



The 2010 Belgian EU Presidency and CSDP

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Col. Johan Andries, Head of the Presidency Task Force of Belgian Defence, takes stock of the Presidency.

The New Framework of the Lisbon Treaty: Presidency or Non-Presidency?

From July until December 2010 Belgium held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the twelfth time. Belgium was a founding member of the European Community in 1957 and as time went by it has grown into “a driving force behind European integration” Consequently once again expectations ran high. And this 12th presidency could certainly not be considered as a routine operation. After all, the Lisbon Treaty was finally ratified in October 2009. This process did not have a smooth passage. The Treaty implementation would especially sharply influence the domain of EU external action, also including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The development from the rotating presidency (the European Council, the Foreign Affairs Council) into a permanent presidency would undoubtedly reduce the Belgian Presidency’s strength and visibility.

Already in the preparatory period it rapidly appeared that Belgium would adhere to and align with this new reality. Consequently Belgium decided that during this transition period its Presidency would support the permanent structures and new authorities. In the field of the CSDP Lady Catherine Ashton was appointed new EU High Representative (HR) and permanent president of the Foreign Affairs Council. As resigning Minister of Foreign Affairs Steven Van Ackere stated that Belgium would not be a fifth wheel among the four major Lisbon powers (Council, Parliament, Commission, and the High Representative) but that it wanted to make sure the four wheels were travelling at the same speed in the same direction. This was no sinecure at all. In addition to her responsibility as High Representative – in other words, as European Minister of Foreign Affairs – Cathy Ashton also acts as European Commissioner and Vice-President of the Commission. But during the implementation phase of the Lisbon Treaty that was coinciding with the Belgian Presidency, she could not rely on her new European External Action Service (EEAS) that was still to be set up.

Considering this new reality, Belgium has definitely opted for a “Non-Presidency” in

compliance with the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty and in full support of Lady Ashton's initiatives and actions. To optimize coordination and consultation, a genuine "Task Force" was created including Belgian diplomats and the High Representative's assistants.

It is therefore obvious that in the preparatory period Belgium would never refer to a Belgian "Presidency programme". The Belgian CSDP-related items resulting from a close coordination between Foreign Affairs and Defence, were passed on to Ashton's private office. The latter was eager to adopt them in order to reach a more decisive, more coherent, efficient and visible CSDP. These items were used to develop the various initiatives Belgium took during the short period of its presidency – a presidency in the second half of the year is indeed de facto reduced to 4.5 working months.

The Objectives of the Belgian Presidency

In this transition phase, Belgium firstly wanted to contribute to and in some ways, also supervise the proper implementation of the Lisbon Treaty.

In this respect, the installation process of the European External Action Service (EEAS) was undoubtedly to be considered as a priority. The activities implied a lot of inter-institutional and international sensitive issues and have developed throughout the Belgian Presidency. The EEAS has been officially set up in compliance with the Council decisions of 26 July and 17 November. From a Defence point of view, it was important to avoid the military expertise (especially the EU Military Staff (EUMS) that has finally been integrated into the Service) being split up. As to the crisis management decision-making process, it was, on the other hand, important for the military to have direct access to the HR. To this end, the indispensable guarantees have been created in

the meantime, in spite of the creation of an additional position referred to as "Managing Director", who is in charge of coordinating crisis management. At the end of the Presidency, two questions have remained unanswered so far: to what extent is the possibility envisaged to include military expertise (namely "military attachés") in the various EU delegations throughout the world? How to consider the future place of the European Security and Defence College in the EEAS?

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The second Belgian item related to the execution of the Treaty was the possible implementation of the new instruments proposed. The reserves Lady Ashton's entourage put forward compelled prudence, especially with respect to the solidarity and mutual defence clauses. Belgium (and Defence more in particular) considerably invested in the examination of the implementation potential of an instrument brought in by the Lisbon Treaty in terms of capabilities, i.e. Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defence (PESCO). This item will be expanded below.

In addition to the Belgian objectives described above, that are typical of this transition phase, Belgian Defence and Foreign Affairs obtained the green light from the High Representative to put a few other CSDP-related items on the agenda. They can be categorized into the three classic themes of operations and missions, partnerships and capability development. We will explain them shortly below, but the

analysis hereafter will reveal that especially capabilities have created much momentum. This can be ascribed to the somewhat unconventional but very fruitful informal meeting of the EU Ministers of Defence, Mr. Pieter De Crem organised in Ghent.

Operations and Missions

During the Belgian Presidency there was no reason to start new operations. Current operations are essentially managed by the EU crisis management structures: Council decisions are being prepared at various levels going from the political-strategic (PSC) to the military-technical (EUMS) level. In this respect the rotating Presidency only acts as a facilitator.

Defence has paid special attention to four operations with a military dimension. Both ATALANTA's mandate (the maritime operation to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia)¹ and EUSEC's (a Security Sector Reform mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) were extended for another two years until 2012. For the time being, the conduct of ALTHEA (the military stabilisation mission in the Balkans) is being pursued under the "Berlin-plus" arrangements, in addition to a non-executive mission, with a reduced order of battle indeed.

The decision to possibly extend EUTM (a training mission in Uganda that was started in May 2010 for the benefit of the Somali security forces) will only be made in the spring of this year.

Relations with the Partners

The search for a better cooperation between NATO and the EU was brought into focus. For the time being, the positive chemistry between Lady Ashton and NATO's Secretary General Rasmussen does not seem to be capable of removing the well-known political obstacles. That is the reason why many efforts were deployed during the Belgian Presidency to further develop practical and capability-related

cooperative projects for implementation in the joint theatres of operations. The initiatives that have been taken in terms of Medical Support and Counter IED within that context have in the meantime led to a joint document, to be used as a basis for further exploration.

Moreover Belgium has acted as a facilitator with initiatives at several levels: a visit of the NATO and EU Military Representatives to the respective maritime operations ATALANTA (EU) and OCEAN SHIELD (NATO) Headquarters in Northwood (UK) and the hosting of a C-IED clearance demonstration organised by NATO. But these harmless initiatives showed how the political gap between a few countries keeps mortgaging even the most elementary form of cooperation between both organisations.

The High Representative endorsed the Belgian ambitions to strengthen the EU-AU partnership. In this context, the EU Military Committee Away-Days were held in Africa. In addition to a visit to the EU Somalia Training Mission, a working meeting with the African Union Commission in Addis Abeba (Ethiopia) was also on the agenda. Different participants considered this study trip as a "de visu" discovery of unknown ground. A better understanding of the evolution of the African Peace and Security structure and an exchange of views on conflict prevention and on the preparation of armed forces for peace support operations have undoubtedly laid the useful foundations for further reinforcement of the African strategic partnership, that will hopefully gain impetus thanks to the installation of the EEAS.

Capabilities

A reliable CSDP requires an adapted set of capabilities, available and trained to be deployed in possible operations and missions. From the perspective of the "EU trademark", the comprehensive approach, it is important to look at the development of these capabilities

from a civil-military angle. The European level of ambition with regard to security and defence does indeed go beyond deploying military power in order to maintain or restore peace and security in high-risk areas within the European sphere of interest. In that respect it is just logical that the revision of the Civil and Military “Headline Goals 2010” during the Belgian Presidency has resulted in one comprehensive political-strategic document that should serve as the basis for exploring civil-military synergies with regard to capability development.

The Battlegroups (EUBG)

In view of a more coherent CSDP the HR thinks it is important to reinforce the EU’s rapid intervention capacity. This brings us to the domain of the EUBG. Most of the EU member states are not in favour of a radical revision of the concept. Yet some are disgruntled at the fact that since the first Battlegroups have been put on standby in 2007 this spear force has not been effectively deployed until now. Furthermore, open places on the “Standby Roster” for 2012 and 2013 have not yet been filled in. This alarming phenomenon could undermine the credibility of the concept. Therefore, creative solutions to this problem are not only urgently required, but it is all the more important to start reflecting on its true causes.

been proposed in the recent Weimar Paper² and can also be understood in this context. However, the question remains to what extent the expansion of deployment possibilities for the Battlegroups can overcome the main obstacle for actual deployment, i.e. the lack of political will.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

The Permanent Structured Cooperation instrument envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty has been discussed abundantly the last few years. Several acronyms have been used to refer to it, but apparently “PESCO” (*Permanent Structured Cooperation*) has now been universally accepted. However, for the moment there is less consensus on the contents of this instrument. The texts already date from the period in which the first lines of a “European Constitution” were put on paper. This was in 2003, the early years of the “ESDP” then in full development. Driven by the integration objective PESCO would offer the opportunity to those countries wishing to do so to make faster progress in the development of defence capabilities in a spirit of very close cooperation. For reasons that we know it would last until 2009 before the Lisbon Treaty would be ratified.

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A possible deployment of military resources in case of natural disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 was one of the topics of a *Brussels Defence Debate* organised by the Belgian Presidency. It is clear how the EUBGs tie in with this. The addition of a civil component to these at present military Battlegroups has also

Due to the intergovernmental nature of the CSDP and the stagnation of the CSDP dynamic there is not much excitement today for the implementation of this institutional instrument. Yet the Belgian Presidency wanted to keep the discussion going because it is convinced of PESCO’s possible added value and with the HR’s consent it was put high on the agenda. In the preparatory months leading up to the Presidency a thorough internal reflection was conducted resulting in a Belgian *position paper* which was spontaneously subscribed to by both Hungary and Poland.

On this basis Defence organised a seminar in the first days of the Presidency, the purpose of which mainly was to build on the previous reflection exercise organised by Spain and to achieve a common understanding of PESCO. The lack of enthusiasm was soon confirmed: a different reading of the outdated protocol texts, the binding character of the criteria to be defined, fear of a two-speed CSDP and an aversion to an additional institutional bureaucratic framework currently seem to be the main obstacles to a quick implementation. Yet in the months following this seminar it would become apparent that PESCO and its potential remain implicitly present in the discussions regarding capabilities.

The Ghent Framework

As is customary, each rotating Presidency organises an Informal Meeting for the EU Ministers of Defence, which is always an opportunity for political reflections on CSDP. However, the unclear transition period to the post-Lisbon setup would leave a specific stamp on the scenario and proceedings of this Informal Meeting which would take place in Ghent as Belgium had already decided in 2009.

Within the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty, Baroness Catherine Ashton, High Representative, would have very much liked to chair this Informal Meeting. Due to incompatible schedules she had to give precedence to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. This concurrence of events gave rise to a creative solution: it was decided to have a very informal meeting of limited size, chaired by the Belgian Minister of Defence Pieter De Crem. Inspired by a similar setting within a NATO context,³ which had produced excellent results, a working dinner was organised exclusively for the MODs and with only one subject for discussion: How can we reconcile the growing demand for EU action on the one hand, and the shortfalls concerning capabilities and the ever shrinking national defence budgets on the other hand?

This format clearly met its purpose. We have seldom experienced such a substantive political discussion. First of all, through a video conference from New York the High Representative presented her most important messages: the importance of *pooling* and *sharing*, of joint civil-military *research*, and of the pursuit of more complementarity with NATO. The following debate between the 27 EU MODs was both substantial and concrete: the answer to the reduced national defence budgets is sought in accepting and creating more and better forms of cooperation. The then German Defence Minister, zu Guttenberg, suggested to divide the military capabilities in three categories: those that are preferably kept at the national level, a second category which can be considered for *pooling* and finally a third category which is suitable for *role and task sharing*. This last category implies the acceptance of a certain degree of interdependence. The European Defence Agency (EDA) was given explicit political support. It is obvious that the Agency will have to play an important part in the search for new opportunities for multinational cooperation and in the coordination of these initiatives. Finally, in a plenary session in the presence of a NATO delegation and in keeping with the message of the HR an appeal was made to look for new opportunities for capability cooperation projects between both organisations.

The current budgetary situation, the untraditional setting, a thorough preparation with respect to content by everyone involved and a passionate chairman were the most important success factors of this Informal Meeting, the outcome of which has been referred to as “the Ghent Framework”.

On 9 December 2010 the first formal Foreign Affairs Council for MODs⁴ took place. During this meeting, chaired by HR Ashton, not only formal Council conclusions were adopted, but the reference to “the Ghent framework” was

also unanimously consolidated.

The Informal MOD meeting and the resulting “Ghent Framework” created a solid political momentum. The challenge for the months and years to come will undoubtedly lie in the way in which these political intentions can be transformed into the most appropriate concrete forms of military cooperation between the various member states. To this end, some initiatives⁵ have already been taken.

Financial benefits, operational added value (with among other things increased interoperability by bigger standardisation) and avoiding duplications should be the objectives. There already are a number of cooperation projects. Due to the pressure of shrinking budgets and thanks to the recent impulse others will surely follow. Most of these “ad hoc” clusters are dictated by financial considerations and consist of a limited number of participating member states. It is important that these initiatives do not only serve the national interests of the participating partners, but that they also contribute to the European CSDP objectives. In other words, they cannot bring about a centrifugal effect.

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Therefore it is just as important that those who conduct this particularly complex exercise are clearly identified and recognised. In this respect all eyes are on the EDA which is facing a crucial period. In the absence of tangible results and *deliverables* the EDA sceptics will undoubtedly continue to question the credibility of the Agency in the years to come.

However, the Military Committee also has a big responsibility. Composed of the military representatives of the CHODs this body is best placed to assess the “military” readiness to cooperation from the various national staffs. Since they are apprehensive of any operational and structural consequences they will certainly not be tempted to dive into rash adventures.

As it turns out, PESCO, the instrument provided in the Lisbon Treaty that has been discussed above, needs some time for further reflection and maturing. Yet we notice that in the ongoing discussions on cooperation and pooling and sharing PESCO almost automatically resurfaces. With a view to harmonising and supporting the numerous multinational cooperation initiatives in favour of a more efficient European capability development PESCO will prove to be a valuable tool, provided the Treaty texts are read in a creative way.

Conclusion

The twelfth Belgian Presidency came at a historic moment. Just between the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and its entry into force this Presidency took place in difficult circumstances. As the rotating Presidency was no longer captain of the ship, Belgium thus opted for the role of “co-pilot” in this transitional phase. The responsibilities turned out to be vague, the coordination with the EU authorities was sometimes difficult and time-consuming, but in retrospect the Belgian choice proved to be the right one. On the basis of its many years of experience, the expertise of its diplomatic corps and administration, and its organisational ability Belgium managed to be of very valued assistance to the High Representative and her entourage in this delicate period. Although no revolutionary breakthroughs with respect to

the CSDP have been realised we have ensured the continuation of the most important issues to the satisfaction of the member states. The “Ghent Framework” has given an important political impetus to a European defence configuration which due to an ever evolving geopolitical environment and because of the budgetary reality will necessarily be based on multinational cooperation models.

While writing these lines the effective functioning of the EEAS is becoming apparent and the further development of the CSDP within this Service appears to receive the attention that the Member States are looking for. The role of the rotating Presidencies will inevitably diminish further in favour of the new structures. Yet I am convinced of the added value that they will still have as a privileged discussion partner who can give the necessary impetus to avoid that the actual development of the intergovernmental CSDP is curbed too much by institutional bureaucracy.

The building of Europe is a long-term process. Whereas Defence is considered by many to be an area with potential for far-reaching integration this process will undeniably be complicated by the delicate duality between cooperation and preservation of sovereignty. From now on, managing this duality in view of a reinforced intergovernmental CSDP will especially be a challenge to High Representative Cathy Ashton and her EEAS.

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Endnotes

¹ ATALANTA’s mandate had to be extended before 12 December 10. The planned Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) held on 13 December was no option in order to avoid a gap in the mandate. A small detail: the decision was not made at the informal FAC in MOD configuration on 9 December, but actually at the Ecofin Council on 7 December!

² On 6 December 2010 the Ministers of Defence and of Foreign Affairs of France, Germany and Poland presented a “Weimar paper” to HR Ashton in which they offered points of interest and suggestions for the reinforcement of the CSDP.

³ In September 2008 NATO Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer and UK Minister of Defence Brown organised an informal meeting for the NATO MODs in London in order to reflect on transformation following the NATO Summit in Bucharest. This meeting is still referred to as the “Armchair meeting” of London.

⁴ Parallel to the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon there was growing awareness of the opportunity for a formal Security and Defence forum in which the MODs could take decisions in matters that belong to their exclusive competence. It is almost a matter of course that this brings us to the domain of military capability development.

⁵ In November 2010 Germany and Sweden issued a joint “Food for Thought” paper with concrete proposals for methods on how to elaborate the “Ghent initiative” on the basis of the ideas of Minister of Defence zu Guttenberg. In its Steering Board of 9 December 2010 the EDA was asked (and the member states were encouraged) to further investigate and propose Pooling & Sharing opportunities. On 4 February 2011 the Chairman of the EU Military Committee sent a letter to the CHODs of the EU Member States in which he inquired about views, opportunities and proposals concerning cooperation.

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