

DISCUSSION PAPER

Switzerland:  
Permanent neutral  
power and its  
prospective non-  
permanent seat at  
the United Nations  
Security Council



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VANJSKOPOLITIČKA INICIJATIVA BH  
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## Switzerland: Permanent neutral power and its prospective non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council

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Back in 1945, after the global catastrophe known as World War II, 51 countries committed themselves to maintaining international peace and security by establishing a unique international organization - the United Nations (UN). In addition to its peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, for which the primary responsibility has been vested in the UN Security Council (UNSC), the UN works on developing friendly relations among nations and promotes social progress, better living standards and human rights. These values are promoted in the UNSC, which serves as an instrument of UN by recommending the admission of new UN members to the General Assembly, discussing any changes to the UN Charter and ensuring international peace and security through dispute settlements.

Since joining the UN in 2002, Switzerland has certainly proved its commitment to peace efforts. But it took Switzerland more than 50 years to join the UN because the organization was perceived as [incompatible](#) with the Switzerland's neutrality. The concept of neutrality, which will be elaborated further on, is a part of Switzerland's legal system, [enshrined](#) in the 1815 Congress of Vienna, 1907 Law on neutrality, and even mentioned in the country's [Constitution](#). The questions of whether the country will change its standing on neutrality and compromise its autonomy by participating in the work of the international organization remain highly relevant even today. Back in October 2020, Switzerland became a first-time candidate to the UNSC for the period 2023-2024. By announcing the campaign "[A Plus for Peace](#)" for the temporary seat at the UNSC - the highest security body in the world that has the power to take military action to restore peace - Switzerland initiated a burning domestic and international debate on the effects of such move to the country's reputation as a neutral power.

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The year 2022 represents the 20th anniversary of Switzerland joining the UN and the year when the election will take place. If elected to the UNSC, there are no doubts that the country will constructively contribute to the organization's central mission and serve the interests of the global community. However, it is quite important for Switzerland to stimulate and engage in the discussions on the potential influence of membership in the UNSC to the country's neutrality, diplomatic role, and credibility in foreign policy. For this reason, the paper will assess positive and negative aspects of Switzerland's candidacy for a non-permanent seat at the UNSC. It will introduce the summary of the students debate on whether the non-permanent seat at the UNSC will represent the end of the Switzerland's neutrality. The authors will build their reflections on the arguments put forward during the debate to assess the prospects for Switzerland's further status development in the international community.

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## About neutrality ...

Swiss foreign policy is based on a principle called [permanent neutrality](#). It was recognized internationally as such in 1815 during the Congress of Vienna. Being neutral gives states the right to territorial inviolability, but it also entails several responsibilities. The [law on neutrality](#) from 1907, codified in The Hague Conventions, sets out the following obligations of a neutral state: non-participation in war, self-defense, impartiality to belligerent states (related to the export of war material), no mercenaries nor allowing use of its territory to belligerent states. Important to note is that the law on neutrality does not apply in internal conflicts, military operations authorized by the UNSC, nor in participation in operations to re-establish peace and international security. The aforementioned explanation is related to the classic form of neutrality – military neutrality which will be used as the basis for understanding Switzerland's position in this paper. Other concepts such as political and economic neutrality will not be elaborated or analyzed in this context.

Even though Switzerland is a neutral country, it remains diligently engaged in preserving international security and promoting peace as a non-belligerent member of international community. For Switzerland, neutrality is practiced actively and applied based on the nature of the given situation. Over the years, it has provided a good deal of scope and prevented the country from being drawn into foreign conflicts. With the use of its multilateral policy instruments, Switzerland strengthened its efforts regarding the prevention of violence and the protection of human rights during and after violent conflicts. To demonstrate its good practice and a long-standing tradition in peace policies stands the fact that Switzerland currently acts as [protecting power for 7 states and in the last 4 years, it offered its assistance in 17 peace processes all over the world](#). Furthermore, Switzerland has remained consistent in [applying its policy of neutrality](#) by being involved in humanitarian initiatives or establishing forums for humanitarian issues (e.g. Humanitarian Issues Group

Iraq in 2003 which provided international forum for relevant discussion on the matter and issued permits for humanitarian and medical evacuations flights).

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## Methodology: Karl Popper debate

In cooperation with the Embassy of Switzerland in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Foreign Policy Initiative BH initiated a project entitled Youth and Security. As one of the activities envisaged for the project is the two-day workshop with young people. The workshop consisted of 19 participants, predominantly political science students from Universities in Banja Luka and Sarajevo. The students have been primarily gathered to be presented the Switzerland's candidature for the UNSC and its promotional campaign "A Plus for Peace", as well as share and discuss their opinion on the matter. Prior to that, they have been presented with expert insight, experience, and practices regarding security, stability, and peace. To foster debate and speech activity, the participants were introduced with the [Karl Popper debate format](#). As a result, they were divided into three groups: affirmation, negation, and judges. Each group was given the opportunity to present arguments and ask direct questions to the opposing team. The role of the judges was to offer constructive feedback, comment on provided evidence and arguments' strength.

The groups had sufficient time to explore the matter and prepare their arguments on whether they agree or disagree with the resolution that the Swiss candidacy for the non-permanent seat at the UNSC will be the end to its neutrality. Only three speakers presented on each side, while the rest of the participants provided support for their group members during consultation time. The participants applied knowledge they gained from the panelists, linking it to their academic backgrounds and presenting clear statements. The debate on Swiss neutrality is an ongoing activity among domestic and international actors, what made it plausible for us to introduce it to the workshop participants as well. The gathered input from participants as an argumentation on both affirmation and negation side has been used as a basis for reflections in this paper.

### **Debate summary: The End of Neutrality?**

The questions around Swiss candidacy for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC stems from the view that the centuries old Switzerland's neutrality and international reputation as a mediator will be negatively affected if it becomes a member of the UNSC - the only body that has the power to authorize military action on behalf of the UN member states. This neutrality developed gradually, and Switzerland has successfully managed to balance its own interests with the interests of other states, and remain non-military involved in conflicts, but engage in humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations. Nonetheless, even though neutrality means that Switzerland will not choose sides in the event of a conflict between two states, it still has a right to condemn any violation of international law. But what would potentially new role at the UNSC mean for Switzerland? To defend the resolution that joining the UNSC would mean the end of Switzerland's neutrality, the affirmation team argued that considering only the definition of military neutrality, its neutrality remains intact. However, participating in the work of the UNSC would mean that Switzerland would have to take a stance and vote on different issues on conflict areas and regions.

Its voting behavior on the Security Council could negatively affect its reputation as an impartial mediator since Switzerland could become externally perceived as biased and non-neutral in the eyes of the conflicting parties.

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The negation team addressed the dispute around the very concept of neutrality. They argued that there is no uniform definition of neutrality since it may encompass different fluid concepts such as political neutrality. Yet, they argued that, nonetheless, neutrality should be perceived as a social construct, hence subject to change. In the case of Switzerland, it not only sees itself as a neutral state, but is also perceived as such by other international actors. Thus, it can be discussed that Switzerland defined the concept of neutrality to the international community and became [“the center of a norm of neutrality”](#). What this essentially means is that the country is committed to this concept and refrains from armed conflict in the same way the [UN Charter](#) proclaims - All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations. Such argument insinuates that the Switzerland in the UNSC is going to guarantee further preservation of UN values, but also further their own values and issues within the UN framework, and with that, its neutrality will not be violated.



Therefore, arguing that Switzerland's reputation as an international mediator might become negatively affected has nothing to do with the concept of neutrality. Also, if a situation perceived as a risk for the Switzerland's external perception and reputation occurs during the voting time, Switzerland can always abstain from voting.

Furthermore, the affirmation team argued that having the seat in this body, even if it is a non-permanent one, will make it more difficult for Switzerland to maintain its tradition of neutrality, due to the Security Council's outdated and inadequate composition which nowadays serves as a platform for great powers to further their own interest at the expense of smaller states.

The negation team did acknowledge that the structure of the Security Council is a flawed one, but the UNSC still remains the highest and most influential international body for security issues. Having a seat there would allow Switzerland to further voice their concerns on its structure and contribute to reform efforts of the UNSC that it has been vocal in for more than 15 years. The team added that the non-permanent seat at the UNSC would further promote Switzerland's engagement in peace policy by allowing it to share its experience and overall expertise in peaceful settlements for the benefit of the wider international community. This will increase Switzerland's impact and commitments to peace efforts and human rights protection rather than making it a subject to adjustments and changes of its tradition. It will still be capable of expressing its views on the current state of affairs and if a certain position at the UNSC would conflict with Switzerland's values, they repeated that it can always abstain from voting or vote against the resolution. Switzerland will not choose sides between the conflicting parties, but remain an advocate of international law, while maintaining its neutrality. In concluding remarks, both teams focused on the key issues that they previously put forward and pointed out the flaws in the opposite team's argumentation.

After that, the judges deliberated and came with the decision that negotiation team won the debate because they were more convincing in arguing that Switzerland's neutrality won't come to an end by its participation in the work of the UNSC.

### **Switzerland, a plus for...?**

Despite various domestic and international reactions, the position of Switzerland in this regard remains unchanged. Its long tradition of facilitation and mediation, alongside peacekeeping, peacebuilding and disarmament is undisputable. Long-year support of the UN peace operations stands in favor of Switzerland's candidacy to continue its mission. The real challenge for the Swiss candidacy campaign is its close link to domestic politics, rather than diplomatic nature. The dispute on its neutrality, however, remains inconsistent and unclear, as from a legal perspective, a seat on the UNSC is not contradictory to this principle. The questions around its candidacy for the seat mostly remain on the domestic level, as [some of the prominent political figures have argued that Switzerland's concept of neutrality is incompatible with the one of the UN.](#)

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Furthermore, Switzerland is recognized as a model of neutrality as it was the first state to have its neutrality formally recognized, and the only state to have continuously maintained it. This demonstrates its dedication to its neutral position and peace efforts. The candidacy campaign presents areas in which Switzerland will continue to make an impact and these include peace efforts, humanitarian actions, sustainable development, multilateralism, and innovation.

The UNSC as the authoritative body ensuring global peace and security could offer Switzerland additional mechanisms to ensure further fulfillment of its vision of neutrality and ensure protection of its interests. Hereby, Switzerland will have a direct impact on decision-making processes and have these decisions binding by international law. This would benefit the small country like Switzerland, as it will be able to protect its interests among great players in international community. Switzerland's dependence on a peaceful and rule-based international order is linked to its own independence, security, and welfare. Thus, the non-permanent seat for Switzerland at the UNSC will ensure protection of its vital interests and a direct impact on decisions on the Council's agenda, which are in a connection to what concerns the country as such.

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As Switzerland is an [important contributor to the UN](#), ranking 18th on the list of contributors to the regular budget and 14th on the list for peacekeeping operations budget, the country will have its say on how the funds should be allocated and decide on the most efficient use of the budget. Further, Switzerland will persist to utilize its neutrality and mediator role to undertake bridge-building part among the Security Council members. Usually, smaller states tend to succeed in contributing constructively to international affairs, especially in cooperation with like-minded members of the UNSC. A similar vision to the UN will enable Switzerland to add on the political climate and strengthen the credibility of its foreign policy. Moreover, building foundations for lasting peace and security must employ versatile strategies and plans. Thus, the role of youth in raising awareness and influencing peace processes cannot be undermined.

As powerful agents for resolving and preventing conflict, young people can contribute to voicing Switzerland's interests and setting the priorities for its mandate at the UNSC. As such, they can influence the level of public debate in Switzerland and inform others on the role of UNSC, tackling challenging threats of the 21st century globalized world. In addition, networking opportunities that arise could be the chance for practical experience to enhance diplomatic strategies. In this process, it is necessary to include civil society organizations, academia, and relevant stakeholders in Switzerland's activities at the UNSC and work together with them in identifying the priorities.

In sum, the assessment of Switzerland's candidacy for the non-permanent seat at the UNSC concludes that the benefits outweigh the risk and that the arising challenges are to be resolved along the way with the promising agenda for the future.

