

Eroding neutrality also undermines international Geneva. Yet Geneva remains silent ...

by Guy Mettan,* Geneva



Guy Mettan
(Picture ma)

By adopting unilateral U.S.-European sanctions against Russia in February 2022, even though it had always claimed that it would only apply sanctions endorsed by the United Nations and enshrined in international law, the Swiss government has dealt a heavy blow to neutrality and interna-

tional Geneva. But in Geneva, nobody flinched. And here are the reasons why.

In theory, this unfortunate decision,¹ which caused great concern to the *International Committee of the Red Cross* ICRC whose reputation for impartiality and independence rests largely on Swiss neutrality, should have provoked thunderous protests. Beyond the ICRC and the “Geneva Conventions”² to which Switzerland is a depositary state, as well as humanitarian and human rights concerns championed by our country, this decision should also have been of concern to all those who hold in high esteem our role as headquarters for international organisations and as capital of multilateralism. But this was not the case.

On the contrary, we witnessed local and federal elected representatives, notably on the left, calling for even more sanctions, condemnations, boycotts and confiscations of private assets against those who had so “savagely attacked Ukraine”. And yet these same elected officials found nothing to object to when this very same Ukraine slaughtered 14,000 people, including thousands of innocent civilians and children, in the Donbass between 2014 and 2022. Nor do they flinch or call for sanctions when another state, namely Israel, burns tens of thousands of

innocent civilians in Palestine and illegally occupies foreign territories.

Early in June, NGO activists and trade unionists from the “International Labour Organization”³ protested the appointment to their board of one of their Russian colleagues. But when the *Wall Street Journal*, in its June 29 issue, exposed the toxic practices and racism of certain executives of the “World Economic Forum”, these activists so mindful of good causes remained silent. Nor did they protest when, as the height of provocation for a city that prides itself on being a city of peace and home to numerous organisations promoting dialogue between warring nations, the Swiss government officially opened a NATO office – the organisation behind numerous wars of aggression in recent decades, starting with the bombing of Serbia in 1999 – in the now rather embarrassingly named “House of Peace”! Two days ago, on 15 July, the head of the *Directorate of International Law of the Swiss Foreign Office* signed an agreement on the legal status of the NATO liaison office in Geneva.⁴

They rejoiced when Russia, a founding and permanent member of the Security Council, was excluded from the Human Rights Council. They shrugged and scoffed when Russia’s deputy foreign minister declared that there was no longer any question of holding the Caucasus talks in a Switzerland that had become partisan and hostile, and that we could therefore say goodbye to any new summit with the Russian president, on the lines of those held between *Reagan* and *Gorbachev* in 1985 and between *Biden* and *Putin* in June 2021. They deplored and sighed when CERN refused to exclude Russia from its nuclear research and merely suspended its participation, despite having pioneered the East-West thaw by welcoming the first Soviet physicists in 1960, at the height of the Cold War. (*CERN hasn’t cut all its ties with Russia, Swiss Television Broadcasting Service, July 7, 2024*)⁵

The geopolitical situation has totally changed ...

The planet’s centre of gravity is shifting, the world is fracturing, tensions are accelerating, a

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new Fire Curtain has replaced the old Iron Curtain a thousand kilometres to the east of the European continent, and an impenetrable Wall of Contempt separates the West from the Global South, which by now accounts for the overwhelming majority in both men and dollars, according to the latest *World Bank* figures in terms of GDP consolidated at purchasing power parity. But why bother with such trifles?

Is it due to delusion? To masochism? To unconscious suicidal inclination? Or, on the contrary, a keen awareness of one's own short-term interests? A little of all these, no doubt, but with a clear preponderance of the fourth explanation.

To understand the lack of response and silence in the face of what can only be described as an assault on the foundations of international Geneva over the past 150 years, we need to recall a few basic facts.

The latest study assessing the impact of the international sector on the local economy, published on 5 March by the "Fondation pour Genève",⁶ shows that the international Geneva in the narrow sense of the term – i.e. the activity of international organisations, diplomatic missions and NGOs based on the Geneva lakeshore – generates 33,000 full-time jobs, thousands of conferences every year, and massive fundraising. On top of which comes the international commercial sector. The 2133 private multinationals listed in the Canton of Geneva, particularly banks and trading companies, provided 153,000 direct jobs and a total of 221,000 jobs in 2019, and generated over CHF 2.6 billion in tax revenues. Both sectors are linked, creating a biotope together and living interdependently typically of Geneva.

Geneva's sociology, with 47% foreigners and dual nationals, perfectly reflects this economic reality. In fact, the international public and private sector now creates one in every two jobs in Geneva, and accounts for 67% of the canton's net added value. It's easy to see why, under these conditions, we don't want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg, and why we take all



Until now, Geneva has been an international venue for conferences and mediation meetings. But the Swiss government's decision to abandon the country's neutrality is likely to make Geneva irrelevant in a matter of years. (Picture ma)

sorts of precautions to avoid upsetting those keeping the geese.

A revealing study

Even more revealing of this dependence is a study published last June by the "Geneva Graduate Institute" (*Paying for Multilateralism: Taking Stock on the Financing of International Organizations in Geneva, 2000–2020*, by Livio Silvia-Muller & Remo Gassmann). It showed that Western countries, members of the G7 and the European Union, provided 92% of the \$253.7 billion in contributions paid to the sixteen most important international organisations during the first two decades of this century: USA 26%, UK 8%, EU 7%, Germany 6.6%, with Switzerland coming 13th with 2.2%).

A closer look reveals that 15 donors accounted for 75% of contributions, including fourteen governments and one private donor, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (3.7% of the total amount, or \$9.4 billion over twenty years). Inflows of funds have quintupled over two decades, reaching 23.6 billion for the year 2020. The health sector (11.5 billion in 2020) and humanitarian action (refugees, migrants and ICRC, 9 billion) are the main beneficiaries. It's worth noting in passing that an organisation like the WEF, which is entirely private but was granted international organisation status (and therefore tax exemption) by Switzerland in 2015, earns between CHF 350 and 400 million a year through its forums.

For Switzerland, it's a very good deal. With a net investment in infrastructure and buildings of

3.2% and annual contributions of 350 million per year, it enjoys one hundred percent of the fees and contributions paid by other countries.

Who pays the piper calls the tune!

In short: Who pays the piper calls the tune! So, it's easy to understand why, when the West decides to sanction a third country, even one as important as Russia, Bern and Geneva keep a low profile and have nothing to object to.

Will this subservient attitude pay off in the long term? That is not so sure. The authors of the study also raise the question of dependency on such major donors, and on the main one, the United States, in a world in full turmoil and amid a multipolar shift, marked by a South and the BRICS in full swing. However, without providing any solutions. Diversifying funding towards the private sector is not risk-free, as we have seen with the importance acquired by the Gates Foundation in the field of vaccines and its growing ascendancy over the WHO since the Covid crisis.

This dependence on the West is in blatant contradiction with the principle of multilateralism, of which Geneva claims to be the torch-bearer. And it leads to an impasse with no end in sight. On the one hand, Westerners see no point in loosening their grip on international organisations to the benefit of states they feel are not paying their fair share. For their part, Southern countries have no desire to increase their contri-

butions to organisations infiltrated by Northern countries and over which they lack the means to exert influence, as can be seen from the stalled UN Security Council reform, unable to make room for India, Brazil or Africa.

By sacrificing its neutrality to align itself with the Western bloc, it is not certain that Switzerland has made the right choice in the long term. Not only will it gain little in terms of security, but it will also lose out in terms of universality. For it will permanently weaken its place on the international stage. It undermines its role as a mediator between warring states, as host of the European headquarters of the United Nations, and as the world headquarters of major international organisations.

At the end of the day, we'll be paying dearly to please countries that won't even thank us for it.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://globalbridge.ch/die-schweiz-hat-ihre-neutralitaet-beerdigt-ich-schaeme-mich-dafuer/>, 8 March 2022

² <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/international-law/international-humanitarian-law/geneva-conventions.html>

³ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_internationale_du_travail

⁴ <https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.msg-id-101857.html>

⁵ <https://www.rts.ch/info/sciences-tech/2024/article/le-cern-n-a-pas-coupe-tous-ses-liens-avec-la-russie-28560113.html>

⁶ <https://www.fondationpourgeneve.ch/en/>