Chains of Neutrality: The Limitations of Swiss Peacemaking in the Russo–Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Since the 16th century, Switzerland has maintained an official policy of neutrality, which has ensured the country's survival through centuries of European conflict. This neutrality has empowered Swiss officials to serve as steadfast peacemakers, providing good offices and mediation services. However, the Russo–Ukrainian War has tested the limits of Switzerland's peacemaking efficacy. This paper examines how the principles of Swiss neutrality bolster and restrict Switzerland's peacemaking agency, illuminating how domestic political forces can strain conflict resolution efforts. In doing so, it outlines how European states may engage constructively toward a resolution of the Russo–Ukrainian War.

I. Introduction

Throughout Switzerland's history, neutrality has often served as a critical survival mechanism, bolstering Switzerland's national security and elevating its reputation as a European intermediary. In practice, Swiss neutrality mandates noninvolvement in armed conflict and prevents Swiss policymakers from joining formal military alliances, sending troops or arms to warring parties, or granting transition rights. Over centuries, neutrality has largely delivered positive dividends to Switzerland, especially in shielding Switzerland as a smaller state geographically situated between larger European powers. However, as dynamics across Europe continue to shift and new conflicts emerge, Swiss neutrality — and its associated reputational pressures — have limited Switzerland's ability to act as a steadfast peacemaker. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Swiss officials have become entangled by the constraints of neutrality. While some officials advocate for Switzerland to condemn and punish Russian aggression alongside European counterparts, others emphasize a traditional stance of neutrality. In this way, unlike other examples of small-state peacemakers, Swiss neutrality presents an optimal example of a small state's diplomatic posture enhancing its peacemaking agency in certain areas, while significantly constraining its agency in others. This paper argues that the principles of Swiss neutrality have restricted

Switzerland's peacemaking agency in the Russo–Ukrainian War. Swiss neutrality has handicapped its agency as a peacemaker in the conflict — and, simultaneously, the conflict has introduced new uncertainties for Swiss neutrality.

II. History of Swiss Neutrality

Over five centuries, Switzerland's neutrality has evolved from an "emergency stop-gap" to an essential factor of Switzerland's national security, identity, and international reputation (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Questions and Answers on Switzerland's Neutrality*). In 1648, the Treaties of Westphalia decreed that European armies were forbidden from passing through Swiss territory, establishing Switzerland's neutral territorial role despite neighboring conflicts. This would remain until the fall of Napoleon in 1814 and the most significant event in the establishment of formal Swiss neutrality, the Congress of Vienna.

Following its independence from France and the ratification of its constitution in 1814, Switzerland requested Russia, England, Prussia, Austria, and France to uphold the wishes of the newly reestablished Swiss Confederation. One of these wishes was "the assertion of [Swiss] neutrality and the attainment of an adequate military frontier," which the Congress of Vienna formally granted in 1815 (Sherman 247). European powers decreed that they would recognize "Swiss perpetual neutrality" and guarantee "the integrity and inviolability of [Swiss] territory" (248). In this way, the Congress of Vienna demonstrates the mutual interest among European powers in Swiss neutrality, especially as a neutral Switzerland would provide a buffer between France and Austria. Swiss neutrality satisfied — and served — the neighboring parties involved. It provided stability and protection for the newly independent Switzerland and offered geographic protection between warring European powers. This buffer role proved to be a key development in the lasting neutrality of Switzerland and shielded Switzerland from future conflicts.

In the 20th century, World War I and II tested and institutionalized Swiss neutrality. In 1910, Switzerland ratified the Hague Conventions of 1907, a series of international agreements that formalized the laws of war and codified Switzerland's (and other signatories') neutrality in international law. Switzerland remains dedicated to promoting international law and norms today (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Respect and Promotion of International Law*). During World War I, Swiss hospitals and doctors provided care to victims from all sides of the conflict. Alongside humanitarian reasons, Swiss officials also delivered this healthcare "to

enforce [Switzerland's] neutral position (Draenert 2712–2725). As a result of Switzerland's neutral status, robust democratic institutions, and nonparticipation in both World War I and previous European conflicts, Geneva was chosen as the headquarters of the League of Nations after the war. The growing role of Geneva as the home to major international organizations would greatly influence the perception of Swiss neutrality abroad (Fox).

As the continent of Europe was torn apart at the onset of World War II, the Swiss mobilized military forces to assert neutrality and prevent invasion. Switzerland developed a role during this period as a center for transnational humanitarian efforts, with the Swiss government and nonprofits "repatriating captives, transferring grants-in-aid, and visiting prisoner camps" (McComas). While these missions contributed to Switzerland's reputation as a neutral party able to save lives in conflict, significant controversy remains over the extent of Switzerland's neutrality during this period. For example, a government-commissioned study in 1999 found that Switzerland was complicit in the Holocaust (Drozdiak).

Following World War II, Switzerland expanded its good offices and furthered the development of Geneva as a hub for international organizations, cementing Switzerland's reputation as a neutral, international peacemaker. Through the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st, countries from around the world, including larger powers, often sought Swiss good offices for assistance with facilitation and dialogue. In recent years, the Swiss provided these services to the Spanish government and the nationalist Basque ETA party in the 2010s and delivered good offices for talks between the United States and Russia in 2021 (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *U.S.-Russia Summit: The Dialogue in Pictures*). Switzerland has leveraged its neutrality in conflicts around the world to provide credible and impactful good offices, empowering Switzerland to "build bridges where others are prevented from doing so" since it "does not belong to any power bloc and does not pursue a hidden agenda" (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Good Offices*). Switzerland is neither a member of NATO nor the European Union, but it has nonetheless meaningfully contributed to global peacemaking and diplomacy. Furthermore, Swiss neutrality has directly cultivated the evolution of Geneva into one of the primary cities for international diplomacy today. Over decades, the Swiss government has welcomed over 750 non-governmental organizations and 41 intergovernmental organizations into Geneva (Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations Office and to the Other International Organisations in Geneva).

Several organizations, such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue, work directly on diplomacy and mediation. Without the demands of alliances or participation in blocs, especially amidst broader geopolitical shifts, Switzerland (Geneva in particular) has been able to provide neutral spaces for diplomats to work on transnational issues, engage in dialogue, and mediate conflicts.

III. Neutrality and Swiss Engagement During the Russo-Ukrainian War

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Swiss neutrality has become an increasingly contested topic among Swiss policymakers and citizens, as well as members of the international community. Swiss officials who champion diplomatic, economic, or military support for Ukraine have regularly clashed with those concerned about maintaining neutrality, which has generated both tension and political paralysis. In February 2022, Switzerland joined the European Union in sanctioning Russia, receiving praise from EU countries in response (*Swiss Info*, "Russia Sanctions: Switzerland Makes EU 'Partners' List"). Switzerland has since implemented fourteen EU-developed sanctions packages on Russia, spanning industrial goods, energy, and finance (The Federal Council of Switzerland). Despite Switzerland's enforcement of sanctions, the 1998 War Materiel Act and neutrality guarantees have prevented the country from exporting Swiss-manufactured arms to countries actively engaged in the war. Switzerland has denied requests to provide new war material to European countries that support Ukraine, and has not filled existing orders from countries that ordered arms prior to the war.

In response to Swiss officials' decision to join the EU sanctions regime and freeze Russian assets, the right-wing Swiss People's Party, now the country's largest party, launched a referendum in 2023 to embed a principle of neutrality in the Swiss constitution (Siebold, "Swiss Summit Divides: Neutrality under Fire amid Ukraine Conference"). Furthermore, the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection, and Sport published a report from an independent study commission that considered it "necessary to revise Switzerland's neutrality policy in view of the security policy challenges" posed by transformed global dynamics, especially the Russo-Ukrainian War (Tenev). The report generated debate and contention, especially since public support for Swiss neutrality has remained high (Möckli). In 2024, 91 percent of Swiss citizens expressed the desire for Switzerland to remain neutral, and neutrality remains a vital national myth. While domestic debates around neutrality are

increasingly relevant and contentious, the majority of Swiss citizens still value neutrality in a near-sacred manner, informed by its long-standing precedent and utility throughout Switzerland's history.

Mixed reactions to Swiss engagement have also proliferated internationally. Many European countries have chastised Switzerland for remaining too neutral, given the gravity of the war. These countries have advocated for Switzerland to follow a more overtly pro-Ukrainian, European-aligned defense policy. Simultaneously, several European publications, such as *Deutsche Welle* and the *Financial Times*, questioned the extent of Switzerland's neutrality after it imposed the EU sanctions regime against Russia. Many outlets ran headlines that Switzerland was either relinquishing its neutrality or that Swiss neutrality was imperiled (Hille and Jones). In addition, Russia responded to the implementation of sanctions by labeling Switzerland as an "unfriendly country," limiting the extent of Switzerland's diplomatic and financial engagement with Russian counterparts (Reuters, "Switzerland Listed as 'Unfriendly' Country by Russia"). In 2022, Russia declared that Switzerland had "unfortunately lost its status of a neutral state" (Reuters, "Russia Says Swiss 'No Longer Neutral', Can't Act as Go-between with Ukraine"). This transformation in Swiss–Russian relations proved detrimental when Switzerland moved to host the Summit on Peace in Ukraine. Switzerland's decision to engage in limited punitive measures against Russia generated controversy and confusion around the extent of Swiss neutrality and limited Switzerland's capacity as a peacemaker. Nevertheless, the Swiss still managed to host the first international summit on a resolution to the conflict, demonstrating their sustained ability to leverage diplomatic and peacemaking influence.

IV. The Summit on Peace in Ukraine

At the request of President Zelenskyy, the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the Summit on Peace in Ukraine from June 15 to 16, 2024, in Bürgenstock. The summit was the first of its kind, designed to facilitate initial steps toward a peaceful resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Swiss officials, who agreed to host because of their interest in facilitating dialogue and an eventual peace agreement, leveraged Switzerland's tangible financial resources and diplomatic expertise to ensure that the summit's sessions ran smoothly and its participants produced a final communiqué on particular commitments (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Summit on Peace in Ukraine: Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework*). However, since June, the impact of the summit has been limited. Institutional constraints, including a

narrow agenda and the absence of key participants, have stunted the summit's influence. Regardless, the summit presents an optimal case study to examine the extent of Switzerland's peacemaking agency — and the constraints of Swiss neutrality — in the Russo–Ukrainian War.

Background

In a November 2022 speech to the G20, President Zelenskyy proclaimed a ten-point plan for peace in Ukraine (Reuters, "Explainer: What Is [Zelenskyy's] 10-Point Peace Plan?"). Zelenskyy declared that Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence would be required for a settlement. The plan also called for the cessation of Russian aggression, the withdrawal of Russian troops, and the launch of reconciliation programs, including reparations (Zelenskyy). Alongside the Ukrainian proposal, officials from some non-European countries have also promoted proposals for a resolution, though with varying results and degrees of special interest. In February 2023, Chinese officials released a peace agreement proposal that failed to acknowledge Russia's invasion as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and echoed many Russian sentiments that Western countries are responsible for the conflict (Gan and McCarthy). The Ukrainian government largely rejected the Chinese proposal. In April 2023, Brazilian president Lula da Silva proposed a "G20 for peace," which would comprise neutral countries willing to contribute mediation services (Vilela). In June 2023, representatives from seven African countries visited Ukraine and Russia to discuss possible ways to resolve the conflict.[1] The primary aim of the delegation was to emphasize the importance of open dialogue to both Ukrainian and Russian interlocutors (Brazzaville Foundation).

Since early 2023, Ukrainian officials have engaged in a series of talks with government officials around the world, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to promote the key principles of Ukraine's peace formula (Office of the President of Ukraine). Prior multilateral talks were held in Copenhagen (June 2023), Jeddah (August 2023), and Malta (October 2023). These talks have notably included countries neutral to the conflict, including Switzerland (Mills). At the fourth round in Davos in January 2024, President Zelenskyy asked the Swiss government to convene a peace summit with international leaders, hoping to leverage a display of global solidarity to compel Russian

[1] The delegation was composed of representatives from Comoros, Egypt, Republic of Congo, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia (Mills).

officials to negotiate.[2] Zelenskyy then visited Bern on January 15, 2024, where he discussed the steps toward a "comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine" with Swiss officials (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Summit on Peace in Ukraine*). The Swiss government agreed to host a summit the following June, informed by Switzerland's traditionally neutral reputation, with the end goal of a framework for peace.

In the leadup to the summit, Swiss diplomats influenced the agenda and format of the talks. Specifically, they "modulated" the Ukrainian peace plan by choosing three of the ten points for official discussion — points they believed would achieve the broadest consensus among participants (Keaten). These points were nuclear safety, food security, and the return of Ukrainian children brought to Russia (Lieven). Through this framing, the Swiss participants aimed to generate a consensus that could establish the foundations of a longer-term peace process and postpone more intractable issues to future deliberations (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs). In doing so, the Swiss demonstrated their agenda-setting capacity as hosts and leveraged their neutral reputation to launch the summit and spearhead multilateral discussions. However, the limitations of their neutrality were laid bare with the summit's participants — or rather, those who refused to participate.

Participants

Switzerland's ability to bring key parties to the table has remained limited, especially since certain countries, including Russia, have accused Switzerland of partiality and still refuse to engage in talks. Swiss officials invited more than 160 delegations to the summit.[3] However, the Swiss government cited Russian officials' opposition to the summit and decided not to invite a Russian delegation. Furthermore, Ukraine's minister of foreign affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, argued against Russian participation if they could not be guaranteed to act in good faith (VOA News). Ukrainian policies also ban direct negotiation with Russian President Vladimir Putin (Harding and Koshiw). Alongside Switzerland, 92 countries and eight international

[2] The fourth round of talks in Davos included the national security advisors of 82 countries. Notably, China did not participate. China is considered a key participant in any peace deliberations, given its close relationship with Russia (Waldersee).

[3] The invitees included members of the G7, G20, BRICS, the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN, and the Council of Europe. Religious participants from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople were also invited.

organizations attended the summit (Swiss Confederation). Ukrainian officials strongly encouraged more countries to participate and targeted countries such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa in these calls. Ukrainian officials particularly encouraged Chinese participation, especially to engage with officials that hold closer relationships with Russian counterparts (Bandouil). China did not attend. Furthermore, while the Swiss government advertised the summit as a high-level meeting among heads of state and government, several countries sent envoys and senior diplomats as their official representatives, rather than representatives at the ministerial level or higher.

While Swiss neutrality was not the sole factor that deterred Russian participation, Russia was able to exploit Switzerland's reputation of neutrality by alleging that the Swiss were in fact not neutral hosts, providing a diplomatic cover to sit out. Russia's minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, labeled Switzerland an "openly hostile state" and questioned the credibility of Switzerland as a neutral country, given Switzerland's adoption of European sanctions regimes against Russia since the beginning of the conflict (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation). Russian officials also criticized the summit as simply a plea to countries of the Global South to rally around Ukraine (Associated Press). In addition, the Russian government has maintained a strict peace negotiation engagement policy. They will only participate in negotiations if the talks legitimize Russian proposals that demand Ukrainian acceptance of Russia's territorial claims (Mills). Critically, Swiss divisions over neutrality have limited Switzerland's peacemaking agency by prompting Russian manipulation and a potential degradation of Switzerland's credibility. In particular, Nils Fiechter, the head of the Peoples' Party youth wing, claimed that the "conference will achieve nothing" and that the summit would be "an absolute farce" and "embarrassment for our country" (Siebold). He delivered these remarks on Russian broadcaster RT, a few days before the summit began. While the specific impacts of these comments are unclear, Russian state media platformed a Swiss voice critical of the summit, arguing that the summit would delegitimize Swiss neutrality.

Additionally, Russian nonparticipation influenced other countries to sit out, diminishing the strength of the international coalition the Swiss sought to assemble. For example, in March 2024, the Chinese ambassador to Switzerland, Wang Shihting, said that Chinese officials were considering the possibility of participation (Court). However, China's foreign ministry later announced that the summit did not meet its requirements for participation — specifically, "the equal participation of all parties and fair discussion of all options for peace" — underscoring Russia's absence in particular

(Reuters, "Ukraine Peace Conference Should Include Russia, Says Chinese Ambassador"). In late May 2024, President Zelenskyy accused Chinese officials of assisting Russia in derailing the summit and pressuring countries not to attend (Sheftalovich et al.). Although Russian participation would have been highly unlikely considering its aggression in the conflict, its critique of the summit, combined with its refusal to participate, sought to discredit Switzerland as a neutral host — and by extension, as a peacemaker. Without Russian participation, the summit's impact was severely limited.

Key Outcomes

During the summit, the Swiss government reoriented its approach to mitigate Russian nonparticipation. The summit thus focused on three objectives: (1) to provide a platform for dialogue on a resolution for peace in Ukraine that would be based on international law and the UN Charter; (2) to promote a common understanding of a framework toward this goal; and (3) to establish a roadmap to involve both parties in a future peace process (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Summit on Peace in Ukraine: Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework*). These objectives differed from Switzerland's original peacemaking strategy of creating an inclusive space for the parties to begin deliberations. In addition, Viola Amherd, the Swiss president, said that the intent of the summit was to support these three objectives — not generate a comprehensive peace plan — and that a second conference would be likely (Bradley). As a result, Swiss officials were able to develop both a framework and an agenda for the summit that would engage the participants in dialogue, even if Russian accusations of Swiss bias in part provided an avenue to condemn the summit. The primary outcome of the summit was the Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework, which provided a foundation for initiating a future peace process and represented the culmination of high-level dialogue.[4] The communiqué focused on the three consensus-generating areas the Swiss identified from the Ukrainian peace plan: first, nuclear safety and security; second, food security; and third, humanitarian issues, including the exchange of prisoners of war and return of unlawfully displaced Ukrainian children.

[4] The invitees included members of the G7, G20, BRICS, the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN, and the Council of Europe. Religious participants from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople were also invited.

While the summit was designed as a mechanism to develop an initial framework for a more extensive peace process, its immediate efficacy has been relatively limited, largely as a result of institutional factors. According to the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Russia's nonparticipation has no bearing on Switzerland's neutrality. Specifically, the Swiss government states that its neutrality is rooted primarily in military policy, and that "being neutral does not mean being indifferent. Outside the military sphere, the law of neutrality does not stand in the way of solidarity and support for Ukraine and its people" (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs). Similar to other international peace conferences, the primary objective of the Summit on Peace in Ukraine was to convene, initiate dialogue, and bring global attention to the conflict. In these ways, the Swiss summit succeeded. The Swiss also successfully provided good offices and facilitated international agreement on the terms of the communiqué.

Switzerland's neutrality afforded the Swiss the ability to host the conference in a manner considered legitimate by dozens of participants, but at the same time, it was viewed as illegitimate from critical states such as Russia. While ambiguous Swiss neutrality positions were not the sole factor in Russian nonparticipation, the summit exemplifies how Swiss neutrality as an institution itself has begun to generate a potential credibility crisis for Switzerland. Would-be Swiss peacemakers are increasingly caught between furthering Switzerland's interests in European security and upholding Switzerland's centuries-old tradition of neutrality. Thus, Swiss neutrality has muddled Switzerland's engagement as a steadfast peacemaker in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Even though the Swiss, in their traditional neutral facilitator role, have been able to achieve certain breakthroughs — such as the summit — the proximity of the conflict to Switzerland and their solidarity for the Ukrainians has brought the extent of Swiss neutrality into question and limited the impact of Swiss peacemaking.

VI. Conclusion

Although Switzerland has maintained its neutrality for centuries, including through periods of sustained, intense conflict in Europe, the Russo–Ukrainian War has made Switzerland's neutrality a pertinent topic once again, especially as Swiss officials have engaged toward a resolution of the conflict. Throughout Switzerland's history, neutrality has largely served as a boon, a key protection mechanism for Swiss security and stability amidst a constantly warring Europe. However, neutrality has produced drawbacks, such as the reputational and political constraints it has applied on Swiss

officials who seek to be more active peacemakers — or seek to protect Swiss and European interests by supporting Ukraine. In this way, neutrality has a double edge, both protecting Switzerland and restraining it from becoming a steadfast peacemaker. As a result, domestic divisions and international pressures have muddied Switzerland's traditional influence as a mediator.

Must Switzerland choose between its desire to support Ukraine and uphold robust neutrality? Or will it be able to take a middle road as a small state, exerting its agency both to help mediate a resolution to the conflict while supporting the Ukrainian cause and rallying European powers to resist Russian aggression? While a resolution to the conflict seems distant today, unwavering support from European powers is essential, and the groundwork Switzerland established with the summit may have helped plant the seeds of a fully-fledged peace process. Neutrality has bolstered Switzerland's agency to protect itself and its interests as a smaller state, but it has limited its agency in peacemaking, as it has created a reputational standard that has become difficult to uphold in the face of a novel and disruptive conflict in Europe's borders.

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