

avenir debate

Security Policy Perspectives

Reality-based Strategies to Protect Switzerland

Geopolitical shifts coupled with societal and technological developments are creating new uncertainty worldwide, and thus in Europe too. Added to this is Russia's war against Ukraine in Eastern Europe. Avenir Suisse's latest publication looks into the implications of these developments in terms of the thrust of Switzerland's defense policy. Investments in security will have to be geared more closely to new threat patterns. Transnational cooperation will have to be strengthened, and cyber-defense competencies will have to be built.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a warlike confrontation between two nations, is a turning point in the European post-war order. But for some time now, conflicts have also increasingly been waged below the actual threshold of war in "hybrid" form. The protection afforded by Switzerland's geographical and political environment is waning.

But military means alone are not sufficient to control the threats to which this country is exposed, threats that include (criminal) cyber-attacks, pandemics, power shortages, mobile network outages, and terrorist attacks, both with and without drones. Unconventional scenarios such as cyber-attacks on military and other critical infrastructure are gaining in significance by comparison with conventional armed threats. These are the conclusions of the latest Avenir Suisse study, authored by Lukas Rühli und Lisa Rogenmoser, entitled "Security Policy Perspectives" (Perspektiven der Sicherheitspolitik).

Military Investment More Closely Geared to Threat Situations

Contrary to these new threat patterns, a large part of the new investments planned for the next ten years within the framework of the complete material renewal of the Swiss armed forces will be devoted to conventional means. Only a comparatively small portion of the budget is earmarked for boosting Switzerland's cyber defenses.

Given the complex and diverse threat landscape, it is a challenge for a small country like Switzerland to equip itself for all conceivable threats. Instead of mere calls for budget hikes, what is needed is a pragmatic approach involving inevitable trade-offs. It is also becoming more important to assess the situation transparently and allocate resources in a way that more systematically prioritizes plausible perceived threats, both present and future.

A conventional conflict on Swiss soil is still not very plausible. If a conflict of this sort were to take place, in all likelihood the threat would not affect Switzerland in isolation, but the whole of Central Europe on a collective basis. This means more attention has to be paid to the matter of transnational cooperation.

Our five theses for developing Switzerland's national defense capabilities are as follows:

- Switzerland should orient itself more closely to probable threats when planning investment in new and replacement assets on the ground. Light and mobile assets for countering unconventional threats must not be neglected.
- F-35A fighter planes are designed specifically for deployment within a military alliance (i.e. NATO). To harness their full potential, transnational military cooperation should be stepped up, for example by taking part in NATO exercises. This means that questions of neutrality have to be clarified.
- Switzerland must increase its cybersecurity, both for the military and for critical infrastructure. When it comes to non-warlike cyber-attacks, the armed forces should still only be deployed on a subsidiary basis. The federal government should prescribe system redundancies, back-up policies, and reporting requirements (in the event of cyber-attack) for operators of critical infrastructure.
- Any capability gaps, for example in mechanized units, could be compensated for by strengthening transnational military cooperation.
- In the planned dialog with parliament on capabilities, the armed forces should be more transparent in their assessment of the situation and present threat scenarios in as much detail as possible.

International Role Models

The security strategies adopted by other European countries could provide interesting pointers for Switzerland. The UK, for example, plans to shift the emphasis from robust assets such as heavy tanks to technologies such as cyber defense and drones with artificial intelligence. Finland and Sweden are showing how small, neutral countries that are not part of a bloc are having to gear their defense strategies to increased transnational cooperation in view of conventional threats. When push comes to shove, defense is at its most effective in alliances, which means that capabilities have to be practiced and built in advance.

With a strategy that allocates resources to security instruments according to need on the basis of actual risks and threats, Switzerland will also be able to provide its people with effective protection, even in an uncertain future.

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