EPIS Basics: Looking at the Concept of Neutrality

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Switzerland is famous for its banking, its watchmaking, its chocolate – and its neutrality. Unlike Sweden and Finland, which recently abandoned neutrality to join NATO in response to the war in Ukraine, Switzerland continues to maintain neutrality as a central pillar of its foreign policy, as it has for centuries. While the concept of neutrality may seem straightforward at first glance, its nuances are more complex. This article unpacks five important differentiations within the concept of neutrality.

Neutrality Law vs. Neutrality Policy

Occasional vs. Permanent Neutrality

Neutrality can be either occasional or permanent. Occasional neutrality occurs when a state decides to remain neutral in a particular conflict without a long-term commitment to avoid all future wars. In contrast, permanent neutrality is when a state commits itself to a neutral stance indefinitely. This concept emerged in the early 19th century with the Congress of Vienna (1815), where Switzerland's permanent neutrality was enshrined in treaty documents.

Integral vs. Differential Neutrality

Another important distinction within neutrality is between integral and differential neutrality. Integral neutrality refers to a state that attempts to remain impartial toward all conflict parties in all dimensions, including economic, military, and ideological impartiality. Differential neutrality, on the other hand, allows for certain forms of engagement, such as economic sanctions, while avoiding direct military involvement.

Armed vs. Unarmed Neutrality

Another common distinction is between armed and unarmed neutrality. Armed neutrality refers to a state that maintains military forces while pledging not to take sides in conflicts unless attacked. In addition to Switzerland, Sweden and Finland practised a policy of armed neutrality

before joining NATO. Conversely, unarmed neutral states, such as Costa Rica, the Vatican, or Lichtenstein, do not maintain military forces capable of defending against violations of their neutrality.

Maritime vs. Territorial Neutrality

Neutrality in international law also distinguishes between maritime and territorial aspects. Maritime neutrality has long been important, as control of sea routes has been crucial to trade and military operations throughout history. In times of war, neutral states often insisted on the right to trade freely, even with belligerent states. Territorial neutrality, on the other hand, refers to a neutral state's obligations regarding its land and airspace.

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