

Message from the Eastern Flank: From Celtic Uprise to Dacian Fall

Wannes Verstraete

Since February 2022, collective defence has again become the main effort of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after decades of ‘out-of-area’ operations. Consequently, the armed forces of NATO’s member states need to transition back to force packages that are well-suited to defend the North Atlantic area as enshrined in the 1949 Washington Treaty.¹ Belgium has adapted rather slowly to this new reality due to, among other factors, an underdeveloped strategic culture, years of cuts in military spending, a lack of urgency in political circles, a failure to see the Russian military buildup at the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022 as a real threat, and persistent budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, over the past years, the armed forces of Belgium did receive extra funding (and more is promised) and new capabilities are on the way. Additionally, the mindset and training of the armed forces also need to change. While the collective security and counter-terrorism experiences from past deployments should be preserved, the forces need to regain familiarity with large-scale peer-to-peer warfare.

Subsequently, from 8 to 16 October, the annual Franco-Belgian military exercise ‘Celtic Uprise 24’ took place in the Ardennes. Approximately 1200 military personnel (1040 Belgian and 160 French) and 200 vehicles participated (150 Belgian and 50 French). The exercise is part of the Capacité Motorisée or CaMo partnership which entails not only the modernization of motorised vehicles from both nations but also enhancing the interoperability between the land forces.² That said, the Belgium brigade will be affiliated but not permanently attached to a

French Division as sovereign decision-making regarding operational deployments remains crucial. During Celtic Uprise, Belgian and French forces trained together in preparation for warfare scenarios that both nations could face on the Eastern flank of NATO. As one of the organising officers said, the motorised brigade is transitioning back to focus on Article 5 scenarios.

At the end of October, along with three colleagues from the Egmont Institute and Ghent University, I had the opportunity to join the Belgian Vice-Chief of Defence and the Land Component Commander on a visit to the French Mission Eagle and the NATO battlegroup in Romania. The goal of the visit was to observe the final demonstration of the exercise ‘Dacian Fall 24’. Here, Belgian troops are practising exactly what exercises such as Celtic Uprise prepare them for, namely, to deter and if necessary, defend “every inch” of Allied territory.³ Opening these activities up for junior researchers and reservists enhances the understanding of what the Belgian contribution to European security entails more directly and tangibly.

BELGIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATO DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE

Belgium has contributed for two decades to the security of the Eastern flank of the Alliance. The country was the first Ally to deploy an F-16 fighter jet detachment in the framework of the Baltic Air Policing mission in March 2004.⁴ Moreover, the Naval Component participates in the maritime domain to the NATO Standing Naval Forces with its frigates and minehunters.⁵ Belgium also contributes in other ways to NATO’s core task of deterrence and defence, most notably by being a Dual-Capable Aircraft

(DCA) Ally. In this regard, the Air and Space Component contributes aircraft, infrastructure, and personnel to the nuclear mission of the Alliance. In October, the annual NATO nuclear exercise Steadfast Noon was organised. Belgium, together with the Netherlands, hosted the exercise which involved over 60 aircraft from 13 Allies, 8 airbases, and 2000 military personnel.⁶ As a result, Belgium's DCA role can be described as the country's most essential contribution to the Alliance since nuclear deterrence makes, firstly, war less likely. Moreover, in case war does break out, nuclear deterrence helps to keep it from escalating to the nuclear level and thus gives conventional defence a chance.

In the land domain, Belgium has contributed since 2017 to the multinational battlegroup in Lithuania after the 2016 Warsaw Summit decided to deploy four battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The framework nation is Germany, and the contributing nations are Belgium, Czechia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway. After the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, NATO expanded the number of battlegroups to eight and thus deployed four additional battlegroups to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. The framework nation for the battlegroup in Romania is France, and the contributing nations are Belgium, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal and the United States. During the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO decided to increase the size of the battlegroups from a battalion to a brigade. The rationale for expanding and strengthening NATO's forward presence is the following:

"NATO has increased its military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance as a direct result of Russia's behaviour, which reflects a pattern of aggressive actions against its neighbours and the wider transatlantic community. Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area."

DACIAN FALL 24

France as a framework nation has contributed significantly to NATO's deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern

flank with Mission Eagle.⁸ This mission started on 28 February 2022, days after the start of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. The two main components of the French mission are a multinational battlegroup based in Cincu and a medium-range surface-to-air detachment in Capu Midia. This detachment is equipped with MAMBA systems that can each fire eight ASTER 30 medium-range surface-to-air missiles and the related command and control, missile fire control, and radar systems. Next to the French forces, the multinational battlegroup also consists of Belgian and Luxembourgian forces. The other two components of the Mission Eagle are a National Support Element to provide logistical support, and a Brigade Forward Command Element (BFCE). The battlegroup forms part of NATO's Headquarters Multinational Division South-East (HQ MND-SE).

The Belgian contribution to the battlegroup consists of around 300 troops. Currently, the main unit that provides the fighting force is the light infantry battalion Carabiniers Prins Boudewijn-Grenadiers (1 C/1 Gr) with Dingo 2 Multi-Purpose Protected Vehicles (MPPVs). They will be relieved soon by the motorised infantry 12/13 Battalion of the Line, who in September 2024 did a successful certification exercise (Certex) in preparation for their deployment.⁹ Next to the Belgian forces, there is also a Luxembourgian reconnaissance unit integrated. Their contribution and RQ-20 Puma UAV have been described by a Belgian officer as a "force multiplier". One of the lessons learned was the importance of having different types of air assets embedded in the company. The Belgian and Luxembourgian troops had direct access to three different types of (smaller) drones, but also to other unmanned air assets such as MQ-9Bs and manned fighter jets (Romanian F-16s and Spanish F-18s) and helicopters (e.g., US UH-60 Black Hawks).

During their deployment in the Battlegroup, the Belgian troops could train in anti-tank, trench, urban, and mountain warfare. This resulted in much-needed full-scale conventional warfare learning experiences. Moreover, they could also work together with mechanised units (e.g., French Leclerc tanks and French, Romanian, and Polish infantry fighting vehicles), heavy rocket artillery

(Romanian HIMARS and LAROM) and 155 mm howitzers (French CAESAR), which led to additional combined arms warfare experience. The scenario of the final demonstration of the exercise ‘Dacian Fall 24’ was a clear example of defensive combined arms warfare. Fictional enemy forces had crossed a river to the North and created a beachhead to invade Allied territory. Together with air support, NATO ground forces repelled the invading forces and pushed them back over the river. For the next exercise, ‘Dacian Spring 25’, the Belgian Land Component would like to contribute 1000 military personnel. This would be the biggest battalion-size deployment abroad in years and would provide a significant but informative challenge.

THE PLANNED TRANSFORMATION OF THE BELGIAN LAND COMPONENT

It is expected that the Belgian Land Component will transition and expand from one medium brigade to two brigades – next to the Special Operations Regiment – pending political approval. Currently, the motorised brigade consists of more than a dozen different battalions (of which five are combat battalions), making it too large. Splitting the motorised brigade into two smaller French- and Dutch-speaking brigades, each consisting of eight battalions (one new combat battalion needs to be created), would be a feasible change and send a strong signal to the other NATO Allies. The number of vehicles on order would also be sufficient. Additionally, talks are ongoing to create a homeland defence regiment that would primarily consist of reservists.

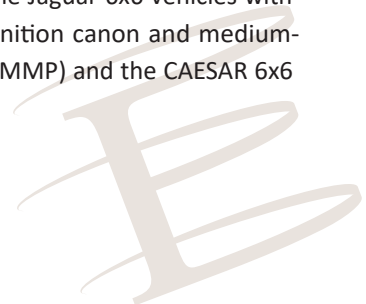
That said, the priority of the Land Component is to first create a fully manned motorised brigade. This brigade will have French armoured vehicles that Belgium is procuring in the framework of the CaMo partnership, including the Jaguar Armoured Reconnaissance and Combat Vehicle, CAESAR self-propelled howitzer, Griffon Multi-role Armoured Vehicle, Serval Light Armoured Multi-Role Vehicle, the VBAE Armoured Engagement Support Vehicle, and other support vehicles. These capabilities are part of the French SCORPION programme and will serve next to the new American-made Falcon CLVs, Commando and Liaison Vehicles.

Regarding the second brigade, discussions on the type of unit are still ongoing, such as light, medium, heavy or airmobile. While a medium brigade is considered a versatile force that is useful in both the low and higher end of the violence spectrum, such a unit lacks the firepower and armour that is needed in large-scale conventional warfare. Subsequently, reflecting on the nature of this set of capabilities – more mobile but lighter protected – the focus seems to remain on the Southern flank of the Alliance. A flank that of course also needs the required attention. In addition, one of the lessons learned in Ukraine is that different types of units are necessary. Nonetheless, having two motorised brigades could end up in a force that is a jack of all trades but a master of none.

AN INCREASE IN FIREPOWER IS NEEDED

Therefore, creating a new heavy mechanised brigade would send a strong solidarity signal to the other Allies given that such forces are better tailored for countering the threats emanating from the Eastern flank of NATO. Logical choices for partner countries in this regard are the Netherlands and Germany by procuring CV90 or KF41 Lynx infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and Leopard 2 or KF51 Panther main battle tanks (MBTs). Both are neighbouring countries, and Belgium already has extensive cooperation with the Netherlands in the maritime and air domain. Moreover, Germany is the framework nation for the battlegroup in Lithuania to which Belgium also contributes. In any case, creating such a mechanised brigade is only possible after 2030 given current financial and personnel constraints. However, if the next government decides on this option in the next months, the Land Component could develop an achievable 10-year roadmap to establish both a (French-speaking) medium brigade that is highly interoperable with army units from France in Romania and a (Dutch-speaking) heavy brigade that is highly interoperable with army units from the Netherlands and Germany in Lithuania.

Another option is to create two motorised brigades that receive higher numbers of the Jaguar 6x6 vehicles with a 40 mm telescoped ammunition canon and medium-range land combat missiles (MMP) and the CAESAR 6x6



155 mm self-propelled howitzers. These capabilities are useful on both the Eastern (more high-intensity warfare) and Southern flank of NATO. Additional numbers of these vehicles will result in two strengthened medium brigades. Nevertheless, while the CaMo partnership will result in increased interoperability with French army units, the Belgian Land Component should make sure that concerning, for instance, communication and information systems, the brigade(s) remain interoperable with other Allied forces.

In the short term, efforts to integrate unmanned systems should be prioritised given the positive experiences in Romania. Additionally, the working budget of the armed forces needs to increase, and especially, the stocks of munitions and other essential supplies need to be replenished since this would greatly improve readiness and sustainment. An additional investment in ground-based air and missile defence is much needed beyond the procurement of Mistral 3 short-range surface-to-air missiles. Belgium has in this regard signed up for the European Sky Shield Initiative.¹⁰ The most important question in this debate is identifying the type of air and missile threats the Belgian homeland and deployed troops face and selecting the necessary system based on such a threat assessment. In the end, multiple systems will probably be needed to create layered air and missile defence.

In conclusion, the next Belgian government has some important questions to tackle, namely what threats and operations should Belgian Defence prepare for? What are the corresponding forces Belgium should field? What should be the focus of the second brigade? Who are the ideal partner states to develop these forces and how to hedge against risky dependencies and (geo)political uncertainties? And lastly, we should stop calling our forces 'Components' and go back to Army, Air and Space Force, Navy, Medical Service, and Cyber Force.

Wannes Verstraete is a PhD Candidate at the European Security in the Indo-Pacific Age (ESIPA) research group and a Teaching Assistant in Political Science at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), specialising in deterrence and arms control. He is an Associate Fellow in the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont Institute, a Junior Associate Fellow at the NATO Defense College (NDC), and a Candidate Reserve Officer at the Chief Strategy Office (CSO) of the Belgian Armed Forces.

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Endnotes

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