

Neutrality and freedom of expression

Ignazio Cassis on the sidelines

by Ulrich Schlüer*



Ulrich Schlüer.
(Picture ma)

Shortly before the start of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis also felt called upon to position Switzerland in the discussion about the future of Greenland. Once again, Cassis cast doubt on Switzerland's neutrality.

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Switzerland declared its neutrality to be "perpetual" and "armed", i.e. integral. In return, it received a guarantee from all the major powers that they would respect Switzerland's neutral position in international conflicts.

Neutrality: respected under international law

The major powers respect the fact that Switzerland as a state does not consider any power on the globe to be its enemy, that Switzerland never takes sides in international conflicts, and that when ways to achieve peace are sought, it is available to initiate and, above all, secure contact between enemies.

An integral part of this policy of state neutrality is that every individual in Switzerland has unrestricted freedom of expression – including the freedom to comment on international conflicts. Neutrality is the stance of the state, of a Switzerland that guarantees its citizens freedom of expression. A Switzerland that – in stark contrast to the EU, for example – does not deprive individuals of their rights when they express and justify their own opinions.

Switzerland's security depends on its neutrality being respected. Neutrality is respected when Switzerland's policy of neutrality is credible – when Switzerland maintains its non-partisanship in the face of every tension and every conflict.

This makes Switzerland predictable for all other states, including parties to conflicts, at all times.

Switzerland is and remains predictable

Every country, even those involved in a conflict, can be certain that Switzerland will never take hostile action. It is recognised and expected that Switzerland maintains a strong army. However, the Swiss army is only ever used for self-defence. This army is never deployed in international conflicts. Every other country knows that the Swiss army can prevent Swiss territory from being misused for the passage of enemy forces.

This stance and the respect it commands are essential to the survival of Switzerland as a small state. However, neutrality alone is not enough. Neutrality must be perpetual, i.e. it must be maintained in all conflicts. And neutrality must be armed, secured by a strong defence army. Such integral neutrality enjoys high international respect, as world history has shown on several occasions, which undoubtedly strengthens Switzerland's security.

Conflict over Greenland

Now, conflict-ridden disputes are circulating about the future of Greenland. The US claims that it would have to bear the brunt of the burden if Russia were to act in a hostile way towards Europe. The US further claims that Europe does not have the military forces to repel hostile operations directed against Europe with its own military means. If, according to the US Department of Defence's argument, the US bears the main burden of defending Europe against attack, then the US should be able to use Greenland as an important base of operations without restriction – if necessary, via the Arctic, against both China and Russia.

How should neutral Switzerland respond to these demands on the one hand and to the counterarguments to these demands on the other? There is only one credible position: the position of neutrality, of strict non-interference in this dispute.

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Freedom of expression

Every Swiss citizen is free to express their opinion on the conflict over Greenland according to their own convictions, including publicly. Freedom of expression is guaranteed in our country. However, the state should also credibly represent the position of neutrality in the conflict over Greenland – and, if necessary, be available if talks between the parties to the conflict are to be initiated on neutral ground.

The fact that the Department of Foreign Affairs, headed by Federal Councillor *Ignazio Cassis*, felt it necessary to take a position in this dispute must be clearly condemned as a serious and unjustified attack on Switzerland's neutrality.

Cassis' failure

The fact that Ignazio Cassis, as Switzerland's foreign minister, caved in to his department and allowed himself to be pressured into making a statement on the conflict-ridden discussions about Greenland that was contrary to neutrality

is not only regrettable, but also a sign of his inability to fulfil the tasks entrusted to him. Neutrality is only credible if it applies always. Taking one position today, another tomorrow, and none the day after tomorrow: this is vacillation that undermines the credibility of neutrality, weakens our country, and robs Switzerland of its life insurance policy called "credible neutrality".

It has long been clear that the officials in Cassis's department are tired of neutrality. They also want to play a role in world politics. They can only do so if Switzerland betrays its neutrality, if it liquidates its neutrality. It is unacceptable that the department of a Federal Councillor who swore an oath to our country when he took office can claim such carte blanche for itself – and it is eloquent testimony to the fact that Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis is not up to his job. He should now face the consequences.

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