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Switzerland to bolster its armed forces

Europe has begun rearming amid the war in Ukraine. Switzerland also wants to invest more in its armed forces and quickly procure new fighter jets.

THEODORA PETER

When Russia invaded Ukraine almost six months ago, many people spoke of a watershed moment. War in 21st-century Europe had seemed inconceivable until then, but the tanks and missiles unleashed on Ukraine have forced policymakers to rethink European security. Many countries are now strengthening their military capabilities. Germany alone is investing 100 billion euros in its armed forces and has pledged to spend two per cent of its GDP on defence. In Switzerland, parliament has decided to increase the country's military budget to 1 per cent of GDP by 2030. This would move defence spending up from the current level of five billion to around seven billion Swiss francs a year. A minority consisting of the SP and the Greens criticised the decision, calling it "blind militarisation" and warning that spending on education, agriculture, environmental protection, and development aid could suffer as a result.

Six billion francs for fighter jets

Defence Minister Viola Amherd wants to use a portion of the additional funds to equip Switzerland's ground troops with artillery. The Federal Council also intends to go ahead with the already approved purchase of new F-35 fighter jets. It aims to sign the relevant contracts with US manufacturer Lockheed Martin by the end of March 2023

– before the "Stop F-35" popular initiative is put to voters. The SP, the Greens and the Group for a Switzerland without an Army tabled the initiative, lamenting that the US fighter jet was a "complete overkill". Thirty-six F-35 jets including weaponry will cost a total of six billion francs. In September 2020, only a wafer-thin 50.1 per cent majority of voters approved the purchase of new fighter jets, as many readers will recall. No one knew back then what the actual aircraft model would be.

New debate on arms exports

The war in Ukraine has also reignited the debate on arms exports. It was only last year that parliament curtailed the Federal Council's authority to approve arms exports (see "Swiss Review" 6/2021). The War Material Act forbids arms shipments to countries involved in "internal or international armed conflict". Consequently, Switzerland has been rebuffing requests from friends and neighbours to re-export Swiss arms to Ukraine. This has to change, says FDP leader and National Councillor Thierry Burkart. In his view, allies who "share Switzerland's values" should receive exemptions in future. Parliament is set to debate the sensitive issue in autumn. Direct arms shipments to Ukraine are out of the question. As a neutral country, Switzerland cannot favour any warring party when exporting military equipment.

At the top of Switzerland's military shopping list – the F-35 fighter jet manufactured by US company Lockheed Martin.
Photo: Keystone