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## Re-Empowering Belgian Foreign Policy

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*Belgium's existing foreign policy framework was never designed to cope with the return of war and the decay of the rules-based international order. As a result, the country's international position is rapidly deteriorating. The incoming Belgian government will face the daunting task of articulating a new foreign policy that is tailored to the demands of a new era. This Egmont Policy Brief makes the case for putting security back at the centre of Belgium's international outlook, complementing the strong focus on the EU with strong bilateral diplomacy, and reversing the budgetary erosion of the Belgian foreign policy apparatus. By strengthening its diplomatic corps and its network abroad, the new government can help ensure the collective security and prosperity of all Belgian citizens, that is to say: the national interest.*

### INTRODUCTION

The international position of the Kingdom of Belgium is eroding rapidly. The Russian war against Ukraine and the bifurcation of global trade that results from the intensifying competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China are together reshaping the international environment in a way that Belgium is altogether unprepared for. In addition, the process of European integration is under growing pressure from within. Relying exclusively on the EU – the mainstay of Belgium's foreign policy post-Cold War – is no longer sufficient for defending all of Belgium's national interests. Whilst EU-level coordination remains important in economic terms, bilateral and other diplomatic

forums have gained in political weight. Largely due to resource constraints, however, Belgian foreign policy has underinvested in both its national security apparatus and its diplomatic engagement with non-EU frameworks. This translates into a significant loss of influence abroad.

This negative trend is not set in stone and can be mitigated. Just as the end of the second World War in 1945 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralded major changes to Belgian foreign policy, the post-2022 international environment calls for a new foreign policy paradigm. As Belgium's national security and economic well-being have become intimately intertwined with the postwar rules-based international order, the partial breakdown thereof will affect the interests of all Belgians. Yet the need to rebuild NATO's collective defence, the friend-shoring of critical supply chains and the enforcement of international rules will require Belgian diplomacy to change gears.

This Egmont Policy Brief makes the case for a substantial recalibration and financial recapitalisation of Belgium's foreign policy. It starts with a hard-nosed net assessment of Belgium's international position. This is done with a view to identifying the sources of the erosion of Belgium's international influence. Second, it makes the case for renewed Belgian engagement with the European continent and the wider world. Safeguarding the interests of Belgian citizens in a changing environment requires clear policy priorities as well as the diversification of Belgian diplomacy beyond the framework of the EU. Finally, this analysis spells out the need for recapitalising Belgian diplomacy in terms of its financial and human resources. Today's fiercely competitive international

environment will demand significantly greater resources for Belgium to confront the challenges ahead.

## RECONSIDERING BELGIUM'S INTERNATIONAL POSITION

Historically, Belgium has been able to play an outsize role in international affairs. Its early industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century endowed the country with economic resources far surpassing the modest size of its territory. Its colonial legacy provided the country with a broad international outlook and residual responsibilities. In the aftermath of the second World War, the country stood at the cradle of the contemporary international system – being one of the original fifty-one members of the United Nations, one of the twelve of allies founding NATO and one of the six countries that established the European communities. Today, it is just one voice amongst 193 in the UN, one amongst 32 in NATO, and one amongst 27 in the EU. Similarly, half a century ago, its economy accounted for approximately one per cent of global GDP. Today, that is 0.43% - a share set to further decline (IMF data 2024). This trend is even more obvious in terms of military expenditure. Whereas Belgium accounted for 0.76% of the global total fifty years ago, it does so for less than 0.32% today (SIPRI data 2024). In relative terms, the international clout of Belgium has shrunk precipitously.

To some extent, this shrinkage of Belgian influence is the result from the economic development of non-Western countries. Yet this trend is compounded by Belgium's own post-Cold War choices to deprioritise its national foreign policy, to defund its own defence, and to dismember its own international presence – choices made under the expectation that European integration would somehow provide a substitute for national responsibility. Furthermore, the broader power shift 'away from the West' has profound repercussions for the international system. The early post-Cold War environment was characterised by a preponderance of U.S. power, creating a largely benevolent environment for all Western interests. Yet today, a dynamic of fierce confrontation has emerged between a diminished and fragmented West and a loose

coalition of autocratic powers led by China, Russia and Iran (cf. ADIV/SGRS 2024). In this new context, Belgium's neglect of foreign policy is jeopardising the national interest – that is to say, the collective political, economic and security interests of all Belgians. As the external trend of Belgium's decreasing relative weight is difficult to avoid, it is imperative to tackle the internal sources of Belgium's declining international voice.

The changing balance of power has resulted in a post-Western world. In the early 1990s, for example, the US and its European and Indo-Pacific allies accounted for over 70% of the global economy and 75% of global military expenditure. This has now declined to a level below 60% on both counts. Furthermore, this decline is much more pronounced in Europe. Whereas European countries still accounted for approximately one third of the global economy and military expenditure in the early 1990s, this has now shrunk to some 17%. This decline is offset by the impressive economic and military expansion witnessed on the Asian continent. The spectacular growth experienced by the People's Republic of China offers a case in point. Whilst China in 1990 accounted for 4% of global GDP and 1% of global military expenditure, this is now 19% and 12%, respectively (IMF and SIPRI data 2024). These trends become even more pronounced when taking relative purchasing power into account. This power shift is propelling the onset of a new era of confrontation (cf. Niblett 2024 and Zelikow 2024). In effect, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, enabled by the economic and military support of other authoritarian powers, heralds the emergence of a new paradigm as different from the recent past as the Cold War was from the post-Cold War.

This international trend has been accelerated by developments pertaining to Belgian foreign policy itself. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Belgium embraced the supposed end of history in its own self-effacing way – to such an extent the UK Ambassador David Colvin (1997) even wondered whether the country would “*divide like an amoeba*”, caught between “*high Euro-politics and parish pump parochialism*”. As Belgium converted into a federal state, it reduced its historically multifaceted foreign policy largely to the promotion of European integration.

With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, it started to neglect its national security and NATO membership. Finally, the erosion of federal state competences and budgetary means helped splinter and hollow out the country's foreign policy toolbox.

The first and most fundamental choice Belgium made in the 1990s was to promote the newly established European Union to the centrepiece of its foreign policy. Historically, Belgian diplomacy had concentrated its efforts on trade promotion and the protection of the rights of smaller countries living in the shadow of larger neighbours. To this end, the Belgian foreign ministry had established a wide network of diplomatic posts abroad – essential to further the country's interests as an export nation – and supported the creation of international institutions. During the Cold War, this multilateral preference revolved around the triad of the UN, NATO and European institutions as complementary foreign policy strands. Yet by the end of the century, the European strand of Belgian foreign policy became the dominant one. This was the product of general enthusiasm about the development of the EU, disillusionment with the UN and domestic politics. In particular, the successive reforms of the Belgian State went hand in hand with an inclination towards European federalism. Prime Minister Wilfried Martens – the key architect of this twin development – famously argued that *“a country as federalized as Belgium requires a (European) project above and beyond itself to stay intact”* (quoted in De Ridder 1991: 193). This European federalist aspiration promised a future in which Belgium could dissolve itself as a nation state, and a globalised economy would be regulated at the supranational level.

The second and parallel choice was to deprioritise the national security function of the state, to radically downsize the size of the armed forces, and to neglect NATO membership obligations. The decisions to suspend military conscription from 1994 onwards and to let the defence effort slide from close to 3% of GDP during the Cold War years to 0.88% of GDP in 2017 constitute evidence thereof. Over three decades the Belgian Defence force structure crumbled to being a mere shadow of its

former self. While successive governments promoted the idea of closer European defence cooperation as a panacea, this argument came to serve as a smokescreen masking the haemorrhaging of Belgium's military power. Over time, the country became known as a security free rider, losing much of the credibility it had accumulated during the Cold War. Political denial notwithstanding, the military incapacity and dependence this has engendered has grave repercussions for Belgian foreign policy credibility. When the country was the victim of major terrorist attacks in 2016, it needed to borrow body armour from the United States to re-equip its own soldiers, for instance.

The third and final choice in post-Cold War Belgian foreign policy concerned the establishment of regional administrations operating abroad. This mirrored the transformation of the Kingdom into a federal state, with the constituent entities becoming responsible for the international aspects of their competences and the new Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs (i.e., the former Ministry) retaining the residual competences: the so-called *‘foro interno, foro externo’* principle. This resulted in the creation of regional export promotion offices from the early 1990s onwards and the gradual emergence of socio-economic focussed regional foreign policies. As a result, the federal competences consolidated around the sovereign functions of state, including consular affairs, security policy, bilateral state-to-state relations – including high-stake economic diplomacy – and European policy coordination.

To a considerable extent, these trends were closely interrelated. On the one hand, the coordination of Belgium's European policy – involving a growing number of intra-Belgian stakeholders – over time came to absorb the lion's share of Belgian diplomatic bandwidth. On the other hand, it was the post-Cold War peace dividend that paid for these new layers of public administration. The net result was the far-reaching fragmentation of the Belgian foreign policy toolkit, as the diplomatic corps, the budget, and policy instruments of the federal level were progressively hollowed out. With Belgian Defence in tatters and with development assistance and export promotion being entrusted to separate agencies, Belgian

foreign policy was progressively reduced to cheering on the EU, providing consular services, and trumpeting liberal norms.

Whilst each of these choices was understandable in the context of the 1990s, the key question is whether they have equipped Belgium with the appropriate toolkit to face the contemporary international environment. When zooming out, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Belgian foreign policy has by and large *disempowered itself*. Moreover, this trend was historically founded on the widespread assumptions that a largely benevolent international environment would sustain itself, and that the EU would over time develop into a global power strong enough to shield its member states. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, neither of these assumptions have been born out. On the one hand, the wider power shift from West to East has reignited fierce interstate competition and conflict. On the other hand, no federal European superstate has emerged, and many EU member states have little qualms about treating the EU as one vehicle amongst many for advancing their national interests. The sterilised foreign policy framework that Belgium has designed for itself one generation ago is uniquely unsuited for meeting today's challenges.

### RE-ENGAGING WITH THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT AND THE WIDER WORLD

Sadly, the reality of war in Europe implies that a new Belgian foreign policy paradigm is called for. But what might be its outline? First and foremost, the incoming federal government needs to come to terms with the world as it is, and not as one would like it to be. Second, this change of direction requires identifying the large goals that Belgian foreign policy must achieve or meaningfully contribute to. The prevention of large-scale conflict in Europe could constitute such a goal, for example, if such conflict had not broken out already. Such large goals will need to be prioritised in function of Belgium's national interests and require arbitration in function of available resources. Thirdly, goals will need to relate to diplomatic ways and financial means. It is to this exercise that this analysis turns. The ideas proposed below are not meant

to be exhaustive, but rather as examples why the re-empowerment of Belgian foreign policy is necessary. If Belgium would not do so, it would default on its most essential task, namely, to shield its citizens from external threat and serve their well-being.

Today's global outlook is decidedly bleak. The past wave of economic globalisation has left the world densely interconnected and interdependent, yet also restless and fiercely competitive. In Europe, Vladimir Putin's Russia has unleashed a war of conquest upon Ukraine. This war is part of a broader campaign in which Moscow seeks to overturn the European security architecture. Furthermore, Russia is supported and enabled by China as an emerging superpower, and by Iran and North Korea as secondary actors pursuing greater influence in their respective neighbourhoods. This confronts the United States as the established superpower with hard choices about its various security commitments worldwide. NATO and the U.S. bilateral alliances with Japan, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea all critically depend on the same finite reservoir of U.S. military power. The alignment between Russia, China, Iran and North Korea is presumably designed to overstretch the U.S. alliance system and break its will to resist. Already today, the U.S. electorate is flirting with the temptation to turn inward rather than continue upholding the international order built over the past decades. With the prospect of major – perhaps global – war looming on the horizon, the deep foundation underlying European integration and Belgian prosperity is at risk.

Belgium will need to prioritise its efforts in function of where its core interests are most at stake. The most important foreign policy goal today must be to ensure that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war does not escalate into a wider war between Russia and NATO. To this purpose, Belgium will need to help strengthen NATO's collective deterrence and defence. The second large goal must be to counter the ongoing erosion of the rules-based international order. Norms do not uphold themselves if they are not backed by material power. Instead of promoting ever more liberal norms, the survival of the rules-based system now depends on the question

whether the breaking of long-established norms will carry real consequences. Whether it concerns unfair trade practices, the conduct of cyberattacks, or the redrawing of borders by force, it is not the norm that stops the violation thereof, but the price that such violation entails. A third foreign policy goal is to ensure that Belgium has sufficient means to further its own economic and political interests when and where these are at stake. Not only does this require having a diversified toolkit available, but it also implies the state having the command authority to synchronise different levers of influence in pursuit of its goals. The coordination role the Foreign Ministry played in developing Belgium's first National Security Strategy already illustrates as much. Yet updating and implementing such a strategic agenda will entail much greater effort.

Relying overwhelmingly on the framework of the EU alone – as Belgium has done for three decades – will not suffice. Of course, the economic importance of the single market implies that the European construction will continue to play a prominent role in Belgian foreign policy. Yet the defence of the European continent is being re-organised in the framework of the NATO alliance. Not only do most European states harbour deep-seated doubts about supranational solutions to defence problems, but the nature of the threat at hand – i.e., Russia as an aggressive nuclear superpower – implies U.S. extended deterrence is essential. The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs therefore has a key role to play in putting forward new ideas for NATO policy. Moreover, bilateral diplomacy and other formats such as the European Political Community and NATO-AP4 consultations have gained in importance in recent years – including within the EU (cf. Mattelaer 2019). As intra-European divisions may prompt the European project to return to a more constrained political agenda centred around the single market, Belgium's foreign policy will need to diversify in parallel.

As a corollary, Belgian diplomacy will need to reinvest substantially greater human and material resources in its own network of bilateral embassies across the world and its Permanent Representations to other international organisations – most notably the UN, NATO and the

OSCE. In keeping with expectations, the recent Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU has been a great success in terms of propelling the European legislative agenda forward. This showcases what Belgium can achieve in diplomatic terms when it puts real effort into its foreign policy. Yet advancing the European legislative agenda is by itself not sufficient when the international system is being reset and when the most existential issues are being debated elsewhere. Today's environment puts a premium on diplomatic presence in as many foreign capitals and relevant international fora as possible. It requires substantial capacity for policy planning, analysis and crisis response at the headquarters level. Beyond the world of ideas, this also demands the necessary resources to be able to develop new initiatives with like-minded partners and bear the costs of common funding mechanisms. Whilst the coordination of Belgian EU policy is essential, many other forums have increased in diplomatic salience, and need urgent attention and resources too.

Today, much of Belgium's international presence is scattered across multiple agencies and other outward manifestations of Belgium's multi-layered persona. In a legal sense, this can only be changed by special majorities that would allow for revising the Belgian constitutional settlement – which may take a long time to materialise. Yet one must also recall that regional trade promotion or development cooperation efforts carry only limited traction in today's international environment. Should war come to Belgium, the command authority of the state will be exercised by the King, i.e., by the federal government via the National Security Council established in 2015. Correspondingly, the network of Belgian embassies will need to strengthen its convening power by relying on a 'team Belgium' approach, in which all Belgian presence abroad is relied upon to contribute to the wider foreign policy goals. In that sense, federal diplomacy, regional trade promotion and development assistance need to be rethought as mutually complementary instruments of influence abroad. Issues such as addressing illegal migration, drugs trafficking and economic security require all hands on deck.



A successfully re-empowered foreign policy is critically dependent on thematic and regional expertise, and tailored instruments for making use thereof. These could range from official bilateral dialogue to track II diplomacy flanking government-to-government communication. Engagement in such frameworks requires nurturing authority in key issue areas. Today issues like cybersecurity, deterrence, geo-economics and Russia as well as China studies warrant urgent investment. These could complement longstanding areas of Belgian knowledge about Central Africa, international law and maritime industry issues, for instance. The development of expertise in key issue areas also offers an opportunity to team up with both longstanding allies and new partners. The example of nurturing Russia studies expertise can help build much-needed bridges with Central European countries, for instance.

### RECAPITALISING BELGIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Many of the suggestions above require the injection of additional financial and human resources into the Belgian foreign policy apparatus. Again, this amplifies the call for discontinuing the post-Cold War trend and re-emphasizing the role of the Belgian Foreign Ministry as a security department. The past disempowerment of Belgian foreign policy has featured the steady hollowing out of the purchasing power of Belgian diplomacy: this is not sustainable. Long term trends and hard facts can help shed light on the present situation and future requirements.

In 2024, the budget of the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation – heading 14 of the Belgian federal budget – amounted to some 1.79 billion euros in total (FPS Strategy and Support 2023: 124317). This includes some 4 million for the ministerial cabinets, some 104 million governance costs, and some 39 million for general services. The latter included the additional cost of the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU. The cost of the diplomatic network itself amounted to some 224 million euros, topped up by some 17 million for bilateral affairs, 118 million for European affairs, and

another 149 million for multilateral affairs. Consular and legal affairs had small additional budget lines (less than one million combined). During this budget year, Belgian development cooperation accounted for over 1.25 billion euros, i.e., more than double than the rest of foreign affairs combined (537 million euros).

Whilst these figures have remained relatively stable over time, they represent a major loss of purchasing power due to inflation. Back in 2013, for instance, the total budget stood at 1.81 billion, split into 467 million for foreign policy and trade and 1.35 billion for development cooperation. Yet if we account for inflation - as measured by the consumer price index - these figures need to be multiplied by a factor of 1.32 (Statbel 2024). Taking the budget of 2013 and accounting for stable purchasing power would thus yield a budget of 2.39 billion euros in 2024. Otherwise put, the foreign policy budget has lost over one quarter of its purchasing power in the past decade – and this process has been ongoing for much longer. Looking ahead, the Belgian Monitoring Committee (2024: 171) estimates that the foreign affairs budget will still be at 1.81 billion current euros in budget year 2029, assuming that no policy change is forthcoming. This is the same amount as in 2013 - only the budget will by then have shrunk over one third in its purchasing power. This disempowerment of Belgian foreign policy in its cold budgetary reality is even more pronounced for Foreign Affairs than for the other sovereign departments of statecraft.

This longstanding budgetary erosion has been offset by savings in terms of personnel, infrastructure and working expenses. In 2011, the Belgian Foreign Ministry employed some 561 Belgians posted overseas (staffing the diplomatic network) and 1305 at the headquarters in Brussels. In 2023, these figures stood at some 451 and 1258, a reduction by -20% and -4%, respectively. This has been mitigated by a greater reliance on staff employed on (cheaper) local contracts abroad (+5%) and temporary reinforcements for specific tasks at home. The hiring of one hundred extra staff for the Belgian Council Presidency – with their contracts running out on 31 July 2024 – offers a case in point. Another important measure has been to

merge the different external career paths, previously split into the diplomatic career, the consular affairs trajectory and the development assistance profile. This merging of profiles has allowed for compressing the size of different embassies and cutting costs. The downside, however, is that the diplomatic career offers even less possibilities for thematic specialisation, despite the need for developing such expertise.

The Belgian network of embassies and representations abroad offers another illustration thereof. In 2006, for instance, Belgium still maintained 131 posts abroad. Today only 115 posts remain. Many of those have also shrunk in size. The network includes many so-called ‘one plus one’ embassies (composed of an ambassador plus one diplomat), notwithstanding the intent to have ‘one-plus-two’ as the desired minimum structure. Even some critically important postings such as the Permanent Representation of Belgium to NATO run on a handful of diplomats, augmented by auxiliary staff made available by the Ministry of Defence. This pattern of scraping by on minimal resources is present in the infrastructure portfolio as well. In some capitals such as Washington DC and Tokyo, this has entailed moving to much smaller and cheaper diplomatic premises, for instance (cf. *De Standaard* 2019). Yet this diplomatic network constitutes the backbone of foreign policy – feeding the government with information and supporting Belgian citizens and their interests abroad. A skeletal network cannot help but offer only limited support.

Of course, critics can point out that Belgium’s international presence also relies on the representations put in place by the Belgian regions and their respective trade promotion agencies. Flanders Investment and Trade, for instance, employs 146 staff at headquarters level and 194 staff posted abroad. Whilst this is perhaps justifiable in the light of the fact that Flanders accounts for over 80% of Belgian exports, it sets a precedent in terms of regional ambitions. The Wallonia Export & Investment Agency (AWEX) also employs some 400 staff spread over two central headquarters, six provincial centres and over 90 economic and trade representations overseas. These include representations in countries like

Peru and Uruguay where the volume of bilateral exports hardly exceeds the salary cost of a single employee (cf. Tradexplorer.be data). When considering the overhead this entails – e.g. in terms of human resources, ICT and governance structures – it becomes clear that this regionalisation has significantly increased the cost of foreign representation whilst not necessarily contributing to the most effective promotion of key national interests. This does not represent a judgment on the work of those civil servants concerned, it is merely the (presumably unintentional) consequence of past choices. The Belgian federal and regional representations typically maintain symbiotic working relationships with one another in the attempt to deliver the necessary services to the Belgian taxpayer.

In the light of the past erosion and fragmentation of the budgetary effort, one key question is what re-empowering Belgian foreign policy would cost. One established international benchmark would be to allocate some 3% of GDP to Belgium’s international engagement outside of the EU framework. This would include spending 2% on defence, 0.7% on development cooperation, and 0.3% on foreign policy proper. In current euros, this would imply some twelve billion for defence, just over four billion for development and just under two billion for foreign affairs. These goals may strike many as staggering, given the constraints of the existing architecture of Belgium’s public finances. While regional-level expenditure must be included in such a benchmarking exercise, the need for budgetary efficiency and strategic direction would suggest that the budget growth needs to be concentrated at the level of the federal state. This would also ensure that the necessary regeneration of Belgian Defence goes hand in hand with a regeneration of Belgian diplomacy and its organic policy instruments.

Another way to model the recapitalisation of Belgian foreign policy would be to start from what the diplomatic network requires in confronting today’s more challenging environment. Given the staffing shortages highlighted earlier, the externally focussed federal diplomatic corps will need to grow to at least some 1,000 full-time equivalents. This would not only allow for addressing the existing

gaps and growing key posts, but it would also establish the necessary capacity for developing subject matter expertise and addressing unexpected security crises (such as evacuation operations or wartime contingencies). Such an effort would represent a sizeable but feasible human resources challenge. Finally, the diplomatic network will need to be re-endowed with adequate working expenses. In a fiercely competitive international system, the conduct of diplomacy on the cheap will not generate the intended effects, but instead invite predatory behaviour by others. At the federal level, such a proposed recapitalisation of the diplomatic staff and working expenses would necessitate a gradual pathway towards a budget well above and beyond 2.5 billion euros for foreign affairs and development cooperation combined.

## CONCLUSION

With a new international paradigm being born out of the return of great power competition, Belgium's vital national interests – including the sanctity of its national territory and the physical security of its citizens – are increasingly at risk. Following the June 2024 elections, the incoming federal government will require a foreign policy that is tailored to the demands of this new era. This includes not only the financial recapitalisation thereof, but also the recalibration of its main parameters. With war already raging on the European continent and palpable risks of major escalation, the national security function of the sovereign state has become paramount again. In this framework, skilful foreign policy centred around alliances and deterrence constitutes the most important and most cost-efficient form of defence. Not only must Belgium rapidly augment its contribution to NATO's collective defence – to prevent war reaching the Belgian territory – it also needs to rebuild its foreign policy and re-engage with the wider world from a position of intellectual strength. Given the trajectory of the past decades, that may appear a daunting challenge. Yet the collective security and the prosperity of all Belgian citizens depends on this challenge being met. After all, this is what the promotion of the national interest is all about.

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