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Switzerland moves one step closer to NATO

The Federal Council wants to join the European Sky Shield air defence system. This goes beyond simply contributing to the procurement of air defence systems. Critics argue it jeopardises the principle of neutrality.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought home to European countries how ill-prepared they would have been for such an attack. The war has demonstrated how important it is to defend airspace. In autumn 2022, 15 European states launched the European Sky Shield initiative in response to a proposal by Germany. The project aims to strengthen European air defence systems and close any gaps.

In the summer of 2023, Defence Minister Viola Amherd signed a declaration of intent to join the procurement initiative. The federal councillor told the media the aim is to coordinate procurement and achieve "interoperability", i.e. maximise compatibility among systems. Switzerland is free to decide to what extent it will participate. The idea is to avoid Swiss airspace forming a gap in the air defence umbrella.

Russia's war of aggression has called into question the conventional wisdom in Switzerland. It has made the Swiss realise that their national security depends on some level of cooperation with their allies, and not for the first time either. At the start of the Second World War, General Guisan ordered cooperation with the French army in the event of a German invasion.

Federal Council on shaky ground

By participating in Sky Shield, the Federal Council is on shaky ground with regard to neutrality. Defence Minister Amherd emphasised that Switzerland will not intervene in other countries' conflicts. Switzerland also included caveats under neutrality law in a supplementary declaration explicitly excluding any involvement in international military conflicts. Austria, another neutral country, is also planning to join the initiative.

However, this declaration does not appease the critics. The SVP is concerned that Switzerland is taking another step closer to NATO through its involvement in the programme and warns that Swiss neutrality may be at stake. Sky Shield does indeed bring Switzerland closer to NATO. The participating states hope to strengthen the European pillar of the Western defence alliance through the programme. It will be integrated into NATO structures. Furthermore, interoperability means that Switzerland and NATO member states are developing their ability to conduct joint operations. That amounts to more than a simple purchasing consortium to acquire weapons under improved conditions.

Those in favour of a less rigid interpretation of neutrality approve of Amherd's plans. They are firm in their con-



The plans revealed by Defence Minister Viola Amherd and Chief of the Armed Forces Thomas Süssli are taking the country a step closer to NATO.

Photo: Keystone (archive image 2020)

dition that Switzerland cannot stand alone in the event of a major conflagration. The country already benefits from NATO protection despite having made no tangible contribution to security on the European mainland during the biggest crisis in decades.

The future direction of the armed forces presented a few weeks later by Chief of the Armed Forces Thomas Süssli runs along similar lines. The focus is now on defence against military invasion – the same as during the Cold War but adapted to the current reality.

If Switzerland is at war, it is no longer bound by neutrality law. The country needs to be prepared for that scenario, according to the report on the fundamental reform of the armed forces by 2031. Switzerland must be ready to defend itself and that includes working with other forces. As standing alone is not an option, international cooperation is unavoidable, and that includes procurement.

No doubt the plans outlined by the defence ministry will lead to some lively debate about the armed forces and neutrality over the coming months.