

Interview

“Politics Is The Art Of Change”

First steps and negotiations can be tricky - they require courage, visionary power, the ability to look into the future, transcending boundaries. The extraordinary run of the first female Swiss Ambassador in Berlin, Christine Schraner Burgener, now on board in Myanmar for the UN special peace-shaping envoy.



Text & Photography by Marcelle de Michiel

Her silhouette is elegant, lightly stepping on the old, creaking parquet through the deep hallways of the 150 year-old building in the heart of Berlin's government district, with a stunning view of the Reichstag, Christine Schraner Burgener makes a relaxed impression as she opens the door. The Swiss Embassy was the only building left around the German Parliament after the bombing of Berlin in World War II. The location makes it seem like a neutral observer in a world political negotiations. Since she took over in 2015, the Swiss Embassy has become an open house and mecca of exchange.

In infectious enthusiasm, “Switzerland is at the forefront of pioneering innovations, but also in great demand in the areas of peace policy and research.” As the first female Swiss ambassador to Germany, she knows what she is talking about. She has been shaping the Swiss diplomatic service for the last 27 years. In 2009 to 2011, during the years of political unrest in Thailand, Christine shared the ambassadorship of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar with her husband, Christoph Burgener. “Our 50/50 ambassador job sharing was a worldwide novelty that had never been done before. The fruits of gender equality work are slowly being harvested”, she smiles and continues, “Thailand has the highest number of women on supervisory boards worldwide. When I was there I was never asked about having a family and career. When I returned to Europe after 6 years, I learned that this was still an issue - I was shocked.”

The ambassador couple began in Dublin in 1998, where their son was born and the daughter was 2 years old, “When I joined the [Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs \(FDFA\)](#) in 1991, there was still a regulation that didn't allow Swiss foreign diplomats to work part-time. I

found that discriminatory and that's how I argued until it was changed by the Federal Council," she explains. After the ordinance changed, she asked for a job sharing position. What started off looking like a mission impossible ended up succeeding. "We approached it in a very pragmatic way: one of us worked in the morning, the other in the afternoon, handing over the children in between. We each worked on our own dossiers and responsibilities."

Schraner wants to shape the future and does not get tired of seizing opportunities for positive change. She installed a solar system for the embassy power station on the roof of the Swiss Embassy in the business district of Bangkok, and she decisively prompted the establishment of a [Thailand Truth Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\)](#) in the seemingly insolvable conflict between the underprivileged rural population, the red-shirts, and the country's elite, the yellow-shirts.

[The great great granddaughter of Melchior Andereg \(1828-1914\)](#), Swiss mountaineering legend during the heyday of first great ascents, brings out a hefty book from the library, "Today, the first comprehensive factual report on this conflict in Thailand is on the table. Such reports are hugely important in reconciliation processes." "It is important to get involved in cultural differences. Many negotiation talks are discreetly held behind closed doors and in great confidentiality. It is certainly helpful for me that I grew up in Japan."

**“Diplomacy today
is still
absolutely essential”**



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The dynamic red on her office wall in the background seems to highlight her experiences. The sculpture of the [Tashi Brauen](#) could be the Swiss Alpine range, or just that unbridled force that inhabits pioneering visionaries – the ability to look into the future and to shape it for the better. With her great capacity as a catalyst for change, she has been in Berlin for 3 years at a time when very different topics, such as economic relations with Germany have been in the foreground. Germany is Switzerland's most important trading partner, with an annual trading volume of over 94 billion Swiss francs. Schraner assures me, "Germany is very connected to us. Every week, at least one delegation from Switzerland comes to discuss issues such as the energy transition, the environment, digitization processes, but also security, and migration or fiscal policy."

She continues to talk about the topics that pepper her everyday work life, the importance of building trust, especially cross-border issues, such as the sites for the storage of radioactive waste, train and air travel, or the accompanying measures concerning the freedom of movement of persons, in particular with Baden-Württemberg in Southwest Germany. The 54-year-old emphasises, "We can only find solutions that are bilateral and European in close cooperation." In the unmistakable tone of honest conviction she points out, "It is always about give and take. Regional stability in Europe is one of the core interests of Switzerland. Unfortunately, the international situation is still marked by many crises."

The trend of greater emphasis on prevention on the international peace and development agenda has always reflected the traditional priority of Swiss foreign policy. Since 1956 the Swiss FDFA has employed 740 diplomats, currently employing 103 female diplomats and 254 male diplomats. Today, women head 16 out of 102 Swiss embassies.

Her eyes wander far into the distance, over the [German Bundestag](#), as she says, "It is important that one speaks to the population about the interdependencies. If other countries – other peoples around the world – are doing well, then it will have a positive impact on us all; this concerns the topics of prosperity, the energy transition, and security, but also the flow of refugees. Diplomacy today is still absolutely essential."