Switzerland under pressure

Swiss neutrality – fundamentals and current developments

by Pascal Lottaz, Japan*

(CH-S) In recent weeks, pressure on Switzerland to join the European NATO alliance has increased enormously. Germany and France, as our country's direct neighbours, as well as the United Kingdom, as a former world power, and the EU leadership want to urgently shift Europe towards a war economy and a state of readiness for war. Billions are being made available for this purpose. For them, war against Russia seems inevitable.

Italy and other European countries are distancing themselves from this assessment. They see no direct threat from Russia and are calling for a peace- and future-oriented security architecture to prevent the war in Ukraine from spreading to Western European countries.

Over the past three decades, our federal government, the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS), the army leadership and parts of parliament have pushed ahead with Switzerland's integration into NATO. Today, it is urgent to halt and reverse this misguided development. This requires an open, objective and honest debate in our country.

The federal popular initiative "Safeguarding Swiss neutrality" (neutrality initiative) came into being in April 2024. It will be debated in parliament this summer and autumn and is expected to be put to a vote by the people and the cantons in spring 2026.

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Pascal Lottaz gives a lecture on Swiss neutrality in the seminar room in Frauenfeld. (Picture mt)

On 1 February 2025, Pascal Lottaz held a seminar on Swiss neutrality at the "Association Schweizer Standpunkt" in Frauenfeld, Thurgau. Subsequently, he kindly provided us with the following article, which was originally written in English. He analyses the options of "security through neutrality" and "security through collective defence".

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In the rapidly evolving global multipolarity, new security issues are arising for Switzerland. However, the most important of these has little to do with external factors, but rather with our conception of Switzerland as a permanently neutral state. While only a very few in the country question the concept of neutrality itself, it is becoming increasingly clear that beneath the surface there is political and ideological disagreement about its fundamental meaning. This has far-reaching implications for the structure of national defence. The crucial military question is: "Now tell me, how do you feel about cooperation?"

The following section first outlines the two security strategies of "security through neutrality" and "security through collective defence" and

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then analyses the existing political preferences in the Swiss political system in order to derive insights for short- and medium-term strategic planning.

Two security models on the table

Switzerland's security discourse is going through one of its most serious revisions of the past 200 years. The new multipolar security environment and a brewing change of hearts domestically are eroding traditional reference frames. This is expressed most visibly in a new debate about the country's neutrality – the traditional north star of Swiss security thinking. While neutrality is not the only security factor, it is a fundamental one in terms of strategy and long-term planning. The basic issue is this:

> Will Switzerland continue to seek security through armed neutrality or is it going to follow the Swedish and Finnish models, seeking security through collective defense within NATO and EU structures?

These are two very different security models, and despite announcements to the contrary by the head of *Switzerland's Defense Department,* Federal Councilor *Viola Amherd,*[1] it is quite clear that both options are on the table.

However, due to Switzerland's direct democratic system, the question of which course Switzerland will follow cannot be settled by a few politicians or their parties alone. This can only be done through the country's entire political process – and to this end, the popular initiative "Preserving Swiss neutrality" was submitted to the federal government in Bern in April 2024. At present, Switzerland's concrete military security strategy hangs awkwardly in the air as it is itself subject to different political visions.

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Incompatible strategies

Security through armed neutrality

The basic problem is that security through collective defense and security through armed neutrality rests on two different and (in principle) incompatible strategies. Security through armed neutrality is based on a mix of "small stick" and "small carrot" approaches. On the one hand, armed neutrals use their limited military abilities to threaten potential invaders with a certain level of pain, signaling that an attacker would have to pay a considerable price in blood and treasure to overcome the neutral's defenses (the small stick).

On the other hand, neutrals offer extensive collaboration, meaning that even potentially hostile parties can obtain benefits through trade and cooperation to a limited degree (the small carrot). However, stationing troops or using the neutral's infrastructure for military purposes remains off-limits.

Militarily neutral states maintain their own deterrents while at the same time being useful to all powers in the international world to incentivize them to seek the neutral's benefits by peaceful means and not militarily.

Those were the strategies of most armed neutrals during the Second World War, of which some were successful (Portugal, Spain, Ireland Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey) while others failed to deter the Axis (Belgium, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, etc.), or the Allies (Iceland, Iran), or both.[2]

The great weakness of a neutral security approach is that if the small carrot is not big enough and the "small stick" looks too weak, an adversary will choose to pay the price in blood to get everything it wants by military means. In the worst case, a neutral can become itself the primary object of bellicose desire, as was the case of the neutral Melians who were purged by ancient Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars,[3] or for the neutral Kingdom of Hawaii, which the United States overthrew and annexed in the 1890s.[4]

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For the neutral security approach to work, armed neutrals need a viable incentive structure toward other powers, and they must keep an independent deterrence potential, albeit one below the threshold of posing an offensive security threat. They must avoid the security dilemma in which their military readiness could be seen as a potentially offensive threat by adversaries and trigger the logic of preemptive military strikes to disarm them.

The latter was one of the main reasons why Sweden gave up its nuclear program in the Cold War. Stockholm understood that acquiring nuclear weapons might actually increase the chances of a Soviet preemptive attack rather than protect its independence.[5]

Security through collective defense

Security through collective defense, in contrast, rests on the "big stick" logic, realized through strength in numbers. The three-musketeer principle "one for all, all for one" means that inside an alliance, states seek to increase deterrence to a maximum to scare off potential invaders through their combined might. This also implies the sharing of military abilities, including weapons systems that extend all the way to nuclear arms. An essential part of modern alliances is the «nuclear umbrella» which the United States explicitly extends to South Korea, Japan, and its European NATO partners.

The collective defense approach, especially through large and operationally integrated alliances like NATO, aims at projecting so much power that no adversary would even think of picking a fight with it.

The benefits of alliances are straightforward, as they increase a state's deterrence capacity many-fold. However, they also imply the risk of "entrapment", meaning that a state might be forced to go to war against its will to help another alliance member – even if that ally might have acted unwisely. Alliances can also be used by powerful members to patrol the behavior of smaller members.

The *Warsaw Pact,* for instance, twice invaded its own members (Hungary and Czechoslovakia) to restore the local political forces that the Soviet Union favored. In the worst case, opposing but interlocking alliances might even lead to massive wars out of relatively small trigger events that kick off chain reactions, drawing one state after another into the fight. The First World War is the standard example of how large numbers of states can "sleepwalk" into a war of alliances.[6]

Cooperating neutrality isn't an option

In principle, the two strategies are mutually incompatible not only because their basic tenets cancel each other out (although there is no international law on this issue, it is largely accepted that a militarily neutral state cannot be part of a military alliance), but also because they create dangerous strategic vulnerabilities if mixed.

If a state without security guarantees from other countries starts cooperating with an alliance, it makes itself the first target of attack by a potential adversary of that alliance as it is the weakest and least protected link in the structure. Adversaries are further incentivized to strike non-allied nations if their cooperation with a hostile alliance becomes important to that alliance.

If, for instance, a strike against the neutral can hurt the entire alliance because military systems are integrated and a blow against the neutral's infrastructure will weaken the military capabilities of the alliance, then a preemptive strike against the cooperating neutral becomes a tempting option.

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In fact, international law forbids neutrals from offering their infrastructure (including radio wave transmission) to belligerent powers[7] as this is an un-neutral act helping one side of a conflict and making it more likely that an adversary will strike the neutral to weaken the primary enemy. More could (and should) be said about the notion of "benevolent neutrality", its risks, and legal implications,[8] but for the sake of brevity, we will continue with the analysis of where Switzerland stands regarding these two security options.

NATO, neutrality, or both?

Superficially, it seems clear that Switzerland still bets on security through neutrality. Annual opinion polls show that an overwhelming majority of 91% are in favor of maintaining neutrality (as of 2024).[9] However, the same polls also indicate that there are significant differences in the views of what that neutrality should include – and what not. Especially on the question of military cooperation with NATO, 52% agree that Switzerland should cooperate more closely with the alliance.[10] 30% of respondents even agree with the statement "Switzerland should join NATO", which means that at least 21% of respondents do not see NATO and Neutrality as incompatible.[11]

Furthermore, there are also important differences within the population. Generally, younger people are less likely to view NATO (or cooperation with it) favorably, while respondents with higher educational backgrounds are more likely to support cooperation and even accession.

But there are other political forces that push and pull the debate in various directions. For instance, a recent study by *Ejdus* and *Hoeffler*[12] shows that elites in neutral and nonaligned countries tend to view NATO and Trans-Atlantic integration in general much more favorably than opinion polls would suggest. The authors find that "atlanticist preferences are not only widely shared among policy elites but also systematically concealed from the public across militarily-neutral European countries" and that "elites frequently avoid public expressions of these preferences due to the general population's deep-rooted attachment to their nation's policy of military neutrality or non-alignment."[13]

While this study focuses only on Sweden, Austria and Serbia, it is not far-fetched to infer that also in Switzerland policymakers in the federal administration might view NATO in a more favorable light than the general public. After all, the Federal Council has made no secret of its preferences.

Over the past three years, it has published four white papers or studies in which it embraced the idea of more security cooperation with NATO and the EU to a level never seen in Swiss history. The 2022 report says that:

> "Switzerland has long sought to have options in the event of an armed attack, either to defend itself independently or to organize its defense together with other states. To improve military cooperation capabilities and thereby increase Switzerland's freedom of action, the army must prepare for international cooperation in a timely manner. The possibilities for cooperation should be utilized to enhance defense capabilities while adhering to neutrality."[14]

The 2024 report[15] even recommends the interoperability of Swiss military systems with NATO standards through «gradual participation» in NATO certification processes. It is suggested that if "necessary, NATO could assess and certify the interoperability and military capabilities of designated units of the Swiss Army", meaning that Switzerland would not only 'aspire' to be NATO compatible but already make sure NATO itself certifies its interoperability.

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Furthermore, the report goes on to suggest that Switzerland should participate in NATO's "Federated Mission Networking" (FMN) project, the aim of which is "to integrate the command and communication systems of the armed forces into a single multinational command system, to establish an integral command capability on a technical level". And because "FMN is considered a cornerstone of any cooperation with NATO […], Swiss participation is necessary". There is no doubt that the vision of this Federal Council report is the transformation of Switzerland's armed forces into an operable part of NATO's overall military capacity.

The passage concludes that

> "this collaboration would enable Switzerland, if necessary, to integrate its own systems into NATO's command and communication systems from the beginning of a joint exercise or operation — whether in military peace-building or defense. NATO refers to this as 'Day Zero Connectivity', a capability Switzerland must have if needed."[16]

While critics argue that this approach amounts to the operational abandonment of neutrality,[17] the Federal Council claims that it is merely preparing for the worst-case scenario of an armed attack against Switzerland. Should that happen, the legal requirements of neutrality law would cease anyway, and the country could defend itself collectively. In other words, the Federal Council's preferred course of action is to prepare the ground for collective self-defense—but only should the need for it arise.

The fourth and most recent report by a Defense Department-appointed study commission also concluded that cooperation with NATO and the EU "must go beyond the previous collaboration due to the new threat situation. Cooperation should be focused on *joint defense* [emphasis added]."[18]

Furthermore, there have been concrete efforts over the past two years to follow up on these policy guidelines, including high-level meetings of Swiss and NATO military representatives,[19] an agreement on opening a NATO liaison office in Geneva (albeit officially not to liaise with the Federal Government),[20] a memorandum of under-

standing about Switzerland joining the EU Skyshield initiative,[21] and, most visibly, Viola Amherd's participation at a *North Atlantic Council Meeting* (the political arm of NATO) — a first in Switzerland's history.[22]

Not a done deal, nor party politics

However, while the political and military rapprochement between Switzerland and NATO is obvious and evident, there are, at the same time, other forces inside the country's political process working on changing that direction.

Not only did the Federal Council itself publish a report on its neutrality policy in October 2022, concluding that the principles outlined back in 1993 are still valid and the basis for its decision-making,[23] but in summer 2024, the National Council (the lower chamber of parliament) adopted a motion that would forbid Switzerland's participation in NATO missions that practice collective self-defense under Article 5 of the *NATO charter.* The rationale of the motion, as presented by the *Council's Security Policy Commission,* is that:

"It is in Switzerland's interest to strengthen cooperation with NATO in specific areas, particularly in military peace promotion, cyberattack defense, or system interoperability, to be prepared for potential future cooperation in case of an emergency. At the same time, the Commission recognizes the need for clarification regarding the preservation of Switzerland's neutrality and non-alignment. Switzerland's neutrality and non-alignment remain important and useful instruments of Swiss security and foreign policy, even in these times."[24]

The success of the motion in the National Council was possible due to a political realignment of NATO-skeptical factions among left- and right-wing parties.[25]

However, it failed to convince the State Council (the upper chamber), which rejected it by 29 to 12 votes (with 4 abstentions).[26] The motion will now be deliberated again in the lower chamber. Looking at the debate in the State Council, it is apparent that there is no consensus among parliamentarians as to what level of cooperation with NATO is or is not compatible with Switzerland's neutrality.[27]

This trend is also visible at other levels of society, most evidently in the form of a popular initiative for a national neutrality referendum. If successful, the initiative would define neutrality in Switzerland's constitution (where the concept is currently only mentioned but not specified) as perpetual, armed, alliance-free, and – for the first time in any constitutional neutrality – it would include the state's duty to remain economically neutral by avoiding the imposition of sanctions on belligerent parties.[28]

The required number of over 100,000 signatures was submitted to the Federal Chancellery in April 2024. Parliamentary debates are expected in summer and autumn 2025, with a referendum in spring 2026.

While the idea initially gained popularity thanks to the support of former Federal Councillor *Christoph Blocher* (SVP), the initiative committee that drafted the text and is preparing for the vote is not affiliated with any political party. During the signature collection process, a separate committee of academics, trade unionists and politicians from left-wing and green parties was formed to actively support the initiative, as did leading members of the Communist Party.[29]

Only five months later, another group of academics and politicians published a counter-proposal against the initiative, advocating for a much more discretionary approach to Swiss neutrality.[30]

Evidently, support for the neutrality initiative is not a question of party politics but of security thinking and perceptions.

[1] «Ein Nato-Beitritt ist ausgeschlossen», Blick, 19. Mai 2022, *https://www.blick.ch/video/aktuell/vbs-chefin-im-*

Die Neutralitätsinitiative

JA ZUR SCHWEIZER NEUTRALITÄT

Information about the Neutrality initiative:

https://www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-en-schweiz/founding-meeting-of-the-movement-for-neutrality.html

https://www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-en-schweiz/for-an-autonomous-and-independent-security-policy-yes-to-the-neutrality-initiative.html

https://www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-en-schweiz/nato-turbos-at-the-eth-zurich.html

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gespraech-viola-amherd-ueber-die-armee-in-kriegszeiten-id17505351.html

[2] Norway was already slated for invasion by Great Britain when Hitler invaded first.

[3] Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War,* trans. Richard Crawley, 1874 ed. (London: Longmans, 431 BC), p. 396–404.

[4] David Keanu Sai, "Hawaiian Neutrality: From the Crimean Conflict through the Spanish-American War," *Paper presented at the University of Cambridge, UK, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Sovereignty and Imperialism: Non-European Powers in the Age of Empire, September 10–12* (2015).

[5] Thomas Jonter, The Key to Nuclear Restraint: The Swedish Plans to Acquire Nuclear Weapons During the Cold War (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[6] Christopher Clark, The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914, (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

[7] See Article 3 of the 1907 Hague Convention.

[8] See, for reference, Luca Ferro and Nele Verlinden, "Neutrality During Armed Conflicts: A Coherent Approach to Third-State Support for Warring Parties", *Chinese Journal of International Law,* no. 17 (2018); Stephen C. Neff, "A Tale of Two Strategies: Permanent Neutrality and Collective Security," in *Permanent Neutrality: A Model for Peace, Security, and Justice,* ed. Herbert Reginbogin and Pascal Lottaz (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

[9] Szvircsev Tresch et al., Studie «Sicherheit 2024». Aussen-, Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitische Meinungsbildung im Trend. (Zürich: Militärakademie [MILAK] an der ETHZ, 2024), p. 55 *https://www.newsd.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/86738.pdf*

[10] Szvircsev Tresch et al., Studie «Sicherheit 2024», p. 46.

[11] Szvircsev Tresch et al., Studie «Sicherheit 2024», p. 42.

[12] Filip Ejdus und Catherine Hoeffler, «Crypto-Atlanticism: The untold preferences of policy elites in neutral and non-aligned states», Contemporary Security Policy (2023), *https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2289329*

[13] Ejdus und Hoeffler, «Crypto-Atlanticism», p. 26.

[14] Bundesrat, Zusatzbericht zum Sicherheitspolitischen Bericht 2021 über die Folgen des Krieges in der Ukraine(Bern: Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 7. September 2022), p. 33–34.

[15] Bundesrat, Verteidigungsfähigkeit und Kooperation (Bern: Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 31. Januar 2024), S. 23–27. *https://www.newsd.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/85931.pdf*

[16] Bundesrat, Verteidigungsfähigkeit und Kooperation, p. 27.

[17] «Globalist elites are trying to fool even Switzerland into the Alliance | Alberto Togni» (YouTube, 27 April 2024). *https://youtu.be/U0eDxAX_tDk?si=B-LX6a-yy-NAUH4D*

[18] Katja Gentinetta, Bericht der Studienkommission Sicherheitspolitik (Bern: Eidgenössisches Departement für Verteidigung, Bevölkerungsschutz und Sport, 2024), p. 39.

[19] «Der Chef der Armee nimmt am Treffen der Nato-Armeechefs in Brüssel teil», Medienmitteilung der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft, 18. Januar 2024, *https://www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/medienmitteilungen.msg-id-99740.html*

[20] «Direktor der Direktion für Völkerrecht unterzeichnet Abkommen über rechtlichen Status des Nato-Verbindungsbüros in Genf», Medienmitteilung der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft, 15. Juli 2024, *https://www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/medienmitteilungen.msg-id-101857.html*

[21] Federal Council, "Federal Council decides to join the European Sky Shield Initiative," *Portal of the Swiss Government* (2024), *https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.msg-id-100650.html*

[22] «In a historic first, Swiss defence minister joins meeting of Nato's North Atlantic Council», North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 22 March 2023, *https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_213105.htm?selectedLocale=en*

[23] Schweizerischer Bundesrat, «Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik: Bericht des Bundesrates in Erfüllung des Postulates 22.3385, Aussenpolitische Kommission SR, 11.04.2022», (Bern, 26. Oktober 2022). *https://www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/medienmitteilungen.msg-id-90895.html*

[24] Sicherheitspolitische Kommission, «Fokussierung auf die verfassungsmässigen Aufgaben der Armee. Keine Teilnahme an Nato-Bündnisfallübungen!», Nationalrat, 13. Juni 2024, *https://www.parlament.ch/en/ratsbetrieb/amtliches-bulletin/amtliches-bulletin-die-verhandlungen?SubjectId=65056*

[25] Andrea Fopp, «Wie linke Pazifisten und rechte Neutralitäts-Turbos die Schweiz abschotten wollen», Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 24. Juni 2024, *https://www.nzz.ch/schweiz/landesverraeterin-pazifisten-erleben-harte-zeiten-und-suchen-ausgerechnet-die-naehe-zur-svp-ld.1834557*

[26] «Motion SiK-N. Fokussierung auf die verfassungsmässigen Aufgaben der Armee. Keine Teilnahme an Nato-Bündnisfallübungen!» Ständerat, 18. September 2024. *https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/amtliches-bulletin/amtliches-bulletin-die-verhandlungen?SubjectId=65557*

[27] Ibid.

[28] Verein zur Wahrung der Schweizer Neutralität. «Die Neutralitätsinitiative», *https://neutralitaet-ja.ch*, accessed on 26 August 2024.

[29] Pascal Lottaz, Verena Tobler Linder und Wolf Linder, «Call from Left and Green Supporters: Yes to the Neutrality Initiative!», *neutralitystudies.com,* 10 January 2024. *https://schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-en-schweiz/call-from-left-and-green-supporters-yes-to-the-neutrality-initiative.html*
For the positions of the Swiss Communist Party see *www.partitocomunista.ch*

[30] Cottier et al., «Manifest Neutralität 21», Association La Suisse en Europe. 29. Mai 2024. *https://suisse-en-europe.ch/neutralitaet-21/*