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Edited by

Thomas RENARD & Sven BISCOP




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President: Viscount Etienne DAVIGNON
Director-General: Marc OTTE
Editor in Chief: Prof. Dr. Sven BISCOP



Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations

Address: FPS Foreign Affairs, Rue des Petits Carmes 15,
1000 Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32-(0)2.223.41.14
Fax: +32-(0)2.223.41.16
E-mail: studia.diplomatica@egmontinstitute.be
Website: www.egmontinstitute.be



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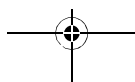
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Introduction: a fragmented external policy

THOMAS RENARD¹

The past few years have been rich in foreign policy developments. Terrorism, migration, popular uprisings, economic slowdown, climate change, or pandemics are just some of the many challenges that have caught the international agenda – in no particular order. Belgium has not been spared by any of these challenges. It has even been affected more than others (in Europe) by the plague of terrorism, drawing onto itself heavy and critical attention from international media and leaders. Belgium also drew negative attention on its diplomacy last year, when it proved unable to strike an internal agreement on carbon emissions repartition ahead of the climate negotiations in Paris.

In truth, the image of Belgium had been scorned before. Talks about the ‘failed state’ or the ‘dead nation’ are not new, particularly popular during the record-long 541 days under a caretaker government. Although such criticisms may sometimes be exaggerated or simplistic, they also reflect a growing feeling (domestically and internationally) that the Belgian system may have become too complex to function properly. It is characterised by a fragmentation of competences, resources, and responsibility.

To begin with, there is the transfer of competences from the federal state to the federated entities, which may lead at times to a degree of competition between the different state actors, as illustrated in the case of economic diplomacy.² The antidote to competition is coordination, for which the Belgian

¹ Thomas Renard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Egmont Institute and an Adjunct Professor at the Vesalius College.

² See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a key role in matters of external policies, highlighted in this special issue of *Studia Diplomatica*. In some cases, these coordination efforts may fail, as illustrated in the run-up to the Paris climate meeting. But it can also work more smoothly and be evaluated more positively by the respective stakeholders.³ Overall, however, the continuous transfer of competences to the federated entities is leading to a fragmentation of competences that is making the formulation and pursuit of a coherent and efficient foreign policy more complicated, to the detriment of all.

The fragmentation of competences leads to a fragmentation of resources. As a small state, Belgium has a limited capacity to face and respond to an increasingly demanding international environment. The terrorist threat, which is both an internal and external issue, has perhaps pushed this reality to its paroxysm, with an unfavourable ratio between the high number of radicalized individuals, on the one hand, and the limited intelligence and law enforcement capacity, on the other hand. In most external policy areas, the problem may be less visible, probably because the challenge is less acute. But it is nonetheless very real, as illustrated by the contributions on trade and aid policies in this special issue.⁴ Furthermore, the economic crisis of 2008 has left lasting scars on the Belgian public sector, deepening a chronic lack of investment. With 2% of its GDP invested in the public sector, Belgium has one of the lowest rates of public investment in Europe, according to Eurostat. This has major consequences on human and financial resources available for the conduct of its foreign policy. For instance, the budget for aid development has been slimmed down, and the staff downsized. All ministries have undergone successive budget cuts, leading for instance to the closing of some diplomatic missions abroad or to significant cuts in the defence budget. Conducting diplomacy and external relations in times of austerity is not only challenging; it is also fundamentally affecting Belgium's ability to shape the international agenda and to defend its core interests.

With the fragmentation of competences also comes a dilution of responsibility. This is a recurring criticism of the Belgian system: if everyone is competent, then no one really feels responsible for the achievement of agreed objectives, or the failure to do so. It is easier to undermine consensus and coordination than to compromise. Although not directly addressed in this

³ See the contributions of Steurs, Orbie and Delputte; and Bollen, Deraus, De Ville, Gheyle, Orbie and Van Den Putte in this issue.

⁴ See the contributions of Molenaers; and Bollen, *et al* in this issue.

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special issue, this question and its implications on Belgium's foreign policy would deserve more attention.

Although not insurmountable, the challenge of fragmentation calls for a clear strategy, priorities, and method. The overall foreign policy strategy, and the priorities resulting from it seem to be largely missing, however. According to Coolsaet, the vital interests of Belgium remain undefined, and the foreign policy has become essentially reactive to the international context.⁵ To be sure, a degree of pragmatism and flexibility are key assets in diplomacy, but this cannot escape the formulation of a sense of direction. Without a strategic compass, different actors and policies will go in different directions, missing a chance to reinforce each other, and possibly even undermining each other. Several contributions in this special issue emphasize this point.⁶

Priorities are also needed due to the resources constraint. Belgium has identified a number of clusters in which it has specific interests and added value,⁷ although Belgium's ability to maintain a strong niche diplomacy, on Central Africa notably, is now increasingly questioned.⁸ Beyond niche diplomacy, priorities are needed in each policy area. In the field of development cooperation, for instance, Belgium has decided to focus its efforts on a limited number of poor countries and fragile states in Africa, as opposed to other countries that focus on either more countries, other geographical regions, or Middle-Income Countries (MICs).⁹ In its health policy as well, Belgium has made choices, to focus on limited issues and approaches.¹⁰ At the broader level, however, in spite of the priority axes defined by the Foreign Minister (European integration, promotion of multilateralism, regional crises, economic diplomacy and consular affairs),¹¹ there are no clear priorities emerging for Belgium's foreign policy, beyond dealing with the crisis of the day, according to Coolsaet.¹²

In times of fragmentation, an efficient method for foreign policy-making is in order. Domestically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acts as a hub for information-sharing, coordination and, at times, policy-making with regard to external policies. Although not perfect, as pointed out by Steurs, Orbie and

⁵ See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

⁶ See the contributions of Molenaers; Steurs, *et al.*; and Bollen, *et al.* in this issue.

⁷ See the contribution of Liégeois in this issue.

⁸ See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

⁹ See the contribution of Molenaers in this issue.

¹⁰ See the contribution of Steurs *et al.* in this issue.

¹¹ *Note de Politique Générale*, Chambre des représentants de Belgique, DOC 54 1428/006, 30 Octobre 2015.

¹² See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue

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Delputte in this special issue,¹³ the Ministry remains central and currently largely uncontested in its coordinating function. However, the central function of the Foreign Ministry could well be challenged over the medium term, in the absence of a clear identification of Belgium's vital interests and of the best policy architecture to pursue them.¹⁴ All contributions in this special issue shed light on the complex institutional set up behind Belgium's external policy-making.

Internationally, as a small state, Belgium favours largely to act in the European or multilateral frameworks, over unilateral or isolated actions. At the European level, Belgium is a small but committed member of the European Union (EU). In addition to a successful rotating presidency in 2010, Belgium has been an active player across policy areas. In the context of terrorism, for instance, it has set up a group of 'most affected countries' by the phenomenon of radicalisation, leading discussions and policy exchanges on this issue in the Council of the EU. Belgium has also been one of the strongest supporters of the EU's trade agenda, as explained in this issue.¹⁵ As in many other policy areas, the internal divisions in Belgium (in this case between the more 'liberal' Northern part and the more 'protectionist' Southern part) constitute a mini laboratory for EU-wide negotiations. On the other hand, Belgium is not immune to criticisms from the European Commission, for instance in relation to its tax system or budget deficit. In other words, Belgium's pro-EU stance does not preclude specific positions or policies that run counter the European stream or, arguably, the European interest. A recent resolution of the regional parliament of Wallonia has called the federal government to oppose the EU trade agreement with Canada, hence undermining Belgium's supportive position on the EU trade agenda.

Belgium has also been at the forefront of the EU integration process. This process is now on hold, however, in a context of political crisis and geopolitical turmoil. In such context, promoting linear EU integration as in the past may not be an option anymore. While the EU clearly needs a new vision or project, Belgium seems no longer to be at the forefront of the European project, notably in its inability to provide new direction. Adjustments to a new form of Union (which may have plural forms) may be necessary in the future, but the ability to shape this transformation should come as a priority.

¹³ See the contribution of Steurs *et al* in this issue.

¹⁴ See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

¹⁵ See the contribution of Bollen, *et al* in this issue

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Multilateralism is another key channel for Belgium's foreign policy. As pointed out by Liégeois in this issue, Belgium is an active multilateral player by conviction, but also by interest (as a small state) – the two being interrelated.¹⁶ All contributions in this issue emphasize that Belgium acts mainly through the multilateral system, and that it is even a major contributor to it in some areas, in terms of leadership, staff, or funding. At the broader level, however, Belgium suffers from the same lack of vision than displayed at the EU or national levels. When it comes to the reform of the multilateral system, which is needed to cope with the challenges of effectiveness and representation, in light of the emergence of new global powers, Belgium has not yet been able to articulate a clear vision. When China announced the launch of a new investment bank (the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB), Belgium was slow to react and, for a while, undecided. As a result, it was one of the few EU member states to miss the chance to become a founding member of the new multilateral institution, although it will eventually access membership later.¹⁷

About this Special Issue

The Egmont Institute has a long tradition of monitoring, studying and making recommendations on Belgium's foreign policy, either at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (to which the Institute is associated) or on its own initiative. The Institute undertakes part of its mission on its own, relying on its internal expertise, but it also regularly calls upon the broad expertise that exists in academia and policy circles in Belgium. Acting as a hub of knowledge and policy exchange is a core mission of the Institute.

In the past, the Egmont Institute published every other year a special issue of its academic journal, *Studia Diplomatica*, on the state of Belgium's foreign policy. A number of prominent academics and policy-makers, from Belgium and beyond, contributed to these issues. These publications always followed a major conference organised jointly by the University of Ghent and the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve. As this cycle of conference was paused, nota-

¹⁶ See the contribution of Liégeois in this issue.

¹⁷ See the contribution of Liégeois in this issue. See also Renard, T., 'The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): China's new multilateralism and the erosion of the West', Security Policy Brief 63, Egmont Institute, April 2015.

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bly due to the government crisis of 2010-II, the latest special issue of *Studia* on Belgium's foreign policy was published in 2009.

In 2015, after long discussions, we decided that time had come for a new special issue, which would cover major developments over the years 2010-15. In coordination with the universities of Ghent and Louvain-la-Neuve, we launched a call for papers in May 2015, which triggered broad interest in academic circles, resulting in a good number of submissions. In this issue, we have selected the best articles covering different dimensions of Belgium's external policies.

The first article from Rik Coolsaet offers a historical perspective on the evolution of Belgium's foreign policy, with a critical eye. He reflects on the (lack of) strategic priorities, and the underlying reasons for it. In the following contribution, Liégeois reviews the multilateral agenda of Belgium, its principles and its means. The article of Molenaers focusses on Belgium's development policy. It describes its aims and challenges, in light of shrinking resources and of a changing global aid landscape. In a contribution that is partly connected to the development goals, Steurs, Orbie and Delputte discuss Belgium's global health policy, its specific expertise and contribution (for instance through the Institute for Tropical Medicine), and its main priorities (including HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and health system strengthening). Bollen, Deraus, De Ville, Gheyle, Orbie and Van Den Putte focus on the trade agenda, with a focus on the two main current negotiations, with the USA (TTIP) and Canada (CETA). They present the main elements of Belgium's position in those negotiations (its 'offensive' and 'defensive' interests), before explaining how this position was formed. Last but not least, Reykers and Fonck make an interesting contribution on the role of the Belgian federal parliament in overseeing military interventions, focussing on the cases of Libya and Iraq. They show how this role is limited in Belgium – compared to neighbouring countries – due to several factors, including legal constraints, but also political ones.

Thomas Renard
18 May 2016