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The Relevance of Neutrality in Contemporary International Relations

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Summary:
The aim of this paper is to discuss how neutrality is reflected, and if it is *relevant,* in the contemporary theory and practice of international relations (IR's). Firstly, the paper departs from the notion that contemporary IR's are characterised by the process of *globalisation.* Secondly, it shows neutrality as a phenomenon which also belongs to the realm of international *security*, and as a concept which has *rarely* been reflected in the theory of IR's. Thirdly, it suggests that globalisation has changed the nature of international security, as well as of neutrality. But the changes have provoked discussions which have reached contradictory conclusions, and the *relevance* of neutrality has been questioned. Lastly, it provides a brief account of Swedish neutrality and its variations throughout history.

Keywords: neutrality, security, globalisation, relevance, Sweden, non-alignment

Relevance neutrality v současných mezinárodních vztazích

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Abstrakt:
Cílem stati je posoudit, jak je neutralita reflektována a zda je *relevantní* v současné teorii a praxi mezinárodních vztahů (MV). Stať za prvé vychází z myšlenky, že současné MV jsou charakteristické procesem *globalizace.* Za druhé přibližuje neutralitu jako jev, který patří do oblasti (také) mezinárodní *bezpečnosti,* a jako koncept, který je *zřídka* reflektován teorií MV. Za třetí uvádí, že globalizace změnila podstatu mezinárodní bezpečnosti, a tedy neutrality. Tyto změny vyvolaly diskuse s protichůdnými závěry a *relevance* neutrality je zpochybňována. Nakonec stať obsahuje stručný pohled na švédskou neutralitu a její variace v průběhu historie. Stať dochází k závěru, že neutralita ještě může být v současnosti relevantní, je však především třeba změnit její vnímání a chápání.

Klíčová slova: neutralita, bezpečnost, globalizace, relevance, Švédsko, neangažovanost

Content

Introduction

Neutrality, of course, can be studied as both a phenomenon (practice) and a concept (theory). Yet, from both points of view, neutrality can be very flexible and acquire many different forms (legal, political, security, economic, cultural, etc.). As a phenomenon, it has been part of human reality for centuries, and it has played varying, more or less important, roles in the various systems of 'international' relations. In theory, it has not been a real issue, nor has it been consistently challenged. Neutrality became most significant, perhaps, during the Cold War. In this respect, the end of bipolarity brought uncertainty and ambivalence. On the one hand, the rationale for neutrality seemed to disappear, on the other, the neutral states, while often accused of being afraid of losing their neutral identity, have increased their activities in new areas and become newly involved in international institutions, organisations, etc.

This paper investigates two main problems:
> How neutrality is reflected in the contemporary theory and practice of international relations.
> Whether neutrality is *relevant* in contemporary theory and practice of international relations.

It departs from the following premises:
> Neutrality also belongs to the realm of international *security*.
> The concept of neutrality has *rarely* been reflected in international relations theory.
> Contemporary international relations are characterised by the process of *globalisation*.
> Globalisation has changed the nature of international security, as well as of neutrality.
> The changes wrought have provoked discussions with contradicting conclusions; the *relevance* of neutrality in contemporary international relations has been questioned.

This paper also includes a brief case study on Swedish neutrality and its variations in history. It starts at the roots of Swedish neutrality in the 19th century, quoting the very first pronouncement of Swedish neutrality made in 1834. Then it briefly follows the path of Swedish neutrality during the two World Wars. It comments on the first 'modern' pronouncement of Swedish neutrality made in 1956, and highlights the role of Sweden, its neutrality and international activities during the Cold War. Then it traces the changes of Swedish neutrality after the end of bipolarity, citing the 1992 security doctrine, and suggests that they might be a result of the changes in the international security environment provoked by the process of globalisation rather than by

the end of the Cold War. Finally, it concentrates on the Swedish accession to the European Union in 1995, and on the following changes in Swedish neutrality reflected in the 2002 new security doctrine.

Regarding the key issue concerned in the paper – the *relevance* of neutrality in contemporary international relations – the author will suggest that a shift in our thinking is probably needed when theorising about neutrality, so that neutrality can be regarded as being not only still relevant, but even innovative and inspiring within the new international security framework.

1. Globalisation

At the very beginning, it is necessary to employ a suitable concept of globalisation, since here, *globalisation* is considered the basic framework in which all changes to human reality; this includes international relations, security and neutrality; occur. The paper adopts a socio-cultural approach to human reality because the author believes that displays more clearly the links between the concepts of globalisation, security and neutrality, and enables one to trace the changes in focus.

Human reality can be perceived as a socio-cultural system (Lehmannová 2007). From this point of view, one can distinguish three subsystems of human reality: (1) Civilising – the first subsystem includes cultural elements which help to secure the basic needs of existence, i.e. the biological survival of the race. (2) Regulative – the second subsystem includes human creations formed as the tools for the organisation of social relations, of relations between the social system and individuals (as its elements), between social systems (e.g. international relations), as well as between social systems and their environment. (3) Spiritual – the third subsystem includes intellectual creations securing the basic worldview orientation of the society and individuals in reality.

Tab. 1: The subsystems of socio-cultural reality and their characteristics

		Characteristics of the subsystems	
		Dynamics	Integration tendencies
The subsystems of socio-cultural reality	Civilising	Strong	Outward
	Regulative	**Relatively strong**	**Ambivalent**
	Spiritual	Weak	Inward

Source: Author

The subsystems have different dynamics and integration tendencies (see Tab. 1): Elements of the civilising subsystem develop dynamically. They have a strong tendency to create a foundation for higher socio-cultural wholes and to integrate them into the civilisation as such. The spiritual subsystem has a different

tendency: Its dynamics are slower. Its integration tendency takes the opposite direction. It has a tendency to inner integration and to strengthen the cultural system and its inner fixation around a value core; this tendency reveals itself in a national, cultural, identity. The regulative subsystem, naturally, stands somewhere in between; it has slower dynamics than the civilising one, and an ambivalent integration tendency.

> Contemporary international relations are characterised by the process of *globalisation.*

From this point of view, the process of globalisation is reflected as

> a natural process emerging from the cumulative effects of the implementation of the human strategy of cultural adaptation;
>
> a dynamic process forming global structures in individual parts of the human social reality and the different spheres of human activities;
>
> a long-term and complex historical process which tends to create a globally met system of human reality, i.e. a global socio-cultural system (Lehmannová 2007: 7).

The process of globalisation, at its current stage of development, is in a high state of instability and imbalance. One part of the system (civilisation) is global, while the other two (regulative and spiritual subsystems) are not; there is a 'global cultural gap'. The global cultural gap is the substance of global crises: *'The global civilization subsystem has lost the ability to regulate itself and human culture has a self destructive tendency. … From the cultural point of view, the main task of the current stage of human history is to search for common regulative and value principles and their implementation into international practice'* (Lehmannová 2007: 10-11).

2. Globalisation and Security

Lately, the realm of security has been one of increasingly growing dynamics and ambivalent integration tendencies reflected in the changes which are briefly described in this chapter.

> Globalisation has changed the nature of international security (as well as of neutrality).

The security implications of globalisation have rarely been studied. In contrast, the economic implications of globalisation, for instance, have, obviously, received much more attention (Cha 2000). Victor D. Cha gives two main reasons for this situation: Firstly, the security implications of globalisation often get confused with changes to the international security agenda which were brought about by the end of the Cold War.[1] Secondly, the effects of

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[1] Here, the author would like to stress his focus on the effects of globalisation (rather than of the end of the Cold War) on security and neutrality.

globalisation in security are inherently harder to conceptualise and measure (than, e.g. in the economy) (Cha 2000: 393).

The basic concept of *threat* in international relations has changed in terms of agency and scope. In the 1990s and later, the so called Copenhagen school has identified new agents and new 'sectors' of security. The concept of security has been extended vertically and broadened horizontally (see Fig. 1) (Buzan; Waever; Wilde 2005; Waisová 2005).

Fig. 1: Combination of vertical and horizontal level according to the Copenhagen school

International (system)   ↑ *Levels*
Regional (system)

          Sectors
State   ←──→
          Military │ Political Societal   Economic Environmental
Interstate groups
Individual(s)   ↓
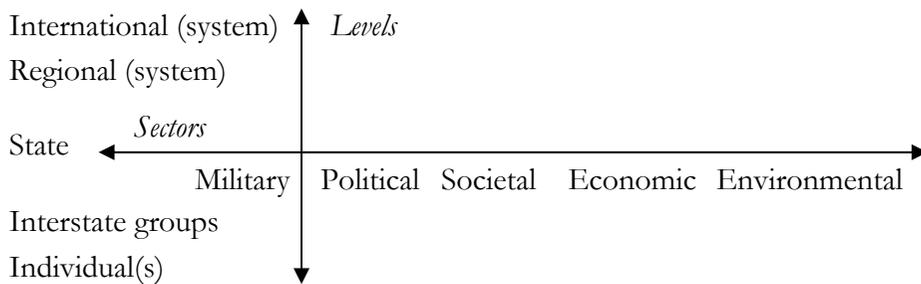
Source: Waisová 2005: 68 (translated)

Traditionally, the primary *agent* of security studies was the state. Today, it has been joined by other agents: different non-state groups and even individuals. Instead of interstate wars one now speaks of 'global violence', 'human security', etc. This makes security threats inherently more difficult to measure, locate, monitor, and contain (Cha 2000: 394).

In terms of *scope*, one can see an expansion beyond military security at national level. The Copenhagen school has identified and highlighted new 'sectors' of security: environmental, economic, societal, and political. Hence, one can speak of 'comprehensive security' which consists of both, military and non-military security (also physical and non-physical security, hard- and soft- security, etc.).

3. Globalisation, Security and Neutrality

Neutrality is an elastic phenomenon and concept which acquires diverse roles and forms (legal, political, military, economic, cultural, etc.). This chapter examines just briefly some of the legal aspects of neutrality (neutrality in international legal theory) before it turns to the analysis of neutrality as both, a concept (neutrality in international relations theory) and a phenomenon (neutrality in international relations practice) of security.

Neutrality also belongs to the realm of international *security*.

Tab. 2: Neutrality as placed in both, the system of socio-cultural reality and the international relations reality

		Dimensions of international relations reality				
		Legal	Political	Security	Economic	Cultural
The subsystems of socio-cultural reality	Civilising					
	Regulative	Neutrality	Neutrality	**Neutrality**	Neutrality	Neutrality
	Spiritual					

Source: Author

Here, the author places neutrality as a concept and a phenomenon in the regulative subsystem of socio-cultural reality (as a tool for the organisation of social relations), and, simultaneously, particularly in the realm of international security (as one of the 'dimensions' of international relations reality) (see Tab. 2).

3.1 Neutrality in International Legal Theory

In the broad sense, in international legal theory, 'neutrality' equals the abstention of a state from all participation in a war (i.e. an international armed conflict) between other states. In the current system of international relations, states (in fact, then the 'great powers') first acknowledged the right to practise neutrality as a strategic policy at the Congress of Vienna (1815).[2] Later, the rules of neutrality were codified in two of the Hague Conventions (1899, 1907); this has been commonly regarded as the first embodiment of neutral rights and duties under positivist international law (Agius 2006: 15). Since then, neutrality has been legally defined only on an *ad hoc* basis in multilateral or bilateral agreements concerning individual states.[3]

3.2 Neutrality in International Relations Theory

Neutrality has largely been a neglected subject in the literature on international relations. Most studies have been in the fields of law and history but, when it comes to international relations theory, neutrality is almost absent. In addition, in theory, at least, neutrality has been consistently challenged.

The concept of neutrality has *rarely* been reflected in international relations theory.

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[2]   The Congress formalised e.g. Swiss neutrality (1815).
[3]   E.g. Austrian neutrality (1955).

The earliest written records of neutrality are found in the Melian Dialogue in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. Also Machiavelli provides some comments on neutrality in *The Prince*, as well as Grotius in his *Mare Librum* and *De Jure Belli ac Pacis.*

The inter-war idealism, inspired by the idea of an international cosmopolitan moral order as described by Kant in the *Perpetual Peace*, saw neutrality in conflict with the 'harmony of interests' of all states and the principle of 'collective security' which were supposed to underpin the post-WW1 international order.

The post-WW2 realism has acquired a dual approach to neutrality: On the one hand, neutrality has contradicted the idea of power politics. While the rhetoric of neutrality has been state-based and centred on the protection of state sovereignty[4], this has been achieved, not by waging wars, but by remaining outside conflicts. Neutrality, as such, has undermined the realist concept of an anarchic international order where states use force to secure their needs. On the contrary, neutrals have sought security through abstention from the use of force and from wars. Thus, realism has not understood neutrality as a viable, or moral, policy. On the other hand, a state acting in its own interest (even a neutral one) should be acceptable to the realist doctrine. Still, during the Cold War, the realist perception of neutrality became probably the only way to explain the behaviour of the neutrals in international relations.

The changes in the concept of security generated by the process of globalisation (as well as by the end of the Cold War, as mentioned above) have altered the views on neutrality. First and foremost, as Agius notes, *'neutrality has disappeared de facto from the official security discourse'* (Agius 2006: 36). Still, with the emergence of critical theory, concepts such as 'state', 'sovereignty', 'power', 'anarchy', etc. have been increasingly questioned, and neutrality has been more often portrayed as a 'social construct'. External sources of neutrality (i.e. neutrality understood as a state's response to exogenous – international phenomena) have been added by internal ones (i.e. domestic sources of neutrality). Neutrality has increasingly been perceived as informed by national *identity* (i.e. historical experience, culture, practices, etc.) (Agius 2006).

3.3 Neutrality in International Relations Practice

Throughout history, neutrality has been commonly regarded as an unrealistic, amoral, and unacceptable stance, as well as as a security choice of small and weak states. It has been synonymous with a kind of self-interested isolationism (Agius 2006).

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[4]   The concepts of 'state', 'sovereignty' ('power', 'anarchy', etc.) are known as central to realist thinking.

In antiquity and during the Middle Ages, there was little room for practising neutrality. In the 19th century, the first permanently neutral countries appeared (e.g. Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg), or neutrality was declared on an *ad hoc* basis (e.g. Nordic countries).

Neutrality was openly violated during WW1 (the cases of Belgium, Norway), as well as during WW2 (e.g. Belgium, Norway, Denmark, Ireland,Luxembourg, the Netherlands).

The foundation of the United Nations (UN) obviously caused difficulties for many neutrals, while for some it became an opportunity to practice a new, active neutrality (the role of the neutral and non-aligned countries in the UN). Thus, neutrals could play a useful role in the bipolar setting, namely through their 'good offices', mediation, peacekeeping, and other activities.

During the Cold War, neutral states became subject to superpower pressure to choose sides politically, economically, militarily, etc. At the same time, they tended to be more active and outspoken on superpower behaviour, and they often served as a 'moral voice' in various debates. Superpowers' attitudes to neutrality varied from suspicion to accommodation (the different US/USSR attitudes). Some neutrals, in order not to have their neutrality violated (again as in the two world wars), started to put a strong accent on defence in their security policies. Adoption of armed neutrality was often presented as providing it with more 'credibility'. In general, it seems that even small, neutral, states were able to cause shifts in the international system during the Cold War.

The end of bipolarity, as well as the process of globalisation (as explained above), brought *uncertainty* and new ways of thinking about the international system. Suddenly, there seemed to be no one to be neutral between. Neutrality was not pushed to the periphery, but was considered part of an era that was, by then, over. More simply, neutrality represented the past. Many neutrals felt forced to relabel the policy from that of 'neutrality' to 'military non-alignment' which is in fact only the 'core' of neutrality.[5]

> The changes have provoked discussions with contradicting conclusions; the *relevance* of neutrality in contemporary international relations has been questioned.

Nevertheless, none of the neutrals has explicitly abandoned its traditional security policy yet. Most of the changes have only been manifested in a new, or increased, cooperation with various international institutions. Ireland stays in the European Union (EU), and cooperates in the areas of the evolving European foreign and security policy. In 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden entered the

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[5]   It is worth mentioning that various new labels for the practice of neutrality have appeared, such as 'non-alignment', 'post-neutrality', etc.

EU, and cooperate as well. In 2002, Switzerland entered the UN. For almost fifty years, Laos has been a ('silent') neutral too.

4. Case Study: Swedish Neutrality and Its Variations

Swedish neutrality has a long tradition. Historically, it has enjoyed strong popular support, and it has become part of the Swedish national identity (Agius 2006). Swedish neutrality has never been a legal concept, rather, a political one. Historically, it has been formed and transformed through political declarations.

The roots of Swedish neutrality can be traced back to the beginning of the 19th century. After the famous historical periods of Viking discoveries from the 8th to the 10th century, and Baltic (if not even European) hegemony in the 17th century, and after its failures in the Napoleonic wars, Sweden had to face a drastically changed geopolitical and strategic position, acquiring a small-state status on European periphery.

> In 1834, Swedish king Karl XVI Johan pronounced *strict and independent neutrality*.

During WW1, Swedish neutrality was not officially questioned. In 1920, when the Swedish parliament approved membership in the League of Nations (LN), the concept of neutrality *de facto* fell out of use. In 1936, when the first signs of war became apparent again, Swedish neutrality was reestablished. In 1939, during the Winter War between Finland and the USSR, Sweden was not exactly neutral, but, rather, 'non-belligerent'. During the first years of WW2 (approximately until 1943), Sweden made concessions to Germany on various occasions as it was practically surrounded by German forces or forces allied to Germany. Later, it became an important refuge for those fleeing from other Nordic or Baltic countries for political, religious, ethnic or other reasons.

After WW2, the Swedish parliament approved membership in the UN[6] while wishing to stay out of any alliance which would be part of any of the two adversarial blocs. The post-war Swedish attempts for a Nordic defence alliance did not succeed, and Sweden once again decided to return to neutrality.

> In 1956, Sweden pronounced *non-alignment in peace, aiming at neutrality in the event of war*.[7]

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[6] In fact, active involvement in the UN gradually became the cornerstone of Swedish foreign and security policy during the Cold War.

[7] This was the first time when Swedish neutrality (*neutralitet*) was labelled 'non-alignment', meaning non-participation in alliances (*alliansfrihet*). Today, Sweden presents its neutrality only as 'military non-alignment', hence non-participation in military alliances (*militär alliansfrihet*).

During the Cold War, Sweden found itself in a strategic position as a neutral territory separating East and West, with a relatively high military profile for a small state. Neutrality was based on a credible defence policy (a traditional territorial, 'total' defence), and a strong national defence industry. From the 1960s, this image was improved through a policy of active neutrality, peace- and bridge-building, and other similar activities particularly in the UN framework. In 1960, Sweden was one of the founding members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) was then not an option since Swedish neutrality was deemed incompatible with the idea of European integration.

The end of the Cold War meant for Sweden, above all, a vast improvement in its security situation (Rieker 2006: 68), but also a brief period of identity crisis (Huldt 2005: 42) since, suddenly, the two blocs which had constituted the main rationale for the policy of neutrality disappeared. There seemed to be no longer anyone to be neutral between. Facing a severe economic crisis, Sweden decided to apply for membership of the European Community (EC), while stressing the wish to maintain its traditional policy of neutrality. *'Thus'*, as Rieker suggests, *'the end of the Cold War did not immediately lead to a change in Swedish security identity...'* (Rieker 2006: 69). After a short period, Sweden found itself forced to change its security doctrine *supposedly* in order to make the membership possible.[8]

> In 1992, the Swedish security doctrine was changed to *non-alignment in peacetime, in order to enable Sweden to remain neutral in the case of war in its vicinity*.

In 1995, Sweden entered the EU and the scope for its neutrality seemed to be further reduced, particularly with a later development of the new European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). At the same time, Sweden asserted its influence on the EU security identity. It has systematically stressed the role of the EU, particularly in international crisis management, with a strong emphasis on its civilian aspects and crisis prevention. This reflects how Sweden has understood the new, 'comprehensive' nature of international security, and how the security identity of the EU has evolved too.

> In 2002, the Swedish security doctrine was further amended:[9]
> *'The aims of Sweden's security policy are to preserve our country's peace and independence, contribute to stability and security in our vicinity and to strengthen international peace and security*.

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[8]   The author suggests that the change was not only an effect of the end of the Cold War or the preparation for the EC membership, but also, and perhaps particularly, of the changes in international security provoked by the process of globalisation. Anyway, this would warrant further investigation.

[9]   Note the length, and the evident vagueness, of the declaration, especially in comparison with the previous ones.

Sweden pursues a policy of non-participation in military alliances. This security policy, making it possible for our country to remain neutral in the event of conflicts in our vicinity, has served us well.

Looking to the future, it is more apparent than ever that security is more than the absence of military conflict. Threats to peace and our security can best be averted by acting concertedly and in cooperation with other countries. The primary expression of this conviction at global level is our support for the United Nations. As a member of the European Union, we are part of a community based on solidarity, whose primary purpose is to prevent war on the European continent.

An adequate defence capability is a central component of Swedish security policy. Sweden is making active efforts to promote disarmament and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction' (Sweden's Security Policy, online).

Today, the key words for the Swedish security policy are: cooperation and solidarity. Sweden combines the policy of military non-alignment with a firm and active commitment in support of international peace and security. While an act of armed aggression (by a state) against Sweden is considered unlikely for the foreseeable future, increasingly, there have been other threats and challenges, more complex and more difficult to predict. In connection with these, Anders Bjurner, Head of the Department for European Security Policy in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, asserts that *'… it is difficult to imagine that Sweden would remain neutral in the (improbable) case of armed aggression against another European Union (EU) Member State. But the Swedish Government does not see any external circumstances for requesting any joint defence guarantees either within the EU or NATO'* (Bjurner 2005: 36). The policy of military non-alignment is not considered incompatible with Sweden's participation in crisis-management operations. However, the participation has to be compatible with international law (Bjurner 2005).

The last Statement of Foreign Policy, presented by the Swedish government on 13th February, 2008, does not mention neutrality or non-alignment at all. The only remaining reference to the traditional policy is the sentence that *'Sweden is not part of any military alliance'* (Statement... 2008: 3). Is Swedish neutrality gone for good?

Conclusion

Traditionally, neutrality in both legal and security terms, as well as in both theory and practice, has been perceived through such concepts as 'state', 'sovereignty', 'war', etc. If a war breaks out between states, neutrals must abstain from it; the abstention is understood above all in military terms. Simultaneously, the belligerents have an obligation not to interfere with the sovereignty of the neutral. Often, neutral states have boosted the 'credibility' of their security

policy by developing a strong and independent defence. Hence, the traditional idea of both the phenomenon and the concept of neutrality has fitted nicely into the structure of realist thinking, and has, rather, flourished in times of war (WW's1 and 2, the Cold War, etc.).

At the beginning of the paper, the author asserted that the characteristic of the process of globalisation in contemporary international relations is in a state of high instability and imbalance. While the civilising subsystem of the international socio-cultural reality is dynamic and, today, most probably global; the regulative subsystem where the realms of security, and, therefore, of neutrality, belong, has a much slower dynamic and an ambivalent tendency to integration in higher socio-cultural wholes.[10] The global civilisation does not have a corresponding global regulative framework which can cause difficulties in the future.

At the same time, and still, the realm of security seems to be much more dynamic than in the recent past. We have witnessed an emergence of new 'sectors' of security, not only military, but also environmental, economic, social, and political. We have encountered new actors, not only states but increasingly various non-state groups or individuals that try to exert their influence in contemporary international relations. More than with interstate wars we have coped with violence on a global scale, or with issues of human security.

In this framework, neutrality in its traditional sense does not seem to have a future. Paradoxically, exactly the neutrals have often been pioneers in the realm of the 'new' security. While they have been obliged to respect the restricted room for manoeuvre in military affairs, their experience in other security sectors has enabled them to understand and grasp relatively quickly the new threats to, and the other challenges of, the new security environment. Sooner and more often than others, they have been in contact with the new security actors. Instead of participating in wars, they have promoted global solidarity and human rights. Here, Sweden could be an outstanding example, with its tradition of 'good offices', bridge- and peace-building, and crisis management promotion, with a special focus on its civilian aspects and conflict prevention.

Perhaps, we will have to abandon the old notion of neutrality, as well as the terms we have been used to labelling it with. And although military security is perhaps not that important, and neutrals are not 'neutrals' anymore, the author believes they could still play a distinct and useful role in the 'new' international (or even global) security setting.

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[10] Worth mentioning is also the spiritual subsystem which has a dynamic and integration tendency even more contradictory to the civilising one.

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