



Speech by H.E. Dr. Ralf Heckner, Ambassador of Switzerland to India and Bhutan within the framework of a Fireside Chat organised by the Asian Pathfinders, 27 February, 2021.

‘From global to digital governance: Switzerland as the hub of international policy’

I am happy to be here at this Fire Side Chat. Let me thank the organizers – the Asian Pathfinders – for giving me the opportunity to exchange ideas with a bright and engaged audience.

Let me begin on a personal note.

When I entered the Swiss Foreign Service 24 years ago, I expected to work on global governance. A country like Switzerland relies on international law, on a stable multilateral order and on an inclusive system of global governance. What I did not expect back then was that I would have to deal with digital global governance. Nevertheless, here we are today, doing just that!

This is the beauty of being a diplomat, addressing new questions and issues all the time.

Years ago, it was good enough to read books about history, geography, culture and economy to be up to date when it came to your diplomatic profession.

Today, it is essential to be up to date on new and emerging trends and innovations. For that reason, some years ago, I started reading books on innovation. I was fascinated by Kevin Kelly’s book *The Inevitable – Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*. I am currently reading the book *Groundbreaking Inventions in Information and Communication Technology* by the Indian Professor V. Rajaraman. He is also writing interesting newspaper columns.

However, let me clarify that reading these books doesn’t make me an expert. This is the first time that I am delivering a talk about digital global governance – governance of the new digital space – and Switzerland’s role in it.

Before I start, let me tell you that it is all to India’s credit that we are talking about the digital space today – India invented the number zero, which is the key to mathematics and for digitalization!

Why is digital global governance important?

When we started to sail the oceans, the countries that ruled the maritime space ruled the world, and set the rules.

After that, we learnt how to fly. Rules for the airspace were established. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, is in charge of setting the standards and regulations for the civil aviation industry worldwide. Countries developed their civil and military air forces to exploit, rule and protect their airspace.

As soon as we were able to send rockets in space, the race to conquer space started. Today, even private citizens are competing for space in space. The fact that some countries have set up so-called Space Forces gives us a taste of the new competition in space. India is a part of this competition.

And now there is the digital space. We are talking about digitalisation, including the creation of networks and the use of artificial intelligence. This new digital space is a space where companies compete with each other – the Big Tech – and where companies and states are in competition too. It is a space that might need some form of common regulation. It is a space with the most important new critical resource to rule the world in the 21st century – digital data!

Let me explain that:

In the 19th and 20th century, countries with coal, oil and gas, as well as steel had the most important resources for their economies and for their political might. Today, it is digital data.

The Carnegies and Rockefellers of today are the owners of the Big Tech companies. The owners of Google, Facebook, Twitter and others are household names all over the world. The richest and most influential people on this planet are those who own our data. With our personal data, they know more about us, our habits, our interests, our likes and dislikes than we and our close ones do.

This raises important questions: Who owns the data; who has access to it; what is being done with the data; is our data used to manipulate us – to rule us and the world?

The digital space, just like the physical space, is vulnerable to crime. Cybercrime cost the world economy US\$ 1 trillion (just over 1% of global GDP) in 2020.

However, the digital space also offers an incredible opportunity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Digital technologies contribute significantly to economic growth: It has been reported that each additional 10 percent of internet penetration adds 0.7 percent to gross domestic product (GDP) growth in developed countries and 1.1 percent in emerging economies. Each additional 10 percent of broadband penetration contributes 1.2 percent GDP growth in developed countries and 1.4 percent in the emerging countries.

Now you understand why the question of digital global governance is so important to all of us today. If you rule the digital space, you put your hands on the most important commodity today – on data.

The major powers are competing for technological leadership in the digital cyberspace. Global digital governance today has at least four powers that dominate the field – I am now talking about Realpolitik in the digital space!

- The USA where private companies have been the main players;
- China, where the State – the Communist Party – has taken the lead in governance issues;
- the European Union, where the need to protect its citizen's data has been a priority;
- And India. India is among the leading countries in developing a public digital infrastructure as a core utility for its 1.3 billion people – for a sixth of the global population! The Indian government aims to digitally empower its citizens. The actions of the Indian Government for its people in the digital space will have a huge effect on the world. India is a big producer and consumer of data.

Therefore, the digital global governance could be

- G 2, i.e. U.S. and China.
- G 4 i.e. U.S., China, Europe and India, or
- G 193 i.e. all U.N. member states.

India will be one of the countries who will have a major say in this. India is one of the most important global players who will decide the future of digital global governance. If India were to decide to favour a digital global governance based on 'G 193', India would be speaking for the majority of the U.N. member states!

Global governance and Switzerland

There is a pattern on how the world has dealt with emerging global issues and technologies – it has been by establishing global rules (conventions) and by establishing international institutions:

- With the emergence of the vicious competition of the European powers for continental and global dominance and with the emergence of modern weapons, there was a need to establish international rules for the conduct of these new kinds of war. That led to the signing of the Geneva Conventions by twelve states and to the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva in 1864.
- With the emergence of the telegraph, which revolutionized global communication, came the establishment of the International Telegraph Union in 1865. This is today's International Telecommunication Union located in Geneva.
- The World Postal Union was founded in 1874 in Berne, Switzerland, highlighting the importance of connectivity and communication.

- With the emergence of railways in the 19th century, there was a need to regulate international train services. In 1893, the Intergovernmental Organisation for International Carriage by Rail was established in Berne.
- After World War I, called the 'Great War' because of its horrors, the League of Nations was founded in Geneva in 1920 in order to maintain world peace.

That's how Switzerland turned into the place where global governance is being made. Since then, Switzerland has been a place where world leaders meet, discuss and address issues of global importance.

That's how gradually Geneva turned into the place to be in. Since then, Geneva has a tradition of hosting international and non-governmental organisations – long before the creation of the digital space.

Multilateralism, as we know it today, began in Geneva just over a hundred years ago (November 1920) with the first assembly of the League of Nations. The League of Nations laid the foundation for the present-day global governance architecture.

Today, no fewer than 41 international organisations, several UN agencies, more than 750 international NGOs, universities and think tanks, and some 32,000 international civil servants, diplomats and representatives of civil society are conducting multilateral diplomacy in Geneva. That's quite some global brainpower that is living and working and thinking in Geneva!

International Geneva is a unique platform, a huge think tank, to find solutions to the challenges of our societies and of our planet. There is not one single issue of global importance that is not dealt with in Geneva: From disarmament, peace and security (Conference on Disarmament), to humanitarian action and humanitarian law; human rights (Human Rights Council) and migration; labour (International Labour Organisation), economics and trade (World Trade Organisation); science; telecommunications (International Telecommunications Union); health (World Health Organisation); the environment and sustainable development. It is massive!

No wonder – Geneva plays a key role in global digital policy making too.

Geneva and digital global governance

Several organisations in the area of digital governance are based in Geneva as the operational hub of the UN system, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which I have already mentioned; the Secretariat of the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF); the International Organization for Standardization (ISO); the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC).

In Geneva, you find the global institutions and the technical expertise to deal with the pressing issue of digital global governance!

Geneva is the space where you can connect all the dots when it comes to digital global governance.

Switzerland and digital global governance

With Geneva having all the ingredients to deal with the critical issue of digital global governance, it is obvious that Switzerland and Swiss diplomacy have a stake in this too.

Strengthening International Geneva, and its unique ecosystem of international organizations, U.N. agencies, NGOs and universities, has always been one of Switzerland's most important foreign policy priorities.

The main aim of any foreign policy is to promote its interests and values, which do not change with the emergence of new technologies or the progress of digitalisation. This is also valid for Switzerland. This means that interests and values have to be defended and promoted not only in the physical space, but also in the digital space.

It is for that reason that the Swiss government just released its Digital Foreign Policy Strategy 2021-24. Switzerland's Digital Foreign Policy Strategy focus areas include:

- Investing in and strengthening the International Geneva and its digital governance ecosystem of which I just talked about;

- strengthening of international governance and cooperation forums; this means promoting dialogues around global digital governance;
- digital self-determination for individual users;
- international law and the use of digitalisation to improve international cooperation.

Switzerland seeks a free, open and secure digital space, based on international law and focuses on people and their needs. This is our vision.

Potential cooperation between Switzerland and India on digital global governance

Switzerland is keen to intensify further its relations with India – digital global governance could be one area. Indeed, there is a potential for Switzerland and India to work together towards a positive digital future:

Today, India is one of the most connected nations in the world. It is investing strategically in digital infrastructure. I am impressed by the use of digital technologies in India. The Indian government wants to deliver services through digital platforms. It wants to better target the beneficiaries of welfare schemes; it wants to eliminate wastage and corruption. India is also managing the Covid-19 vaccination rollout through a digital platform. Each Indian resident can have an e-identity. The Swiss citizens will vote on an e-identity on March 7. India has been faster than Switzerland in this respect!

It is India's priority 'to promote technology with a human touch' during its ongoing tenure as a non-permanent UNSC member, and Switzerland and India can work together in the multilateral system to promote this shared objective. Prime Minister Modi's vision is that of human centric multilateralism. Switzerland and India have an opportunity to work together for the people of this planet!

Both of our governments and foreign ministries have developed digital strategies and administrative units to deal with this new and critical issue of digital global governance.

My foreign ministry, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, has just created an administrative unit dealing with digitalization. And, as I outlined in my remarks, digitalization is now an integral part of our new Foreign Policy Strategy. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has established the 'New and Emerging Strategic Technologies Division' in January 2020. It is responsible for policy making, for example defining India's position in multilateral fora. Both the foreign ministries have sent out a clear message that digitalisation is a foreign policy issue. When it comes to using the opportunity for cooperation in the digital space, that is a foundation on which we can build upon.

The right place to cooperate on this would be Geneva!

Working together on digital global governance is not only an opportunity for Switzerland and India, it is a necessity – India, as I mentioned earlier, will be one of the most important global players who will decide the future of digital global governance.

Switzerland and India could cooperate on digital global governance in Geneva by working concretely in all platforms and official or informal processes that are dealing with global digital governance. This can take place in several ways.

First, our countries can work together on the follow up of the two UN World Summits on the Information Society, which took place in Geneva 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. This takes place at the annual World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) Forum in Geneva. The lead organization is the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Another important outcome of the WSIS was the creation of the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF), whose secretariat is based in Geneva. The UN Internet Governance Forum is the largest global multi-stake holder dialogue platform, bringing together not only states but also private businesses and other actors with an interest, on issues relating to digitisation. The Forum is a key platform where all actors in the digital space, in one way or another, have a chance to meet and try to connect the dots. It is not an intergovernmental process.

Secondly, our countries can work together on the recommendations of the Report of the UN Secretary-General's – Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, published in June 2020. The vision of the report is that all people are connected, respected, and protected in the digital age. It recommends global digital cooperation around the Internet Governance Forum in Geneva and a strengthening of the Forum. It also calls for discussions on issues such as digital inclusion, digital capacity-building,

digital human rights, artificial intelligence, digital trust and security to take place. These are all incredibly important issues in which Switzerland and India could cooperate.

Thirdly, our countries can work together in all international organizations which deal with digitalization – and there are 41 of them in Geneva. They are all in the process of getting digitalised. The World Health Organization is working on e-health, as the World Trade Organisation is working on e-commerce. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is dealing with questions ranging from data protection for refugees to the potential of digital tracking of refugees to provide services. The Conference on Disarmament has been looking into emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapon systems. This is what will happen in Geneva in the next four to six years. We will see the digitalisation of the traditional agendas and the digitalisation of the UN institutions in Geneva! The digitalisation of the traditional agendas and the mandates of the international organisations will have very interesting areas for cooperation between Switzerland and India.

Geneva to New York

Switzerland and India can also cooperate in this field at the UN Security Council in New York. India is a member of the Council for the period 2021-2022. Switzerland is candidate for a non-permanent seat of the UN Security Council for the period from 2023 to 2024.

Countries are using the digital space not only to steal state secrets but also scientific and economic know-how. They could use the digital space to attack the functioning of the infrastructure of another country.

What if a cyber-attack by one country would be labelled as a *casus belli* by the attacked state – a reason to go to war invoking the right to self-defence? NATO has defined cyber space as the fourth domain of collective defence (together with land, air, and sea). Therefore, what is happening in the digital space could have very real consequences for global peace and security!

Switzerland and India need to be active in Geneva and in New York at the same time – possibly together working for an inclusive and free digital global world! Both our countries have the ambition to shape world affairs.

I conclude with this pitch. Switzerland with the International Geneva is well placed to be the place for the international community to define our digital global governance.

Geneva is the place where countries like Switzerland and India can best defend their interests when it comes to our digital global governance.

Thank you for your attention.