

SWISS MILITARY OPERATIONS ABROAD: CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

The contribution of the Swiss armed forces to international crisis management so far has been a limited one. The disparity with regard to the efforts of comparable countries such as Austria, Sweden, and Finland is considerable. The expansion of military peace support, which has been planned for some time, would serve Switzerland's security policy interests, but has so far failed to materialise due to a lack of political will. It would be advisable to explore the option of high-value niche contributions that can gain domestic support. Pragmatism is required on the part of the political parties to facilitate compromise solutions.



Swisscoy Super Puma helicopter in Kosovo.

Image: Swiss Armed Forces Joint Staff

Swiss military operations abroad have always been a contentious issue. They are the focus of one of the core controversies in the elaboration of the new Security Policy Report. Today, the spectrum of opinions ranges from demands for a complete renunciation of operations abroad to suggestions for expanding them substantially. There is no solid parliamentary majority in sight for either course; neither is there any consensus between the heads of the defence and foreign affairs departments in this matter, which causes additional difficulty for the strategic positioning and political steering of military peace support.

The fact is that the Swiss armed forces' contribution to international crisis management so far has been a limited one. This also becomes clear when the comparison is made with other neutral and non-aligned countries in Europe. During the Cold War, the security doctrines of Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, and Finland were essentially

similar, being geared towards autonomous territorial defence. Since the strategic watershed of 1989, however, Switzerland's security policy has differed markedly from the strategies of the other states.

Austria, Sweden, and Finland today are consistently on track with the pan-European trend of cooperative security, which is about jointly managing crises and risks. Austria and Sweden have considerably reduced their military personnel levels, transformed their armed forces into a multi-functional crisis instrument, and elevated international crisis management to a structure-determining task. Finland, due to its proximity to Russia, continues to maintain a large force level and remains committed to strong territorial defence, but regards international crisis management as an equally important task.

Switzerland, though it has reduced its force levels and restructured the armed forces,

has still only geared its security policy towards cooperation and crisis management to a limited extent. "Peace support" as part of the armed forces' mission statement is not really a priority in everyday politics and has so far failed to make any significant impact on the evolution of the armed forces. The shift of emphasis in the "Force Development Step 2008/11" from defence forces to security forces largely relates to domestic army tasks. Security and defence are still mainly conceived of in national terms in Switzerland.

This idiosyncratic Swiss security policy orientation is partially due to its non-membership in the EU. Another, more deep-seated reason can be found in Switzerland's traditional role conception that is shaped by the country's specific experience in World War II and the Cold War, and which is reflected both in its European policy and in its security policy. A conception of neutrality that goes beyond the bare-bones definition of the term under international law, a security doctrine based on autonomous territorial defence, and international solidarity that focuses on humanitarian aid and civilian services – these continue to be important elements of Switzerland's self-image. Its continued efficacy is seen in the security policy positions endorsed by parties from the left and the right of the political spectrum, which are more sceptical towards international military operations than comparable parties in other countries. Due to the system of direct democracy in Switzerland, this self-image of the country's role is also reflected in the implementation of Switzerland's peace support policy.

When they rejected the proposal of creating a UN peacekeeping battalion in 1994, voters set the country on a course of reticence in military peace support that is still manifest today. Since then, the legal foundations for participation in international crisis management have been formulated in a restrictive manner in order to be acceptable to a domestic majority. In this context, the remarkable expansion of civilian peace promotion in recent years can also be seen as compensation for the restrictions on military deployments abroad, as civilian assistance is less controversial domestically.

Explicable though Switzerland's limited political will for military peace support is (given its specific historical experience and political system), the question remains whether the current status quo is in its security policy interests. To be sure, a significant expansion of Swiss foreign engagements cannot realistically be achieved in the short term, especially since the domestic acceptance of military peace support today is even more questionable in view of factors such as the increasing complexity of crises, the difficult situation in Afghanistan, and growing budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, there is a need to develop a strategy for raising the profile of Swiss peace support. In the following, we will discuss some options for Switzerland's future military contributions to crisis management, based on an assessment of the status quo and a discussion of the country's interests.

Taking stock

The quality of the Swiss armed forces' contributions to military crisis management so far is undisputed and meets international standards. Both the Swiss military contingents and the efforts of military observers and specialists are appreciated. However, Switzerland does not match up to comparable states in terms of quantity, level of ambition, and the legislative framework.

During the past five years, on average, 271 members of the armed forces were deployed on crisis management missions. This is three times less than in the cases of Finland and Sweden, and nearly five times less compared to Austria (see table). It is also remarkable that Switzerland supplies only two contingents of 20 or more soldiers – the Swisscoy Company in Kosovo, which numbers up to 220 personnel, and the two liaison and observation teams as well as four staff officers in Bosnia. The other three states had deployed between four and six contingents each in recent

Comparison of military crisis management								
	Switzerland		Finland		Austria		Sweden	
Troops on foreign deployments ∅ 2005–09	271		785		1254		893	
Percentage in Western Balkans (Feb. 2009)	90.74%		75.64%		55.85%		39.16%	
Contingents (≥20)	Feb. 09	Max level *	Feb. 09	Max level *	Feb. 09	Max level *	Feb. 09	Max level *
Kosovo: NATO KFOR	220	220	450	510	623	623	253	650
Bosnia: EUFOR Althea	26	27	53	200	103	291	0	77
Chad: EUFOR	-	-	61	61	175	175	79	200
Liberia: UNMIL	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	234
Golan: UNDOF	-	-	-	-	383	383	-	-
Lebanon: UNIFIL	-	-	0	205	-	-	0	42
Afghanistan: NATO ISAF	-	-	80	100	-	-	280	350

Sources: *ISS Military Balance 2005–9*

* relates to years 2005–9

years, with force levels for their respective Kosovo contingents exceeding 500 troops in all three cases. Contingents of armed Swiss soldiers have so far only been deployed in the Western Balkans, while Finland, Sweden, and Austria are additionally engaged in the Middle East and Africa; the two Scandinavian states also have troops deployed in Afghanistan. Austria has defined a geographic perimeter for possible missions that includes not only the regions mentioned above, but also the Caucasus, the Black Sea region, and Central Asia.

Switzerland also differs from comparable states when it comes to the level of ambition. The latter have already taken on lead responsibilities in international missions. Finland, for example, was the first non-NATO state to take the lead of a multinational brigade in Kosovo. All three states also contribute substantial contingents to the EU's crisis response forces (battle groups). There is also a marked difference in terms of the recommended size for the number of troops in future deployments. While policy-makers set the framework at 1,500 troops in Austria and 1,700 soldiers in Sweden (starting in 2014), the Swiss Federal Council and parliament have been considering for years to double the capabilities for international operations to 500 soldiers – however, without making the necessary structural and legislative adaptations.

A key difference where the legislative framework is concerned, e.g., in comparison to Austria, is the comprehensive volunteer principle in effect in Switzerland. In Austria, this principle applies to militia soldiers, which make up about 60 per cent of the contingents in stabilisation operations. The so-called "ready key-personnel units" (Kaderpräsenzheiten), on the other hand, are

obliged to deploy on international missions. Another factor that has made expansion of international deployments more difficult has been the abolition of field experience in crisis management as a precondition for promotion to higher professional officer's ranks – a provision that was struck off the Swiss Ordinance on Military Obligations (Verordnung über Militärdienstpflicht) again just a few years after its introduction. Unlike in other countries, participation in an international mission is still a career obstacle in the Swiss armed forces rather than being conducive to promotion.

At the level of the Military Law, it is noticeable that Switzerland is the only country still to require that peace support missions be mandated by the UN, and thus to link them to a quorum of the UN Security Council. In practice, however, that distinction is not overly relevant, since the comparable countries, too, would only participate in a non-mandated mission (e.g., one conducted by the EU) under very specific circumstances. It is more significant that Switzerland is the only of these countries to legally restrict the range of tasks by excluding "participation in combat operations for peace enforcement". In view of the growing complexity of crises and the multilayered nature of crisis management measures, this provision in the Military Law is increasingly restricting the range of options for Swiss participation.

Swiss interests

From a security policy point of view, there is much to suggest that Switzerland, too, should do more to ensure domestic support for its crisis management operations and make them more visible to external observers. While the country's immediate security environment is marked by strategic stabil-

ity, a number of crisis hotspots can be identified on the European periphery, in an arc of crisis ranging from Africa across the Middle East to South Asia. Due to the effects of globalisation, manifestations of transnational violence such as extremism, organised crime, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction today constitute core challenges for the security of European countries. The migration pressure emanating from such conflict-ridden states may also be considerable. In the context of an increasingly interdependent world, geographic distance from crisis areas can only offer very limited protection from the attendant risks and threats.

Increased burden-sharing and division of responsibilities in preventing and coping with crises on the ground, where they occur, thus serves the interests of Switzerland's security policy. International stabilisation missions are not a Western neo-colonial project, as has occasionally been suggested in the aftermath of the war in Iraq, which was in violation of international law. Instead, in the age of globalisation, they are a necessary element of security policy that is essential for the protection of the Swiss population.

Unless the Swiss armed forces orientate themselves towards the most likely threats, they may gradually lose their legitimacy. This danger seems all the more real because the preparatory work on the Security Policy Report reveals a persistent scepticism of the cantons and the police towards the notion of an increased domestic role for the armed forces. Furthermore, the hitherto limited feedback of experience from international missions into the further development of the military, as well as Switzerland's abstention from the European Defence Agency, threaten to restrict the range of options regarding military structures and capabilities. Even under the unlikely scenario of a military threat to Switzerland, this could be a disadvantage, since effective defence today is only feasible as a collective European effort.

From the point of view of fiscal policy, there is little reason to object to peace support. The direct costs of ongoing missions amount to CHF53 million per year. Even on the basis of full-cost accounting, this amount is unlikely to exceed CHF100 million. Thus, the savings potential from abolishing military peace promotion is low, but its importance for security policy is considerable.

Options

The options for future crisis management participation must be in line with what is achievable at the level of domestic policy. A significant qualitative expansion would appear to be unrealistic in the short term. Nevertheless, the goal of expansion should be upheld. A debate is required as to whether the European trend towards stronger engagement in Africa is also applicable for Switzerland for reasons of migration and security policy.

In the short term, the extension of the Swisscoy engagement beyond 2011 will be the main priority. The reduction of KFOR assets will increase the importance of the Swiss contribution. However, the countries that continue to maintain a presence in Kosovo have so far failed to achieve agreement on how to implement the cutback from the current force strength of about 10,000 to the intended level of 2,500 troops. Many states wish to remain deployed with larger contingents in order to escape pressure to increase their contributions in Afghanistan. The shift of focus within KFOR from infantry to Liaison and Monitoring Teams, in analogy to the situation in Bosnia, is fundamentally in line with Switzerland's interests, as the Swiss militia soldiers have comparative advantages in civilian capabilities. Nevertheless, Switzerland's negotiating power is weak, which makes the performance profile and size of its future contribution impossible to predict at this stage.

Besides the Kosovo mission, there are several niche options for which majority support could be secured in the coming years. While these do not allow the same level of experience feedback, they still constitute valued contributions to crisis management. It is crucial that Switzerland base its decision on a diligent demand analysis. Both the EU and the UN have identified serious capability gaps in recent years. Switzerland should assess which of these gaps will not be filled even in the medium term, and thus create an opportunity for a niche policy. Many European states are currently considering ways to raise the profile of their contributions through fostering specialised capabilities.

One opportunity of particular interest for Switzerland for contributing high-value assets might arise in the area of tactical airlift. There is a particular demand for transport helicopters that can operate even in difficult terrain. Such a module would be of particular value if Switzerland could

also take charge of security and logistics. It is also conceivable, however, that these complementary tasks could be outsourced. There is also a huge demand for intelligence contributions, for instance in the area of situation awareness (intelligence-gathering, surveillance, reconnaissance). Engineer units, too, are in high demand.

Deployments of Swiss military observers, staff officers, and humanitarian demining teams have resulted in good experiences to date. Pursuant to international demand, these capabilities could be expanded from the current 25 to 40 or 50 staff. However, these services do not enjoy a great deal of visibility. The same applies to the accumulation of expertise in areas such as ordnance storage and disposal or security sector reform. Nevertheless, Switzerland could make important contributions in these areas.

A one-sided focus on the UN as a recipient of Swiss services is not advisable. While the UN has a high demand for high-value contributions, military cooperation is sometimes more difficult in the framework of the UN than in the regional Euro-Atlantic organisations. Furthermore, the close overlap of interests with the EU in the framework of bilateral agreements is a further argument in favour of engagement within European crisis management. Finally, irrespective of the concrete shape of future crisis management policy, the incentive structures for international missions must be reconsidered. Besides the aspects already mentioned above, this would also involve awarding equal credit for military service abroad in calculating the number of days served.

Switzerland does have a range of options for raising the profile of its contributions to crisis management. It will be the task of the Security Policy Report at least to present these options for the Swiss armed forces. Subsequently, much will depend on whether the Federal Council and the security experts of the various parties will be able to agree on the cornerstones of a compromise solution. What is required most is pragmatism on the part of the political parties.

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