

## Might the EU crisis get really, really ugly?

2015-11-01 19:45:37 by Southern

Do the Swiss know something the rest of us don't?

Ueli Maurer, the Swiss defense minister, has been making coy statements about the European crisis getting ugly – as in really ugly, like needing armed troops to deal with it. This sounds more like Greece, where the rioting is regular and increasingly scary, than anything in Central Europe, but where the whole EU furball is headed does seem less than clear of late.

The Swiss are famous for preparing for everything and having an absolutely huge army, relative to their population, to deal with any eventuality. They maintain their special military system, based on training for nearly the whole male population but a very small active duty cadre (plus a few, tiny UN peacekeeping-type missions abroad, since the Swiss have an actually defensive defense force): the Swiss can call up over 200,000 trained troops, which is but one-third of what was on-call twenty years ago – like everyone, they have downsized as the threat has receded since the fall of the Soviet bloc – but that's still pretty huge in Swiss terms. In America, that would mean a mobilization strength of nearly 8,000,000 for the U.S. military (it's a hair under three million, in case you were wondering).

Minister Maurer, accompanied by whispers from the top uniformed leadership in Switzerland, is trying to raise awareness that Europe's massive fiscal-cum-political crisis could get very unpleasant. Swiss military exercises in September, called STABILO DUE, were based on EU instability getting out of hand. The Swiss have stayed out of the EU – one more thing the very prosperous Swiss are gloating about these days – and they certainly don't want EU problems spilling over into their peaceful little country. That the Swiss military is adding four new military police battalions to the army, to be spread around the country, indicates that the threat they have in mind is more disorder and chaos than actual invasion.

The Swiss are in the process of modernizing their military, which they have discovered is very expensive; the purchase of 22 new Saab Gripen fighters has proved a big political headache, since the Swiss are as notable for their frugality as for their military preparedness. But Minister Maurer is on firm ground when he notes that the massive decline in European militaries since 1990 has implications for today, none of them positive. When even the British have cut their army so much that, in the event of a serious crisis, there would be at most two dozen infantry battalions on hand in the UK (that's well under 20,000 bayonets), one has to wonder if the next London "disturbances" could be kept in check if things got truly ugly. It's commonly held by European security insiders that if the next Anders Breivik were to target Muslims, not fellow Europeans, things could get unimaginably ugly very quickly. It is difficult to see how Europe's much smaller militaries could cope with massive civil disturbances. (And don't ask Uncle Sam for help, since the very last thing the Pentagon wants is to get dragged into any riot suppression – particularly

putting down Muslim uprisings - anywhere in Europe.)

It's easy to dismiss the Swiss, since they are a tiny country whose military hasn't actually fought anybody in a couple centuries. On the other hand, they managed to stay out of both of Europe's catastrophic World Wars precisely through preparing for eventualities and maintaining a strong defensive capability. They're clearly on to something.

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