

Why Swiss Neutrality Is Essential for American National Security: Scott Ritter

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Thirty years ago, a gathering of like-minded teachers, social workers, and medical professionals took place in a village some 40 miles outside of the northern Swiss city of Zurich. Their goal was to create a discussion group dedicated to the idea of the courageous pursuit of ethical living—"Mut zur Ethik," in Swiss-German.

Over the course of three days—September 1-3—this group, by this time veterans of three decades of commitment to their cause, convened their 30th meeting in a conference center in the quaint Swiss town of Sirnach. The conference featured speakers from around the world—Peru, the Congo, and Afghanistan stand out—as well as Europe and North America. The noted journalist Patrick Lawrence, together with his wonderful wife, Kara, were in attendance. I joined them as the only other American present in a crowd that numbered well over 200, with many more participating via video conference.

Numerous topics were discussed, ranging from American exceptionalism to Lithium mining, and almost everything in between. But the one that stood out to me was the issue of Swiss neutrality.

Perhaps it was the fact that I had the opportunity to spend quality time with two Swiss officers, one of whom served as an observer in the DMZ separating North and South Korea, and the other who did a tour with the OSCE in Ukraine and heard first-hand the value of having a neutral presence in conflict zones dominated by violently competing objectives and ideologies. Maybe it was the allure of the uniquely Swiss tradition of direct democracy, which had been engaged by the proponents of Swiss neutrality to enshrine the practice in the Swiss Constitution. Or maybe it was the outrage I felt upon learning about the role my own country was playing in undermining an institution that had been formally recognized in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The main takeaway for me from the Mut zur Ethik conference was the absolute necessity of

Switzerland remaining viably neutral, and how important this was from the perspective of American national security.

Scott Ritter will discuss this article and answer audience questions on [Ep. 97](#) of [Ask the Inspector](#).

The current debate regarding Swiss neutrality has erupted in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The European Union (EU), together with the United States, enacted a series of stringent economic sanctions targeting Russia and Russian interests. Switzerland joined in on the EU sanctions, provoking a Russian rebuke in the form of finding itself on a list of nations Russia deemed to be “unfriendly.” The reality of this action was made manifest when Russia refused to meet with the United States in the Swiss city of Geneva, traditionally the venue for arms control talks, citing Switzerland’s loss of its neutral status because of its decision to sanction Russia.

Switzerland continues to honor its current laws prohibiting the direct delivery of weapons to any nation engaged in war. Moreover, the re-export of Swiss-made weapons by third countries requires permission from the Swiss government. In the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, several European governments whose military possess stocks of Swiss-made ammunition have made such requests, but to date, no permission has been granted, something that has drawn the ire of the United States.

Enter Scott Miller, the US Ambassador to Switzerland. Miller has strongly urged Switzerland to allow the re-exportation of munition, declaring that the ban “benefits the aggressor [Russia], who violates all principles of international law.”

Miller also argues Switzerland should do more regarding the sanctioning of Russia, including the freezing of Russian assets. While the US Ambassador has acknowledged that the Swiss have frozen some \$8.37 billion in Russian assets held in Swiss banks, he noted that there was an additional \$50-100 billion in Russian assets that should be seized by Switzerland. “Sanctions,” Miller recently told Swiss reporters, “are only as strong as the political will behind them. We need to find as many assets as possible, freeze them and, if necessary, confiscate them to make them available to Ukraine for reconstruction.” Miller has taken umbrage over comments made by Helene Budlinger, the Swiss Secretary for Economic Affairs, indicating doubt from within the Swiss government over the utility of sanctions.

Many Swiss are concerned about what they view as the blatant interference in Swiss neutrality on the part of the US and its European allies. Last year, Pro Schweiz, an association affiliated with the conservative Swiss People’s Party, launched a campaign calling for a referendum designed to protect Switzerland’s neutrality by prohibiting it from participating in future sanctions and defense alliances. This would be accomplished through changes in the Swiss Constitution that would prevent Switzerland from joining a defense alliance unless it first came under direct attack, and ban “non-military coercive measures” such as sanctions.

But first Pro Schweiz needs to collect 100,000 signatures in support of the referendum by the Spring of 2024 before the measure can be brought up for vote via a national referendum. Recent polls indicate that more than 90% of Swiss voters are in favor of maintaining Swiss neutrality. But this number is deceiving—the poll also indicates that 75% of Swiss voters believe that sanctions are compatible with Swiss neutrality, and some 55% believe that Switzerland should be able to reexport munitions to Ukraine.

If Pro Schweiz can gather the 100,000 signatures needed (as of the Mut zur Ethik conference, some 70,000 signatures had been collected), then the matter will go before the people. Even if the measure passes muster through a simple majority, it must still be recommended for adoption by the Federal Council and Swiss Parliament. For this to occur, there needs to be a double majority, meaning at least 24 of the 46 members of the Federal Council and 101 of 200 members of Parliament must vote in favor. While the Swiss People's Party is the largest in the Swiss governmental system, holding 53 seats in the parliament and six in the Federal Council, it would need the support of other parties to assure adoption of the amendment, an outcome which is not assured.

Even if the referendum passes and is subsequently adopted, it won't shield Switzerland from the pressure brought to bear on it from Scott Miller and other non-Swiss parties. As an American who has sworn to uphold and defend the US Constitution from threats both foreign and domestic, I am insulted by the notion of an American ambassador, and by extension the US government, displaying such open disregard for the will of the Swiss people as freely and openly expressed through a democratic process which far exceeds the American equivalent in terms of transparency and accessibility. I would hope my fellow citizens would share in this outrage.

One way to prevent future interference of this nature would be for the American people to engage in a bit of direct democracy themselves, writing letters to their elected representatives in the US Congress seeking an amendment to the US defense and foreign affairs budget that "prohibits any US funds to be spent in support of policies that act in contravention to the principles of neutrality as defined by the government of Switzerland," and which "promotes policies that encourage Switzerland to maintain a genuinely neutral status, since such a posture is deemed to be in the best interest of the national security of the United States insofar as it promotes the principles of peaceful coexistence among nations."

This amendment would do far more than simply show respect for the will of the Swiss people. One day the conflict between Russia and Ukraine will end. At that time, the United States and Europe will need to find a way to engage Russia on the issue of formulating a new European security framework, as well as breathing new life into the issue of arms control and nuclear disarmament. Given the level of distrust that currently exists between Russia and the collective West (the US and Europe), it is difficult to imagine such talks taking place directly.

There will be a critical need for a neutral party who can provide a haven for the talks and negotiations that will be essential for the preservation of world peace and security. Switzerland is ideally positioned to be that neutral party, but only if it can regain the stature it enjoyed prior to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This can only happen if the United States stops pressuring Switzerland to give up on its neutrality in pursuit of shortsighted policies that will do little to change the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Swiss neutrality is not just good for Switzerland. It is also essential for US national security and should be supported at all costs.

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Featured image: A loaf of Swiss bread baked in honor of the 30th Anniversary of the founding of “Mut zur Ethik” (Source: Scott Ritter Extra)

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