

SWISS CIVILIAN PEACE SUPPORT: POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS

For several years, civilian peace support has constituted a key area of Swiss foreign and security policy. This has translated into concrete political achievements of late. These successes should not, however, distort perceptions as to what Switzerland's peace policy is capable of achieving in the field of conflict resolution and in terms of enhancing the country's political standing. Unrealistic and excessive expectations will invariably lead to disappointments and contribute to an erosion of domestic political support.



Peace support as a way of fostering relations: Micheline Calmy-Rey and Hillary Clinton at the signing of the Turkish-Armenian accord, 10 October 2009.
Reuters/Christian Hartmann

Switzerland has recently achieved some remarkable successes with its policy of civilian peace support. For instance, on 10 October 2009, the protocols on normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey were signed in Zurich. Switzerland's mediation efforts made an important contribution to this Armenian-Turkish détente process. Only days before, the country had hosted the Geneva Talks between the EU3+3 (Germany, France, the UK, China, Russia, and the US) and Iran on security and nuclear issues. Switzerland has even reinvigorated its role as a protection power: Since Russia and Georgia broke off diplomatic relations in the wake of their armed conflict in August 2008, Switzerland has represented the interests of these two states to the respective other side.

These activities are the visible signs of a conscious prioritization in the area of civilian peace support. For several years, the expenditures of financial resources in this policy field have been steadily increasing. With persistent engagement, Switzerland has successfully enhanced its international profile in the area of peace policy. In order to gain broader domestic support for civilian peace support, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has for some time been promoting the country's activities more vigorously in public. On the one hand, it aims to highlight the importance of contributions for conflict resolution and the enhancement of human security in the regions concerned. On the other hand, the FDFA points out the

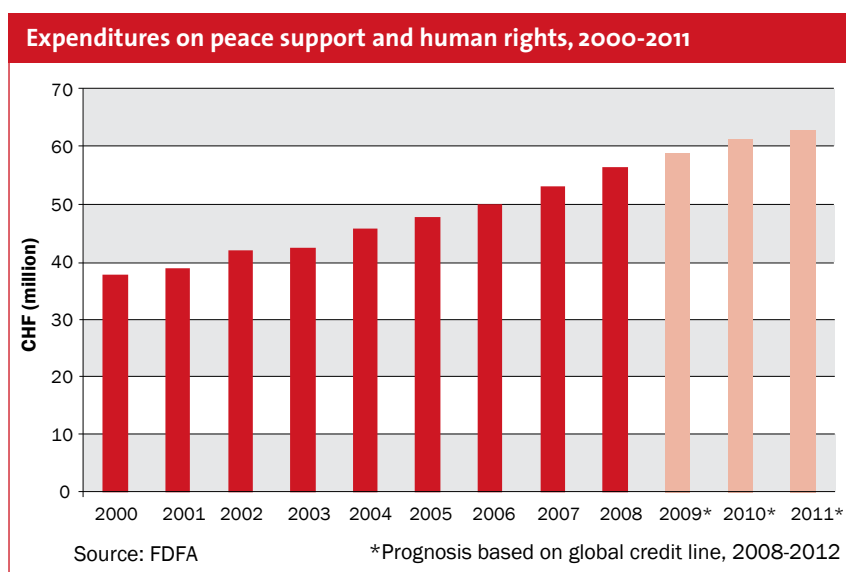
benefits for Switzerland itself. These are related primarily to the country's security interests. Furthermore, it is asserted that the Swiss engagement has positive effects on the image of Switzerland, access to international key actors, the country's influence in peace and security policies, and its foreign economic interests.

This communication strategy is something of a tightrope walk. While it aims at generating domestic support for civilian peace support, it also threatens to give rise to unrealistic expectations as to the results that such an approach is effectively able to produce. Despite a sense of gratification at what has been achieved, the limitations of Swiss peace support policy should not be overlooked.

Reasons for increased importance

The importance of civilian peace support in the context of Swiss foreign policy has increased over the past years, not least because the demand for civilian contributions to conflict resolution has grown at the international level since the end of the Cold War. It soon became clear that prevention and resolution of the new, frequently intra-state conflicts as well as dealing with fragile states and the phenomena of extremism and terrorism required not just military measures, but also a broad spectrum of civilian instruments.

The upgrading of peace policy as a core business of Swiss foreign policy was also



the result of a change of course at the domestic level, where there was also a growing awareness of the need to improve international cooperation in the area of security. The insight that Switzerland, too, was affected by the direct or indirect ramifications of geographically distant conflicts consolidated the political determination to contribute substantially to cooperative security production.

Because engagement in military peace-keeping remained strictly limited for domestic reasons, civilian activities were accordingly stepped up. The country's longstanding tradition of good offices was helpful for securing domestic consent to an expansion of civilian peace support policy. Switzerland as a democratic, neutral small state without a colonial history, and with its experience in dealing with minorities and federalism seemed to be especially suited for tasks in this area. From the Swiss point of view, the prospect of following Norway's example by enhancing the country's international influence through a distinctive peace policy, and thus compensating for certain institutionally conditioned shortcomings in international participation, increased the attractiveness of increased civilian engagement.

Benchmarks and tension areas

The increasing importance of civilian peace support for Switzerland is manifested in the development of expenditures (cf. Table). Spending increased from CHF 37.9 million to CHF 57 million between 2000 and 2008. Moderate growth of expenditures is also envis-

aged for the next years. Since 2003, these funds have been part of a four-year global credit line, which makes it easier to plan activities. The main instruments of civilian peace support policy are good offices and mediation, programs for civilian conflict resolution, human rights dialogues, a pool of experts, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic partnerships.

In terms of issues and geographic focus, there has been a process of concentration in recent years. It was based on the conviction that serious engagement required well-founded know-how as well as considerable time and assets, and that a bundling of resources would increase the efficiency of Switzerland's contributions. In terms of content, the focus areas were mediation, the rule of law, separation of powers, federalism, election support, humanitarian demining, human rights, justice and peace, and dealing with the past. Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Colombia, the Great Lakes/Burundi, and Sudan were identified as focal areas.

Occasionally, in view of the limited security policy and economic relevance of certain focal areas, criticism was levelled that the selection of these priorities had been determined too much by opportunity and not enough by interests. This tension area between interest- and value-driven engagements is also seen in the list of criteria Switzerland has established as decisionmaking aid with respect to accepting new activities (see text box). In view of the increasing foreign-policy pressure Switzerland has

recently been exposed to, as well as the tighter budgetary situation, there may be increasing demands for increasing prioritization of Switzerland's national interests in the future.

The question of whether Switzerland wants to position itself primarily as a niche actor or rather to instrumentalize its civilian peace support policy as part of an intensified cooperation strategy with important partners such as the EU or the US forms another contested point. For some time, the emphasis was on the first of these options. For instance, in its policy of promoting dialog, Switzerland's mediation efforts were based on the approach of speaking to all parties that were relevant for conflict resolution. In doing so, it occasionally pursued a pronounced niche strategy. Thus, its persistent willingness to engage in talks with Hamas in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the concomitant distancing from the isolation strategy pursued by the EU and the US gave rise to criticism that was occasionally quite vehement (cf. CSS analysis no. 35 [↗](#)). Switzerland's deployment of civilian capabilities as a strategic instrument of international cooperation is less developed. The country only participates sporadically in the EU's civilian missions in the context of ESDP. It is currently contributing individual experts to the European Union Police Mission (EUPM) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and EULEX Kosovo.

Mixed balance

Civilian peace support is delicate, elaborate, and often fraught with setbacks. In order to answer the question of whether Switzerland's engagement is worth the effort and whether its activities to date have been successful, one must take into account that a variety of criteria for success exist. First of all, it is necessary to enquire as to the direct effect of engagement on a concrete peace process; the second factor is the perception of Switzerland by the international actors involved and the gain of influence and reputation that this may incur; and thirdly, domestic reactions must be considered. Accordingly, the assessment of individual peace support activities results in a mixed balance sheet.

One positive example with regard to the actual peace process was the mediation of the peace agreement in Nepal

Criteria for Swiss engagement

- Effectiveness:** Is there a reasonable chance that a commitment could make a significant positive contribution towards peace, protection of human rights, or the observance of international humanitarian law?
- Foreign policy interests:** Does a conflict have any impacts on Switzerland in terms of security, the economy, migration policy, development policy, humanitarian aspects, or the environment?
- Comparative advantages:** Are there any special historical, political, or economic relations with the conflict region? Does Switzerland have any specific expertise to offer that could be useful for solving the conflict?
- Demand:** Is any commitment on the part of Switzerland desired by the conflict parties?
- Synergies:** Is there any scope for synergies with other Swiss activities (development cooperation, military peacebuilding, etc.) or multilateral efforts?
- Risk:** Can the political risk for Switzerland and the individual risk for personnel on location be calculated?

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in 2006, which contributed to ending a ten-year civil war. Another positive development was the successful mediation between Turkey and Armenia, though the sustainability of the agreement that was reached remains to be seen. However, the signing of the accord in Zurich not only met with a positive reception domestically, but also gave Federal Councilor Micheline Calmy-Rey an opportunity to meet bilaterally with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. There was a similar situation at the Geneva Talks between the EU₃₊₃ and Iran in the past year. While they did not bring a breakthrough on issues, Calmy-Rey as the head of the FDFA used this opportunity to conduct bilateral talks with EU High Representative Javier Solana and Iran's chief negotiator Saeed Jalili. There is no doubt that such meetings are in Switzerland's interests. Such contacts also favored the de-escalation of the conflict with the US over Swiss bank UBS and the country's banking secrecy laws as well as the conclusion of a natural gas deal with Iran.


Of course, there are also activities that are more problematic and less successful. In the Middle East especially, Switzerland was repeatedly criticized in harsh terms for its activities, such as in the context of

the Geneva Initiative or the dialog policy with Hamas. The Colombian government's decision to forgo Switzerland's facilitation services also gave rise to controversial domestic debates on the usefulness and implementation of the Swiss dialog policy.

Challenges

The difficulties in the area of civilian peace support are inevitable and inherent to these issues. There can be no guarantee of success. Switzerland has achieved quite remarkable successes within a relatively short time through its strategy of boosting civilian peace support efforts. This can be seen in the concrete contributions towards peace processes, in the development of internal expertise, in the conceptual and institutional design, or in the financial consolidation of this policy field.

There is further scope for optimization in the area of international cooperation. Switzerland's autonomous capacities are limited, and will remain so. In this area, too, Switzerland depends on strong partners such as the UN and the EU, or on the participation of like-minded or strong states. Expanding cooperation with the EU in the context of civilian ESDP missions could be useful for gearing these activities more strongly towards Swiss security interests. At the same time, Swiss contributions would probably also be welcomed by the EU, considering the shortcomings of member states in meeting the *Civilian Headline Goals*.

At the inter- and intradepartmental level, too, there is scope for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of Switzerland's peace support efforts. A greater willingness to participate in military peacebuilding missions would place Switzerland in a better position to complement its mediation activities with security policy elements. Increasing the coherence between peacebuilding engagements and activities in the field of development policy would serve a similar purpose (cf. CSS Analysis no. 40 ). Ideally, the linkage between Switzerland's civilian and military activities in concrete missions would follow a cross-departmental "Whole-of-Government" approach. Switzerland is trying to achieve this, for example, in Nepal and in Sudan.

Caveat: Avoid excessive expectations

In conclusion, it is appropriate to include a critical remark with a view to the high

hopes attached to Switzerland's civilian peace support policy. In order to consolidate domestic support for the latter, public statements tend to highlight that the country's peace policy not only serves conflict resolution in crisis regions and enhances the country's own security, but that it also improves its image, increases its political influence, raises its international standing, and facilitates the pursuit of foreign economic interests. There is a danger that this multiplicity of goals may raise unrealistic expectations among the general public as to what Switzerland can achieve with its peace support policy.

It is legitimate for Switzerland to apply the political credibility it has gained in the field of peacebuilding to other areas, in pursuit of its own interests. It must be clear, however, that the core metric for assessing the country's engagement must be the contribution of the latter to conflict resolution and to producing security for Switzerland. Any other benefit that may accrue, such as enhanced influence in other policy fields by way of access to key actors, can only be of a secondary nature.

Civilian peace support should not be converted predominantly into a way of compensating for shortcomings in other areas with regard to Switzerland's international standing, or be seen as a general dispensation from the requirement to deal with basic issues of foreign and security policy. Especially with regard to the uncertain nature of peace processes and the great likelihood of setbacks, it is virtually certain that civilian peace support cannot fulfill all of the hopes projected onto it. These expectations must be brought to a more realistic level; otherwise, disappointments – and thus, an erosion of domestic support for the core task of civilian peace support – are inevitable.

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