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Autor: Rutz, Eveline
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Switzerland in the UN Security Council

Switzerland recently took up a two-year seat on the UN Security Council. Its presence on the Council comes at a difficult juncture. Russia's war in Ukraine poses a huge challenge to a body tasked with maintaining world peace.

EVELINE RUTZ

People in war-torn Syria had to wait a long time for help to arrive following the earthquake in February. Only one border crossing from Turkey was open. This was due to ruler Bashar al-Assad's policy of insisting that all humanitarian aid be sent through Damascus – a set-up that allows him to monitor everything. "Not enough aid is reaching the men, women and children in need," complained Swiss UN Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl a few days after the disaster. Under pressure from the UN Security Council, the Damascus regime eventually opened two further border crossings.

This episode shows the UN Security Council can mitigate humanitarian suffering in times of conflict. Switzerland has had a seat on the Security Council since the beginning of the year, its views being represented by Pascale Baeriswyl on a daily basis. The experienced diplomat has been heading the country's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York since 2020. Switzerland's term on the Security Council runs until the end of 2024. Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis believes the country has "a major role to play" on the Council, bringing its experience to bear as a peaceful, multicultural nation and defending values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

Overshadowed by the war in Ukraine

Switzerland is one of ten non-permanent members of the Security Council. The influential core of permanent members consists of the US, the UK, France, Russia, and China. All five permanent members have a veto, meaning that any one of them can block a Council decision, including resolutions against them.

When Russia marched into Ukraine in February 2022, the implications of this arrangement became clear. Suddenly, a prominent member of the Security Council was flouting the UN's core principles and violating international law. The Council was superfluous and had failed to fulfil its original purpose of preserving world peace, said critics. And in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the world was on the verge of the abyss and heading in the wrong direction. Other Council members slammed Russia's actions and called on Vladimir Putin to end the killing. That was all they could do.

UN Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl installs the Swiss flag at a ceremony to welcome Switzerland and four other non-permanent members to the Security Council. Photo: Keystone

"Its preventive function is limited"

Indeed, the Council has limited scope. It can impose economic and diplomatic sanctions. It can also authorise military operations, provided individual members put soldiers on the ground.

"The Security Council is not fulfilling its purpose, considering that its primary task is to prevent war," Baeriswyl told the Swiss public radio and television network SRF. This was most regrettable, she said. The Council's preventive function is limited, she added. Nevertheless, it can always play a mitigating role, authorising humanitarian corridors that have helped to save the lives of millions of people in the past.

"Neutrality does not mean a lack of solidarity"

Switzerland has four priorities during its two-year term on the Security Council: build sustainable peace, protect civilians, enhance effectiveness, and address climate security. It attaches great importance to upholding the values of the international community, said Federal Councillor Cassis last autumn in New York. Cassis strongly condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Switzerland may be a neutral country, he said, "but neutrality does not mean indifference or lack of solidarity".