

# Does Neutrality Truly Exist? Understanding Whether a Nation Can Truly Be Neutral in the Present Day

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The UN defines neutrality as “the legal status arising from the abstention of a state from all participation in a war between other states, the maintenance of an attitude of impartiality toward the belligerents, and the recognition by the belligerents of this abstention and impartiality.” This definition implies that neutrality cannot exist during peacetime. It assumes a conflict between two or more equally sovereign states, where the neutral entity remains impartial. Switzerland has assumed the position of neutrality since 1815 and is an example of a permanently neutral power. However, in light of the armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia, Switzerland adopted several sanctions and froze billions of Swiss francs in funds and assets against Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine, taking a sharp deviation from the traditional definition of neutrality. The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement declaring that “Neutrality does not imply to be indifferent with regard to violations of international law.” However, this is not in line with the traditional definition of neutrality.

Neutrality, in its true essence, places a special focus on the impartiality and the inactivity of the neutral state. This definition of neutrality and whether a nation can truly be neutral has been questioned by the socio-legal paradigm of the modern world as being far too utopian. For the weaker state, from a realist perspective, neutrality is an imprudent policy. For example, during the Nazi invasion, Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, and Norway had all adopted the neutrality policy but were eventually occupied. For a powerful state, neutrality can be viewed to be immoral. For example, during World War II, Switzerland maintained its neutrality. Along with its primary goal of survival, it also grew richer by doing its usual business with the combatants. This included accepting looted gold from Germans, in exchange for Swiss francs. While Switzerland became the richest country in Europe by 1945, their willingness to turn Nazi plunder into currency only prolonged the war and suffering. The decision of Switzerland to remain neutral can be considered to be immoral. This was also demonstrated by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel when he said “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.” However, a conflict situation becomes extremely complicated when there is no clear demarcation between moral and immoral. This dilemma is heightened when all the parties in conflict are guilty of immoral acts. In such a situation, staying impartial and neutral is not only acceptable but can also be considered to be morally superior. Switzerland’s decision to impose sanctions on Russia as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine may be on the right side of morality, but it was not in line with the concept of neutrality.

The concept of neutrality is also affected by economic and strategic factors. Even (formerly) neutral nations may be forced to join military alliances to protect their sovereignty during a war. Neutral nations with a struggling economy may choose to import resources at prices that have deflated due to war.

Geopolitics is very complicated and so is morality. Remaining true to the traditional definition of neutrality, when there are so many intertwined factors, appears to be too utopian. A powerful nation may exercise its privilege of remaining neutral, at the cost of sacrificing its morality. A weaker nation's decision of neutrality may come at the cost of losing its sovereignty and economic downfall.

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