

Konrad Hummler: «Independence Before Neutrality»

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Leopard 2 and Sky Shield: we must act. World history is taking place now, today. There's no time for further dilly-dallying. History punishes those who come too late, Konrad Hummler writes in an essay for *finews.com*.

Russia's war against Ukraine has undoubtedly confronted our country with a strategic dilemma. Our policy of neutrality, practiced for well over a century, now seems somewhat incongruous in the context of a modern armed conflict.

While some voices loudly – and with resort to every political tool – call for a return to a strict application of the neutrality principle down to the letter, others continually coin new adjectives allowing for an ever more nuanced interpretation of neutrality, to the point of voiding the concept of meaning.

Then there are yet others who advise throwing neutrality overboard entirely and looking the

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reality of our bloc affiliation straight in the eye.

«Neutrality is not a national policy objective»

As ever when faced with truly difficult decisions, it is inadvisable to dismiss any of these positions out of hand. Indeed, the situation is too earnest to abandon thorough discourse conducted with due consideration and respect. Because ultimately, Switzerland must – in a more or less unified manner – do what is right, or at the very least what is unavoidable.

First, it is advisable to clarify a few key concepts. On the one hand, «neutrality» is not a national policy objective, but rather a guiding principle for handling matters of foreign and security policy; on the other, it is a collection of standards and directives set out in both international and national law – ranging from the Hague Convention of 1907 to regulations of the Swiss Armed Forces.

By contrast, what do constitute national policy objectives are certain concepts explicitly stated in the Swiss Federal Constitution, such as the «independence and security of the country». (Article 2). The federal government bears responsibility for foreign and security policy, and the implementation thereof is the remit of the federal authorities; any anchoring of neutrality in the Constitution would conflate legislative and executive power.

«Switzerland has often stood at the brink of openly breaching neutrality»

Furthermore, «neutrality» as both a guiding principle and a binding obligation of international law remains relevant only to the extent that our country is not under attack. The question of how far we may go in preparing active cooperation with a potential ally is highly contentious.

From a historical perspective, it is certainly true that the policy of neutrality has served our country well, from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 to the First and Second World Wars, and through to the Cold War. Nonetheless, it is striking to note the differences in how neutrality was practiced in each conflict and how malleable the concept was throughout the entire period.

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Switzerland has often stood at the brink of openly breaching neutrality, for instance in 1940, when General Guisan initiated cooperation with the French at the beginning of World War II, or more recently when Swiss encryption software enabled the US to decipher more or less the entire confidential communications of non-Western embassies throughout the world.

«Has neutrality been our saving grace?»

Depending on the situation and, too, the level of complacency within the federal authorities, neutrality has been interpreted as everything from a passive avoidance strategy to an occasion for active intervention – be it negotiating prisoner swaps, facilitating food deliveries (to both sides) or providing medical care to the war wounded. In such matters, however, autonomy and readiness to act have generally been diminishing for some time now in favor of supranational demonstrations.

Has neutrality been our saving grace? Yes. But not alone, and not without many favorable circumstances and the luck of providence. Had there been no overriding interest (for all war parties) in an intact Swiss economy and infrastructure, and had Switzerland lacked a convincing military readiness and ability, our country would have been swept up in the maelstrom of global history just like its neighbors.

Neutrality, in other words, is insufficient in and of itself. It additionally requires a dual strategy of cooperative and non-cooperative conflict resolution: economic concessions on the one hand, and military defense with all its ramifications on the other.

«The modern conflict, however, begins earlier and at a distant location»

What factors constitute today's challenges? First: in the times of ground warfare, neutrality was much easier to define and manage than now. In those days, a war began when one party breached another's national borders with hostile intent; for us, the barrier at Diepoldsau or Kreuzlingen or Chiasso. Hence, it was equally clear when an attacked party was entitled to cooperate with allies for the purpose of common defense.

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The modern conflict, however, begins earlier and at a distant location; in light of verifiable cyber breaches, it is indeed possible that the conflict has already begun. The following is therefore essential: even if we wish in principle to adhere to the concept of neutrality, the leaders of a country committed to independence and security must remain at liberty to independently determine when and where its strategic interests have been compromised.

Furthermore, a country's leadership must be in a position to manage the gradual deployment of the means at its disposal – sans restrictions from within or without. In resolving modern conflicts, this includes the implementation of sanctions, despite the difficulty of gauging their impact.

«We must differentiate between three levels of security»

Second: at the latest since the end of World War II and the advent of missiles and weapons of mass destruction, it has become patently unfeasible for a small, independent nation with a fundamental defense capability to solve all its security challenges alone. Cruise missiles, remotely operated drones and cyberattacks further accentuate the problem. In principle, we must differentiate between three levels of security:

- Security operations that an independent country must be able to carry out itself and for which it must have the requisite resources. These include police operations, territorial defense, as well as an integrated defense combining the armed forces, other state entities, civil organizations and the economy. The latter, long known as «general national defense», has been left by the wayside.
- There are also security measures for which cooperation is indispensable – in the areas of air and cyber defense, for instance.
- The third level encompasses those spheres that are the preserve of larger powers, and to which smaller nations are partly prohibited access by international laws such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons of 1968.

The third challenge: neither in the security operations we must conduct ourselves nor in those requiring cooperation with other nations or organizations is Switzerland in a state of readiness. In the best-case scenario, our current ground defense capabilities would hold out for one month.

«Neutrality is abused as an excuse to do nothing»

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In matters of air defense, we will, through the pending acquisition of F35 fighter jets, become structurally capable of transnational cooperation – yet effective, well-drilled cooperation (with whom, exactly?) is far from sight. Even worse: we are doing precious little to break the deadlock. Neutrality is abused as an excuse to do nothing.

What we lack is an intelligible doctrine supported by the majority of the Swiss on how – with or without neutrality – to handle the challenges of modern conflict and how it can be realized in the concrete situation of today's Europe. If our overriding goals are security and independence, then one thing is already clear: the less the Russians succeed in their war of aggression against Ukraine, the more time we have to get our own house in order.

The head of the Swiss armed forces suggests it would take ten years to secure a defense force that is reasonably ready for deployment. Timewise, that may just work out. Russia, weakened by military losses and Western sanctions, will surely need at least ten years to be structurally capable of an attack on Western Europe – which is by now evidently their aim. Indeed, we must not lose another minute in wrangling over whether to rebuild our defense capabilities.

«With our support, the war may be shortened»

Are we willing, if necessary (and unfortunately quickly), to sacrifice our neutrality to gain much time? And how explicit may our ensuing support for Ukraine then be? The issue at stake here is not the release of a mere 14,000 rounds of anti-aircraft ammunition; that request, at most, was a dry run for the Federal Council and Parliament.

Indeed, the real litmus test relates to the around 100 Leopard 2 tanks warehoused at a purportedly undisclosed location. With a little upgrading, they would not only be readily deployable but could potentially turn the fortunes of war. In favor of Ukraine. Against Russia, for whom Western Europe is a strategic target. In ten years, however, the tanks will no longer be of use. By then they will be obsolete.

With our support, the war may be shortened. 100,000 perhaps one million lives could be spared. How will the world judge us in time, if we literally hunker down on our tanks under the

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Sunday, 12 February 2023 04:52

pretext of neutrality only to later sell them for scrap? Will we have truly acted independently and in the interests of our own security?

«A situation that Friedrich Dürrenmatt himself could not have contrived better»

Or viewed from another perspective: what are the dangers if we do deliver the tanks? Do we run the risk of becoming a party of war? 100 tanks are significantly more than the 14 contributed by Germany. After such a step, can we return to the good old policy of neutrality, or would we have to follow Finland and Sweden in seeking the protection of NATO membership? Would a triangular transaction, for instance through a sale to Poland, be interpreted as a disingenuous circumvention of neutrality policy?

Questions upon questions – and none with clear answers. That, indeed, is the nature of a dilemma. Every potential solution entails clear disadvantages or risks – a situation that Dürrenmatt himself could not have contrived better. Serious discourse is urgent and necessary.

The second, somewhat simpler challenge relates to preparing effective airspace protection. Indeed, an aerial attack may eventuate much sooner than a ground attack; when seen in the cold light of day, already now.

Or to put it bluntly: tanks may be what we need in ten years, but air defense is what we need now. We have to assume that Russia will receive ongoing supplies of aerial weapons from China, Iran and maybe even India. Natural gas and crude oil wash in enough foreign currency to pay upfront.

An eastward-facing network of intelligence procurement and air defense instruments is imperative and urgent. And it must be strategically positioned at the outmost location.

«The greatest hole in European airspace is the one gaping over the Eastern Alps»

In summer 2021, German Chancellor **Olaf Scholz** spearheaded such an initiative under the name of «Sky Shield». Apparently, the initiative is already obsolete, for whatever reasons. Perhaps a similar effort by a neutral (sic!) country in the middle of Europe, but with a clear

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exposure to the East, might prove more expedient. Austria, logically, would have to be involved.

Because the greatest hole in European airspace is the one gaping over the Eastern Alps. Well designed, a Sky Shield initiative would certainly have no bearing on neutrality. Because preparing for common airspace defense, even at a far-off front, violates no neutrality laws – these take effect only when the airspace is breached and thus a state of defense arises. Why on earth are we still dithering?

«There's no time for further dilly-dallying»

Leo 2, Sky Shield: we must act. World history is taking place now, today. There's no time for further dilly-dallying. «History punishes those who come too late» (**Mikhail Gorbachev**).

And a word, finally, to those who hold dear the independence of our country and for whom it is the party program: a Switzerland that is in a position to render useful services – indeed, perhaps indispensable contributions – to its European neighbors will be able to retain its independence far longer than a country that limits itself to absenteeism.

Although the criticism, mostly from Paris and Berlin, that Switzerland habitually indulges in EU-cherry picking is unwarranted, the accusation that the Swiss engage in NATO-cherry picking in matters of security and defense politics is unfortunately fair. Under no circumstances may our aim be NATO membership, but rather an honest relationship of exchange for measurable services.

Konrad Hummler joined what today is known as UBS after his law studies. He was a member of staff of then-Chairman **Robert Holzach**. In 1989, Hummler together with partners took charge of Wegelin, a Swiss private bank that folded during the Swiss dispute with U.S. authorities on the treatment of untaxed assets. After this incisive event, Hummler started anew. He founded M1, a think tank for strategic questions. Today, the former private banker has several mandates. He is the chairman of [Private Client Bank](#) in Zurich.