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The sham of Swiss neutrality

OPINION PIECE BY PATRICK FEUZ*

A Zug-based company has been revealed as the hub of an audacious spying operation. From the early 1970s, the CIA and the then West German intelligence service, BND, used rigged Swiss encryption devices to snoop on over 100 different countries. The Americans may have continued using this technology to eavesdrop on governments and armies until very recently.

Germans and Americans wiretapped Argentina's generals during the Falklands War, not to mention the Iranian revolutionary guards during the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran. They claim that this surveillance, lasting half a century, helped to avert suffering – though their actions may also have had the opposite effect.



Either way, these revelations hurt. They show that Swiss neutrality, held up to this day as sacrosanct, is often a mere pretence. The US and German intelligence services benefited directly from our neutrality and our status as a technology leader. This was the main reason why so many encryption devices were purchased in Switzerland of all places.

Swiss functionaries – from intelligence to military, and from judiciary to politics – must have known or suspected that these machines had been manipulated. After all, Switzerland was aligned to the West in de facto terms during the Cold War. The Swiss intelligence service worked closely with the Americans and still relies on US assistance to this day.

Switzerland therefore turned and continues to turn a blind eye.

Put another way, neutrality was and is a myth to some extent. Strictly speaking, participation in military alliances is the only thing that neutrality has ever prohibited. Yet it has always been celebrated as a way of life. We will treat everyone equally and keep quiet. Politicians and the military peddle this lie, and we are only too happy to go along with the charade. Especially if it's good for business.

But now that this affair has blown up in our faces, we may now be paying the belated price for our amenability, both political and economic. If people begin to doubt Swiss impartiality, demand could wane for the good offices of our diplomats and the products of our technology companies.

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in order to find out what Switzerland knew about the espionage – and whether the Swiss intelligence service may even have benefited.

To what extent does the 'Crypto leaks' scandal jeopardise Switzerland's current role?

Switzerland mediates in many conflicts, offering its 'good offices' in some of the world's most geopolitically tense regions. For example, it is currently acting as an intermediary in the US-Iran crisis. Switzerland can only play this diplomatic role if its credibility as a neutral state is intact. This credibility is precisely what is at stake. It was the Iranians, incidentally, who were particularly spied on via the rigged Swiss devices sold to them by Crypto representative Hans Bühler.

The Americans and Germans spied. Why does this damage Switzerland's reputation?

It remains to be seen how much of a hit Switzerland's image abroad has taken, but how Switzerland sees itself has certainly been affected. The neutrality that so many Swiss hold dear has been damaged. The scandal could make a mockery of Swiss neutrality (see the opinion piece on page 15).

Credibility, trust and self-image are all soft factors. Will the revelations negatively affect any tangible economic interests?

Switzerland's technology sector is on the up. This, too, is reliant on the country having a credible image. Furthermore, Switzerland wants to position itself as a squeaky clean digital innovation hub and is pushing for an international initiative to promote ethical standards. The Crypto affair could not have come at a worse time.

Further information

Documentary on Swiss television (SRF): ogy.de/crypto

Hans Bühler / Res Strehle: "Encrypted – the case of Hans Bühler", Wird & Weber-Verlag, new edition 2020; ISBN 978-3-03922-044-1.