

Switzerland's experiences in peace mediation

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This article provides a brief overview of Switzerland's role in international peace mediation, examining the historical context, policy instruments, and regions of engagement of Swiss peace policy. It finally points to a number of key challenges of the peace mediation field in light of Switzerland's experiences.

Switzerland as a mediation actor

Switzerland's current engagement in peace mediation actually represents the continuation of a long-standing tradition. Starting around 1870, Switzerland adopted a more active foreign policy and sought to contribute to world peace by organizing

international arbitrations and peace conferences. The Swiss government also began to offer its "good offices", representing one state in another state with which the former does not have diplomatic relations. Good offices peaked during World War II when Switzerland held nearly 200 protective power mandates.⁹⁷

After the war, the Swiss government reverted to a more isolationist posture, emphasizing permanent neutrality and choosing to remain on the sidelines of the newly created United Nations. However, it continued its peace promotion activities, which increasingly included mediation, for example brokering an agreement between the Algerian National Liberation Front and the French government in 1962.

⁹⁶ The authors of this article work in the Mediation Support Project. The Mediation Support Project (www.peacemediation.ch) is a joint venture between the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the ETH Zurich and the Swiss Peace Foundation, Swisspeace. It receives financial support from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). The authors would like to thank Murezi Michael (Swiss FDFA), Matthias Siegfried (Swisspeace), and Damiano Sguaitamatti (former CSS) for their valuable inputs in preparing the presentation.

⁹⁷ T Fischer, 'From Good Offices to an Active Policy of Peace: Switzerland's Contribution to International Conflict Resolution', in: *Swiss Foreign Policy 1945-2002*, J M Gabriel and T Fischer (eds), Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Moreover, Switzerland took on further protective power mandates, most famously representing the US in Iran and Cuba.

The end of the Cold War brought profound changes to the attitudes of Swiss public opinion and foreign policy decision-makers. Many of them embraced a new concept of security, centred on the notion of 'human security'. At the same time, they sought to position Switzerland as a more active player in the world, invoking the phrase 'active neutrality' to this end. Since domestic politics put a check on Swiss participation in military peacekeeping missions, the emphasis was rather put on civilian peacebuilding and mediation in particular.⁹⁸

In this context, three main arguments emerged in the discourse around the Swiss government's engagement in peace mediation. First, mediation is said to contribute to a more secure world, which is increasingly interconnected and requires global burden-sharing to counter security threats. Second, it was argued that mediation improves Switzerland's standing in the world, opening doors for Swiss diplomacy in Washington, Moscow and other places. Third, mediation is described as a good fit in terms of the values that many Swiss identify with, such as neutrality, the humanitarian tradition and the protection of minority rights.⁹⁹

These arguments have gained momentum in the last ten years and as a result, Switzerland has extended its peace promotion engagement on multiple fronts. Accordingly, Swiss voters have anchored peace promotion in the federal constitution and the government has defined it as one of its five foreign policy objectives. Also, peacebuilding was institutionalized within the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs with the creation of a division dealing specifically with human security issues – the Human Security Division. Moreover, at four-year intervals starting in 2004, the Swiss Parliament has approved a credit facility, which provides the government with fixed annual budgets for peace promotion activities. During her tenure as head of the Swiss FDFA between 2003 and 2011, Federal Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey also showed leadership in pushing the mediation logic of talking with all actors who are willing to talk, which helped to make the idea of mediation known domestically.

⁹⁸ D Lanz, 'Active Neutrality Constructed: The Development of Swiss Peace Policy since the End of the Cold War', Paper presented at the 6th ECPR General Conference, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011.

⁹⁹ Thomas Greminger, 'Swiss Civilian Peace Promotion: Assessing Policy and Practice' Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, 2011, online: www.css.ethz.ch

External perceptions were also important with regard to fostering Swiss engagements in peace mediation. As a small state with a long-standing policy of neutrality and a consensus-oriented system of democracy, Switzerland is often perceived by conflict parties and other mediators as non-threatening while at the same time being seen as competent. Another factor is that Switzerland does not have a policy of listing armed non-state actors as terrorist groups, and as a non-member, it is not obligated to follow the European Union's policy in this area. This means that representatives of the Swiss government can legally talk to many of these groups, even as other countries are precluded from doing so.

Taking these factors into account, since 2000, Switzerland has been engaged in approximately 20 processes in 15 countries and regions. The list below presents a selection of some of these engagements:

- Armenia-Turkey Protocols (2009)
- Burundi: Arusha and post-Arusha peace talks (1997-2008)
- Colombia: ELN - Government of Colombia (2005-2008) and FARC - GoC talks (2002-2008)
- Cyprus: talks on Bürgenstock (2004)
- Indonesia, Aceh: Coaching of GAM (2005), support in implementation of agreement (2005-2007)
- Middle East: Geneva Initiative, support of track 1.5 Israel Palestine talks (2003-ongoing); support of Israel-Syrian track II (2005-2007)
- Nepal: support of peace process with process and constitutional experts (2006-ongoing)
- Uganda: North Uganda-LRA process (2006-2007)
- Sri Lanka: hosting of LTTE - Government of Sri Lanka talks (2006)
- Sudan: Nuba Mountains Bürgenstock Agreement Swiss-US co-mediation (2002), North-South mediation expert in IGAD CPA mediation process (2002-2005), Darfur: power sharing expertise and capacity building (2005-2010)
- Western Sahara: support to talks led by the UN (2010-ongoing)

Switzerland has various tools at its disposal to support mediation processes in different phases and on different tracks. One of these tools is the direct involvement of Swiss government representatives, such as the State Secretary or its special envoys. Switzerland also seconds mediation experts that work in teams led by other entities, such as the UN. It organizes training workshops, aimed at strengthening the mediation capacities of regional or international organisations. Switzerland also has strategic partnerships with NGOs working in the field of mediation (e.g. Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and Conciliation Resources). Finally, it funds various peacebuilding programmes and deploys advisors working to support peace processes at various levels of society (grassroots to government).¹⁰⁰

Challenges of peace mediation

The Swiss experience reveals a number of key challenges that are illustrative of the general challenges in the mediation field.

Motivation(s). From the outset, the promoters of peace policy in Switzerland have put forward two distinct lines of argumentation. One line is that peace mediation corresponds to Switzerland's values and its humanitarian tradition, the other being that mediation promotes the national interest by enhancing Switzerland's standing in the world. The combination of these two motivations has been effective because it caters to two audiences: those thinking that foreign policy should reflect their values and those focusing on material benefits. However, this double argumentation does pose several challenges. For the latter group, the challenge is to not 'oversell' mediation or to foster unrealistic expectations of what mediation can achieve. As far as the former audience is concerned, the challenge is to ensure that mediation is not self-referential, but that the yardstick of success remains improving the situation for people in countries of conflict.

Risk-taking. Inevitably, peace mediation is messy and politically delicate. Mediators can become scapegoats or misused for other

¹⁰⁰ See: S Mason, 'Peacemaking through Mediation: the Swiss FDFA in Israel-Palestine, Sudan, and Guatemala', in Peacemaking, from Practice to Theory, S A Nan, Z C Mampilly and A Bartoli (eds), Praeger, 2012 (forthcoming).

political purposes. In 2008 the Colombian government discredited a Swiss mediator, partly to detract attention from their military hostage rescue operation.¹⁰¹ For a state like Switzerland the question is to what degree it is prepared to take risks in mediation processes. Of course, risky engagements can backfire politically. However, if a state is risk-averse, there is a danger that it will circle around mediation, missing opportunities for getting involved or opting out at the most crucial phase in the process and leaving the parties in a ditch. The challenge is for a state to build domestic support and a cross-political consensus on peace mediation, empowering its representatives to take the necessary risks to achieve their intended outcome. In this regard, Norway serves as a role model for other small state mediators.

Coherence. Mediation is not a standalone tool. A range of policy areas have repercussions on countries of conflict, and different tools can be brought to bear to support peace processes, some of which go beyond conventional peace promotion. In the case of Switzerland, trade policy, development aid and security assistance are all relevant. The challenge is to seek complementarity and coherence between these different areas as well as the government agencies in charge of them, in the spirit of the ‘whole-of-government’ approach. Thus, Switzerland’s experience supporting the peace process in Sudan has shown that regular contacts between persons in charge of the Sudan file in different agencies fosters the implementation of a coherent approach.

Professionalisation. Mediation processes are increasingly complex and require specialized knowledge on the part of the mediators. Small states like Switzerland are often sought-after as mediators precisely because they can provide such knowledge. Therefore, the challenge for an aspiring small state is to build up the expertise and human resources to make it an attractive candidate in mediation processes. This can happen within state structures; as mentioned above, Switzerland has created a division within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs exactly for this purpose. Flexible structures are also promising, allowing for human rotation and knowledge transfer between state and non-state actors. It is vital that efforts to professionalize peace mediation are supported financially and by

¹⁰¹ ‘Die Affäre Gontard Ist ein Ablenkungsmanöver’, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 23 July 2008.

building up human resources through long-term training and career management.

Collaboration. Peace mediation is a crowded field in some cases, but not in others. Thus, there are worrying signs of competition and turf battles between different mediation actors in some conflicts, while less attractive conflicts are neglected. The challenge for small state mediators is therefore to collaborate with others using their specific comparative advantages. One area of collaboration is joint training. For example, the Swiss government organizes the annual Peace Mediation Course¹⁰², bringing Swiss mediators together with practitioners from other foreign ministries, the UN as well as NGOs. Another possibility is for small states to provide targeted support to processes led by other actors. For example, a senior Swiss mediation expert was brought in to coach GAM negotiators in the Aceh negotiations mediated by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari and his Crisis Management Initiative.

Conclusion

Small states have unique comparative advantages in the field of mediation, as they are generally more nimble than larger mediation entities such as the UN, regional organisations or powerful states. At the same time, they have more resources, political clout and democratic legitimacy than NGO mediators. Nonetheless, small states are confronted with numerous challenges when seeking to develop their mediation profile: creating a solid domestic consensus for mediation, fitting mediation activities into a coherent ‘whole-of-government’ approach, professionalizing the field of mediation by investing in human resources, and collaborating with other mediators in order to increase efficiency and minimize negative competition. Switzerland’s experience in addressing these challenges seems to follow an incremental, step-by-step approach. The hope is that this leads to a more stable basis for greater mediation activities.

¹⁰² Available at: www.peacemediation.ch