

## **Keeping outside the EU – Switzerland’s “sakoku” – from self-chosen to self-inflicted isolation?**

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**Abstract:** Switzerland is sailing between Scylla and Charybdis: Becoming a member with the feared loss of independence, or trying to come to terms with the EU as a non-member, maintaining a rather imaginary political and economic independence? Either selection has its drawbacks. I compare it with the Japanese policy of strict isolation from the early 17<sup>th</sup> through to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It did not work and had to be abandoned. Will Switzerland’s **self-chosen** keeping off the EU turn into a **self-inflicted** isolation?

**Keywords:** democracy, arguments against the EU, fear of EU bureaucracy, loss of independence, how important is Switzerland for the EU?, continuation of the present arrangement?, questionable attitude towards the EU

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Two questions I am almost always being asked by foreigners are about the Swiss Banking Secret and why Switzerland keeps outside the EU. This text is not a scientific analysis, I write as a politically active Swiss citizen, the aim being to provide the foreign reader with some insights that he rarely comes across in the mass media.

The word “sakoku” refers to the isolation imposed by the Japanese rulers from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Any contact with abroad was severely forbidden, the only access was permitted to Dutch ships, twice a year, and restricted to a small island in the port of Nagasaki.

The isolation was broken up by an US squadron of warships in 1853. The outside pressure plus the political situation in Japan led to the overthrow of the regime and the establishment of an imperial rule in 1868. The emphasis was on rapidly modernizing the country, adopting Western expertise and techniques. The isolation had more and more revealed itself as a serious hindrance to the development of the country and its political and economic independence and stability.

Of course the situation of Switzerland in 2009 and that of Japan between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century is not comparable, but there is a common denominator:

### **Fear that the independence will be endangered by foreign powers**

This argument is constantly being stamped on the mind of the people, accompanied by horror scenarios of how the EU administration, eager to regulate even the most trivial matters, would interfere with our daily lives, with the compounded drawback that we would be deprived of our right to decide on almost anything by popular vote. Lack of democracy is the catchword. I accept that this is far more than just an emo-

tional outcry. Distrust of a constantly growing and hardly checkable Commission and its bureaucracy is not unfounded.

For centuries Europe was ruled by monarchies which, either in absolutist terms, or in combination with more or less complaisant parliaments, determined the course of politics, of which a major share was devoted to waging wars. Our political system was the total opposite to that and was frowned on. The neutrality is the result of bitter experience in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and proved its value all the time through to WW I and II. All this led to the almost religious conviction that our political system is second to none. Why should one give up something that has proved useful over centuries?

Let me now look at some arguments of the opponents to an EU membership:

1. As a small country we would have no say, the EU dictates and we lose our right of self-determination by means of the referendum. Whether we would have a say in the EU will depend on how skillfully we act. By forming alliances we can influence matters. Absence in the EU decision-making leaves us at the mercy of others.

My viewpoint: How important is the referendum to the Swiss really? The numerous yearly polls, about four on the national and many more on cantonal and municipal levels, attract, as an average, between 30 to 40% of the voters! I myself am fed up with having to vote on items of which I lack any expertise, and even less the time to get reasonably acquainted with. What do we have a federal and 25 cantonal governments and parliaments for?

2. The way of bilateral agreements with the EU is successful.

My viewpoint: To arrive at such agreements is time consuming. Where the EU has already finalized internal agreements, the maneuvering space for negotiations with Switzerland is narrow. EU countries with whom we negotiate on a bilateral level will more and more lean to, or even adopt, EU guidelines. We would have to make concession like any member, with the prominent difference that members act with the support of the EU, with all the opportunities

open to them, whilst we are just in the waiting queue. The more members the EU counts, the harder it is to win support for us.

3. Even as a non-member we can adopt EU norms, if that suits us.

My viewpoint: The misleading term for this is “autonomous adoption of EU norms” (autonomer Nachvollzug). This is nothing but a semantic smoke screen by which we hide the humiliating fact that there is not the scantiest room for “autonomy”, we are simply limping along the pace set by the EU.

4. The following benefits for the EU are invoked as arguments why we should be rewarded with a benevolent treatment of our requests.

A. Switzerland is an important trade partner of the EU.

My viewpoint: We are important to the EU only and exclusively because it suits us. How can we survive without the vital EU export- and supply market?

B. Swiss companies in the EU employ a large number of people.

My viewpoint: Swiss companies are not active in EU countries because they want to serve them; it is simply a question of survival for enterprises with far too small a home market.

C. By building, at our own cost, two tunnels through the Alps, we contribute to the protection of the environment.

My viewpoint: We do this primarily because we consider it essential for ourselves.

The foes of an EU membership persistently bypass the fact that the EU is the result of laudable steps, taken since 1957, to prevent that wars keep devastating Europe. Did our continent ever enjoy 60 years of peace? Switzerland too is being benefitted by this marvelous achievement.

The results so far seem to somehow justify speaking of **self-chosen** isolation, but as the virulently exploded tax problems show we may be finding ourselves, before long, in a **self-inflicted** isolation. Amongst themselves the EU-members are no less selfish than we, but the rule of the game compels them to come to terms. What reason should they have to be lenient to an outsider? Are we strong enough and willing to endure hardship for the sake of our beloved freedom and autonomy? I doubt it. The constant fear that the EU will resort to sanctions if treaties are not ratified points to our crucial weakness: We are entirely dependent on its goodwill. Alone as a small country, though economically strong, we are political nobodies; our wealth instills envy rather than affection. Being so, I prefer to act within the EU, instead of barking at it, vociferating patriotic slogans.

Pursuing anti-EU propaganda distorts the views of our people. A campaign, pro and contra, is appropriate once the question of joining is to be decided by a referendum. Until that moment we better try to understand the EU, watch its development and its impact on Switzerland and avoid derogatory remarks. Sympathy in international politics is no less important than in private life.



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