

Dependence on foreign weapons systems

Armed neutrality and the Swiss army

by Ralph Bosshard*

From a discussion on the careless handling of Switzerland's neutrality – which the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) department management and the army leadership have cultivated since the mid-1990s – one aspect that moved many listeners was that of armed neutrality.

The lecture and discussion took place as part of the event "On the careless handling of neutrality" organised by "Swiss Standpoint" on 7/8 June 2024 in Frauenfeld.

There can be no doubt that neutrality must be armed if the neutral state does not want to leave a military option open to a foreign power to gain access to the country's resources or to territory and airspace. A neutral state must not itself become an element of instability in a crisis region, which would be caused by the vacillating position of a non-participant.

Countermeasures against blackmail are also appropriate if a country's decision-making processes are not to be influenced by violent methods. If a state cannot maintain a minimum degree of independence in its decision-making, its neutrality will not last long anyway. In a crisis in particular, the opposing parties would probably engage in a race to see who would be the first to win over a previously uninvolved state to their side.¹

Dependence through armaments

By procuring equipment for its army, a country always becomes dependent to a certain extent on a manufacturer whose decision-making pro-



Ralph Bosshard. (Picture ma)

cesses are often not transparent and can hardly be influenced by the customer. This is also accompanied by a dependency on the country in which the material is produced, as nowadays states tend to control and regulate the trade in war material. In addition, states can also become involved in the procurement process, even if they are not the country of manufacture, but may be linked to it through contracts and regulations, such as patent rights.²

In the case of aircraft, dependence on manufacturers is particularly high, as certain maintenance work must be carried out periodically for safety reasons, inspections must be performed and wearing parts must be replaced, whereby original spare parts must almost always be used to ensure airworthiness.³ If essential systems fail, a vehicle can simply pull over, whereas an aircraft can quickly crash.

* On 7/8 June 2024 Ralph Bosshard held a lecture "On the careless handling of neutrality" at an event organised by "Swiss Standpoint" in Frauenfeld, eastern Switzerland. This resulted in the above review.

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He knows the regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia from his own experience and from his six years with the OSCE. Among other things, Ralph Bosshard was a special military advisor to the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to this organisation. As part of his current activities, he is also preparing expert reports on the military situation in the Ukraine conflict and previously on the situation in Kazakhstan and Armenia/Mountain Karabakh.

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With the use of now almost omnipresent computer systems, dependence on manufacturers has taken on a new dimension: Regular software updates are not only mandatory for aero planes, but also for weapon systems on the ground and for vehicles. Nowadays, mission planning, navigation, reconnaissance, weapons deployment and communication are almost inconceivable without the support of software – with all the data security requirements that this entails. As a result, the manufacturer's personnel often must be deployed and are therefore present in military facilities. This has been standard practice for decades in the propulsion of ships – including warships.⁴

Corresponding doubts regarding the operation of the ordered F-35 stealth fighter aircraft, which have been expressed by various parties, are therefore not entirely unjustified. However, the problem would also arise with almost any other type of aircraft. But whether it was wise to become dependent on a US manufacturer and the US government for a second time after the F/A-18 is a very legitimate question.

Why a stealth bomber?

Armed forces that are supposed to suppress uprisings in distant parts of the world or are supposed to operate far from home as part of an alliance look different from those that are supposed to protect neutrality on home soil and, if necessary, fend off military aggression. This applies particularly to air forces. The organisation, deployment procedures, training and equipment of an air force designed to combat enemy air forces,⁵ achieve air superiority, support its own naval and land forces and, if necessary, achieve directly strategically relevant effects, differ massively from those of an air force designed to defend its own airspace.⁶

In this respect, too, the decision to purchase the F-35 can certainly be scrutinised. This fighter aircraft was primarily designed for an offensive role, to combat enemy aircraft, their installations on the ground and air defences, which in Switzerland's case means a mission far outside Swiss airspace.⁷ It is not enough to argue for a strong army to protect Switzerland's neutrality: it should also be fit for the purpose.

(Translation Swiss Standpoint)

Source: <https://bkostrat.ch/2024/06/20/bewaffnete-neutralitaet-und-schweizer-armee/>, 20 June 2024

¹. On the military agreements between Switzerland and the belligerent powers during the First World War, see

H.R. Kurz: *Von Monat zu Monat; die Schweiz und Frankreich im Ersten Weltkrieg, ein Beitrag zur Frage der Vorbereitung von Kriegsbündnissen neutraler Staaten* in: Der Fourier, offizielles Organ des Schweizerischen Fourier-Verbandes und des Verbandes Schweizerischer Fouriergehilfen, volume 49 (1976), Issue 11, online see <https://www.e-periodica.ch/cntmng?pid=arl-001%3A1976%3A49%3A%3A826>. Cf. Hermann Böschenstein: Bundesrat und General im Ersten Weltkrieg, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte 10 (1960), P. 515–532, online at <https://www.e-periodica.ch/cntmng?pid=szg-006:1960:10::786>. The commonly called «Säbelrasslerbrief», in which the then Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Army, Ulrich Wille, considered entering the war on the side of the Central Powers, can be found on p. 521.

- ². This is particularly true in technology, as was shown, for example, in the procurement of payloads for the drones manufactured in Austria, which the *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE) intended to use to monitor the ceasefire in Ukraine. An infrared camera manufactured in Canada, for example, could only be exported with a licence from the US government. The author took part in this procurement process on behalf of the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the OSCE.
- ³. In this context, various problems arose in the procurement of spare parts for the Swiss Air Force's F/A-18 fighter aircraft, which the author became aware of in his capacity as Chief of Operations Planning in the Armed Forces Joint Staff at the time.
- ⁴. The *Guarantee Group* of the *Harland & Wolff* shipyard on board the "Titanic", which accompanied the newly commissioned ship and whose members all lost their lives when the ship sank, is known to a wider audience today. See «*Guarantee Group*» on the homepage of Fandom, online at https://titanic.fandom.com/wiki/Guarantee_Group and at «*Titanic Heritage Plaques – the Guarantee Group*» on the homepage of Maritime Belfast at <https://www.maritimebelfast.com/case-studies/titanic-heritage-plaques-the-guarantee-group/>. Renowned manufacturers of marine engines such as *Wärtsilä* also support their customers with *on-site repairs* and *in-situ machining*. Cf. the Homepage of *Wärtsilä* at <https://www.wartsila.com/marine/services/maintenance-and-repair> und <https://www.wartsila.com/docs/default-source/Service-catalogue-files/Engine-Services-4-stroke/wartsil%C3%A4-in-situ-machining.pdf?sfvrsn=0>. The presence of technicians on the ships during the voyage is not uncommon.
- ⁵. Referred to as *Offensive Counter Air* in the language of air force doctrine. See "Counterair Operations", at *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-01*, 15 June 2023, online at https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFD-P_3-01/3-01-AFD-COUNTERAIR.pdf, p. 4f. For some years now, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles for this task has also been under consideration, such as Osman Aksu: *Offensive Counter-Air Operations*, from *Joint Air Power Competence Centre Kalkar* (DEU), January 2021, online at <https://www.japcc.org/chapters/c-uas-offensive-counter-air-operations/>.
- ⁶. Also termed *Defensive Counter Air*. See "Counterair Operations", op. cit., p. 5f.
- ⁷. See Micah Garbarino: *Hill AFB Airmen bring F-35A's vital capabilities to Red Flag's modern fight, on the official website of the United States Air Force*, online at

<https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3660622/hill-afb-airmen-bring-f-35as-vital-capabilities-to-red-flags-modern-fight/#:~:text=As%20a%20multi%2Drole%20stealth,enemy%20aircraft%20before%20they%20attack>: "As a multi-role stealth fighter, the F-35A's primary job in many of these missions is Of-

fensive Counter Air. This could mean escorting and protecting stealth bombers or other fighters by detecting and picking off enemy aircraft before they attack. Or, tracking down and eliminating surface-to-air threats with a combination of technology and tactics that are unique to the F-35."