

Reflections on “armed neutrality”

by Suzette Sandoz,* Pully VD



Suzette Sandoz. (Picture <https://blogs.letemps.ch/suzette-sandoz/>)

A neutral country cannot be credible if it does not have a credible army. But first, we must agree on what is meant by the term “credible army”. This is not just a matter of military capabilities, but also – and perhaps above all – of the ability and the will to “be prepared to defend oneself”.

It is therefore as much a question of mindset as it is of technical capabilities. Let’s be honest: we currently fulfil neither of these conditions, as for decades we have been shaped by the mindset that prevails (or perhaps “prevailed”?) in NATO countries. NATO was Uncle Sam, and we could sleep soundly!

Being prepared to defend oneself does not mean ignoring others or the complexity of Europe

It means, first and foremost, taking responsibility for one’s own security and assessing the risk of a threat as a neutral country, just as was the case during the last world war. Armed neutrality does not mean ignoring reality. It may well prove necessary to be able to cooperate with others for our own security. This is a particularly delicate situation, as the aim of cooperation is not to take part in a war affecting others simply to show solidarity and ease our conscience – at the risk of achieving nothing. Such cooperation must avoid increasing the danger to other countries and to ourselves by becoming a sort of “tactical

gap” in their overall defence. The ability – depending on the situation – to defend ourselves alongside other European states requires a willingness to cooperate with them at a military level. It therefore seems logical that we should maintain military contacts with NATO, but ...

As always when it comes to neutrality, the difficulty lies in how we communicate

It is by no means a question of “moving closer to NATO”, as one often reads and hears, but rather, as a neutral country, of ensuring that we do not jeopardise either our own security or that of Europe. Compatible equipment and joint exercises can be a suitable means to this end – something we are already mindful of, although all too often it remains unclear to what extent we are subordinating ourselves to NATO. This must be limited to cooperation in specific situations of danger, as stated in the neutrality initiative to be put to a vote this coming September.

To be credible, neutrality must be backed by military strength, but it must also be constantly explained. However, communication is an art in which our politicians have been failing for years. How can one be honest and nuanced in a world that has become binary? It is also difficult to provide clarity when one seeks to cheat with the truth. The stance of the Federal Council and Parliament towards the “Neutrality Initiative” is extremely worrying. If the people and/or the cantons reject it, that would be suicide, and the rest of the world would laugh at us. If both accept it, what trust can we still place in our government?

May the 2027 federal elections mark the start of a genuine new beginning!

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