

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 36 (2009)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Army in crisis : the Swiss army - where does its future lie?
Autor: Ribì, Rolf / Spillmann, Kurt R.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906369>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Swiss army – where does its future lie?

Having gone through three reforms in fifteen years, the Swiss army is looking for a solution to new threats. Some factions want to bolster the traditional defence of Switzerland, while others wish to see the military deployed for peace in the world. The Swiss people are behind their army, but there is an air of uncertainty. By Rolf Ribi

“The Swiss army is not on the brink, but it has lost its way”, says the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”, which points the finger at a “military policy impeded by ideology”. The fact that there is no common ground in Parliament on the analysis of the strategic position or on the role of the army is “alarming”.

Three current bills show just how divided political opinion on the army is at present. The 2008 armaments programme concerns vehicles for the armoured transport of infantry units and principally an upgrade of the F/A-18 fighter jets, which form the backbone of air defence. An alliance made up of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), the Social Democrats and the Greens defeated the bill in the National Council, and it will now go before these representatives of the

Article 58 of the Federal Constitution reads: “The armed forces shall serve to prevent war and to maintain peace; they shall defend the country and its population. They shall support the civilian authorities in safeguarding the country against serious threats to internal security and in dealing with exceptional situations.” The army's general mandates are derived from this article:

- Territorial protection operations to safeguard important areas and air space in the event of a strategic threat, usually in conjunction with civilian authorities.
- Active defence against a military attack in order to stop or destroy the attacking enemy using weapons, blockades and military



“Security through cooperation”

The army and military reform have been a constant topic of political and public debate since the 1990s. Three factors explain this – the new global situation after the end of the Cold War, deficiencies in the army and an increasingly restricted budget. The “Army 95” proposal, the 2000 security policy report, the “Army XXI” proposal and, more recently, the 2008–2011 military reform are all milestones. The “Army 95” document

100-page military blueprint XXI for the “Armada Svizzera” (as the army is known in Romansch) was based on this security policy report.

The security report and army blueprint led to the next step in the reform process – the “Army XXI” proposal. This communication from the Federal Council to Parliament in October 2001 contained the following key elements – as well as defence and territorial protection, the army would

2008–2011 army reform

The next controversial step in the reform of the army came in May 2005. The army's main responsibility was no longer to be the traditional task of national defence. Its main role would be territorial protection involving surveillance of border crossings, localities and transport axes. Federal Councillor Samuel Schmid said: “National defence should not be restricted to defence against military attack.” He said traditional warfare in Europe was “unlikely in the foreseeable future even though it cannot be ruled out altogether”. On the other hand, he said, the threat of terrorism was very real and it was now a matter of “protecting a high-tech society”.

The capacity for traditional defence was therefore to be reduced by half to around just 18,500 personnel. The total number of people serving in the army was to remain unchanged at 220,000 men (and women). Equipment was to be transferred from the armoured units and the artillery to the infantry. The infantry would assume responsibility for territorial protection and the armoured units would provide military expertise.

Opposition from military circles...

The 2008–2011 development plan sparked

defence scenarios. He said: “No army would enter into an operational security mission without such resources.” This former senior officer also believed the concept of the militia army was in jeopardy as there would be very few positions of command and staff officer roles for militia officers (alongside professional officers) in a significantly scaled-down army.

Jean-Pierre Bonny, President of the Association of Former Members of the Swiss Army (Pro Militia), was critical of the “Federal Council's hasty move just 14 months after the entry into force of the XXI Army reform approved by the people”. He said the proposed reduction in defence forces would also have a detrimental effect on territorial protection as armoured divisions would be “absolutely indispensable” for this purpose.

... and from politicians

The restructuring of the army for the years 2008 to 2011 caused great controversy in Parliament. The new role of the army came in for criticism from the left and right of the political divide. The National Council soundly rejected the reform in October 2006. The Swiss People's Party said the proposals



people again after being presented to the Council of States. In respect of the replacement of 54 outdated Tiger fighter jets with the Swedish Gripen, the French Rafale or the Eurofighter, the budget only stretches to 22 new aircraft and the left opposes the acquisition of new fighter jets. The right, on the other hand, is strongly against military deployment for peace-keeping missions abroad.

The role of the army

What is the role of the army under the Federal Constitution? What are the mandates of the militia army in the present day?

strongholds and by means of counter-attack.

- Army deployment in a supporting role at the request of civilian authorities, such as military disaster relief, safeguarding of air supremacy (for international conferences, for example), support for police and border control units, and protection of property (such as foreign embassies).
- Operations to establish peace abroad and prevent the outbreak of armed conflict based on a mandate from the UN or OSCE, and usually in cooperation with other countries.

(400,000 men as opposed to 600,000, shorter periods of compulsory service) revealed fundamental shortcomings in the army, in particular with regard to training and support for senior officers. The Federal Council said at the time that the “defence situation was unsatisfactory”.

The Federal Council report to Parliament on Switzerland's security policy in June 1999 highlighted the new principle of “security through cooperation”. This meant greater cooperation between the army and civilian authorities in Switzerland and an increased contribution to peace-keeping abroad. The

also be deployed to “prevent and overcome life-threatening dangers” (together with civilian authorities in Switzerland and abroad) and to “safeguard peace and tackle crises” (together with other countries and international organisations). The number of army personnel would be reduced from 360,000 to a maximum of 140,000 with a reserve corps of 80,000. The compulsory service age would be lowered to 30 and the training of recruits extended to 21 weeks. In May 2003, the Swiss people approved the “Army XXI” proposal by a majority of 76%.

strong criticism from military circles and in Parliament. Former Lieutenant General Simon Küchler said a “muddled situation” had emerged as the security report and army blueprint had been superseded by the new reform proposals. According to Army XXI “defence remains the army's key responsibility”, yet it was felt that this was no longer the case in view of the proposed reduction in defence forces.

Former Major General Paul Müller also voiced criticism, arguing that warfare involving the use of heavy weaponry was called for in territorial protection as well as in de-

moved too far “away from the traditional role of defence towards that of combating terrorism” as it was apprehensive about a coalition with NATO in an emergency situation. The Social Democrats were wary of army operations within Switzerland and believed its peace-keeping missions abroad were in jeopardy.

Defence Minister Samuel Schmid attempted to reach a political compromise – the abolition of just two instead of four armoured divisions and no increase in military peace-keeping operations. The slightly toned-down army reform was unanimously

approved by the Council of States in March 2007. But there was still criticism from some quarters. The "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" highlighted "concessions made to the supporters of an outdated traditional defence-oriented army" and "lost opportunities to develop expertise and gain experience" owing to reduced international operations.

The 2008–2011 reform bill was then returned to the National Council. The representatives of the people also gave the reform their resounding approval in June 2007 as the

Social Democrats (unlike the Swiss People's Party and the Greens) also supported the proposal. However, a key issue remained unresolved – the number of armoured battalions to defend the nation. By law, this decision lies with the Federal Council and not Parliament ...

A militia army?

The militia army has been a key issue in every step in the reform process in recent years. Does Switzerland need a militia army or a professional army? What size should the

army be in future? Is general compulsory military service still appropriate or do we want an army of volunteers?

The militia army is as deeply engrained in the Swiss mindset as direct democracy and federalism. It is the traditional means of defence for Switzerland as a small, armed and neutral nation. And it is also part of the Federal Constitution: "Switzerland shall have armed forces. In principle, the armed forces shall be organised as a militia" (Article 58). Prominent critics nevertheless fear the clandestine abolition of the militia army by the



"WE NEED THE ARMY"

INTERVIEW WITH KURT R. SPILLMANN, FORMER PROFESSOR OF SECURITY POLICY AND CONFLICT RESEARCH AT ETH ZURICH

How do you see the security situation in Europe?

I cannot envisage any military threat to Switzerland today or in the foreseeable future. I believe the threat comes instead from terrorist and criminal organisations. This type of threat cannot be combated by military means. However, today's threats and risks are often indirectly linked to violent conflicts sometimes in distant parts of the world. The key task of the armed forces is to secure peace and stability in these conflict regions.

Could Russia become an aggressive major power in Europe?

I don't believe that is likely in the foreseeable future. Russia only possesses around 10% of America's military strength excluding nuclear potential, which can hardly be used for military purposes. Unfortunately, under President Bush the USA failed to integrate Russia more into the international system. The new American President Obama now wants to open fresh dialogue with Russia. This may improve global security.

What if, for the sake of argument, Switzerland were to come under military attack?

Before launching a military attack on Switzerland, the foreign army would have to have overcome the defence forces of NATO and the European Union. That being the case, Swiss militia officers and soldiers would face a very battle-hardened army. This would be a war of self-destruction that we would have to prevent by using all of our political guile.



Should Switzerland have its own air force?

Yes, but this air force should not just operate in its own air space. Our fighter jets can make a contribution towards securing European air space. Incidentally, autonomous national defence means having to secure your own air space, but to achieve air supremacy you need to have your own satellite, which Switzerland doesn't have.

How do senior officers and soldiers in the Swiss army motivate themselves when there is no evil enemy in sight?

Switzerland needs to hold a major debate on whether it should increase its cooperation on peace-keeping operations in view of the current threat situation. I am thinking primarily of the European Union, which is developing civilian and military peace-keeping forces as part of its security and defence policy. To say to our soldiers that they have the task of ensuring security on the periphery of Europe would provide great purpose.

INTERVIEW BY ROLF RIBI

department of defence and senior military staff. They argue:

- Switzerland now has a regular army. Single-term conscripts carry out their entire compulsory service of around nine months in one go. They are now trained by professional soldiers instead of militia officers. They say: “the gradual professionalisation of the army is alienating it from the people.”
- Compulsory military service provided for by the Constitution is being avoided. Only 60% of men now discharge their compulsory service as set out in the Constitution. The

tary expert Barbara Haering of the Social Democratic Party. She believes 10,000 soldiers with high availability and 40,000 with lower availability are sufficient and that peace-keeping missions with the international community are the most important task. She also says that increasing the use of the army to ensure internal security is the wrong approach.

Former Brigadier General Hans-Ulrich Ernst would like to see a militia army of just 30,000 men. He says: “The army is too big. We have 140,000 soldiers who have to serve

battle tanks in densely populated areas (former National Councillor Ulrich Schlürer). On the left, the Social Democrats and Greens would like to see the army’s operations within Switzerland restricted and instead to increase peace-keeping missions abroad. Josef Lang, the Green Alternative National Councillor, said: “The real challenges facing our country are no longer military ones. They concern protection of the environment, natural catastrophes and global poverty.”

However, official military policy also comes in for criticism. The “security through



remainder perform civil defence or are rejected as unfit for service. They say: “This contradicts the spirit of equity in the application of the draft and undermines the concept of the militia.”

A militia army or a professional army? A professional army “going it alone” without dependence on an international alliance is not a cheaper option than a militia army. An army with professional soldiers only makes sense if military operations abroad are required, but not if the army has a purely defensive role. The Federal Constitution would also have to be amended to provide for such a change and there is no majority support among the people or the cantons for a professional army.

“We don’t need a huge army”

The Federal Council and the army leadership agree that the size of the army has to be reduced. The Swiss army currently numbers around 220,000 active soldiers (77,000 of whom are reserves). The size of the army, which is large by international standards, is primarily due to general compulsory military service. “Having an army based on the compulsory military service system makes no sense from a security or military perspective and is financially unsustainable”, says mili-

for ten years. We don’t need a huge army.” Ernst recommends that in future 90% of recruits carry out military service of seven months’ duration in one go. This means that 9,000 soldiers would be available constantly. These single-term conscripts would be trained and led by professional officers and senior militia personnel in permanent positions. Such a move would reduce the army in active service to around 30,000 soldiers in addition to 80,000 reservists as before.

Karl Haltiner, a military expert from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), proposes a militia army made up of 30,000 men – a core armed force of 25,000 volunteer soldiers and 5,000 professional soldiers. His recommendation is modelled on the National Guard, the American voluntary militia who are well-equipped and led by militia officers. His idea would provide a financially attractive solution.

Rigid military policy

The opposing sides in the debate about a modern Swiss army are fairly uncompromising. On the right, there is the Swiss People’s Party and Pro Militia, the association of former army members. They support traditional national defence using tanks, infantrymen and artillery and talk about positioning

cooperation” principle remains a controversial issue. The army’s new mandate for territorial protection, the decline in importance of traditional defence and the threat situation in general do not seem to have been fully thought through. One thing is clear, and that is that in the foreseeable future any threat to Switzerland comes not from foreign armies, but from global terrorism (see the interview with security expert Kurt Spillmann).

Both opponents and advocates of the army reforms can find support among the people. Almost 70% of Swiss people believe the army is necessary. Around 80% want to see a “well-equipped and well-trained army”. 51% are in favour of the militia army, while 42% support the abolition of general compulsory military service. The authors of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology study on security say: “The army still has the backing of the people. Support for general compulsory military service is declining. There is definitely an air of uncertainty.”

DOCUMENTATION

The Federal Council’s report to the Federal Assembly on Switzerland’s security policy of 7 June 1999
XXI Army blueprint of 24 October 2001
Documentation centre doku-zug.ch
(www.doku-zug.ch)