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European Languages

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Associated Press

Cold War neutrals now taking sides, timidly

4/9/2011

Swedish fighter jets are roaring into action over Libya under NATO command. Ireland is offering itself as a transit hub for U.S. military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Even famously independent Switzerland has peacekeepers in Kosovo.

For Europe's once-staunchly neutral countries, much has changed in the two decades since the Cold War ended. With no East-West conflict as a reference point, the concept of neutrality has been redefined to the point that some would say it's lost its meaning.

"There's total confusion. People have forgotten the concept of neutrality, which means don't take sides in a military conflict," said Swiss peace researcher Daniele Ganser.

Switzerland is considered the only truly neutral nation left in Europe. But it, too, has compromised its goal of staying out of other nations' troubles.

Switzerland finally joined the United Nations in 2002 and since 1999 has about 200 peacekeepers in Kosovo. It recently allowed allied forces to drive through and fly over Switzerland on their way to missions in Libya. The government said Swiss neutrality was intact because the Libya operation was authorized by the U.N. Security Council.

"To my mind that is not compatible with complete neutrality," Ganser said.

Sweden and Switzerland became neutral at the end of the Napoleonic wars. Ireland stayed out of World War II and shut its ports to Allied convoys. Austria and Finland turned to neutrality after taking the German side in that war.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, all five have moved closer to what used to be one of the rivaling blocs during the Cold War: NATO. All have joined its Partnership for Peace program for nonmembers and have sent troops to serve in NATO-led missions in the Balkans or Afghanistan.

Sweden reinforced its bonds to the alliance by sending eight fighter jets to the NATO-led air campaign in Libya, the only country in the former neutral group to do so. However, their limited mandate reflects Sweden's ambivalence toward entering combat with NATO.

The Swedish warplanes are allowed to unleash their weaponry only if fired upon, an unlikely scenario since Libya's air defenses have already been pounded by NATO jets for weeks. The Swedish planes cannot attack Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's ground forces.

Ove Bring, professor emeritus at the Swedish Defense College, said Sweden's reluctance to "go all the way" shows it still carries "mental baggage" from a tradition of neutrality that kept it out of wars for nearly two centuries.

Not that neutrality was always absolute.

Sweden allowed German troops to pass through its territory during World War II. Ireland permitted British and American servicemen who strayed on to Irish soil to be repatriated to the British territory of Northern Ireland. German crews from crashed Luftwaffe aircraft and sunken U-boats faced internment in Ireland without trial.

After the Soviet collapse, Finland and Sweden quietly abandoned their policy of neutrality, essentially by not using the word anymore. Instead they talked about "nonalignment" — remaining outside military alliances but not ruling out taking sides in a conflict.

Lately, they've stopped using that label, too.

"We don't call ourselves nonaligned, we never call ourselves neutral either," Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt told The Associated Press during a visit to Helsinki on Tuesday.

According to Bildt, those labels don't make sense after Sweden joined the European Union in 1995 — together with Finland and Austria.

The EU has deepened cooperation on security and defense matters since then. The EU treaty calls for all member states to help out if one of them comes under attack, while recognizing the "specific character" of members with a tradition of neutrality.

How, then, should countries previously known as nonaligned be defined?

Bildt's Finnish counterpart, Alexander Stubb, offered a suggestion.

"We are not a neutral country, have not been so for the past 20 years. And we are not a militarily nonaligned country but we are a country which does not belong to a military alliance," Stubb told AP. "I think there is a misunderstanding in some countries we've been trying to rectify for a long time."

Austria has stuck to the neutrality label even though it also is an EU member and cooperates closely with NATO. Unlike Sweden and Finland, Austria's neutrality is established by law.

Ireland also describes itself as neutral, even though it has allowed the United States to use Shannon airport for deployments back and forth to Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 100,000 U.S. troops annually have passed through Shannon since 2001. The Irish Army had to deploy troops around the airport's perimeter in 2003 after pro-neutrality protesters attacked a U.S. Navy plane with a meat cleaver.

When pressed on the issue, former Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern explained that Ireland's neutrality means that any belligerent can land its aircraft at Shannon and can even transport munitions or other weapons if granted special permission. He said if the Iraqi Air Force had wanted to land there, he wouldn't have had a problem with it.

"Anybody from any country can land at Shannon. We pride ourselves on being an open economy for everyone," he said in 2003.

Public opinion remains firmly against joining NATO in all five countries and none is likely to do so anytime soon.

But all except Switzerland are so closely linked to the alliance, through joint military exercises and international missions, that analysts say very little separates them from being actual NATO members.

"Nothing in substance," said Austrian security analyst Gerhard Karner. "Basically we are taking on all duties of member countries except we're not paying membership fees."