

# The Swiss Candidacy for the UN Security Council

For the first time, Switzerland applies to take a seat as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, for the period from 2023 to 2024. Switzerland has good chances of being elected. However, the candidacy has proven controversial domestically. Being a member of the Security Council would undeniably entail many opportunities, but also some risks.

By Fabien Merz

Many of the most pressing challenges today – among them pandemics, migration, and terrorism – are of a global nature. Accordingly, they must be tackled at the international level. The UN, founded in 1945, is the multilateral forum where the international community jointly addresses such transnational issues. The UN Security Council is the authoritative body regarding the promotion of peace and international security; its decisions are binding by international law. Switzerland has been a full member of the UN since 2002. In 2011, after a long and broad-based consultative process, it decided to apply for a seat as a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the period from 2023 to 2024.

The Federal Council considers this candidacy a consequential continuation of Switzerland's international engagement thus far. Furthermore, it foresees a unique opportunity for Switzerland to better shape the international environment and thereby to improve its ability to fulfil its constitutional goals of safeguarding Switzerland's independence and security as well as promoting a more equitable and peaceful international order. Switzerland has good chances of succeeding in the vote scheduled for 2022. However, the candidacy is subject to controversy at the domestic level. How has this candidacy unfolded at the domestic and at the international level since the commencement of the consulta-



The United Nations Security Council votes to approve a resolution at the UN headquarters in New York on the Iran nuclear program on July 20, 2015. *Mike Segar / Reuters*

tions in 2007? And what are the opportunities and risks for Switzerland associated with taking a seat on the Security Council?

## The UN Security Council

According to the UN Charter, the UN Security Council's primary responsibility is to maintain global peace and international security. In performing its duties, it acts on behalf of all member states. The Security Council is made up of fifteen members in

total. The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China are permanent members (P5). The P5 each have veto power. Each year, the UN General Assembly appoints five of the ten non-permanent members (E10 for "elected ten"), a vote requiring a two-thirds majority, for a period of two years. Adequate geographical distribution of the seats is ensured (see chart). Switzerland is running, currently only alongside Malta, for one of the two seats

reserved to the UN regional group of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) for the 2023 to 2024 period.

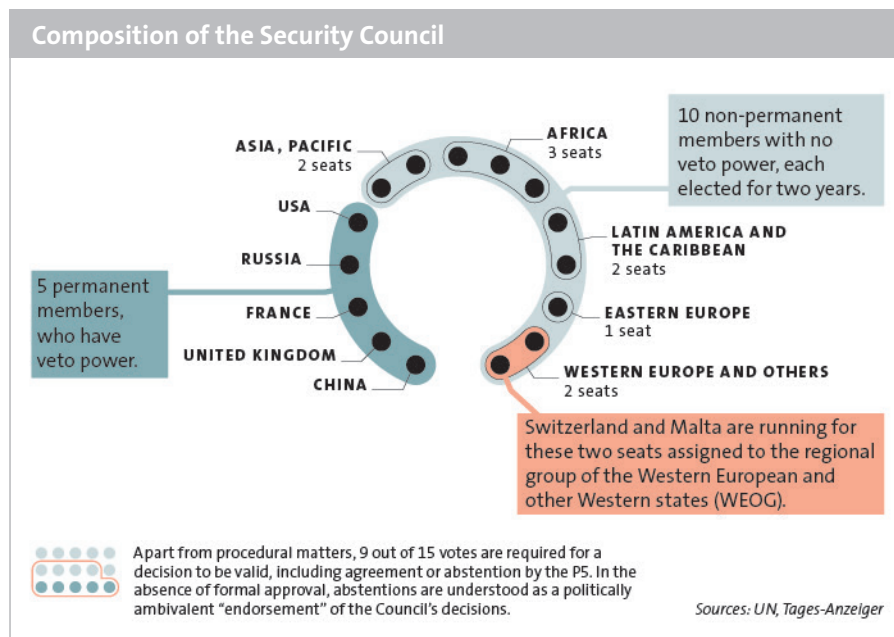
Each member of the Security Council has one vote. Votes on procedural issues require a qualified majority of nine, whereas all other issues require nine votes including the agreement or abstention of all five permanent members (corresponding to their veto power). This system reflects the international balance of power at the end of World War II and at the time of the founding of the UN in 1945. It was created to protect the interests of the victorious powers and to ensure that they would support Security Council decisions. Unlike during the Cold War, the use of the veto has become rare. During the past five years, the veto power has been exercised some two to seven times per year. However, for Security Council operation, the mere awareness of such a veto power is important. This provides the P5 with a great deal of influence over the selection and content of issues submitted for a plenary vote.

In principle, in accordance with Article 34 of the UN Charter, the Security Council can investigate any situation that may lead to international tensions in order to determine whether it could jeopardize the maintenance of world peace and international security. The Security Council has a permanent agenda featuring conflict regions and

## Switzerland has been campaigning for reforms of the Security Council since 2005.

topics ranging from “Protection of civilian population in armed conflict” to “Children in armed conflicts” and “Threats to global public health”. To take up a new topic or situation in a certain country, nine votes are required. Since this is a procedural matter, the Council’s permanent members have no veto power.

It is important to note that the Security Council primarily acts as a moderator or advisor. However, should the Security Council ascertain the existence of a threat, a breach of peace, or an act of aggression according to Article 39, Chapter VII of the UN Charter gives the Council the power to adopt coercive measures. Such measures are legally binding for the member states. Therefore, the Security Council may adopt resolutions to impose sanctions, such as travel restrictions or arms export bans, or establish UN peacekeeping operation. In



extreme cases, the Security Council can authorize military intervention. This has only happened three times since the foundation of the UN in 1945: during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, in 1990 to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, and in 2011 in Libya. According to Chapter VII, the Security Council also has the option of taking further measures after an armed conflict.

Some examples are the system of inspections established to clarify Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs from 1991, or the establishment of international special tribunals for the investigation of crimes against humanity, such as for Rwanda or for former Yugoslavia.

The Security Council is not without controversy. A common criticism is that its composition and the existence of permanent veto powers reflect the situation at the end of World War II. This is considered outdated by many UN member states, including Switzerland, which has been campaigning for reforms since 2005. Moreover, in recent years, tensions between the P5, notably between the P5’s Western members, on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other, have hamstrung the Council. However, the impact of this dynamic on the Security Council’s ability to act should not be overestimated. It is true that in relation to some issues that have received a lot of media exposure, such as those on the Syrian civil war and the situation in

Crimea, the Security Council proved to be incapable of action, or was able to take action only to a very limited extent. At the same time, on many issues it deals with, often less well known to the public but no less important, the Council maintains its capacity to act. On Yemen, for example, the Security Council in January 2019 unanimously authorized a UN mission to observe a local ceasefire in Al Hodaida.

### The Swiss Application

During the referendum campaign on joining the UN in 2002, the Federal Council already expressed that the full membership of Switzerland may also include a mandate on the Security Council. As part of the reflection and consultation process on a Security Council seat, which began in 2007, the National Council’s and Council of States’ Foreign Policy Commissions largely supported the endeavor of a Swiss application. Subsequently, in 2011, the Federal Council decided to officially submit Switzerland’s application for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for the period from 2023 to 2024 with the relevant UN regional group, the WEOG. Since then, Swiss diplomacy has been promoting the Swiss application at the international level. Thanks to this preparatory work and the early start, but mainly thanks to the fact that Switzerland has a well-respected profile on the international stage, the chances for the elections in 2022 are good. It might also prove helpful that, despite the popularity of the Security Council seats, so far

only one other candidate besides Switzerland, Malta, has applied for one of the two vacant WEOG seats for the period 2023 to 2024. Thus, Switzerland is currently without a direct rival candidate.

Despite a long and broad process of reflection and consultation preceding Switzerland's application, the project is controversial at a national level. Criticism has been expressed particularly by conservative representatives who have been, from the start, deeply concerned by an application for something they perceive as incompatible with their understanding of neutrality. The announcement of the application in 2011 was followed by several critical parliamentary initiatives. However, the majority of parliament has always supported the position of the Federal Council and, thus, the application. But given the recurring question of the compatibility of neutrality with a Swiss seat on the Security Council, parliament has requested that the Federal Council prepare a report. This report, submitted in 2015, clearly confirmed the compatibility of a Security Council membership with Swiss neutrality. After its publication, parliament repeatedly supported the Federal Council's stance, for example by clearly rejecting a 2016 motion by the Swiss People's Party aimed at renouncing the application.

In 2018, various media reports and alleged uncertainty in the center parties suggested an erosion of the majority in parliament in favor of the application. The Swiss People's Party submitted another motion in November 2018, demanding a withdrawal of the application, which the National Council clearly rejected in March 2020. Therefore, the application is now largely considered secured at the national level. In parallel, the Federal Council has been commissioned to submit another report by mid-2020 on how it potentially intends to involve parliament whilst occupying a seat on the UN Security Council.

### Opportunities and Risks

Occupying a seat on the Security Council would undoubtedly entail opportunities for Switzerland, but also some risks. It is indisputable that being a member of the Security Council would allow Switzerland to better shape its international environment. This would improve Switzerland's ability to pursue its constitutional goal of promoting an equitable and peaceful international order. Not only is this desirable in principle, it

is also directly in Switzerland's self-interest. Indeed, as a small and highly globalized state, Switzerland is dependent on a peaceful and rule-based international order to guarantee its independence, security, and welfare.

As a full member of the UN, Switzerland must already abide by Security Council decisions. A seat on the Council, meanwhile, would allow Switzerland to have direct influence on these decisions. This is relevant

## The election to the Security Council would be a consequential continuation of Switzerland's international engagement.

because many of the issues the Security Council discusses directly affect Switzerland. For example, the situations in some of the most important countries of origin of asylum seekers in Switzerland – Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Syria – are regularly on the Council's agenda. In addition, Switzerland operates development or peacebuilding programs in around three quarters of the countries whose situations are discussed at the Security Council. Since Switzerland is also an important contributor to the UN (4th per capita and 18th in absolute figures), direct influence on the Security Council would also be in line with pursuing an efficient use of funds.

The election to the Security Council twenty years after Switzerland joining the United Nations would not only be a consequential continuation of Switzerland's international engagement to date but would also represent an opportunity to further the values and issues that are important to Switzerland, within the UN framework and beyond. Since becoming a member in 2002, Switzerland has played an important and constructive role in all the UN's main bodies apart from the Security Council. For example, former Federal Councillor Joseph Deiss led the UN General Assembly from 2011 to 2012. Switzerland has also repeatedly been a member of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and of the UN Human Rights Council. In this context, Switzerland focussed on unhindered access to humanitarian aid in conflict areas, the protection of the civilian population, and the respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. Security Council members are oftentimes in a position to submit issues they consider important. Experience shows

that smaller states tend to succeed – especially when acting in association with like-minded members of the Security Council – to contribute constructively and act as bridge-builders. Luxembourg, New Zealand, Jordan, and Sweden, for example, have managed to secure humanitarian access for hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria since 2013, all the while the Council generally is stuck in gridlock on the case of Syria.

The exact priorities of a potential Swiss membership of the Security Council have not yet been established. Switzerland will probably continue to be committed to those issues it has pursued at the UN to date and for which, depending on the composition of the Security Council and on the political climate, there could be potential for synergies with other like-minded Council members. The experiences as Chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2014 indicate that a participation in the Security Council may not only strengthen the credibility of Switzerland's foreign policy but would entail important networking opportunities and a gain in practical know-how for Swiss diplomacy. Swiss foreign policy in the future could greatly benefit from this experience. Moreover, a direct representation on the Security Council would also help to highlight and strengthen Geneva's unique role and importance as a center of global governance.

As shown in detail in the report presented by the Federal Council in 2015, Switzerland's neutrality, as defined by the federal government, would be compatible with a seat on the Security Council and the associated obligations. A majority of members of parliament, who have repeatedly supported the application, seem to share this view. The experience of other neutral and non-aligned states such as Austria, Sweden, and Ireland, seems to confirm this: They have all been members of the Security Council more than once. At times, neutrality can even be a great advantage. In the current international context, the Security Council is reliant upon states who can assume bridge-building functions and mediation roles based on their credible independence.

However, in some scenarios, there is a certain risk that Switzerland could be perceived as biased by the parties involved in conflict as a result of its voting behavior on the Security Council. This would not be a question of compatibility with one's own



understanding of neutrality, but rather of the way some conflicting parties may perceive Switzerland. In rare cases, this could damage Switzerland's image as an 'impartial mediator' and as a provider of Good Offices. However, if there were indications of such a risk, Switzerland would still have the option of abstention. Since such situations are only likely to occur very rarely, the argument that Switzerland would systematically weaken the Council through abstention is hardly convincing.

The criticism that the Security Council is an inadequate and anachronistic structure serving as a stage to the great powers, especially in times of increased international tensions, is justified to some extent. Renouncing a seat for this reason would, however, appear counterproductive. Despite its flaws, the UN Security Council remains the authoritative body for international security issues. In addition, since 2005 and in association with other countries, Switzerland has been actively involved

in pragmatic reform efforts of Security Council working methods. To push ahead with this agenda, it is vital that reform-oriented countries be represented on the Security Council. A seat would present Switzerland with a unique opportunity to contribute to such urgently needed reforms.

Ultimately, as with any other political issue, the Swiss application to the Security Council is a matter of weighing up different issues. Both the majority of the Federal Council and parliament seem to be convinced that the opportunities through a seat on the Security Council would justify

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the commitment. Going forward, it will be important to continue carrying out Switzerland's international campaign as efficiently as it has been conducted so far, even

under the difficult circumstances of the coronavirus crisis. If necessary, new and innovative means should be used. At a national level, meanwhile, efforts should be made to further broaden existing support. Both parliament and civil society should remain well involved in the preparations for a Swiss Security Council membership, in order to secure their support for the commitment that would result from election to the Security Council. In any case, were Switzerland elected to the Security Council, the Federal Council should consider the extent to which it could not only involve parliament but also civil society in setting the priorities of its mandate.

For more on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

**Fabien Merz** is Researcher in the Swiss and Euro-Atlantic Security Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich, where he focuses on Swiss foreign and security policy as well as counter-terrorism and PVE.