

5 The deep roots of Swiss conflict prevention

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Introduction

Switzerland is known as a neutral country with an active peace policy. The Swiss themselves consider conflict prevention an essential feature of foreign affairs, and, indeed, peace promotion is enshrined in the Swiss constitution as one of five objectives of its external relations. Internally, Switzerland's political system is underpinned by the need to manage diversity in a heterogeneous society, accommodating people speaking different languages, practicing different religions, and having different socio-economic backgrounds, in order to ensure peaceful coexistence.

How to explain Switzerland's focus on conflict prevention? What are the deep roots of Switzerland's internal and external conflict prevention efforts? How does Switzerland prevent conflict? This essay explores these questions by first outlining Switzerland's geopolitical profile, taking into account its geography, economy, demography, and political history. It then surveys Swiss infrastructures for the prevention of internal conflict and finally looks at the country's policy on preventing conflicts abroad.

Geopolitical profile of Switzerland

What are the main features of Switzerland's geopolitical profile? A glimpse at the world map reveals that Switzerland is a relatively small, landlocked country located in the middle of Western Europe. With the exception of Liechtenstein, Switzerland's neighbors, i.e. Germany, France, Italy, and Austria, are larger countries and count among Europe's great powers that have shaped the turbulent history of the continent. While the Alps mountain range covers about 60%

of Switzerland's territory, over two thirds of its 8 million inhabitants live on the plateau north of the Alps with few natural boundaries vis-à-vis neighboring countries. Historically speaking, the implication of Switzerland's small-state status is that the country could not primarily rely on military defense for its survival. In times when the use of force, and the conquest of one state's territory by another state, was common, a policy of neutrality emerged as the best approach for Switzerland to avoid being drawn into military confrontations with or between large powers. Therefore, its small-state geography implies that Switzerland has an existential interest in a peaceful world order and, in particular, in good relations among European powers.

Concerning the economy, Switzerland's small size implies that its internal market is limited. This means that the development of an export industry and opportunities to trade with other countries were crucial to generate wealth. Looking at Switzerland's economic history, it was indeed in the second half of the 19th century when growth rates shot up thanks to companies producing goods and services for the export market (Bergier). In essence, Switzerland's economic outward orientation meant that the country depended on a peaceful world order, where conflicts are contained and prevented, both for its security and for its welfare.

Switzerland's demographic makeup reveals a heterogeneous society with linguistic diversity, German, French, Italian, and Romansch being official national languages, as well as religious diversity, as the country is divided between Catholics and Protestants. Politically, Switzerland functioned as a confederacy until the mid-19th century: an alliance of territories that worked together in some areas, but remained politically independent. In 1848, following a short civil war, Switzerland became a federal state. Some power was pooled in the center, although the constituent parts, the cantons, remained strong (Maissen). Switzerland thus never had a central authority to impose order and, likewise, the heterogeneous nature of Swiss society meant that no dominant way of life emerged, assimilating other cultures. To hold the country together, Switzerland had to find ways to manage its diversity and prevent conflict. The country therefore needed to develop mechanisms for different groups to negotiate with each other and resolve their differences, thus ensuring peaceful coexistence.

In sum, this essay argues that Switzerland's geopolitical profile – its geography, economy, demography, and political history – explains why conflict prevention is an existential interest, internally to maintain the unity of the country and externally to ensure security and

welfare. The two subsequent sections deepen the internal and external dimensions, focusing on mechanisms that put Swiss conflict prevention into practice.

Mechanisms for conflict prevention within Switzerland

After the establishment of the federal state in 1848, Switzerland progressively developed an infrastructure to prevent conflicts from emerging and, when tensions did arise, to prevent them from escalating. The most important institution in this regard is federalism: the idea that power is shared between constituent parts and the center, where the constituent parts are also represented. Modeled after the US system, Switzerland features 26 cantons (including six so-called half-cantons), which have their own constitution and possess a high degree of autonomy in many fields, including taxes, education, courts, and police. At the federal level, the Swiss parliament, the Federal Assembly, consists of two chambers: the National Council, with proportional representation based on population size, and the Council of States, where each canton has two seats (except for half-cantons, which have one seat each) (Vatter). The core idea behind federalism is subsidiarity: decisions are taken where people are directly affected by them. This reduces conflict vis-à-vis the center and between different regions of the country, allowing them to preserve their identities and political cultures (Fleiner et al.).

A second conflict prevention mechanism is called “concordance” (*Konkordanz* in German). This refers to a political system predicated on consensus and compromise, where relevant stakeholders are involved, and their interests taken into account, before a decision is taken. One aspect of concordance pertains to the composition of the Swiss national government, i.e. the Federal Council, which includes seven members from the major parties and regions. The bicameral parliamentary system means that the interests of cantons are taken into account in the law-making process. Moreover, the parliament practices an institutionalized multi-stakeholder consultation process (*Vernehmlassung* in German), in which all interest groups concerning a specific policy area are heard (Iff and Töpperwien 29–36).

What happens when there is a conflict? Courts play a certain role. For example, the Federal Supreme Court decides in matters where there is a conflict between the federal constitution and the constitution of a canton. However, the role of courts is relatively limited in the Swiss political system. For example, there is no constitutional review, allowing

the Federal Supreme Court to invalidate a law adopted by the national parliament on the grounds of its inconsistency with the federal constitution (Iff and Töpperwien 56–62).

The more common, and more accepted, conflict resolution mechanism in Switzerland involves votes and referenda. If 50,000 Swiss citizens sign a petition opposing a bill adopted by parliament, a nationwide referendum will be held to take the final decision. 100,000 signatures will bring an initiative for a constitutional amendment to a vote. Finally, if the federal government or the parliament wants to change the constitution, a nationwide vote automatically takes place to decide on the matter. Decisions adopted in nationwide votes have a high degree of legitimacy and are more easily accepted by losers, thus preventing polarization and conflict (Linder). Further reducing conflict in Switzerland is a well-functioning rule of law, as well as the rights and freedoms enjoyed by citizens. As a result, there has been a low level of internal conflict since the establishment of the federal state in 1848, even if the compromise orientation of the political system means that decision-making is slower than in other countries.

One example to illustrate Swiss internal conflict prevention pertains to the conflict in Jura, a French-speaking and Catholic region that was part of the predominantly German-speaking and Protestant Canton of Bern. A separatist movement emerged in the 1950s, demanding autonomy for the “Jurassic” people and decrying Bern’s cultural and political domination. Throughout the 1960s, the movement grew more militant and committed acts of sabotage, provoking a forceful response by the Bernese police (Bassand). As it became apparent that the creation of a new canton in Jura had widespread support and as the government of the Canton of Bern feared losing control, a series of votes were held to address the problem and eventually defuse the situation. In 1970, a vote was held in the entire territory of the canton about whether or not to amend the constitution allowing for a part of its territory to separate and establish a new canton. The vote was affirmative, albeit with a small margin. Subsequently, in 1974, a vote took place in all municipalities of the Jura asking inhabitants whether they wanted to establish a new canton. The result was again affirmative. One year later, in 1975, another vote took place in the same municipalities, asking people whether they wanted to join a new canton of Jura or remain with Bern. Areas with a majority of French speakers voted to join the new canton, whereas areas with a majority of German speakers voted to remain with Bern, leading to a contiguous territory for the new canton. Finally, a nationwide vote took place in 1978 approving a change of the

Swiss constitution allowing for the creation of a new canton with all rights and privileges. Given the affirmative outcome, in January 1979, Jura became the 26th canton of Switzerland, and tensions subsequently diminished.¹

Switzerland's efforts to prevent conflicts abroad

What does conflict prevention mean for Switzerland's external relations? The cornerstone of Swiss foreign policy is neutrality. It derived from a desire to avoid being drawn into great-power conflict, an essential survival strategy practiced by Switzerland as well as other small states. There is an internal dimension of neutrality too: given the heterogeneity of Swiss society, siding with one or the other side in conflicts could have led to split loyalties and jeopardized the cohesion of the country. The origins of neutrality go back to 1515 when the Swiss Confederacy lost to France in the Battle of Marignano, although it was only formalized in 1815 when the European powers at the Vienna Congress stipulated Switzerland's "perpetual neutrality" (Goetschel et al.).

What does neutrality mean and how is it connected to conflict prevention? The legal core of neutrality refers to the duty to abstain from supporting warring parties, coupled with the right of having its territorial integrity respected.² However, neutrality does not dictate a specific foreign policy and indeed, debates about what type of external engagement neutrality mandates are prevalent and recurring (Rhinow). Since 1848, Switzerland has vacillated between more isolationist and more active interpretations of neutrality. Actions to prevent conflict abroad are part of a more active foreign policy based on the idea that neutrality is a reputational asset that gives Switzerland credibility to promote a peaceful world order. This explains why actions to promote peace and prevent conflict are, as today, a central component of Swiss foreign policy during certain periods, but more marginal in others.

Active peace-promotion efforts started in the second half of the 19th century after the establishment of the federal state when a national foreign policy took shape. For example, Switzerland took over protective power mandates, representing countries vis-à-vis others with whom diplomatic relations were ruptured. It also hosted international conferences and organizations, for example, a conference in Geneva in 1864, at which states adopted the First Geneva Convention, the founding act of international humanitarian law. Switzerland also hosted arbitration tribunals, including the first such tribunal dealing with claims made by

the United States against the United Kingdom for its involvement in the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865, which had poisoned the relations between the two countries and led to threats of war.

After the Second World War, Switzerland took a more isolationist stance and refrained from joining the United Nations in 1945. However, during the Cold War, Switzerland engaged in some bridge-building activities. It maintained good relations with countries in the socialist block and, in 1950, was one of the first Western countries to recognize the People's Republic of China. Examples of conflict prevention during the Cold War include the involvement of the Swiss military in the Nations Supervisory Commission in Korea of 1953, an engagement that continues until today. Other examples are the protective power mandate related to US–Cuba relations, Switzerland's active diplomatic role in the establishment of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and hosting the Gorbachev–Reagan meeting in 1985.³

After the end of the Cold War, peace promotion was elevated to one of the core pillars of Swiss foreign policy and enshrined in the Swiss constitution.⁴ While Switzerland's engagement in military peacekeeping has remained limited, civilian peacebuilding expanded. A federal law on civilian peace promotion was adopted in 2002, and Switzerland became a member of the UN in the same year. Within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), a specific division with a funding line from parliament was created under the banner of "Human Security", implementing a broad range of measures, ranging from mediation, dealing with the past, humanitarian policy, and human rights.⁵ Support for conflict prevention also increased in the Swiss population. For example, a representative survey in 2013 showed that over 90% of Swiss citizens find it "important or very important" that their country engages in international peace promotion (*swisspeace*).

The result is that in the past 15 years, Switzerland has taken an active role in preventing conflicts in different parts of the world. One example is Nepal, where Switzerland helped facilitate a comprehensive peace agreement in 2006, preventing an escalation of violence and paving the way for a political transition that ended a ten-year civil war (Bächler). Likewise, in Sudan, Switzerland provided political and technical support in the negotiations that led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 (Greminger). A more recent example, acting through a multilateral organization, is Switzerland's chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2014. Under the leadership of Switzerland, the OSCE responded swiftly to the Ukraine crisis, setting up a monitoring mission as well as a format for political

negotiations. Both mechanisms have helped to curb violence escalation, even if they have not resolved the conflict (Nünlist).

Conclusion

Two concluding insights derive from Switzerland's experience in conflict prevention. The first pertains to the deep roots of conflict prevention anchored in Switzerland's geopolitical disposition as a small state with a federal structure and a heterogeneous society. Conflict prevention, therefore, represents a fundamental interest for Switzerland. Over time, it has become part of national identity, as many citizens consider conflict prevention a core value to be upheld inside the country and to be promoted internationally.

Second, conflict prevention mechanisms did not automatically emerge, but were the outcome of negotiations, and re-negotiations, between different groups throughout Swiss history. This means that the specific mechanisms used in Switzerland for conflict prevention are tailored to the specific national context and as such, they are not one-to-one transferrable to other countries. For example, holding popular votes works in Switzerland because they are embedded in a compromise-based political culture. In the absence of this, popular votes risk dividing the populace and fueling conflict, rather than preventing it. However, there are aspects of the Swiss experience in conflict prevention – for example, managing diversity in society through a multi-layered system of power-sharing – that do offer relevant lessons for other countries.

Notes

- 1 While the creation of the Canton of Jura resolved the situation overall, tensions continued to simmer in some areas, in particular the municipality of Moutier, which is divided nearly 50:50 between German and French speakers. In 1975, Moutier, by a small margin, voted to remain with Bern. Because of continued tensions, another vote was held in Moutier in June 2017, and this time, again by a narrow margin, a majority voted to join the canton of Jura. However, the vote was declared invalid in November 2018 and thus the final outcome remains unclear.
- 2 On the legal aspects of neutrality, see a background file prepared by the International Committee of the Red Cross.
- 3 On the evolution of Swiss peace policy, see Graf and Lanz.
- 4 Article 54, paragraph 2, of the Swiss Constitution as amended in 1999 stipulates:

The Confederation shall ensure that the independence of Switzerland and its welfare is safeguarded; it shall in particular assist in the alleviation of need and poverty in the world and promote respect for human rights and democracy, the peaceful co-existence of peoples as well as the conservation of natural resources.

5 For details, see website of the FDFA Human Security Division.

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