



# Belgian Defence Policy: The Fight Goes On

*Sven Biscop*

**The Coalition Agreement of the Di Rupo government comes at a moment when the international context can help overcome the dilemmas of Belgian defence policy: transformation vs. budget cuts, collective security vs. pacifism, and European vocation vs. stagnation in European defence.**

When the Cold War was nearing its end, Belgium was one of the first to shift to a “Europeanist” stance in foreign and security policy, from NATO primacy and territorial defence to European autonomy and a broad concept of security. Realizing the limits of individual countries, Belgium became the most vocal supporter of European cooperation as the only way of maintaining a relevant as well as cost-effective military capacity. Simultaneously, it welcomed the opportunities that the unblocking of the UN offered for collective security, in support of which since the early 1990s Belgium has been engaging in multinational operations under UN, NATO and EU-command.

The Coalition Agreement of the Di Rupo government confirms these orientations. However, this switch from territorial defence to expeditionary operations has generated three as yet unresolved dilemmas for Belgian defence policy:

- Transformation of the armed forces has proved tortuous in the face of the cashing-in of the peace dividend, resulting in a sharp decline of the defence budget and, more importantly, a succession of unfinished reform plans, leaving the forces in disarray.
- The strong plea for European defence, though meant to reinforce and not to compete with NATO, at times results in tensions with more exclusively NATO-oriented EU Member States. At the same time it is not always followed up with actual participation in EU frameworks, and runs into the lack of cohesion and dynamism in European defence in the last few years.
- A tension exists between strong principled support for collective security through multilateral organizations, which may require the use of force, and the pacifism of the major parties, opinion-leaders and public opinion alike, which is deeply rooted in Belgium’s historical experience as the battlefield of Europe.

## **THE LEVEL OF AMBITION**

In view of the scale of its military capabilities, Belgium profiles itself as a “small but reliable” or “responsible and credible” partner, as the latest transformation plan (2009) and the Coalition Agreement put it.

Transformation of the armed forces has taken place in the context of a decreasing defence budget, from 1.37 % of GDP in 2000 to an estimated 1.09% in 2011. Invariably the budgets included in successive capability plans were revised downwards before the plan could be fully implemented. And, like in many countries, the investment part of the defence budget is often used as an easy post on which to save money to fill the overall deficit. Personnel reduction is the only means therefore of restoring a healthy balance between personnel cost (which in 2010 still accounted for some two thirds, to be reduced to 55% by 2015), running costs (some 23%), and investment (some 12%). Until now, however, savings thus made on personnel have never been reinvested in defence but have served to fill the overall deficit in the federal budget.

Belgium was one of the first to end conscription, in 1993, and has continued to downsize its volunteer forces. The Coalition Agreement provides for a further reduction to 30,000 military and 2,000 civilian personnel by 2015 (down from 44,500 in 2000). The stated aim in the 2009 transformation plan is to be able to sustain a concurrent deployment of 1,200 troops, which has effectively been the case in recent years. If that rhythm of deployment is to be maintained however, 30,000 military does seem to be the minimally required critical mass. Belgium should actually aim to increase the number of deployable and sustainable forces, which both the EU and NATO urge their members to do.

### **EUROPEAN DEFENCE**

The Coalition Agreement states that “the Belgian government will actively cooperate in the creation and reinforcement of European defence, an essential basis for a credible European foreign policy. This defence will enable Europe to engage in more balanced and hence more credible partnerships with our

allies, including within NATO”. While there are differences in style from one government to another, this has been the position since the 1990s. Belgium’s strong push for European defence during its EU Presidency in the second half of 2010 was another expression of its European vocation.

Belgium has long come to accept that in view of the small scale of its armed forces, common procurement and pooling capabilities with partners in permanent multinational structures is the best way of maintaining militarily relevant capabilities in a cost-effective manner. This has led, first of all, to a dense network of bilateral cooperation. The most far-reaching example is Admiral Benelux, the integration of the Belgian and Dutch navies. Belgium further is a part of European Air Transport Command, of the Eurocorps, and cooperates with France for pilot training, to name but the key examples.

At the collective European level, Belgium during its last EU Presidency tried to promote Permanent Structured Cooperation, and when that debate stalled, was key, with Germany, in launching the Ghent Initiative for Pooling & Sharing of capabilities (which was afterwards complemented by NATO’s very similar Smart Defence initiative). A combination of pooling, by deepening integration in existing multinational frameworks and launching new initiatives, and sharing and specialization, should create budgetary margin to address the strategic shortfalls that both the EU and NATO have identified (and that the Libyan crisis has once again highlighted). If thought through to their logical conclusion, both the Ghent Initiative and Smart Defence imply that bottom-up, project-by-project cooperation be complemented by strategic and top-down coordination, of national defence planning as a whole, by the Ministers of Defence. Within such a permanent and structured framework countries can focus their defence effort,

identify opportunities for pooling and specialization, and do away with redundant capabilities.

The Coalition Agreement once more calls for “maximal pooling and sharing with our European and NATO partners”, and for the identification of “niches of excellence” in which the armed forces will specialize. In spite of Belgium’s conceptual leadership however, its actual defence policy has often lagged behind. If rhetoric would be more systematically followed up by concrete proposals for exemplary capability initiatives, Belgium’s position would gain in legitimacy and its guiding conceptual role would more readily stimulate action by its fellow Member States. In the context of Pooling & Sharing/Smart Defence, Belgium could notably propose to pool the eventual successor of the F16 with partner countries – a separate Belgian fighter force no longer makes budgetary sense. Between armies, pooling and specialization in the Eurocorps context (in which integration until now is relatively limited) can be deepened. Belgium should also participate to the fullest possible extent in broader European projects in capital-intensive areas as listed by the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council on 1 December 2011, such as air-to-air refuelling and ISTAR.

Belgium’s armed forces are among the most integrated with other countries already, so there are no more quick wins in pooling and sharing. And of course it takes two to tango: partners must be willing to step up cooperation. Nevertheless, true to its European vocation, Belgium should not hesitate to be ambitious. Otherwise, its position risks being seen as ideological rather than practical.

### **THE USE OF FORCE**

In view of the difficult budgetary context, Belgium’s ambition has been to create in every component, army, navy and air, a less wide-ranging but well-chosen capability mix that

allows each to operate across the entire spectrum of operations. With its F16s the air force can certainly take part in combat operations, as proved in the Kosovo and Libya air campaigns, while with its frigates the navy participates in operation Atalanta against piracy.

There is debate however about the ability of the army, reorganized in 2011 into two brigades, to operate at the higher end of the spectrum against a “traditional” opponent, for lack of firepower. This applies especially to the “median” brigade of four battalions equipped with armoured infantry vehicles and multipurpose protected vehicles. The “light” brigade of two paracommando and one light battalions plus special forces is geared to operations against specific types of adversaries. The additional reduction of manpower could force new choices upon the army; at the same time, additional pooling and sharing can be an opportunity.

In any case, while recent participation in combat operations by the air and navy components was uncontroversial, because the cause appeared legal and just and because of the relatively low risk entailed for Belgian troops, deploying the army on a combat operation would be extremely difficult. Here the support for collective security and international law, including as the Coalition Agreement states for the Responsibility to Protect, clashes with the still strong pacifism of a country which as a result of its own historic experience is very much averse to war.

Of course no army deployment is entirely free of risk, as e.g. Belgian troops coming under fire in the Kunduz PRT in Afghanistan will testify. But it will have to be a very worthy cause that convinces the Belgian people and its policy-makers of an all-out combat operation. Meanwhile some perceive Belgium as not sufficiently sharing the burden, or the risk, of collective security – somewhat undeservedly,

given its rate of deployment as compared to the EU average and its participation in operations such as Libya.

## CONCLUSION

The budgetary pressure on all EU and NATO members alike might help Belgium overcome some of the dilemmas that mark its defence policy.

The need to pool resources is becoming obvious to all, and is pushing the eternal EU-NATO debate into the background. As European countries, under pressure from a US urging Europe to develop the capacity to take care of crises in its own neighbourhood, are looking for pragmatic and cost-effective solutions by cooperating among themselves, Belgium's principled stance in favour of European cooperation is becoming less controversial. If Belgium follows this up with concrete and creative initiatives for further cooperation, based on its long-standing experience, the country could play a leadership role in European defence cooperation, in CSDP as well as NATO.

More pooling and specialization requires a fundamental revision of defence planning. The Coalition Agreements provides for the Defence Minister to present an updated multi-annual capability plan, including an investment plan 2011-2014, following which reflection should start on the replacement of some of the major platforms. In the spirit of deepening cooperation, the choice of with whom Belgium wants to partner should be a major factor in any procurement decision. Belgium has a crucial opportunity to set an example: rather than present a new capability plan to fellow EU and NATO members as a *fait accompli*, it should offer to have a dialogue with them about the draft plan and amend it in function of collective EU and NATO targets and the intentions of other countries.

Most importantly perhaps, a firm budgetary commitment, over several years, is required. On the one hand to create the stability that the armed forces need to consolidate transformation. On the other hand to convince potential partners for Pooling & Sharing that Belgium will have the means to be indeed a reliable partner.

The dilemma that is most defining for Belgian strategic culture however, between its historically determined pacifism and its principled support for collective security, remains difficult to resolve. The shape of the next crisis will shape the Belgian response. Grown as it is out of the experience of centuries of undergoing other States' wars, Belgian strategic culture is bound to evolve gradually, but perhaps at a quicker pace than expected, in the light of a fast evolving strategic reality.

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