MARYAM FORUM FOUNDATION

THE GEOGRAPHY OF TRUST
Building Resilient, Trustworthy, Neutral Spaces for Global Governance

Executive Summary

A resilient system of neutral governance hubs is indispensable today because it

(1) provides legally guaranteed impartial venues for both formal (Track-One) and informal (Track-Two) diplomacy amid great-power rivalries;

(2) leverages digital and physical security to counter cyber-attacks and disinformation in hybrid summits; and

(3) accelerates multiregional coordination on transnational crises—from pandemics to climate shocks—by bypassing venue disputes and political stalemates.

Switzerland's 200-year legacy of armed neutrality, though recently strained by EU sanctions on Russia, still offers a foundational model, while Gulf states (UAE, Qatar, Oman), Asia's Singapore, and Latin America's Panama and Uruguay provide complementary strengths in geographic proximity, digital infrastructure, and symbolic neutrality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Global governance faces unprecedented stress from intensifying great-power competition, digital fragmentation, and eroding trust in multilateral institutions, which has accelerated since the start of 2025.
In this context, genuinely neutral governance hubs—states or platforms that abstain from military alliances and sanction regimes—serve as anchors of impartiality, offering safe havens for peace negotiations and norm-setting processes
By guaranteeing diplomatic immunity, host-state privileges, and non-alignment, such hubs enable adversaries to convene without fear of coercion or political bias, a capability essential for both Track-One state talks and Track-Two expert dialogues.
Finally, rapid responses to transnational threats—pandemics, climate disasters, cybercrime—require pre-established, networked venues that transcend bilateral rivalries, reducing delays and power-politics vetoes.

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF NEUTRALITY IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

2.1 HISTORICAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS

Neutrality as a state policy was formally recognised at the 1815 Congress of Vienna, which guaranteed Switzerland's abstention from military alliances and external conflicts—a status it has maintained ever since .
The Hague Convention (V) of 1907 codified the rights and duties of neutral powers and persons in war on land, establishing legal obligations to refrain from supporting belligerents and to treat all parties.
Subsequent treaties, including the First Geneva Convention of 1864, reinforced neutrality's humanitarian dimension by safeguarding wounded combatants and medical personnel under neutral auspices.
Neutrality differs from mere impartiality or objectivity: it is a binding legal status, not just a normative stance, obliging states to avoid military blocs, prohibit foreign troop basing, and abstain from sanction regimes not mandated by the UN Security Council.

2.2 NEUTRALITY VS. IMPARTIALITY VS. OBJECTIVITY

While **impartiality** denotes fair treatment of all parties and **objectivity** requires basing decisions on factual analysis, **neutrality** adds a structural guarantee via formal renunciation of alliances and belligerent support.
This guarantee enhances legitimacy: stakeholders perceive outcomes as free from host bias, increasing compliance with agreements—from arms-control

treaties to humanitarian accords—brokered on neutral soil.
Thus, effective global governance demands a synergy of neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity, with neutrality forming the legal bedrock that underpins the others.

2.3 NEUTRALITY'S RELEVANCE IN A MULTIPOLAR, DIGITAL AGE

- **Great-Power Rivalry.** As U.S.-China and Russia-Western tensions rise, neutral venues offer the only politically acceptable forums for discreet crisis-management talks, reducing miscalculation risks in flashpoints such as Taiwan or Eastern Europe
- **Digital Fragmentation.** State-sponsored cyber-attacks on conferencing platforms (e.g., "Zoom bombing," spyware infiltration) threaten the confidentiality of virtual diplomacy; only hubs with quantum-resistant networks and air-gapped rooms can ensure secure hybrid dialogues.
- **Transnational Crises.** Pandemics, climate shocks, terrorism, and cybercrime cross borders without deference to alliances; a decentralized consortium of neutral hubs can coordinate rapid, cross-regional responses without being blocked by power-politics gridlock
- **Legitimacy Deficit.** Public trust in the UN and G20 is declining; demonstrably impartial hubs that deliver tangible outcomes—truce agreements, normative frameworks, cooperative financing—can restore confidence in multilateralism.

3. SWITZERLAND: THE ARCHETYPAL NEUTRAL HUB AND ITS EVOLVING ROLE

3.1 ORIGINS AND PILLARS OF SWISS NEUTRALITY

Switzerland's policy of armed neutrality dates to the Reformation but was internationally recognised at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, ending centuries of mercenary involvement in European wars. Its 1848 Federal Constitution and subsequent legal provisions enshrine non-participation in military alliances, prohibition of foreign troop deployments, and a mandate to offer its territory for impartial humanitarian action.
Geneva, as a physical and normative hub, hosted the 1864 Geneva Convention, the League of Nations (1920–1939), and, since 1949, the UN Office at Geneva, solidifying Switzerland's role in shaping international humanitarian law and normative regimes.

3.2 SWITZERLAND'S CONVENING POWER AND INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Home to over 200 international organizations, including ICRC, WHO, and the Human Rights Council, Switzerland provides unparalleled translation services, secure facilities, and diplomatic privileges that enable continuous operations of multilateral bodies. Its multilingual workforce and federal governance create a culturally neutral environment, minimizing perceptions of host-state bias and fostering broad participation in treaty negotiations—evident in the Ottawa Process on landmine bans and the Cluster Munitions.

3.3 STRAINS ON SWISS NEUTRALITY: SANCTIONS AND NATO DEBATES

On 28 February 2022, Switzerland broke with tradition by adopting all EU sanctions on Russia, stating an "extraordinary situation" justified extraordinary measures—a move criticised as a departure from strict neutrality. Russian media and commentators decried the decision as violating neutrality, while domestic political parties (e.g., SVP) warned of a drift toward NATO, raising questions about Switzerland's ability to host truly impartial talks. An expert report in 2024 even recommended closer cooperation with NATO—including joint exercises—reflecting internal debates over modern defense realities versus historic neutrality commitments.

We argue that the loss of neutrality has corresponded to Switzerland loosing one of its key competitive and leadership advantages, and it is critical for the Alpine country to take the right steps towards greater neutrality – if it wants to maintain its global stature.

4. EMERGING AND COMPLEMENTARY NEUTRAL HUBS

Neutral governance hubs in the Gulf, Asia, and Latin America complement Switzerland's historic role by combining regional proximity to conflicts, cutting-edge digital infrastructure, and symbolic commitments to impartiality. The UAE and Qatar leverage sovereign wealth and state-of-the-art centers to mediate Yemen and Sudan, while Oman's Ibadi tradition and non-alignment have powered Iran–US back-channel talks in Muscat. Singapore's Smart Nation platform and leadership of the Global Governance Group (3G) enables secure hybrid summits that bridge G20 and smaller states. In Latin America, Panama's canal neutrality and Uruguay's democratic consistency make them ideal for hemispheric dialogues.

4.1 GULF STATES: UAE, QATAR, AND OMAN

The United Arab Emirates and Qatar have invested over significantly in mediation and humanitarian initiatives to position themselves as neutral powers in the Horn of Africa and other global initiatives. Through the Gulf Cooperation Council framework, they combine financial resources with local expertise to underwrite peacemaking efforts, enhancing trust among regional actors reluctant to engage on third-party soil.

Oman, with its Ibadi Islamic tradition of moderation and a consistent policy of non-alignment, has successfully brokered key agreements—most notably the April 2022 Yemen truce and successive Iran–US nuclear back-channel talks in Muscat—demonstrating its credibility as an emerging neutral middle power. Omani neutrality is enshrined in its 1996 Basic Statute, which emphasizes peaceful mediation. While Oman generally refrains from direct military involvement in regional conflicts, it actively participates in international security efforts and maintains a significant military presence.

4.2 ASIA: SINGAPORE'S UNIQUE MODEL OF PRINCIPLE PRAGMATISM

Despite its modest geographic size, Singapore plays an outsized role in global governance. It possesses a proven track record of diplomatic agility, neutrality, and legal clarity, makes it a key candidate for hosting and anchoring global governance initiatives.

The city-state foreign policy is rooted in principled pragmatism, emphasizing rule of law, respect for sovereignty, and non-alignment. This has allowed it to mediate between conflicting blocs without the perception of ideological bias.

Notably, Singapore has successfully hosted sensitive high-level dialogues—including the Trump–Kim Summit in 2018—proving its capacity to guarantee security, confidentiality, and neutrality. Its neutrality is not merely procedural; it is structural—backed by a credible reputation for non-intervention and balanced relations with both the U.S. and China.

As chair of the Global Governance Group (3G), an informal coalition of 30 small-and-medium-sized states aligned with neither the G7 nor G20, Singapore convenes 3G ministers alongside G20 Troika meetings to ensure inclusive policy deliberations on climate finance, digital norms, and pandemic preparedness. Singapore has championed the voices of underrepresented nations in major global fora. Its ability to build consensus among disparate actors strengthens the legitimacy of global decision-making processes.

4.3 LATIN AMERICA: PANAMA AND URUGUAY

Despite recent threats of Annexation by the United States, under the Torrijos–Carter Treaties, the Panama Canal enjoys a status of "permanent neutrality," compelling all signatories to guarantee unrestricted transit and refrain from military intervention—a framework reaffirmed by the U.S. Senate in 1978 and recently tested by U.S.–China competition over canal concessions in 2025. Panama leverages this symbolic neutrality and its strategic logistics network to host South-South cooperation forums and track-two dialogues on migration, trade, and environmental security.

Uruguay, known for its stable democracy and progressive foreign policy, has served as a mediator in Mercosur and UN peacekeeping discussions, with proposals underway to establish an "Uruguay Neutrality Center" focused on digital diplomacy pilots and regional confidence-building measures.

4.4 AFRICA: ABIDJAN: A RISING WEST AFRICAN FOR NEUTRAL GOVERNANCE

We argue that Abidjan, the economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire, is increasingly emerging as a credible and underutilized hub for neutral global governance in West Africa. While traditionally less prominent than Addis Ababa or Nairobi in diplomatic circles, it is less directly involved in regional and global conflicts. Abidjan's strategic position within the Francophone sphere, its hosting of the African Development Bank (AfDB), and its growing political stability make it a compelling candidate for future multilateral engagement.

5. LEADERSHIP AND NEUTRALITY

Genuine leadership rooted in neutrality is vital for convening diverse actors, mitigating polarization, and fostering innovation. By **abstaining from partisan alignments**, neutral leaders signal that they prioritize common interests over geopolitical agendas, creating psychologically safe environments conducive to open dialogue and creative problem-solving.

Neutral leadership also **preserves institutional legitimacy**. In conflict-affected regions, parties are more likely to accept mediation offers from leaders with no competing security pacts, enhancing the probability of compliance and reducing post-agreement disputes. For example, Oman's neutral facilitation of Iran-US nuclear discussions demonstrated how

impartial leadership can bridge ideological chasms that formal channels cannot.

Moreover, neutrality **catalyzes innovation** within organizations. The creation of safe spaces allows for novel ways of dialogue and problem-solving to emerge that have critical importance to find ways to solve diplomatic stalemates.

6. WHY NEUTRAL HUBS AND NEUTRAL LEADERSHIP HAVE BECOME RELEVANT AGAIN – AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

6.1 GREAT-POWER RIVALRY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

As U.S.-China and Russia-Western tensions deepen over Taiwan, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, neutral hubs **provide the only politically acceptable venues for discreet crisis-management talks and contingency planning**, lowering risks of miscalculation in flashpoints I.

6.2 TRANSNATIONAL CRISES DEMAND RAPID, INCLUSIVE COORDINATION

Pandemics, climate shocks, terrorism, and cybercrime cross borders without deference to alliances. A **networked consortium of neutral hubs** can deploy thematic pop-up nodes—physical or digital—to orchestrate swift, cross-regional responses free from bloc-based vetoes or delays.

6.4 RESTORING FAITH IN MULTILATERALISM

Public trust in the UN, G20, and other forums is eroding, driven by perceptions of great-power dominance and inequitable decision-making. **Demonstrably impartial hubs that deliver tangible outcomes**—truce accords, normative frameworks, cooperative financing—can **reinvigorate confidence** in global governance.

6.5 ENABLING INCLUSIVE INNOVATION

Neutral hubs and leaders reduce barriers—geographical, financial, and ideological—to participation, integrating smaller states, civil society, and the private sector into policy dialogues. This **broadens the pool of expertise**, leading to more sustainable and equitable solutions.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Neutral governance hubs represent our best defense against the fracture of global cooperation. As great-power tensions, digital threats, and transnational crises escalate, the world needs a distributed network of Geneva, Muscat, Singapore, Panama, or Montevideo—each contributing unique strengths yet united by codified neutrality, technological rigor, and leadership excellence. Only through these concerted measures can multilateralism be revitalized, trust be restored, and collective action be mobilized to address the defining challenges of our age.

1. Reinforce **neutrality** as a principle for existing neutral hubs, especially Switzerland

2. Develop **an informal network of neutral hubs** and share best practices and knowledge – and possible a **global charter for neutrality**

3. Establish a **Neutrality Fellows Program** – teach neutrality as a way to lead, and mediate

4. Consider paving the way for a **Neutrality Trust Fund** to finance summit hosting, diplomatic fellowships, and rapid-response pop-up hubs

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