offices also includes failed attempts to mediate (such as the 1916 peace initiative between the United States and Germany and Federal Councillor Arthur Hoffmann's attempt to bring about peace between Russia

and Germany in 1917). Swiss mediation attempts also took place during the Second World War – though with greater prudence and to little avail. But a number of personal mediation initiatives had local success. Thanks to the efforts of Max Husmann and Max Weibel, many lives and much of Italian industry were saved at the time of Germany's capitulation in northern Italy. Walter Stucky prevented the destruction of the town of Vichy and Franz Rudolph von Weiss that of Bad Godesberg. Carlo Steinhäuslin saved many lives and works of art in Florence, and Carl Lutz was responsible for saving the lives of more than fifty thousand Hungarian Jews.

Switzerland as protecting power

The history of good offices also includes Switzerland's role as protecting power, where one state represents another in its dealings with a perceived enemy. As early as 1870/71 Switzerland represented the interests of Bavaria and the Grand Duchy of Baden in Paris. During the Second World War it represented a total of 35 states, and it represents 11 states today. It has looked after United States interests in Cuba since 1961 and in Iran since 1979. After 1982 it represented British interests in Argentina following the Falklands/Malvinas war. Less widely known is the fact that since April 1991 it has been representing Cuba in the United States, having taken over this role from Czechoslovakia after thirty years.

Special tasks

Since the beginning of this century Switzerland has also received a number of special missions. In 1935, for example, it supervised the referendum in Saarland, which was won by Germany. In 1937 the Swiss diplomat, Carl J. Burckhardt, was appointed League of Nations High Commissioner in the Free City of Danzig. Other important missions were in the Korean war (1950–53, Commissions for the repatriation of prisoners and supervising the ceasefire) and in the conflict between Algeria and France (initiative by Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre leading to the Evian Accords of March 18, 1962).
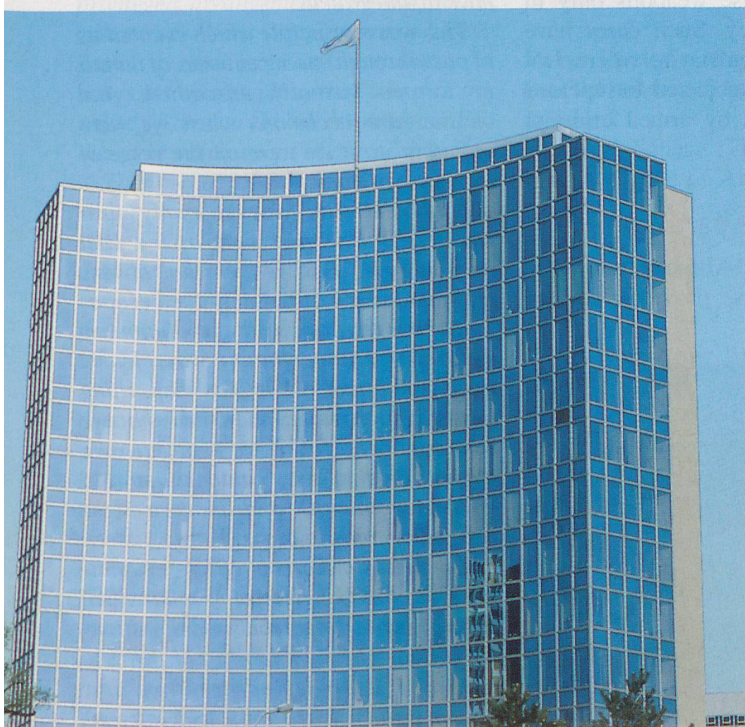
In the last few decades Switzerland has also supported a number of UN peace operations: in 1956 in the Suez crisis, in 1960 in ex-Belgian Congo and in 1964 in the Cyprus crisis. It has also been involved with Palestinian refugees and the UN Lebanon operation.

In recent years Swiss territory has been used for a number of important meetings. In 1985 Reagan and Gorbachov came to Geneva for their first meeting, and the special UN General Assembly on Palestine took place in Geneva in 1988. Talks are now taking place in Geneva between the warring parties in former Yugoslavia. ■

International humanitarian organisations in Geneva

We list below some of the main international humanitarian organisations established in Geneva. In 1871 Count Scolpis described Geneva as having "the most favourable climate, in which a liberal, upstanding and serene spirit is combined with respect for public order, in a country where tradition fulfils the criterion for present discussion and future security".

*United Nations Office in Geneva ●
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ●
Commission on Human Rights ●
Conference on Disarmament ●
Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator ●
Office for the Co-ordinaton of Humanitarian Assistance relating to Afghanistan ● United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research ● United Nations Research Institute for Special Development ●
United Nations Children's Fund ●
United Nations Development Programme ● United Nations Institute for Training and Research ● International Organization for Migration ● League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies ●
International Committee of the Red Cross*

Geneva shelters many international organisations. From left to right:
the UN building, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), and EFTA.
(Photos: KeyColor)