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Factsheet: Neutrality and security policy

Overview

Neutrality is a means of safeguarding Swiss interests such as its independence and security, as well as its prosperity and a peaceful and just international order. The law of neutrality requires Switzerland to refrain from participating in wars between other states and from providing military support to warring parties. At the same time it provides that the territory of a neutral state is inviolable. In this way neutrality helps to prevent Switzerland becoming a party to a war.

As a neutral state, Switzerland must be able to assert its neutrality in a credible way. In other words, it must be able to defend it. As Switzerland is not a member of a military alliance, it cannot count on the support of others. The security policy challenges are growing, however. The global security situation has worsened, and threats are transnational in nature and difficult to predict. Threat scenarios such as cyberattacks are becoming more dangerous as a result of rapid technological development. Alone, Switzerland would scarcely be able to defend itself against a strong opponent. It would have to rely on cooperation with partner states, for example to defend its airspace, or against large-scale cyberattacks. This type of cooperation must be prepared for in advance. Cooperating on security policy is therefore essential if Switzerland is to uphold its security, independence and neutrality.

Implementation in Switzerland

To reinforce its defensive capabilities, Switzerland presently works with selected partners and its neighbouring states in particular. This takes the form of information-sharing and joint exercises. In doing so Switzerland remains within the bounds of the law of neutrality. It does not join any military alliances or assume any joint defence obligations as part of individual cooperation projects. Before cooperating on security policy Switzerland always assesses whether it is permitted to do so under neutrality law. In principle it may work with a cooperation partner as long as that partner is not involved in a war with another state, and provided that Switzerland does not enter into any obligations or dependencies that would make it impossible for it to remain neutral if that partner became involved in a war. This is referred to as the anticipatory effect of neutrality.

The law of neutrality does not apply if Switzerland were to come under armed attack. Switzerland is permitted to defend itself, and also to work with partners to do so.

Importance for Switzerland and its neutrality

Over the centuries neutrality has been key to protecting Switzerland's independence and security. It enables Switzerland to advocate independently for its interests while playing its part in peace, stability and international cooperation. Neutrality remains an important element of Swiss security policy. It balances the duty of non-participation in wars between states with the responsibility to support the international peace order, dialogue between states, and stability in Europe and beyond.