

Switzerland's 'neutrality initiative'

Mains: GS-II - International relations

Why in news?

Switzerland remains neutral, but its approach reflects greater strategic flexibility - more than 70% of Swiss voters rejected a referendum seeking stricter neutrality, signalling a preference for flexible neutrality.

What are the provisions of Switzerland's neutrality?

- **Policy of neutrality** - It means the country refuses to take part in armed conflicts, join military alliances, or provide military support to warring nations.
- **Origin** - The policy originated from the post-Napoleonic turbulence in Europe in the early 1800s.
- The policy became a defining feature of Swiss foreign policy as Europe experienced political and military upheavals.
- In addition to being a tax haven and celebrated for its chocolates, watches, and army knives, Switzerland became globally associated with neutrality.
- **Constitutional status** - The country's neutral position has been enshrined in its Constitution since 1848, accepting a neutrality that is "permanent and armed".
 - **Permanent nature** - It prevents the country from taking part in any armed conflicts.
 - **Armed neutrality** - Switzerland maintains armed forces to defend its territory and to prevent them from being misused for war-related purposes.
- However, this neutrality is not rigid, and policies have changed over time as the country has set up a buffer space to apply neutrality according to national interests.
- **World War Scenarios** - During the First World War, Switzerland managed to avoid being drawn into conflict by staying neutral.
- But following the war, it joined the League of Nations with "differential neutrality", supporting its economic measures while being exempt from military obligations.
- In 1935, it adopted sanctions by the League against Italy, in a first major shift from neutrality.
- Following the Second World War, Switzerland reduced its involvement with the League and refrained from adopting sanctions.
- **International engagement** - Initially, hesitant to join the UN and kept its distance from the process of European integration in the second half of the 20th century.
- But, in the last two decades, Switzerland has increasingly made a space for itself in international organisations, becoming a UN Security Council member in 2022, and adopting UN and EU sanctions on other countries.

 WHAT IS SWISS NEUTRALITY?	
 Neutrality is a successful instrument of Swiss foreign and security policy. It is based on the law of neutrality and neutrality policy as well as on Switzerland's history and traditions.	
A LEGAL FRAMEWORK  Switzerland's permanent neutrality is anchored in international law. The law of neutrality sets out the rights and obligations of neutral states. It is enshrined in the Hague Conventions of 1907 and is part of customary international law.	A POLICY The policy of neutrality aims to uphold Switzerland's credibility and independence as a neutral state, in accordance with specific circumstances. Switzerland plays a special role internationally by mediating and building bridges.
AN IDENTITY Neutrality is an integral part of the identity of Switzerland and its citizens. It does not impede Switzerland from freely expressing political opinions and working for the respect and defence of its fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights.	A HUMANITARIAN TRADITION Based on its long-standing tradition of good offices and humanitarian aid, Switzerland accords its neutrality a peace-related and humanitarian orientation. 
© FDFA, Presence Switzerland, 2022 / Source: Federal Department of Foreign Affairs To find out more: https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/international-law/neutrality.html	

What did the referendum seek to achieve?

- **Referendum background** - Officially titled 'Safeguard Swiss neutrality', it sought amendments to the country's Constitution, making neutrality stricter in practice.
- **Introduced by** - Pro Schweiz, a nationalist organisation, with former Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher and his right-wing Swiss People's Party.
- **Key triggers for the referendum** - It was Switzerland taking part in sanctions on Russia by the European Union in 2022 in response to the invasion of Ukraine.
- **Demands of referendum** - Many of the proposals were already part of Switzerland's existing neutrality policy; supporters wanted them to be -
 - Permanently embedded in the Constitution and declaring neutrality is "perpetual and armed".
 - Establish that the country will not join any military alliance, take part in armed conflicts between other countries, or impose sanctions against warring parties.
 - Wanted to make sure that Switzerland is constitutionally obliged to use its neutrality to fulfil its role as mediator.
- **Outcome** - The referendum, which needed a double majority to be accepted, saw only 47.06% participation and was turned down with 70.15% no votes.
- All 26 cantons, or member states of the confederation, also rejected the referendum, showing overwhelming support for a "flexible neutrality".

What was the government's position regarding the referendum?

- **Rejection of proposal** - The Federal Council, a seven-member executive body which governs the country, had rejected the referendum without making any counterproposal.
- The Council argued that most of the initiative's demands were already being followed in practice.
- **Existing Neutrality** - According to the Federal Council, Switzerland already follows a policy of permanent neutrality and describing neutrality as "perpetual" would not bring any major change.
- Also, the demands of the initiative, which went beyond the current practice, could damage the country's interests.
- **Concerns** - Stricter neutrality would curtail the current flexibility that the country enjoys in its foreign policy.
- The council said, stressing that "room for manoeuvre" was important amid a "deteriorating security situation", in reference to the Russia-Ukraine war.
- It would impede cooperation on security policy, excluding the country from knowledge-sharing and making it less secure in the event of an attack.

What are the possible scenarios had the referendum passed?

- **Government's Concern** - The Federal Council, in the run-up to the vote on the initiative, was of the view that, if passed, the referendum would mandate the country to lift sanctions against belligerent states, including those against Russia.
- This could lead to unfreeze Russian assets in Swiss banks.
- **Impact on international order & Switzerland** - Switzerland, as a small state, benefits from the international order being upheld and considers sanctions as a tool to respond to violations of and threats to this order.
- Switzerland would no longer be able to join sanctions by international agencies, like the UN, on warring countries, which could affect both its interests and reputation.

Reference

[The Hindu | What is Switzerland's 'neutrality initiative'?](#)