



## AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

# Belgian Special Forces in the Sahel: A Minimal Footprint with Maximal Output?

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In a shifting geopolitical context, the Belgian Defence has intensified its presence in the Sahel region and developed a new strategic military collaboration with Niger through Operation New Nero. This policy brief critically examines the strategy and identifies three challenges for the future of the operation: Niger's democratic development, the asymmetry between the Western Partner Nation's capabilities, and diverging agendas within the Belgian Defence. To counter these challenges, it is suggested that the minimalist approach and the social networks which enable horizontal collaboration among partners are maintained, while new civil-military opportunities are explored. On a broader level, it is recommended that Belgium aligns its political and military agendas to achieve long-term strategies geopolitical regions of importance.

### INTRODUCTION<sup>i</sup>

Since 2017, Belgium does not have any active military partnerships in the Great Lakes Region. This is the first time since 2003, that there is no military collaboration between the three former colonies and Belgium.<sup>1</sup> However, during the last few years, the Belgian Defence have increased their presence in the Sahel, both multilaterally, with contributions to missions like MINUSMA, EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Mali, and bilaterally, by relaunching 'sleeping' partnerships and developing new collaborations.

Against this shifting geopolitical context, the Belgian Special Forces Group (SF Gp) developed a new type of strategic military collaboration with Niger at the end of 2017. Following three years of training Nigerien forces during the annual Flintlock exercise<sup>2</sup> in the Sahel, the SF Gp took the initiative of trying a new light-footprint approach in the framework of a major Nigerien Force

<sup>1</sup> Belgian military attachés are still present in each of the three countries.

<sup>2</sup> A US-led regional military exercise lasting two weeks per year, involving approximately 34 countries.

Generation project – Localisation Strategy (LS).

This policy brief situates the new strategy in a broader context of Belgian military collaboration in Sub-Saharan Africa and provides a critical analysis of the strategy and its implementation. In addition, it identifies challenges for the future, pointing to Niger's development, the asymmetry between the Western Partner Nation's capabilities and diverging agendas within the Belgian Defence as main risks for the future of the operation. To maintain the overarching aim of the operation, which is to build resilience in the partner state, it is suggested that the social networks which enable horizontal collaboration among partners and the light footprint are maintained, while new civil–military opportunities are explored. On a broader level, it is recommended that Belgium aligns its political and military agendas to achieve long-term strategies in important geopolitical regions.

### **A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL CLIMATE IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION**

In a politically tense climate in April 2017, Kinshasa decided to suspend the long-term military collaboration between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Belgium, closing the door on several projects.<sup>ii</sup> The Belgian military partnership in Burundi was suspended in 2015, following the eruption of a political crisis and a failed coup attempt. Three years earlier, Belgium's military partnership with Rwanda was suspended due to the Rwandan authorities'

support of the rebel group M23 in the east of the Congo. As a result of these developments, the Belgian Defence found itself in a situation where it did not have a presence in a region which has been considered for decades a strategic priority for historical and political reasons.

Since 2003, Belgian Defence have been involved with Military Partnership Programmes (PPM) in each of the three countries. In the DRC, where the Belgian military has been most active, it has, for example, trained a whole brigade of three rapid reaction battalions with an Etat-Major between 2008 and 2015 and provided military officers as advisors to the Military Academy in Kananga. In Burundi, Belgium started by harmonising the training of the new integrated army following the end of the civil war in 2005, followed up in later years by a number of 'train-the-trainers' courses and specific projects such as an audit of the Burundian Defence' general staff. For Rwanda, the PPM has mostly played out in Belgium, where Rwandan soldiers and officers have followed various courses.<sup>iii</sup>

The most obvious advantage of the Defence' presence in the Great Lakes Region from a Belgian perspective is the maintenance of expertise and connections to the three states. This expertise has earned Belgium a specific place in multilateral organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) when issues related to the region are brought up for discussion. From a military point of view, training possibilities in different environments make it possible to prepare

for the event of a rapid evacuation of Belgian citizens.

Yet Belgium's relationship with the three states over the past two decades has been turbulent, both due to the instability that continues to plague the region and to Belgium's own instability, characterised by a divided and complex political arena. Added to this are a number of diplomatic incidents involving outspoken Belgian and Congolese ministers who accentuate sovereignty issues and problems of the colonial past. The abrupt suspension of the military collaboration in the DRC in 2017 is therefore no surprise in itself but rather another bump on the road in a complicated and tense relationship. Belgium's turn towards the Sahel region needs to be seen against this particular geopolitical background.

### **A NEW PARTNER IN NIGER**

In the Sahel, the security situation has gradually worsened since the start of the Libyan crisis in 2011, Boko Haram's resurgence and the beginning of the Malian conflict in 2012. Despite large-scale external interventions in both Libya and Mali and a robust peacekeeping mandate in the latter, the number of armed groups has increased, making the Sahel a hotspot for issues such as trafficking, terrorism and weapon smuggling. Niger's relative stability in this region, in combination with its strategic location as a transit point for migrants going to Europe, has made it an attractive partner for Western

states fighting terrorism and illegal migration.

This geostrategic location and the Nigerien president's willingness to host foreign troops have made Niger one of the most militarised states in the Sahel, with hundreds of troops from several different Western Partner Nations (WPN), including the United States, France and Italy. The United States is, for example, currently finishing construction of its largest drone base on the continent in Agadez for \$100 million,<sup>iv</sup> while Germany opened a new military base in Niamey last year<sup>v</sup> and France has established an airbase in Niamey and a Forward Operating Base in Madama, in the north of the country.<sup>vi</sup> It is in this relatively crowded scene of foreign militaries that the Belgian SF Gp with the Operation New Nero (ONN), has initiated military collaboration under the Localisation Strategy (LS).

### ***Localisation Strategy in Niger: Minimalism, Local Ownership and Sustainability***

After three years of training a Nigerien battalion in the annual Flintlock Exercise,<sup>vii</sup> the SP Gp initiated a long-term military collaboration with Nigerien Defence Forces at the end of 2017 based on the LS, a strategy developed by the SF Gp.<sup>viii</sup> The overall aim of the LS is to build resilience through a deep impact in the partner nation by emphasising local ownership, sustainability and a light footprint, guided by the host nation's reality. While these are all common buzzwords for most military interventions, the LS also suggests adopting principles of minimalism and less authority

to encourage imagination and creativity with the partner forces – aspects which are less common themes in military collaboration. Given the Belgian Defence’ current state of affairs and tight budget, minimalism is also an attractive principle for reasons other than creativity.

The LS strategy was adopted in the framework of a Nigerien Force Generation project that debuted in early 2018 with the aim of creating 12 Special Intervention Battalions (BSI) over five years. To standardise the training and avoid duplication of efforts, the small Belgian SF Gp of approximately ten people brought together other Western Special Operation Forces (SOF) teams in Niger: the United States, Germany, Italy and Canada,<sup>3</sup> and created a ‘SOF fusion cell’ with weekly meetings in which the Nigerien military also participates. In close cooperation with the Nigerian Special Operations Command (COS), the Belgian SF Gp took the lead in an effort to develop a common curriculum: a programme of instruction (POI) to standardise the training of the BSIs.

The work on the POIs has forced the SOF teams to put principles into practice and build on local knowledge, taking guidance from the Nigerien military on their priorities and work with minimalism. Each POI is tested and approved by Nigeriens, making sure that they are tailored to Nigerien needs and that local ownership is sustained. A new, locally made first-aid kit has, for example, been developed in collaboration with the

Nigerien military to respond to Nigerien needs and resources, ensuring that it will be sustainable after WPNs leave. Instruction videos are made with Nigerien instructors, and a ‘train-the-trainer’ approach is integrated in every POI, underlining the mentality that the Belgians are ‘working themselves out of a job’.

### *How new is Operation New Nero?*

Is ONN and its implementation of the LS delivering what it promises and how new is the approach? The defence forces that have been deployed in the Great Lakes region for military collaboration projects are likely to question the novelty of ONN. A ‘train-the-trainer’ approach has been used in most, if not all, of the courses taught by Belgian Defence in the region, while 3-D<sup>4</sup> projects like FAMIKI,<sup>5</sup> which included construction of housing for military families, provided a type of sustainability. Basic agricultural skills to ensure self-sustainability by providing vegetables to the armed forces were also taught from a perspective of adapting to local needs and resources.

The novelty of ONN and LS lies not in the emphasis on local ownership and sustainability but in the fact that there is a coherent strategy in place with a clear beginning and an end, where each phase of the strategy has a specific purpose. Also new is the coordination of efforts between WPNs to avoid duplication and increase efficiency. This is due to the Nigerien

<sup>3</sup> Canada is represented by conventional forces.

<sup>4</sup> 3D refers to Diplomacy, Defence and Development, although today the use of the ‘comprehensive approach’ is preferred.

<sup>5</sup> FA for family, MI for Military, KI for Kindu (location).

Defence Forces' transparency about bilateral collaborations but also to WPNs' readiness to cooperate, each on its own terms and with its own resources, and perhaps most importantly, under its own command.

Finally, the uniqueness of ONN lies in its reliance on social networks established and maintained by key individuals in the SF Gp. During the past year, the small group of individuals from the SF Gp, rotated every three to four months, has developed a vast network of contacts both within and outside of military circles. Weekly social gatherings with NGO representatives and other military forces, including Nigerien Defence Forces, as well as the SOF 'Fusion cell' meetings, have made it possible for Belgium, which currently has the smallest military presence in Niger, to take on an external coordinating role for the Nigerien Special Forces' Force Generation project. The smooth relationship with the Nigerien Defence authorities is clearly also key to this development and owes much to the establishment of good personal contacts between individuals. This horizontal collaboration is both one of the main assets and weaknesses of the project, as we will explore later.

### **IDENTIFYING FUTURE CHALLENGES**

ONN has become a type of flagship for the Belgian Defence over the past few months due to its novelty and visibility in a region where Belgium, up until recently, has had little presence. Yet there are several challenges ahead for ONN. Three of these will be explored below: 1) the Nigerien

state's democratic development, 2) the collaboration between WPNs and 3) differing agendas within the Belgian Defence.

### ***Niger's democratic development***

Niger is currently considered the eye of the storm in a turbulent Sahel region, with two completed elections since its last coup d'état in 2010 and no major internal conflict brewing. President Issoufou has been careful to avoid renewed tensions by addressing socioeconomic grievances in the north, where Nigerian Tuaregs are concentrated. He has also encouraged press freedom while taking a strong stance against terrorism. While these aspects have made Issoufou popular with WPNs, the elections in 2016 were marred by scandals, including flawed voter registration lists and the imprisonment of the chief opposition candidate. In addition, the last few years have seen an increase in crackdowns on journalists and civil society activists.<sup>ix</sup>

Strengthening the military in states that have experienced several coups and where democratic traditions are recent, is a risky business. Scholars have debated whether such military partnerships could be justified by the need to professionalise core state institutions,<sup>x</sup> or whether they increase the risk of strongly biased civil–military relations which might circumvent civil rights and undermine democratic development.<sup>xi</sup> This is a debate which Belgium needs to follow attentively, chiselling out its position, conditions and a possible exit plan, in spite

of its vision of a long-term engagement in the region.

### *Western Partner Nations' collaboration*

The horizontal collaboration between the Nigerien SOF and the WPNs is one of the advantages of ONN but it is also a potential weakness. While Belgium, through its strong relationship with the Nigerien SOF authorities and its role as the external coordinator of WPNs in the Force Generation project, currently enjoys a lead role, there is a risk of this role gradually disappearing in the future. One reason for this is that the networks put in place to ensure the collaboration and coordination of the various efforts are based on personal connections. Individuals from the different WPNs have thus established ties and shared understandings from a bottom-up perspective. While this is an efficient collaboration strategy when connections are maintained, rotations of key individuals and the arrival of new persons may change the relationships and, therefore, also the direction of the project.

Other WPNs' involvement in the overarching framework of the LS also faces increased tension due to the asymmetry of the contributions. From a Belgian perspective, the minimalist principle and reliance on local material is a convenient match as Belgium is not ready to equip the Nigerien forces. However, other WPNs are both willing to and capable of providing different types of equipment, which may, over the longer term, both reduce Belgium's

central role in the project and result in some WPNs driving their own agendas based on their capacity and contributions, thus circumventing the minimalist approach.

### *Differing Agendas within the Belgian Defence*

The third challenge facing ONN in Niger is the differing agendas among units within the Belgian Defence. This is due to several different parallel and interrelated developments of the past few years, including the drawn-out homeland operation Vigilant Guardian (OVG) and the free-fall in human resources.

OVG<sup>6</sup> was established in early 2015 in the wake of the terrorist attacks in France and the dismantling of a jihadist cell in Belgium. So far, it has involved four years of deployment of soldiers in the streets of Belgium. Deploying up to 1,800 personnel at its maximum, OVG has caused significant strains on the Belgian Defence. Firstly, the lack of a clear timeframe for the operation has meant that the Belgian forces are unable to plan ahead efficiently, and sees the OVG extended each month, seemingly infinitely. Secondly, the time spent on guarding public spaces and patrolling the streets of Brussels means less time for the basic and specialist training needed to maintain the operational level of the land component.<sup>xii</sup> Finally, the huge demands of the homeland operation have reduced the number of free troops for

<sup>6</sup> At its start, the operation was called Operation Homeland, and only after the attacks on the 22/3 was the operation expanded and renamed Operation Vigilant Guardian (OVG).

foreign operations, which, in turn, is closely linked to the free-fall in human resources.

The Belgian Defence is facing a major human resources problem due to the lack of balance in the age pyramid of the armed forces and continuous budget cuts, both of which have placed a strain on recruitment processes.<sup>xiii</sup> Adding to this, the last four years of OVG have reduced opportunities to deploy abroad and/or get specialist training. Many men and women join the army ‘to see the world’ and broaden their vision, but given the OVG’s impact on foreign deployments, few infantry battalions have had the chance to deploy abroad. Add to this the strain that long and undetermined OVG deployments put on family life and the lack of stimulation resulting from missed training, and there is a clear need for the Defence to come up with not only new recruitment strategies but also means to retain the personnel it already has.

The differing agendas regarding ONN should be seen in this context. While the infantry battalions have been deprived of foreign deployments due to the protracted OVG – and in part to the suspension of collaboration in the Great Lakes Region – the SF Gp continues to be the most deployed unit of the Belgian Defence, with each individual deployed up to seven to nine months abroad per year. Given the different types of missions undertaken by the SF Gp, which usually require small, highly trained teams to perform in difficult conditions, this is normal. Yet, in an environment where whole battalions lack foreign deployment and where there is a human resource crisis,

the SF Gp’s recent operation, which, in essence, is a military assistance (MA) mission, is attracting attention from other units. While the Operations and Training Department sees ONN as an opportunity to deploy more troops abroad in a mission which – a priori – does not necessitate the competence and speciality of SF Gp, the Strategic Department sees a long-term opportunity for collaboration and deployment in a region which is in line with EU strategy. However, the SF Gp sees the risks of sending too many troops and thereby distorting the minimalist approach and horizontal collaboration built through personal connections.

These differing agendas may nevertheless find a future compromise if new deployment opportunities arise in the Sahel and military collaboration is resuscitated in the DRC. Such developments would reduce the pressure to expand deployments to operations like the ONN and allow for the minimalist approach to be maintained.

### **THE WAY AHEAD**

ONN in Niger has, until now, provided military training to several different units. However, apart from the annual Flintlock exercises, this training has so far not been focused on the Nigerien SOF. Instead, Belgian Defence have provided training to Nigerien Special Gendarmerie Intervention Units (USIGN) and EUCAP’s new initiative of training mobile border police units (Compagnies Mobile de Contrôle Frontiers or CMCF) among others. These ‘side

projects' have been understood as important opportunities to create new connections. They have also enabled the Belgian Army to deploy smaller teams from the para-commando battalions to give trainings under the lead of the SF Gp who are in place.

During the coming year, several additional training projects are planned, including the formation of a Battalion of Surveillance and Reconnaissance (BSR) previously trained during the Flintlock exercise and thereby implying continuation, although the BSR is no longer under Special Forces Command. The most important formation planned this year is the training of the 31<sup>st</sup> BSI in Maradi during the autumn. This is important, firstly, because it will enable the ONN to test all of the POIs developed during a complete formation of 14 weeks while drawing from lessons learned during the WPNs' training of other battalions earlier in the year. Secondly, because it entails a new type of collaboration with ENABEL, Belgium's cooperation and development agency and military engineers. The objective is to build a smaller medical infrastructure, which will serve both as a basis for a Surgical Team and Resuscitation Team (SORT) and a Special Operations Surgical Team (SOST), to support the Belgian military deployment and to give medical training to local nurses and doctors throughout the duration of the military formation.

The latter project is an example of the result of a comprehensive approach which has enabled the ONN to go beyond the military sector in terms of influence while simultaneously providing new collaboration

opportunities with ENABEL. There are many benefits to draw from such a project for all parties, most importantly, of course, for the Nigeriens who are facing an enormous shortfall in medical staff. Yet these types of projects are rare because they demand that various agendas converge at the right time and place, with the right people in the lead, capable of driving the projects forward. They are, however, more likely to take place in an environment where Belgium maintains a minimalist approach, with a limited number of troops deployed, and where social networks that go beyond the military sector are maintained.

If ONN is to remain a new type of minimalist flagship with a deep impact for the Belgian Defence, it is important to remember the conditions that make it innovative and keep its impact sustainable. Social networks need to be maintained, ideally through the civil–military approach that the SF Gp debuted in Niamey. Troop deployment should be kept at a needs-based level, which does not risk distorting principles of minimalism and lowered authority, yet even these lighter deployments would give much needed foreign experience for individuals from, for example, para-commando battalions. Side projects outside the scope of the SOF Force Generation project need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis where the potential benefits should be assessed against the overall objective of achieving resilience and local ownership, not only of the final product, but over the whole process. Opportunities to realise comprehensive approaches which

bridge the civil–military divide should be privileged, especially in a country which is increasingly militarised.

Zooming out from Niger, the Belgian Defence need to consider in which geographical regions they should place their main focus once the OVG is terminated and troops are free to deploy. For Belgian Special Operations Forces (BELSOF), the advantages of a regional approach are many, including the possibility of accumulating expertise, developing networks and acting as an early warning and early action body.<sup>xiv</sup> Given the geopolitical importance of the Sahel region and the lack of colonial baggage for Belgium, this is a potential arena for long-term engagement. Yet, when political conditions allow for it, it is also highly likely that Belgium will renew its ties with former partner states in the Great Lakes region, thereby creating space for the resumption of suspended military partnerships. Developing long-term strategy for the Defence nevertheless requires coherent and clear strategies on a political level, something which so far has been missing, in particular for the Sahel. This is due to a realignment with EU strategies on the one hand and a lack of human resources to effectively

consider such a strategy on the other. Belgium's support and alignment to EU strategy is important and shows Belgium's role as a team player. However, this support does not prevent Belgium from developing a bilateral strategy, which could complement and reinforce the overarching EU objectives.

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<sup>i</sup> This brief is informed by the author's observations of Operation New Nero (ONN) in Niger during two weeks in March and by more than 25 interviews with various national military staff in Belgium and Niger since November 2018.

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