

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 33 (1970)
Heft: [4]

Artikel: Neutrality and Swiss international institutions
Autor: P.M.B.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942207>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 17.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

NEUTRALITY AND SWISS INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Swiss neutrality has at times been both acclaimed, at other times highly criticised. It has been appreciated all over the world for its peace-fostering character. On the other hand, especially at the outbreak of wars, it has been practically despised as a means of being spared, as a show of indifference and aloofness. In the present day, Switzerland upholds her neutral principles in keeping out of any collective organisation of a political nature. She has also been criticised for this. It is argued that in staying out of the United Nations and not being affected by collective economic sanctions, she acts in a self-interested and unco-operative way. In maintaining trade with Rhodesia, she goes against the design of the majority of the nations of the world and puts commercial interest above moral principles.

Secondly, it is argued that neutrality is not incompatible with adhesion to an organisation such as the UN. Sweden is put forward as an example: she is a neutral country and finds no objections in participating to the decisions of the organisation, and willingly lends troops for operations in the Middle East.

However, one may not compare Swiss neutrality with Swedish, or Austrian neutrality. Swiss neutrality is something far more ingrained and far more binding than Swedish neutrality. In the latter case it is a relatively recent agreement not to take part in any alliances, just compatible with international law's understanding of neutrality. In the case of Switzerland, it is something which was established in principle as far back as the Confederal Diet of 1674. It is anchored in the Constitution. As the Swiss jurist Max Huber has put it: "Switzerland is a political nation; that is to say, it is a state which is founded not on a people united by language, race or religion, but on a visible, historical, voluntary act, and hence on a particular part of political culture". No description could indicate better why neutrality, a basic element of this "voluntary act", is an essential part of Swiss existence. This explains to some extent the apparent rigidity in the official attitude towards neutrality since the end of the war.

The Swiss have evolved the principle of "integral neutrality", which in effect means more than not taking part in a war and adopting a completely partial attitude in the case of conflicts. In practice, it means that neutrality is considered as incompatible with the adhesion to any international organisation with political or defensive overtones. The question of compatibility first struck hard in the days of the League of Nations. Integral neutrality pledges the state not only to do everything to preserve peace, but to boycott any endeavour that might involve it in war. On the other hand, nations bound in collective security also pledge

to do everything in view of peace, including collective military operations against peace-breaking nations. Switzerland therefore refuses in the name of neutrality to fight for peace in other lands, although her neutrality is primarily designed for peace too. There is an undeniable contradiction there and Switzerland had to agree to ease the self-imposed strictness of her neutrality by accepting, as a member of the League of Nations, to participate in economic sanctions against other countries. She was however dispensed from participating in military operations and from granting free passage of troops through her territory.

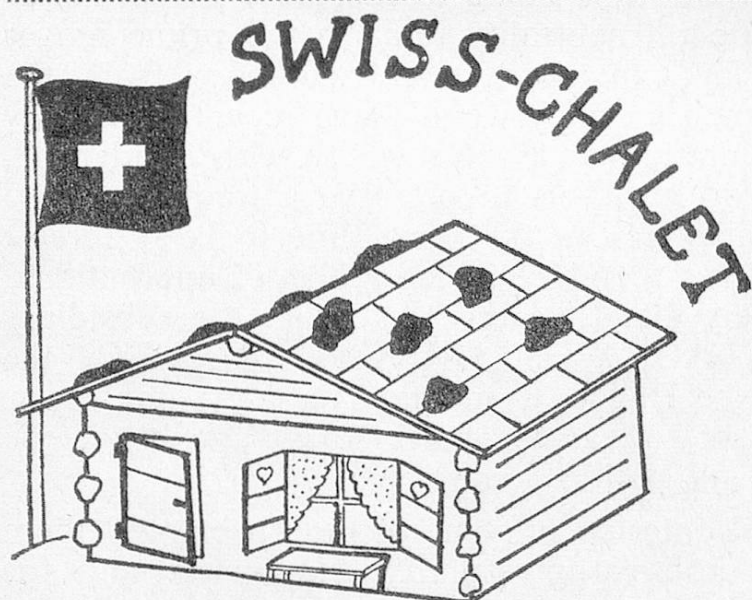
The League of Nations found an untimely end and the same problems were met at the creation of the UN. This time Switzerland was no longer prepared to compromise on the principle of integral neutrality and asked to be exempted from joining collective economic sanctions. Max Petitpierre, former president of the Confederation, represented Switzerland at the UN General Assembly of October 1945 and suggested that Switzerland's non-participation in economic sanctions be compensated by some other obligation towards the UN. The world organisation would however not admit this and the Swiss have stayed out of the UN from that day.

The reasons why they will not join a politically or militarily binding organisation today are threefold: Switzerland wishes to assume her own defence entirely by herself, she will not take position or be involved in the quarrels of other countries, and she is not prepared for the time being to recognise the principle of supranationality. Integral neutrality remains the prime mover in this choice of policy. In order to break loose from the unavoidable isolation such a policy would have meant, neutrality has been somewhat reinterpreted as "Neutrality with Solidarity", a designation pointing to an effort to preserve a traditional and highly cherished neutrality and at the same time to keep abreast of history. Switzerland has therefore joined a host of international organisations with purely material aims. Such are the subsidiary bodies of the UN — FAO, WHS, UNESCO, IRO, ILO, the International Court at the Hague, to mention the most important. This is a worthy show of solidarity, of help to others, but keeps the country free from all political encroachment.

This attitude can be contested in some of its aspects and there has been considerable political pressure within Switzerland for an adhesion to the UN.

After all, the tenet of neutrality is that each country should take care of itself. When everybody cares for his own troubles and refrains from interfering into the affairs of the neighbour, then there are fairly good chances for peace and harmony. What might hold for humans in a very small community, what might be true of relatively interspersed and independent nations is not necessarily true in the world today. The creation of powerblocks

has changed the context in which integral neutrality was first affirmed. Taking the question of collective security agreements, there are sound reasons why Switzerland should join NATO. The first is that future wars will conceivably be waged between blocks of nations rather than individual countries. Switzerland is part of the Western World, believes in the same ideals as other NATO countries, is probably the most anti-communist of them all (e.g. the controversial civil defence handbook that is to be distributed to every household) and yet insists on fighting it alone. From a practical point of view, it seems more promising to join forces and adopt a common strategy. This would certainly permit stronger defences, should the Communists want to push a few steps west of Czechoslovakia. But then Switzerland, in view of her strategic position, would probably limp out of a conflict battered far more badly than if she had chosen to remain neutral. This is an argument which understandably has some weight. A possibility could be to align, in a tacit agreement, Swiss and NATO defence strategies. This is probably being done since it would be hard to believe that NATO staff-planners don't include Switzerland, that small but strategically vital tract of hill and mountains, in their scheming. One may also speculate that they take account of the Swiss defence system and their particular type of armaments.



HOME MADE cakes
our speciality

OPEN
7 DAYS

Restaurant
and
Coffee-Bar

ENGLISH and
CONTINENTAL
MEALS

HAMILTON
270 Victoria Street
(Opp. Commercial Hotel)

Phone 82-305

Props. Mr & Mrs Bert Fluhler

The attitude is similar towards the Common Market. The Common Market has a philosophy which is contrary to the Swiss principles of foreign policy as they now stand. Switzerland considers that the time is not yet ripe for a united and supranational Europe. She is not prepared to join a community which works both imperfectly and heedless of immediate Swiss interests.

In all this one senses the guarded attitude of the small country afraid to be down-trodden by bigger and more influential partners in a collective organisation. It is true that small countries put more at stake than big powers when they join such an organisation. The latter still manage to remain independent and keep matters in their own hands, thanks to their sheer importance.

Probably the most valid reasons for a continuation of integral neutrality are the fruits which it has brought both to the world and Switzerland. Thanks to her staunch neutrality, Switzerland has been entrusted with an important role in the job of maintaining peace. She represents the interests of countless states and harbours innumerable peace conferences and international welfare institutions. She has gained stability and the financial confidence of other countries as a highly appreciated by-product. Switzerland can arguably play a more effective role in the fight for world peace by sticking to her special and unique neutrality. According to international law, the general behaviour of the neutral state is governed by the rule: "That it shall avoid any action which might undermine the confidence of other states in its will to remain neutral should war break out, and shall, on the other hand, do everything in its power to strengthen that confidence". Switzerland has strictly abided to this rule and other countries know it. Should this confidence in her neutrality be shaken, then it is her whole position in the world which is at stake and it explains why the heads of Swiss foreign policy have always been loathe to tamper with neutrality in any way.

Still, the world is evolving towards a situation where every nation will be a member of a large **family**. No member of a family can remain inactive in a strife which may destroy it; if family life is something worth struggling for, then the would-be members must actively strive to create it. This is why, with the world changing, the question of a renewed interpretation of neutrality will seriously come to a head. (P.M.B.)

Laugh a little . . .

A Scotsman went into a shop and asked if they sold spurs. The shopkeeper said yes and reached for a pair. Says the Scot: "I only want one spur please".

Answers the shopkeeper: "But they are always sold in pairs".

"But one is sufficient for me", says the Scot, "if I prod the horse on one side the other side will automatically run too".

—Nebelspalter.