Neutrality: when it works and when it does not. The cases of Switzerland and Ukraine

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NO WAR

With the Russia-Ukrainian full-scale war going on for the fourth year, discussions about its roots and options for peace never end. Russia is putting big efforts in promoting its narratives that, although already less, still get substantial attention. One of the famous Russia's arguments is that Ukraine should be neutral and Ukraine's NATO aspiration provoked Russia's aggression.

Definition of neutrality

Here, we look into the concept of neutrality, study the most famous neutral country – Switzerland and analyse if and on which conditions should Ukraine be neutral.Neutrality refers to a foreign policy orientation of a state, who will not take part directly or indirectly in wars between other states. The concept can be separated into two aspects, the neutrality defined by international law, and the political actions a neutral state takes in international relations. The Hague Conventions of 1907 are seen as the basis of the neutrality law, in which signature states agreed to respect the territorial integrity of a neutral state if it refrains from engaging in wars of third countries, ensures its own defence, refrains from supplying mercenary troops or its territory to the belligerent stats and treats the opposing sides equally with respect to exportation of war materials. Exceptions are given to military operations authorized by United Nations Security Council.

What are the history and conditions of Swiss neutrality?

Switzerland is probably the most famous and successful case of a neutral country. The country's neutrality was internationally recognised at the Vienna Congress in 1815. Since then, Switzerland has not faced any major war on its territory, which is remarkable given it being surrounded by major war parties in the two world wars.

This achievement is often seen directly connected to Swiss neutrality. Yet, this can easily be rejected by looking at the start of the WWII: when Germany had to decide between two options for invading France, one through neutral Switzerland and the other through neutral Belgium. Given the attack tactics of the Reichswehr, moving fast with tanks and "Stukas", the Belgian plains turned out to be much more suitable than the hilly Swiss midlands. Geography was more decisive than the neutrality law.

Switzerland has developed different policies in connection with its neutrality. The most famous one being its adaptability to external conditions. One might call it opportunistic, but by constantly adapting its neutrality policy Switzerland was able to keep itself safe. For this, Switzerland sometimes even broke at least parts of its neutrality law: In WWII the country exported weaponry to Germany and Italy much more then it did to the Allies, and it allowed the Axis powers to transport weapons on Swiss train tracks and through Swiss tunnels. During the Vietnam-War Swiss watchmakers exported detonators for American bombs and during the whole Cold War Switzerland did not export technological goods to the USSR but it did to the US.

Two principals were leading Swiss politicians in their definition of this flexible neutrality policy. First, Switzerland's neutrality must be of value to the international community. Switzerland invested to build its reputation for being a valuable interlocutor between belligerent states, and a place for international organizations. Second, it should not become political annoyance for the most influential players. Swiss leaders understood that neutrality only is of value if it is supported by the powers involved, while the signed convention does not protect. This policy proved to be very successful, not only in protecting the country from the ravages of war, but also in building a particular image of the country. Neutrality is very much linked with the international image of Switzerland and Swiss neutrality was seen as a role model for neutral states (e.g. Austria adopted its neutrality policy after the model of Switzerland in 1955).

Ukraine's neutrality

The Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine in 1990 proclaimed the country's intention to become neutral, avoid military alliances and stay nuclear free. Ukraine's Constitution of 1996 included non-coalition and neutrality. Holding the world's third largest nuclear arsenal, Ukraine gave it away in accordance with Budapest Memorandum in 1994 in its desire to show its peaceful intentions to the world. Yet, hot internal discussions preceded the signature of the Memorandum and Ukraine experienced both political (from US and Russia) and economic (the country received financial compensation that was very needed for its struggling economy) pressure to sign it. Ukraine's Constitution kept words about the country's neutrality up until 2019, when the Constitution was amended to include Ukraine's strategic goals to join NATO and the EU. In practical terms, Ukraine is still neutral at the moment of writing in 2025.

Ukraine avoided military alliances both with the West and Russia. Ukraine did cooperate with NATO, e.g. being part of NATO Partnership for Peace, where Russia also participated. With some discussions about Ukraine's potential membership in NATO, population was not supportive for the idea. Before the annexation of Crimea, only 18% of Ukrainians supported NATO membership and 67% did not. After Russia annexed the peninsula in 2014, Ukrainians' opinion changed – already 48% supported joining NATO and 32% did not. Yet only after Russia gathered hundreds of thousands of its troops near Ukraine's border in 2021, the majority of Ukrainians expressed the will to join NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2022, the support jumped into over 70%.

Ukraine's neutrality did not sustain peace for the country. Russia attacked Ukraine both in 2014 and 2022 when the country was neutral and had no concrete intentions to join any military alliance. Interestingly, after Russian full-scale invasion in 2022, other previously neutral countries in proximity to Russia – Finland and Sweden – decided to join NATO, seeking security from the Russian threat. Ukraine's giving away its nuclear weapon as part of Budapest Memorandum did not sustain the support of other its signatories, the UK and the US, when Russian broke the Memorandum. They introduced sanctions against Russia and provided Ukraine with some support, but that was not enough to stop Russia. Ukrainian case shows how becoming non-nuclear also does not create peace and more security.

Will Ukraine be neutral after the war?

We are coming to our core puzzle: why did neutrality work for Switzerland, but did not for Ukraine? The answer is not easy to give, but one thing is clear: the letter in an international treaty alone is no guarantee of peace. The success of such a treaty depends first on the willingness of the interested states to follow up on their commitment. In this respect the nature of the political systems and ambitions of the involved states is important. Today Switzerland faces close to no risk to be invaded by one of its neighbours, as all of them are peace seeking democracies and having little imperial ambitions. This was different in first half of the twentieth century, when authoritarian states or monarchies with strong imperial ambitions surrounded the country. Here a second important aspect comes into play: What would be the benefit for the ruling party of breaking its commitment in international law. And: How do involved parties evaluate the reaction of others. Neutral Belgium was overrun only when military benefit exceeded costs of a military confrontation with Allied Forces, and neutral Switzerland was left unshattered as military benefits were deemed too small. To understand this cost-benefit-analysis in an authoritarian state one needs to have a close look at the ruler's personal perspective, which plays a smaller role in a democratic state.

The Kremlin obviously came to the conclusion that a military intervention in Ukraine would benefit the country and especially the ruling party more than it would cost it. On first sight this is surprising as the economic cooperation between Russia and Ukraine was strong and mutually beneficial. Though, especially the costs of the 2022 invasion were underestimated in the Kremlin. Yet, Putin's preference is to stay in power until his death. Unable to deliver any successes at home, e.g. in social policy or economy, he conducts wars abroad to make Russians happy (of course, via enormous propaganda machine) with 'the great Russia' – a boogieman of the world. Putin did win the hearts of the Russians – when he annexed Crimea, his support rating jumped from 60% to 80% and exactly the same happened after he invaded Ukraine in 2022.

Can Ukraine become neutral after the war? Ukrainians do not want to join NATO per se. However, Ukrainians cannot agree for peace with Russia without real security guarantees, which is more than a piece of paper based on neutrality law. NATO is seen as the most reliably security provider, but Ukrainians would agree for other security guarantees outside of NATO, with the US participation seen crucial.

Our analysis shows that neutrality is not a panacea for peace. It can be beneficial and save countries form foreign influences, but it is no guarantee. Switzerland has a long tradition of neutrality which helped the country to develop and to use its status in conflict resolutions. Ukraine would only be able to follow a Swiss example, if Russia follows the German example – it overcomes its imperial wishes and develops into a civilised democratic country.

Sources:

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