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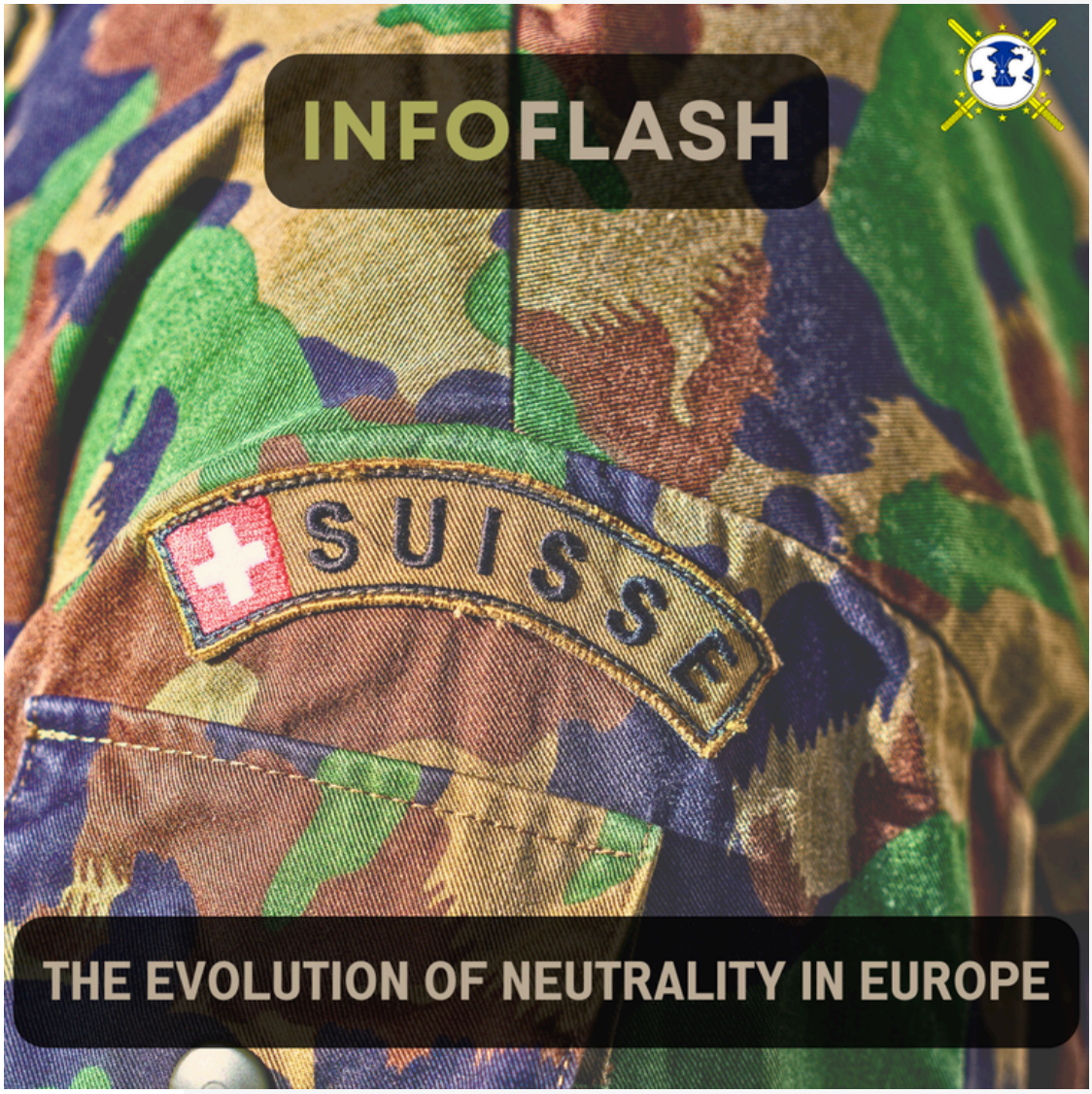

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Introduction

Neutrality is not a static concept but has evolved significantly, reflecting changes in political, military, and economic contexts over time. This paper argues how neutrality has changed in Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland, particularly in response to the invasion of Ukraine. These European case studies highlight neutrality as a complex, dynamic and multifaceted concept, which has transitioned from a rigid principle to a dynamic and adaptable practice across military and political realms that evolves in response to shifting geopolitical contexts, public opinion and growing alliances. This paper reveals how increased spending, expanding alliances and shifting public opinionhave redefined the concept and practice of neutrality in Europe. By redefining the territorial boundaries of NATO's Article 5, which commits members to collective defence measures, new borders with potential adversaries are introduced, creating new vulnerabilities and opportunities for defence. The paper will begin by giving a brief account of the historical development of neutrality in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries to contextualised the following discussions. For each case study, the dynamic nature of neutrality will be revealed, with a particular focus on developments following the invasion of Ukraine.

Historical Development

A series of international agreements across the 17th and 18th Centuries cemented the official practice of neutrality in modern international relations. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty-Year War, also heralded the beginnings of modern state sovereignty (Patton, 2019). The First League of Armed Neutrality originated in 1780 during the American Revolutionary War and protected neutral trade from attack. The most significant advancements toward neutrality as a common practice in International Relations occurred in the 18th century. Neutrality was imposed upon Switzerland in the Congress of Vienna in 1815, leveraging its geographical positioning as a buffer state (Pauchard, 2015). Meanwhile, the Treaty of London in 1839 declared Belgium a neutral and independent state (UK Parliament, 1914). While these provisions set a trend for official neutral states, the Hague Convention of 1907 codified the rights and requirements of neutral states in warfare. Key provisions included the inviolability of neutral territory, the lack of obligation for neutral states to prevent the export of arms to belligerents, and the prohibition of military recruitment and formations within neutral countries to assist warring nations (Convention V respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land, 1907).

Switzerland

Switzerland is the most iconic example of neutrality in Europe and internationally. However, some argue that the neutrality so inextricably connected to Switzerland has begun as an imposition rather than a choice. The Congress of Vienna, which secured the Swiss Confederacy military neutrality, was imposed upon the state by major powers to isolate France's revolutionary mission, leveraging Switzerland's geographical positioning as a buffer state during the French Revolutionary Wars (Pauchard, 2024) Switzerland ratified its position with the signing of the Hague Convention in 1910, which defined the rights and obligations of a neutral state under international customary law (Swiss Confederation, 2021). The Swiss Federal Constitution in Article 185 described neutrality as an instrument for safeguarding independence (Swiss Confederation, n.d - b).

Military neutrality is often misunderstood, frequently leading to the debate around the legitimacy of a state's neutral status. Swiss President and Head of the Federal Department of Defence, Viola Amherd, clarified that neutrality does not equal indifference (Swiss Info, 2024). Since the war in Ukraine, the media has characterised the actions taken by the Swiss Confederations in response to Moscow's aggression as unprecedented"(Berni & Anderson, 2023). Despite initial reluctance, the Swiss Federal Council adopted the EU sanctions against Russia in February 2022 (Berni & Anderson, 2023). Since then, Switzerland has adopted 12 sanctions packages (Swiss Confederation, 2024) covering "entry bans, a blocking of assets, a take-off and landing ban for military aircraft, as well as financial measures and a trade ban on certain goods" (Berni & Anderson, 2023). In March 2023, Amherd attended the North Atlantic Council meeting, marking the first-ever by a Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Defence (NATO, 2023).

This April 2024, despite objections from both the left and right (Pasino & Reusser, 2024), Bern approved the country's participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative, an integrated European air defence system supported by collaborative procurement and joint operation principles (NATO, 2023). The initiative is not legally binding, and Switzerland is "free to decide where and to what extent it participates in the ESSI" (Pasino & Reusser, 2024). Despite pressures from Western countries, Switzerland remains steadfast in its ban on the re-export of war material to conflict zones, such as Ukraine. As many Western nations seek to support Ukraine by providing arms for conflict, Swiss defence production has had a 27% drop in exports (Revell, 2024). Reflecting the economic consequences of neutrality in a changing security landscape, the Swiss government seeks to amend its strict neutrality laws to allow increased arms exports under certain conditions (Zoria, 2024).

Despite being within its legal rights, Switzerland has faced heated internal debate and external dismay from Russia regarding its actions, accused of jeopardising its traditional position as a peaceful mediator. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ivan Nechayev has recently criticised Switzerland for what he described as "illegal Western sanctions" against Russia. Nechayev argued that Switzerland's actions undermine its neutrality and, therefore, outrun its ability to "act either as an intermediary or a representative" in international affairs (Reuters, 2022). It reflects international unfamiliarity with Swiss policy, which has conducted sanctions since the 1990s (Leutenegger & Lichtsteiner, 2023).

However, in response, the right-wing People's Party, the largest party in Parliament, has advocated for the Neutrality Initiative. A public vote, scheduled for some time in 2024, will decide if the initiative will see the enshrinement of a new constitutional provision to "safeguard" Swiss neutrality and the role of Switzerland as a mediator (Swissinfo, 2024). The Federal Council recommends the public reject the referendum, arguing that it limits the flexibility of Swiss neutrality, harming Swiss national interests and its role in maintaining "peaceful and just international order". On top of this, participating in sanctions outside the UN framework, such as the EU, on belligerent states would no longer be possible, and defence alliances would be limited to direct attacks on Switzerland (The Federal Council - The Swiss Confederation, 2024).

While Switzerland remains the quintessential example of neutrality in Europe, its longstanding position has not been without periods of intense scrutiny and adaptation, particularly since the war in Ukraine. The evolving security landscape highlights Swiss neutrality as a nuanced practice, subject to evolution and re-evaluation over time, aiming to secure peace and international order.

Sweden and Finland

While the Swiss case offers insight into neutrality as a legally and constitutionally defined practice, the cases of Sweden and Finland offer a different perspective on the evolution of neutrality. The Scandinavian neighbours illustrate a long and drawn-out transition from neutral to non-aligned to NATO members, as new security challenges have emerged and tensions simmer with nearby Russia. Neutrality has formed the basis for Swedish foreign and security policy since 1812 when the upcoming Swedish King Karl XIV Johan laid its foundations (Billström, 2024). This journey toward neutrality, however, was nonlinear and characterised by several changes in policy, which were reflective of developments in the international security landscape over this period, either forcibly or voluntarily (Billström, 2024). World War II marked "deviations from neutrality rather than neutrality itself" on three occasions, including the "Winter War in 1939–1940, the German occupation of Denmark and Norway in 1940 and the German attack on the USSR in 1941" (Tepe, 2007). Sweden did not abandon its neutrality but developed flexibility in its approach.

While Sweden's neutrality was voluntary and formed a core part of its national identity, Finnish neutrality or “Finlandisation” was imposed by the USSR in the 1948 Friendship Agreement. For the USSR, The Treaty incorporated Finland it’s security system and guaranteed that the Nordic State would remain on its side of the Cold War Bloc Division (Kansikas, 2017). For Finland, it’s foreign policy of neutrality was ultimately a survival mechanism against the threat of the neighbouring USSR (Chatterjee, 2023). In 1994, both Scandinavian states joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP), a program to forge bilateral cooperation between NATO members and non-member states (NATO, 2024). The program allowed states to tailor the level of involvement with NATO in aspects such as joint exercises, training, and sharing of best practices without impeding individual sovereignty, thus not technically affecting individual claims to neutrality (NATO, 2024). This nuanced approach, however, changed when both nations joined the European Union in 1995. Following the collapse of the USSR, “Finland modified its policy of neutrality and adopted a doctrine of non-alignment” (Suchoples, 2023) until the referendum of 1994, whereby Fins voted for joining the European Union, aligning itself closer to the West.

While Sweden’s recent adoption of NATO membership if often regarded as the country’s departure from neutrality (Al Jazeera, 2024), Sweden actually views its accession to the European Union in 1955 as this final step away from neutrality (Billström, 2024). Under Article 5 of NATO, an attack on one or more NATO allies constitutes an attack on the alliance as a whole. Allies can provde any form of assistance that they deem necessary to respond to the situation (NATO, 2023). The core purpose of a state's neutrality is to function as a tool for its population’s freedom, security and prosperity (Michael, 2022). Consequently, NATO membership challenges the notion of military neutrality for traditionally neutral states. This is demonstrated by the abstention of NATO membership by countries like Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland from joining the alliance.

However, as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Tobias Billström, described in Cambridge in April earlier this year, “Sweden’s NATO accession is the culmination of a long farewell to the policy of neutrality and non-alignment" (Billström, 2024). The EU's mutual assistance under Article 42.7, declares that if a Member State is a victim of an attack, all other Member States have to provide assistance in response (European Union External Action, 2022). Such assistance can include diplomatic support or military aid and, thus, constitute for many a departure from military neutrality (European Union External Action, 2022). This provision represents a potential departure from traditional military neutrality.

Subsequently, it is arguable that both Sweden and Finland, have in contrast to media noise, departed from their neutrality over time, rather than with recent NATO accession.

Driven by Russian aggression in Ukraine, in May 2022, Finland and Sweden both applied to NATO, ending any notion of remaining neutral for these Scandinavian states. Finland officially joined the alliance on April 4, 2023 (NATO, 2023). Hungary and Turkey delayed Sweden's ratification. The latter requested Sweden to lift the arms embargo it placed on Turkey following Turkish operations against Kurdish forces and also harsher measures against Kurdish terrorism harbouring in Sweden (Silverman, 2024). In contrast to Switzerland, Sweden and Finland did not require any public vote for a referendum to join NATO and subsequently "depart" from their neutrality. However, in Finland, public support for NATO membership jumped from 33% in 2018 to almost 80% in 2022, according to polls (Shah, 2023). Although not required for policy change, public opinion likely plays a significant role in how a nation views neutrality, especially in cases, like Finland, where neutrality is not mandated by law. This shift suggests that public sentiment can either enhance or diminish the value assigned to neutrality based on the current geopolitical context and perceived security threats. While Switzerland's neutrality is constitutionally mandated as an instrument for safeguarding independence (Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, n.d.), in Sweden and Finland, historically, it has been a matter of foreign policy, which brings an extra level of flexibility to how this concept was applied and understood.

Since 2022, Finland and Sweden have both ramped up their defence spending, translating into tangible improvements in the capacity of the NATO alliance. During the recent NATO Summit, Finnish Minister of Defence Antti Häkkänen confirmed that Finland's defence spending will reach 2.3% of its GDP in 2024, surpassing the NATO minimum target of 2% (Finland Ministry of Defence, 2024). As of 2024, Finland has committed to 24 defence packages for Ukraine, culminating in a total of EUR 2.2 million (Finland Ministry of Defence, 2024).

The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has profound implications for the European security landscape. With the Finnish access, NATO's military frontier with Russia has expanded by over 1,300 km, increasing the alliance's territorial exposure (Finland Ministry of Defence, 2024). However, this expansion simultaneously unlocks NATO's direct access to the Baltic Sea (LaGrone, 2024), which NATO argues would greatly influence the alliance's defence and deterrence abilities if required against Russia (Van Wijngaarden, 2023).

Ultimately, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fractured Sweden and Finland's sense of stability and destroyed any remaining image of military and political neutrality. The Swedish and Finnish accessions to NATO have reflected the gradual increasing flexibility of neutrality, characterised by alliance, spending, and changing public opinion.

Ukraine and the Role of Neutrality in the Future

This shifting landscape is evident in Ukraine's recent history. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, in the Declaration of State Sovereignty of 1990, Ukraine indicated an intention to become permanently neutral (Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine, 1990). However, while caught between the USSR and the EU, Ukrainian foreign policy has oscillated with various forms of neutrality. The 2014 invasion of Crimea marked a significant turning point, leading Ukraine to pursue EU membership and abandon its previous neutrality stance. In the wake of the recent conflict, Ukraine has considered abandoning its NATO membership ambition as a way to de-escalate Russian aggression. Proposed concessions have also included removing foreign military bases and scaling down Ukrainian forces (Lutsevych, 2023). These measures where activley considered in 2022 as potential steps to reduce tensions with Russia. Now however, demilitarisation is currently not up for discussion, and a referendum would be required to approve any neutrality for Ukraine (Lock & Boffey, 2022). Ukraine's experience underscores the complexity of maintaining neutrality in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, where security concerns and international alignments are in constant flux.

Conclusion

Neutrality has evolved from a rigid principle to a more flexible and adaptable concept. This paper illustrates how Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland have redefined neutrality in response to changing geopolitical contexts, most notably the invasion of Ukraine. Sweden and Finland's NATO memberships and Ukraine's shift in stance since 2014 reflect the increasing complexity of maintaining neutrality. Judging recent developments, neutral European countries such as Switzerland may develop more flexible and selective approaches to neutrality, participating in international efforts when pressured, threatened or aligned with national interests. Additionally, abandoning neutrality may become an increasingly viable option for European states in the face of growing military frictions.

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