

“Neutrality remains essential”

ICRC President Peter Maurer* discussing war and peace

Interview held by Roger Köppel on October 6, 2022

(Ed.) As President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer has visited the hotbeds of conflict around the world. In his final interview as president, he expresses cautious optimism. Peter Maurer believes that international humanitarian law is being better upheld in the Ukrainian conflict. The role of a neutral mediator remains essential in the struggle for peace.

Weltwoche: Mr. Maurer, we are witnessing dramatic days. The Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines have been damaged by an alleged act of state terrorism. Russian President Vladimir Putin is settling scores with the West in a significant speech. We are talking about the possibility of a nuclear strike as a something quite normal. You have the experience of war and crises, and have been president of the “International Committee of the Red Cross” (ICRC) for a long time: how do you assess these events? Where is the world heading to?

Peter Maurer: War and conflict are part of everyday life for the ICRC. That is why I was not overly frightened when I heard about these events. This does not mean that I take them lightly. Where the world is heading to, I cannot say. The true intentions of political and military decision-makers remain a mystery, even for an ICRC president. But what I do know from experience is that the more radical the language of war enters the public mind, the more difficult it will be to return to peace and reconciliation.

If I understand you correctly, as a diplomat, as a wordsmith in international relations, who always carries a precision scale in his luggage, do you observe a dangerous unleashing of vocabulary, an unbounding of language in the Ukraine war?



Peter Maurer, 2012, Syria (Photo ICRC)

Yes, that is correct. Rhetorically, the war in Ukraine has been waged ruthlessly since 2014. When political leaders give either side indirect legitimacy for escalating the war with radical concepts, it is always dangerous. This often drives commanders on the ground to feel entitled to scale up the war as far as they can. This is why we are always worried when war is not only waged with weapons, but also with words.

Why is the war in Ukraine so charged with rhetoric?

The war in Ukraine entered the global communication system in February 2022. This has never been the case for any of the wars over the past ten years. Syrian belligerents also spoke in a controversial manner, but the world public opinion wasn't as captivated. In Ukraine, the geopolitical

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der Politischen Direktion des Eidgenössischen Departements für auswärtige Angelegenheiten ernannt. Von 2004 bis 2010 war er Chef der Schweizer Ständigen Mission bei den Vereinten Nationen und anschliessend als Staatssekretär im Eidgenössischen Departement für auswärtige Angelegenheiten. Er war ab dem 1. Juli 2012 bis zu seinem Rücktritt Ende September 2022 Präsident des *Internationalen Komitees vom Roten Kreuz* (IKRK).

stakes are much higher. The interest is therefore much higher.

As president of the ICRC, what can you do about this heated war rhetoric? Is there anything you can do?

Our tool is the somewhat technocratic vocabulary of the Geneva Conventions. We keep reminding it to all parties involved. One can, for example, call the other a “party to the war” or a “torturous and terrible enemy”. This makes all the difference. The escalation rhetoric pleases some advocacy groups. This may not result in any direct consequences for a while. But suddenly, these groups demand the implementation of such martial words. This is why rhetorical overkill is a constant danger. And when this rhetoric is relayed through a global communication system, it becomes all the more difficult to bring the discussion back to the facts.

Let's get to the facts. Let's talk about the war in Ukraine. How should it be classified? How is it different from other wars you have experienced, apart from the global interest?

It is an inter-state conflict with regular armies. Over the past decade, we have often dealt with belligerents who had never heard of the Geneva Conventions. This is different in the war in Ukraine. Most of the participants belong to a regular army. This means that they are trained in international humanitarian law. They know the internationally recognised norms for the conduct of war. We see that there are real efforts on both sides not to let this conflict get completely out of hand. We use the term “precautions”. There are precautions to be taken with regard to the civilian population. We observe a discrepancy between the radical nature of the words on the one hand and the actions on the ground on the other.

The “New York Times” recently reported, referring to American officials, that the number of civilian casualties in the war in Ukraine is unusually low compared to the number of military casualties. In relative terms, few civilians are being killed in this war. Is this consistent with your findings?

Yes, this is consistent with my own information. The share of civilian casualties in wars has been steadily increasing since World War I, and even more so in the unstructured terrorist conflicts of the last ten or fifteen years. I once said, referring to Syria, “If you want to survive in this war, the

best thing you can do is put on a uniform.” Indeed, few fighters lost their lives in the Syrian war, but far more civilians did. The war in Ukraine marks a reversal of this trend. There is no doubt about that.

Interesting. This is hardly reflected in public opinion.

Yes, I also get that impression too.

Instead, we read a lot about alleged atrocities. Can you tell us about that? Have you noted more violations of international humanitarian law in this war than in other comparable conflicts?

If we look only at international humanitarian law – that is, at the question of how war is fought and whether the norms of the Geneva Conventions are respected – we find that yes, there are violations. But such violations exist in all wars. I do not want to say how serious they are in Ukraine and who is responsible in each case. When we find a violation of international humanitarian law, we inform the responsible party in a confidential report. We are convinced that this is how we can contribute to the improvement of the situation rather than by public accusations.

How do you go about such sensitive discussions?

My standard phrase comes from *Gotthelf* [Jeremias Gotthelf, Swiss writer, edit. cv]: “It is at home that the homeland must shine first.” I tell war commanders, “I don't want to argue with you to know if others have done something wrong. I want to argue with you to know if you have done something wrong. The goal of all of us must be to prevent future violations of international humanitarian law. And rest assured that I say the same thing to the other side.”

You describe this as if it were a conversation with a recalcitrant employee, unpleasant, yet commonplace. Yet, as ICRC president, you also have to shake hands with a thug in order to help a prisoner. How do you cope with that?

You have to remain pragmatic, accept other views, even extreme ones.

In a world of pandemic moralism, such an approach is viewed with suspicion. It is quickly said that the Red Cross subverts the struggle and the proscription of all forms of war by humanising the conduct of war. How do you respond to this?

This allegation is as old as the Red Cross itself. All ICRC presidents have been confronted with it. *Florence Nightingale* had once criticised *Henry Dunant* for humanizing war when he founded the ICRC. Dunant's answer was essentially: "No, if we try to subject war to a few simple rules and humanise it, we take the first step towards peace. Reconciliation occurs when we bring the belligerents to resolve their conflicts in a humanitarian way."

How do you assess the current debate?

I notice around the Ukraine war a striking mixture of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello* arguments. As humanitarian actors, we are not concerned with the causes of war. It is not our mandate to look for its causes, to name its responsible parties. International humanitarian law deals with the norms of war. And it is important to note that: Not every death in Ukraine is the result of a violation of international humanitarian law. As a neutral intermediary, we have to be precise in this regard, otherwise we compromise our credibility.

In the face of evil, you cannot be neutral, say the critics of neutrality. You are doctor of history. What do you think of this line of argument?

I don't like operating with opposites such as good and evil. The more you know about a subject, the harder it is to distinguish right from wrong. There is a very fine line between understanding and excusing. Understanding is important, so we find ourselves in the domain of hermeneutics. In this area, one can also try to exert influence. I can't go to a commander-in-chief or a minister of defense at war and insult him. You have to find words that allow him to understand something, to change something. On the other hand, if you get into Manichean black-and-white thinking, it's hard to find your way out.

Does this mean that you have never faced evil head on in your work?

I don't think so. But perhaps it also depends on me, the observer- If you focus strongly on people – identifying them as the decisive drivers of historical development – you tend to recognise evil. But as soon as you incorporate structures into your thinking, it becomes more difficult to think in terms of uniqueness. At best, you depersonalise too much.

The critics of neutrality criticise you for exactly that: Underestimating the wolf nature of man.

There is a type of politician whose insatiable thirst for land has to be fought against, they say.

This argument follows an extreme logic of political theory, a logic of political radicalism. I think it is irresponsible. Wars are a fact, they have always been a fact, long before the ICRC was created. Our mission is to guarantee a space of humanitarian protection in wars. We can only do this if we are neutral and recognised by all belligerents. I have never seen anyone blame us for our neutrality after saving their life. Wars do not end with attributions such as "good" and "bad", but with concrete reconciliation and mediation work, for example by a neutral intermediary. Without wanting to overdo it: the ICRC has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize four times. Our approach cannot be completely wrong.

Swiss diplomat Paul Widmer wrote about the irritating moment of neutrality: "In times of war, it reminds of peace by standing aside, and in times of peace, it discreetly reminds of the possibility of war." Such differentiated views have now virtually disappeared from public opinion. Anyone who is neutral is suspected of supporting the aggressor. Switzerland is also confronted with this accusation. How important is Swiss neutrality for the work of the ICRC?

For a long time, the ICRC has been perceived as part of official Switzerland. Whenever a federal councillor or an ICRC president spoke about neutrality, it meant almost the same thing to the public. My two predecessors, Cornelio Sommaruga and Jakob Kellenberger, succeeded in establishing the ICRC's autonomous neutrality. This is their historical achievement.

Why is it so important?

Because the proximity of the ICRC to Switzerland has often led to some confusion. People referred to the ICRC when they meant Swiss politics and vice versa. That is hardly the case today. This makes our work easier. However, the ICRC is still based in Switzerland, which also remains the depositary state of the Geneva Conventions. There are historically rich connections. From this point of view, it benefits the ICRC if Switzerland interprets its neutrality in a reasonably consistent manner.

Russia's foreign minister has publicly called on Switzerland to return to neutrality. Apparently, Russia no longer recognises Switzerland as neutral. Is this a problem for the ICRC?

This may be a topic of discussion here and there, but it does not affect our work. So far, we have been able to explain to all belligerents that we are independent and that we would not be affected by a possible change in the meaning of Swiss neutrality.

Until 1993, only Swiss nationals worked for the ICRC. Today, 35 percent of the staff come from other countries. How has the ICRC changed as a result?

We have 22,000 staff members from over 130 countries. All, or at least most of them, have assimilated our fundamental principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. The ICRC has a strong corporate culture. This fills me with joy and pride. In many countries, we have local staff who are family members affected by the war and who could therefore legitimately give their hearts to one or other of the belligerents. Despite this, they do humanitarian work on the ground.

In the past, the Swiss passport was considered a guarantee of neutrality. Today it is perhaps rather the ICRC employment contract. At the latest Delegates Assembly, it was once again reaffirmed by resolution that neutrality, impartiality and independence shall remain immutable principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The Russian and Ukrainian national associations also supported this resolution.

The ICRC has always worked discreetly and has not even publicly accused Nazi Germany and its extermination camps. Only your predecessor Jakob Kellenberger deviated from this principle. He criticised the United States for the bombing of civilians and the lack of access to prisoners of war in Iraq or Guantánamo. What is your position on public acts?

The ICRC's goal must always be to achieve progress for the people affected by war. This is usually more feasible through confidential talks with the belligerents than through public accusations. There may be exceptions. Take the example of the Nazi extermination camps. When you have privileged information about such horrific crimes, it is better to make them public. This is now a consensus within the ICRC. Silence at the time was a mistake. The decision as to whether publicity leads to better protection of the persons concerned or whether, on the contrary, it puts them at greater risk is taken on a

case-by-case basis. This is one of the most difficult tasks of a president.

Is the impression correct that you're a more reserved type?

Yes, that's probably true. If I see even a small chance to move forward through confidentiality, I take that route.

Others in your position would be tempted to uncover the archangel inside themselves and engage in battle against the devil.

The path I chose corresponds to my understanding of law. I believe in the rule of law through insight, not in the rule of law through coercion. And insight is easier to achieve in confidential conversation than with public admonitions. I note, however, that the ICRC is practically the only organisation that still upholds this hypothesis. The rule of law is mostly seen only in the perspective of its possible violation and its necessary punishment by higher authorities. I consider this to be wrong.

Then there is a second consideration: The ICRC is often asked to finally say something. I am amazed by the number of people who believe that something is achieved by saying something. What interests me are concrete improvements in the living conditions of people in war zones.

To be president of the ICRC, do you have to be an unwavering optimist? Someone who believes in the good in man in all circumstances?

I don't know if you should. Personally, I've always looked at the positive and tried to address it. I'm not someone who complains about what's wrong. That's not my style. At the end of the day, it is our duty to always find new ways to make life easier.

Is this why you also studied international law? Historians look at the world. Lawyers transform it.

I agree. International law, and especially international humanitarian law, is an attempt to enforce the rule of law by consensus. It is a voluntary agreement based on the understanding of reason.

Unfortunately, it doesn't really work, otherwise there would be no more wars. Or do you see a general progress towards peace?

In the large part of the world, there is a juridification, a greater predictability. On the other hand, we've seen a lot of unregulated conflicts over the last 10 to 15 years. Is there a general progress? To put it positively: there have never been so many healthy, well-trained people. The downside is that for the poorest people in the world, the equation doesn't work. And we're talking about one to two billion people.

Mr Maurer, you will leave the ICRC presidency at the end of September. This is the end of a long and exceptionally successful career in the world of diplomacy. Before taking up your current position, you were acting as Secretary of State at the Foreign Affairs Ministry. Before that, you represented Switzerland at the UN. To summarise, what have you learned for life as a diplomat?

The ability to identify a common landing point in negotiations. There are different styles and experiences. It is all theatre, but sometimes you act in a comedy, sometimes you act melodramatically. First, I learned to identify my own interests. Second, I learned to recognise the other's interests. Third, diplomacy is a profession, but also an art, the art of the possible. It is this artistic, creative aspect that fascinates me the most.

What have you learned from working in war zones around the world?

I have always been impressed by the resilience, the suffering capacity and the speed of adaptation of people and societies under the most difficult, even inhuman conditions. When I was handed a microphone after returning from Syria and asked what it was like to arrive here at Zurich airport, I said, "It's a scandal". By that I meant the slick, intact, luxury issues we struggle with around here, while in other countries, people are fighting for their naked lives.

This sounds quite emotional though. Normally, you seem very sober when you talk about your work. Yet you have seen human abysses, you have been confronted with violence, torture and death. How did you react?

These images of horror that you evoke did not drip off me like a drop of rain on oilskins. That would be a false impression. It is the art of not letting it get you down, but getting motivation for your own work from it. What I observed about myself: the direct confrontation with horror was generally less serious for me than the media



Hassaké, Al-Hol refugee camp, Syria. Visit by ICRC president Peter Maurer, 12 May 2022. (Picture ICRC, S.N.)

confrontation with it. The media transmission is almost always one-dimensionally oriented towards misery.

When I visited a terrible prison or a poorly equipped hospital, I also met people laughing and eating together. Studies of the Holocaust show that the second generation of people involved often suffered more severe trauma than the first generation. The stories had more impact than the actual experiences. Journalists in particular should be aware of this: Exaggerations can perpetuate and aggravate trauma.

Or perpetuate and worsen a wrong policy. We started the discussion with the bad news of the present times. I would like to conclude it with a message of confidence: How to organise peace in Ukraine?

There is a well-known American saying: "He who has only a hammer for a tool sees a nail in every problem". At the risk of you seeing me as the man with the hammer, I give you the classic diplomat's answer: It is important to stay in touch with each other. We know from hundreds of other conflicts around the world that there comes a time when we have to talk again. And that moment is difficult to organise if it has to come out of nowhere. This is why we need what is commonly called "track II", unofficial channels of discussion that allow the belligerents to better understand the other side. Diplomacy must be most active when the situation seems most desperate. The ICRC provides indispensable services here.

*Source: "Die Weltwoche", n° 40, 6 October 2022
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(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*