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Ban nuclear weapons? Yes, but ...

Switzerland wants a world without nuclear weapons. Yet the Federal Council has not yet signed the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This has something to do with Swiss-NATO rapprochement.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

Switzerland is defined, among other things, by its commitment to conflict resolution, nuclear disarmament, and world peace. The Federal Council applied for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council with these very goals in mind. Switzerland will remain at the high table of UN diplomacy alongside the world's major powers until the end of 2025, debating political crises, sanctions and peace missions. Which is why signing the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) immediately would seem to be a no-brainer for the Federal Council. Switzerland was one of the 122 UN member states to negotiate and adopt the TPNW in 2017. But it is yet to ratify it.

The TPNW goes way beyond other existing treaties. It prohibits the production, possession, transfer, testing, use, and threat of use of nuclear weapons. The 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), meanwhile, is the cornerstone of today's nuclear world order, defining the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China as nuclear-weapon states.

The new treaty is hard to swallow for Switzerland's policymakers. On the one hand, the Federal Council believes that the TPNW fills a gap in international law, with nuclear weapons the only weapons of mass destruction never to have been subject to a comprehensive prohibition treaty until now – unlike biological and chemical weapons, for example. To ratify the TPNW would also be in keeping with Switzerland's humanitarian tradition. And yet the same Federal Council has hit the brakes. After the TPNW was adopted, Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis said that the treaty was not the way to achieve these objectives. This has been the government's view ever since.

Yet pressure is coming from parliament, which has already urged the government to sign the treaty on several occasions. Members of all the political parties have called for a nuclear ban, albeit for different reasons. The left-wing parties are committed to pacifist principles, whereas representatives of the SVP want ratification of the TPNW because this would make it harder for Switzerland to move closer to NATO – probably the very issue that explains why the Federal Council is stalling in the first place. Since the war in Ukraine began, the Western defence alliance NATO has taken on greater importance for Berne. By signalling its intention to join the Sky Shield air defence system (see Review 5/2023), the government has made its latest step towards NATO. Switzerland has been a NATO partner country under the Partnership for Peace programme since 1996.



But NATO also cooperates with countries like Austria that have already signed on the dotted line, say advocates of the treaty. Accession to the TPNW would not jeopardise Swiss security interests, in their opinion. Nevertheless, Western countries are exerting pressure on Switzerland to ditch the treaty for good. Once-neutral Sweden recently went through a similar process. NATO wants more in return for its friendship.

A federal government report published in 2018 already goes some way to allaying doubts, saying that Switzerland would probably cooperate with nuclear-weapon states or their allies, in the extreme case of self-defence against an armed attack. As a party to the TPNW, Switzerland would abandon the option of explicitly placing itself under a nuclear umbrella within the framework of such alliances. Commentators in Berne agree that Switzerland would be ill-advised from a foreign and security policy perspective to sign a treaty that not only questions the security doctrine of our most important partners but also attacks it directly by stigmatising nuclear weapons.

Closer ties – NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Swiss Defence Minister Viola Amherd met at the 2022 World Economic Forum in Davos. Photo: Keystone

Immediately after the Second World War, Switzerland made plans to build atomic bombs of its own. Read the Swiss National Museum's blog post for more details: [revue.link/bomb](https://www.snm.ch/revue/link/bomb)