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Autor:	Keckeis, Christophe / Eckert, Heinz
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Christophe Keckelis – “Do your duty, then step aside.”

Admired by some and condemned by others, Christophe Keckelis stepped down as commander-in-chief of the Swiss army at the end of last year. The former military supremo talks about national defence and Switzerland in an interview with Heinz Eckert.

SWISS REVIEW: Would you agree that the Swiss people have become less supportive of the army? Is there no direct threat?

CHRISTOPHE KECKELIS: I don't believe the Swiss people are less supportive of the army. More than two-thirds have a positive perception of it. It's true that there is no obvious threat. But because today's dangers are more widespread and more complex, the new role of the army is more difficult for people to understand. Terrorism and organised crime are today the main threats worldwide. The army is needed to counter these threats. Just because we are not faced with conventional military aggression, that doesn't mean there is no danger.

How do we counter these threats?

We need to improve information levels and have a debate on security policy. It's astonishing that not everyone is aware how important security is to Switzerland. It is vital to the banks, the insurance companies, the economy as a whole and the prosperity of the entire whole country. This is something that has to be debated and put on the agenda. It amazes me that many business leaders no longer appreciate the value of the army. Security is a priceless asset and must be guaranteed.

Are business leaders also to blame for the fact that military service has become less attractive in terms of career prospects?

Not solely. But there are lots of foreign CEOs who are not familiar with the Swiss army and national service system and cannot understand why their employees have to repeatedly serve in the armed forces. Anyone unable to work because of military service is seen as a loss.

Does that mean the national service system no longer meets modern requirements?

No, not at all. I fully support national service and hope we can maintain it. As the

whole of Swiss society serves in the army, the level of education is very high. National service is also considerably less expensive than a professional army. It also provides a higher standard of soldier as it is not made up of people who are unable to do anything other than enter the army.

How fit for duty are the young men who have to enter military service? Is it true that fewer and fewer young men are up to standard?

No, that is an inaccuracy that keeps reappearing in the media. We are very pleased with the number of men fit for duty. In 2005 it was 61 percent, and a few percent higher last year. Then there are the 18 percent who do non-military service. What does concern us is the enormous differences between the cantons. While around 80 percent of those eligible for service are fit for duty in central Switzerland and Canton Appenzell, cities like Basel are well below average.

You were given the task of carrying out a reform of the army in 2003. How successful was it?

We carried out the most far-reaching reform of the army ever and met 80 percent of our targets. The remaining 20 percent are well-defined challenges that we must tackle over the coming years. What matters to me is that all of our efforts were successful. We have made tremendous progress in recruitment and have improved security analysis. We were not able to increase the number of professional soldiers for financial reasons, and that is fatal in my view. We are simply not getting the funding that we need. We receive CHF 600 million less a year, yet our responsibilities are the same.

You have said that the Swiss army is not equipped for a crisis situation. What did you mean by that?

I have been widely misquoted on this. What I actually said was that the Swiss

army is not prepared for a conventional war today. But it doesn't have to be, and that applies to all European armies. In Switzerland we must also accept that the army now has a different role today to the one it fulfilled during the Second World War. It's time to stop dreaming about tanks and artillery guns. We no longer have to defend our borders against an enemy. The Swiss army is in great shape to carry out all its other duties.

And what are these duties?

They might involve unrest within Switzerland, demonstrations, riots or terrorism: the kind of problems that often occur in other countries. The army must support the police in certain circumstances or even be able to take over the role of the police, for instance in security operations. The football season causes problems nowadays due to the rise in hooliganism. The forthcoming European Cup Championship also poses major challenges.

You came in for constant criticism over operations involving Swiss soldiers abroad.

Politicians often forget that operations abroad are part of the federal constitution. Under the army reform it is our duty to commit battalions of soldiers to operations abroad for peace-keeping operations.

Did you feel that you were sometimes let down by politicians?

As head of the army I understand the primacy of politics and have to accept the decisions of parliament. However, the fact that the defence budget was cut in the year following the reform certainly didn't make the job any easier. The debate on keeping ammunition and military-issue weapons at home is detrimental to the army. The army is being used as a scapegoat in both cases for what is a social problem.



Opinion on the army is increasingly divided. Some people would like to see it abolished, others still want an army like the one in the Second World War.

That is exactly right. This is why we urgently need a debate on security policy: a topic which in recent years has been neglected. Support for maintaining security levels has been declining in Switzerland, and many people can't see things as they really are. We are not an island and could just as easily be a terrorist target as other countries. But we just won't accept that here. We are still doing very well for ourselves and sometimes we lose sight of things. People criticise my zero-tolerance stance on smoking pot in the army, saying that it's just part of life today. I simply can't understand that.

You have also been criticised for favouring internationalism and for destroying the Swiss army.

Yes, but I was just carrying out political decisions or what was set out in the constitution. It wasn't my idea to reduce the number of troops from 800 000 to 220 000. That I'm in this position now is just part of history.

The key debate still centres on the purchase of military aircraft. Does Switzerland actually need an air force?

I believe we do. We are responsible for our own airspace which requires protection and surveillance. Aeroplanes are needed for that.

Where do you think military weapons should be stored in future?

If someone is killed with an army-issue weapon, that is a social problem – not an

army one. A decision on this requires a great deal of consideration. If parliament discusses this issue in spring, its complexity should not be underestimated. Just think of the shooting clubs up and down the country and the organisational problems the army would face if weapons had to be stored in arsenals. We would not have the space, the staff or the money to do it. It would cost millions of francs. We should be focusing on what other measures can be taken.

What do you have in mind?

The lack of discipline that has taken hold in civilian life should not be allowed to spill over to the army. High standards of discipline must be set for soldiers. We should also consider making data protection less stringent. We should know which soldiers have previous convictions and what for, so that they can be dealt with accordingly. As things stand, all that we are allowed to know about soldiers' previous convictions is the law that applied and the sentence that was given. It is staggering how many soldiers have criminal records today.

Has discipline in the army suffered generally?

Nowadays people are always on the telephone or writing text messages. I believe

team spirit has suffered. Soldiers are now much more concerned with themselves than with the group. Lots of commanding officers are too soft and do not demand enough discipline. A national military service army reflects the society it serves. More discipline is needed. You wouldn't believe how many complaints I get from people about how untidily soldiers are dressed or about their behaviour in public. This type of thing immediately creates the impression that these young men are just as sloppy when carrying out their military duties. And that is certainly not the case. Standards are generally very high. But the image of the army is tarnished by a lack of discipline.

What do you plan to do when you retire?

I'd like to spend a lot of time travelling. I've had no time to do that in recent years. I'd like to go to Patagonia, then to Namibia and Zimbabwe, and also to Mongolia and China. Then I'll take my time looking at the options available to me. But I'll be leaving my colleagues in peace to get on with their jobs – I very much believe in doing your duty, then stepping aside.