

Swiss diplomat embedded in NZ's UN Security Council team

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UN Matters

Swiss diplomat embedded in NZ's UN Security Council team

Switzerland and New Zealand share a common set of values and principles on the international stage. As global trading nations and beneficiaries of international peace and security, both our countries are committed to a fair, rules-based international system. Both also recognize the key role the United Nations (UN) plays in support of this.

Against this backdrop, some years ago Foreign Ministers of New Zealand Murray McCully and Didier Burkhalter of Switzerland discussed options to further enhance our cooperation on UN matters. At the time, New Zealand's campaign for a seat on the 15 member UN Security Council (UNSC) was in full swing. Switzerland had also recently declared it was running for a seat a few years further down the track.

One concrete outcome of these discussions was the idea of a temporary deployment (or "secondment") of a Swiss diplomat to the UN Security Council task force within New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). Plans for the secondment were further discussed during Federal Councillor Burkhalter's visit to New Zealand in October 2013, the first-ever official visit by a Swiss Foreign Minister to these shores, and quickly finalised once New Zealand was successfully elected to the UNSC in October 2014.

In international politics and diplomacy, vying for a term on the world's top body in charge of maintaining international peace and security is no small feat by



any standard. Both campaigning to get elected, as well as servicing the two-year term as a member require careful, long-term planning. UNSC elections are often contested, and candidate countries need to secure the support of two thirds of the 193 member states of the UN. While since the UN's founding in 1945 five seats are permanently reserved for the victors of World War II (China, France, Russia, UK and the US), smaller countries such as ours could typically hope to secure one of the sought-after, non-permanent seats only once every twenty years.

Unlike New Zealand, which has been a member of the Security Council four times since 1945, if elected in 2022 this will be Switzerland's first time to join the UNSC (Switzerland only became a full member of the United Nations in 2002, making it the only country thus far to join the organisation by means of a direct democratic vote). The secondment therefore is an extremely useful opportunity for Switzerland to understand the mechanics and practical challenges of being a UNSC member in more detail. Insights and lessons learned on organisational and procedural aspects are of particular interest, as well as getting a sense of the scope for elected UNSC members to effectively influence UNSC discussions and outcomes.

Having previously served as Deputy Head of Mission at the Swiss Embassy in Wellington for two and a half years, it was a real privilege for me to join MFAT early last year. It has been an intensive and fast-paced experience ever since. The UNSC meets in New York almost on a daily basis, often on short notice, and covers all major conflicts of our times including Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, etc.

My role in the task force includes developing New Zealand's strategies and day-to-day coordination of issues on the Council's agenda, preparing Ministerial briefings, and supporting outreach to international and domestic partners. I'm also involved in longer-term projects including UNSC-related organisational and staffing aspects, as well as New Zealand-led work to improve the situation of civilians caught in the cross-fire of conflict in Syria and elsewhere.

My personal highlights have been New Zealand's month-long UNSC

presidencies in July 2015 and September 2016, as well as a 20-day relief assignment to New Zealand's Permanent Mission in New York earlier this year. This included having the honour of representing New Zealand at working-level meetings of the Security Council. Sitting behind the "New Zealand" name plate and taking the floor on its behalf is certainly something quite extraordinary for a Swiss! In another historic moment, I was able to attend closed Security Council consultations, which to the best of my knowledge would have been the first time ever for a Swiss diplomat.

With only a few more weeks remaining until the end of New Zealand's term, my work at the UNSC task force is now squarely focused on ensuring an enduring legacy of New Zealand's achievements, and building on and expanding the enhanced relationships and institutional knowledge beyond the term.

Looking back over the past two years, progress on the Security Council often seemed frustratingly slow, which is a common feature of many multilateral institutions. Reflecting the current state of world affairs more generally, the UNSC's effectiveness was often severely hampered by narrow national interests, zero-sum politics, as well as by the veto powers which permanent members have been granted in 1945. Syria is undoubtedly the most glaring example of the Council's – and indeed the whole international community's – failures to effectively address and end conflicts.

That said the Security Council can and does have an impact when it is united and manages to work through the necessary compromises. This was exemplified by the Council's political backing and international legal endorsement of the Iran deal last year. On average, consensus is eventually found on around 90% of Council resolutions, which are the most formal, legally binding form of its decisions. The UNSC has also managed to set up a global response to outlaw and sanction terrorist groupings, ISIS and Al Qaeda in particular – work which has been successfully led by New Zealand over the past two years. Less in the spotlight but equally important is the role the Council plays in overseeing the UN's 16 peacekeeping operations across the globe. While often far from perfect, these do contribute to saving lives on a daily basis in some of the worst conflicts of our times.

Embassy News

Despite its shortcomings, the UNSC is and remains the only permanent forum for discussion and decision-making with the mandate and global legitimacy to tackle today's many complex security challenges. Having a voice of reason such as New Zealand on the Council, with creative and practical ideas and no vested interests, is important and can make a difference in achieving the necessary compromises and reaching better outcomes.

The insights I was able to gain from working in MFAT are consistent with key findings of the Swiss Government's recent report to Parliament on its bid for a seat on the Security Council. UNSC membership would offer Switzerland an additional platform for demonstrating its traditional and proven skills as an impartial bridge builder and for putting them to good use on behalf of the international community, thereby advancing its own interests and values. The report also concludes that Switzerland's ability to fully pursue its policy of neutrality – which is not an end in itself, but an instrument of Switzerland's foreign and security policies – would remain unchanged. Moreover, the report indicates that a seat on the Security Council would offer Switzerland better access to key states and enable it to expand its international network, which I can confirm has clearly been the case for New Zealand.

Allowing a Swiss diplomat to work as a fully integrated member within MFAT in this once-in-a-generation diplomatic endeavour is also a reflection of the strength of the bilateral relationship and mutual trust between our two countries. While there is currently no New Zealander embedded in the Swiss foreign service, perhaps a successful outcome of Switzerland's campaign for a seat on the UNSC in 2023/2024 might provide a perfect opportunity to reciprocate this valuable and inspiring opportunity.

About the author:

Flavio Milan is a Swiss career diplomat born in Biel/Bienne. With degrees in history and international relations and work experience in research and education, UN affairs and trade policy, he joined the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs in 2002. Prior to taking up the role of Deputy Head of Mission at the Swiss Embassy in Wellington in 2012, he served in various positions in Berne, Tanzania and Thailand. He is married and has two young daughters who have developed a distinct Kiwi accent, in addition to their German mother tongue and their father's Bernese dialect.

Swiss citizenship: Act before it's too late

The Federal Assembly has decided in 2014 to tighten the rules regarding Swiss citizenship. It had been widely felt in the country that foreigners can obtain it too easily and without being sufficiently integrated in our society. In future, citizenship applicants have to know one of our national languages, may not be social aid beneficiaries, must respect our public order and the principles of our Constitution, participate in the economic life, encourage the integration of their families into Swiss society, respect our way of life and of course not be a potential threat to the security of our nation. These changes were all overdue.

This revision of the citizenship law had been caused by abuses in Switzerland and had nothing to do with the descendants of Swiss citizens living in other countries, for example New Zealand, who might want to recover Swiss citizenship. However, the Federal Assembly has decided that also these people must fulfill the same conditions in the future if they want to become Swiss citizens. In particular, they must legally reside in Switzerland. This is an important

change compared to the actual situation when Swiss descendants with close ties to Switzerland, for example to a Swiss Club, had been able to recover the citizenship of their ancestors while living abroad, for example in New Zealand.

The new law will enter into force on 1 January 2018. Complete applications by residents of New Zealand in this situation can be received by the Embassy of Switzerland in Wellington before, but not anymore after that date.

The Embassy furthermore strongly encourages Swiss parents resident in New Zealand to register the birth of their children with the Embassy without delay. Certainly New Zealand hospitals will not do that for them. Children thus registered will automatically be Swiss citizens. This registration has currently been possible until the age of 22. Under the new law it will be raised to the age of 25. After that date, they will be able to apply for Swiss citizenship only when residing in Switzerland.

Embassy of Switzerland

New Intern at the Embassy

Dear Helvetia Readers,

I started an internship at the Embassy of Switzerland in November, where I will be working for six months. I already spent one month in New Zealand as a traveller last January, being attracted by the weather, the interesting history, the movie locations, and, of course, the natural beauty of this country. Indeed, as I grew up in Basel-Landschaft in a rural area, with my family being one of the oldest families in the village, going to a new place with a lot of agriculture, untouched nature and farm animals (my grandfather owned sheep) did not feel very foreign to me at all.

I read colonial History at Basel University and later at University College London, which meant that I learnt a lot about Swiss emigration over the last 200 years. Since my father had emigrated from Turkey to Switzerland, become Swiss and married a Swiss woman, I can fully understand the difficulties of creating one's sense of belonging in a different culture, and I am continually amazed by how Swiss traditions and a sense of community are kept alive abroad while



also successfully integrating into the local society.

At the Swiss Embassy, I hope to learn more about the workings of diplomacy and foreign affairs. Among many different projects, I will be involved in the organisation of the Swiss summer event in March 2017, where I hope to meet many Swiss Abroad in order to celebrate our traditions.

Derya Sarina Ünal