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Turmoil over defence policy

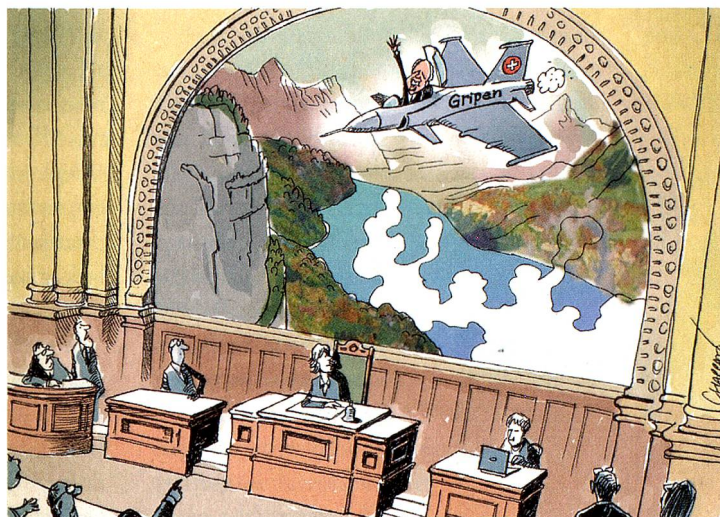
Swiss security policy is currently characterised by uncertainty. Parliament and the government are at loggerheads over military spending levels, there is a furore over Gripen fighter jets, and contentious referenda are coming up. A snapshot from the spring session in Parliament.

By Jürg Müller

Colonel Peter Forster, editor-in-chief of the magazine "Schweizer Soldat" (Swiss Soldier), is going into battle – against the Federal Council. It is toying with "a precious commodity – our national security", writes Forster in the newsletter "Pro Libertate". It is "scandalous" how the Federal Council disregards resolutions of Parliament, making "opposition to the government" necessary. The background to Forster's outburst is the row between the Federal Council and Parliament over military spending. Parliament wants to release more money to the armed forces than does the Federal Council. The wrangling over finances is symptomatic of deeper-lying uncertainty over the army's future role.

Crash landing in the Council of States

This uncertainty came to the fore during the spring session of the Federal Parliament. The procurement of the new fighter jets was on the Council of States' agenda. The row over the Swedish Gripen (see also "Swiss Review" 5/2012) appeared to have subsided; former critics, including conservatives, backed Minister of Defence Ueli Maurer shortly before the parliamentary debate. Only the left-wing parties unanimously opposed the purchase of the fighter jets. So, the crash landing that the proposal then suffered was completely unexpected: the Council of States approved the Gripen jets but rejected the lifting of the spending brake on which this motion depended. This effectively constituted a rejection of the Gripen proposal. This is a clear indication that some conservative politicians are also sceptical about the procurement of the jets. The sceptics argue that the current fleet is adequate for policing the airways, a major air battle over Switzerland is highly unlikely



to occur, even in the distant future, and the future of aerial warfare belongs to drones in any case.

Observers anticipate that the fighter jets will win the approval of the National Council in the autumn despite the reservations of the Security Policy Commission and also eventually secure the backing of the Council of States. However, the Swiss people will have the final say on the matter, as a referendum or initiative against the resolution is inevitable. The ambiguous decision of the Council of States and the lack of unity among conservatives represent major setbacks in the referendum campaign, which the fighter jet opponents will seek to exploit to the full.

Contentious defence policy proposals

It is not only the Gripen proposal that will cause emotions to run high and result in a fiercely contested referendum battle. A popular initiative from the Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSoA) is seeking to abolish compulsory military service. The initiative was rejected by both the Council of States and the National Council during the spring session. But fundamental issues concerning the future of the army will be raised during the referendum campaign. And the GSoA should not be underestimated – 35.6% of the electorate voted in favour of a radical call to abolish the army in 1989. In 1992, the GSoA collected over 500,000 sig-

natures against the purchase of the F/A-18 fighter jet within a month – a record in terms of collection period and number of signatures. The GSoA was then defeated at referendum, but just under 43% rejected the acquisition of the fighter jets. A shock outcome cannot therefore be ruled out on either compulsory military service or the Gripen jets.

Army planners face an unenviable task

The wrangling over the previously mentioned military spending levels is a further element of uncertainty. In 2010, the Federal Council set the ceiling at 4.4 billion Swiss francs a year in its army report and demanded a reduction in the number of troops to 80,000. Parliament wanted 100,000 men and a five-billion budget. The Federal Council put its foot down and is only prepared to raise the ceiling to 4.7 billion on finance policy grounds. In spring 2013, the National Council insisted on the 5-billion army budget. The majority found that the army's mandate would be compromised if this benchmark figure were not met. But a consensus on what this mandate should be is far from being reached. A parliamentary minority therefore argued that the ceiling could not be set without first discussing the current threat situation and the army's future challenges.

The forthcoming army reform will provide an opportunity for this. It should enter the consultation stage around the middle of this year. The parliamentary debate on the future development of the army will however not take place until next year. The army planners therefore face an unenviable task. They will remain on shaky ground for some considerable time to come.

JÜRIG MÜLLER is an editor with the "Swiss Review"