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**Will the New Government
Safely Navigate Belgium
through Turbulent International
Waters?**

A Young Scholars' Review of National Security

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Victor De Decker and Sjorre Couvreur on Economic Security in Belgium:	
From Afterthought to Priority	6
Anne-Marie Dedene on China Policy	7
Karen De Vos on Advancing Cybersecurity	8
Thor Geunens on the Party Politics of the New Coalition Agreement	9
Julien Godfroid on the Political Measures Against the Russian Federation’s threats	10
Marion Jacques on a Third Military Programming Law	11
Magali Michiels on Maritime Security	12
Julie Orlans on the Evolution and Relevance of Sanctions	13
Alexandre Piron on Humanitarian-Development-Security Nexus	14
Robin Vanderborght on Military AI in Belgium’s New Coalition Agreement	15
Wannes Verstraete on Nuclear Weapons Policy	16
Berk Vindevogel on the Belgian Contribution to NATO	17
Edouard Xia on a Multidimensional and Coordinated Foreign Policy	17
Conclusion: The Critical Importance of Next Generation Scholarship in National Security	
Alexander Mattelaer, Sven Biscop, and Tanguy Struye de Swielande	19
Acknowledgements and List of Contributing Authors	20
Endnotes	22



Introduction

Wannes Verstraete

“Yes, our country is vulnerable”, said Belgian Major-General Phaleg Bernard during a hearing in the Defence Commission from the Chamber of Representatives in October 2024.¹ The remarks by him and other senior officers stressed the urgent necessity of accelerating the modernisation of Belgium’s military forces at a moment when the government negotiations were ongoing. By the end of January 2025, these negotiations proved to be successful. The new De Wever Government released its coalition agreement and was sworn in on 3 February 2025.² As is often the case in Belgium, the coalition is made up of different ideological parties, namely the N-VA (conservative Flemish nationalist); MR (Francophone liberals); cd&v (Flemish Christian democrats); Les Engagés (Francophone centrists); and Vooruit (Flemish social democrats).

The national security sections of the new coalition agreement are spread throughout the document and can be found in the parts on foreign affairs, defence, and elsewhere. In comparison with former governments, the new coalition agreement showcases an increased ambition and formulates some of the minimum necessary adjustments. The previous 2020 coalition agreement was 97 pages long in total and contained 2 pages on defence, 5 pages on foreign affairs, and 2 on development.³ The new 2025 agreement is 199 pages long and contains 8 pages on defence and 11 pages on foreign affairs and development.⁴

The problem is, however, the risk of empty promises. Given the budgetary constraints and multiple domestic challenges on the federal and regional level (pensions, healthcare, education...), there is always the risk of deferring much-needed investments toward the next government. The new government should therefore articulate a convincing narrative on national security to explain to the Belgian society why these additional investments are essential for the safeguarding of our democratic way of life, prosperity, and welfare. It is to this purpose that this collection of academic essays seeks to contribute.

Belgium and its Allies and partners are facing a deteriorating security landscape. On a global scale, the challenges range from war to economic, environmental, migration, health crises, rapid technological innovation etc. Examples are the return to power of Donald Trump in the United States, the continuing rise of China that results in a changing global balance of power, the risk of protectionist economic policies and trade wars, and the challenges and opportunities that emerging and disruptive technologies entail. On a regional scale, the threats range from large-scale conventional war between Russia and Ukraine – and the accompanying Russian nuclear threats, to turmoil in the Middle East, increasing tension in the High North, subversive activities against European critical infrastructure, and the surge in populism. Locally, there is the enduring and, in some cases, increasing risk of terrorism, hybrid warfare, espionage, sabotage, and disinformation.

Belgium is ‘vulnerable’, combine this with an expected but mindboggling pace of geopolitical change and you have potentially a recipe for disaster. Consequently, the central question this group of young scholars attempt to answer, each from their own research background, is if the new government will safely navigate Belgium through turbulent international waters.

Victor De Decker and **Sjorre Couvreur** argue that despite its importance, economic security has long been overlooked at the federal level due to governance challenges and political reluctance. The new government now prioritises regional collaboration, but a comprehensive strategy is long overdue. **Anne-Marie Dedene** examines whether the agreement shows a changed Belgian positioning vis-à-vis the People’s Republic of China. **Karen De Vos** examines the

agreement from a cyber perspective, highlighting its advancements in cybersecurity policy as well as some challenges of implementation. **Thor Geunens** examines whether the heightened emphasis on defence stems from rising geopolitical threats or the ideological composition of the government. **Julien Godfroid** analysis explores the strategic approach in countering “Russian political war”, the risks of inconsistent value-based defence and foreign policy, and the critical need to strengthen both military capabilities and psychological resilience in the face of high-intensity conflict. **Marion Jacques** explores the Defence section regarding the potential upcoming strategic plan for Defence and the Military Programming Law. **Magali Michiels** delves into the government’s maritime security agenda. **Julie Orlans** discusses the evolution of sanctions as a non-military solution to regional conflicts. **Alexandre Piron** examines the foreign aid policies and the lack of consideration from the new government. **Robin Vanderborgh** examines the initiatives and commitments regarding the uses of artificial intelligence in a military context. **Wannes Verstraete** assesses the change in language regarding nuclear weapons policy. **Berk Vindevogel** focuses on the Belgium’s aim to move towards the 2%-guideline by this summer. However, with the current threat environment and the likelihood of a higher guideline, it all seems too little too late. How can we stop this from happening again in the future? **Edouard Xia** examines the multidimensional and coordinated approach to foreign policy adopted during times of international uncertainty.

What this diverse group of young scholars have in common is that they are doing their research at a moment when total war is again being waged on the European continent after a decades-long hiatus. It is, therefore, not surprising that they collectively call for strengthening Belgium’s instruments of national security statecraft.



VICTOR DE DECKER AND SJORRE COUVREUR ON ECONOMIC SECURITY IN BELGIUM: FROM AFTERTHOUGHT TO PRIORITY

Even though mentioned as one of the four pillars of the Belgian National Security Strategy as of late 2021, economic security has not received the political attention it deserved at the federal level. This is largely due to our country's federal structure with divided competencies among the regions, which makes drafting policy that mixes economic and security policy particularly complex. However, also harsh political realities play a role. Politicians find it hard to implement measures that may harm companies' profit margins in the short term – in an already difficult economic conjunction – even if this is to protect their well-being in the long term.

Belgium, despite its small geographic size, plays a crucial role in Europe's economy as a hub of innovation (Imec) and a key logistical link (the Port of Antwerp-Zeebrugge). As geopolitical tensions rise and global markets become increasingly competitive, economic security can no longer be an afterthought for the new federal government. While previous Belgian administrations largely delegated economic security to the European level, the current government acknowledges its significance in its government agreement, albeit with a narrow focus on protection rather than promotion or partnership.

To address the divided competencies in economic security, the new government agreement enables the "State Security Service to collaborate with regional actors in safeguarding scientific and economic potential while implementing European directives on Foreign Direct Investments."⁵ This signifies a crucial recognition and strengthening of the regional government's role as a key player in economic security. However, to ensure a resilient and competitive economy, Belgium must take proactive steps to secure its strategic interests beyond involving regional partners.

A first crucial step is conducting a thorough review of Belgium's economic landscape through a security and an open strategic autonomy lens. Identifying key strategic sectors vital to national prosperity is essential. These sectors should then be assessed for their reliance on foreign supply chains and ownership structures. A nuanced risk analysis must consider the geopolitical stability of supplier nations, ensuring that Belgium is not unduly exposed to economic coercion or supply chain disruptions. This approach aligns with broader European efforts to enhance strategic autonomy while maintaining an open economy – as stipulated in the European Economic Security Strategy, dating back to the Summer of 2023.

Building on these insights, Belgium should establish a comprehensive National Economic Security Strategy (ESS) tailored to national interests. This strategy must go beyond economic policymakers and adopt a whole-of-society approach. Industry leaders, policymakers, defence experts, and diplomats should collaborate to shape a forward-looking policy that balances economic openness with resilience.

To institutionalize economic security, Belgium can draw inspiration from our Dutch neighbours by embedding it within the existing national security framework. A dedicated inter-federal advisory committee under the National Security Council could serve as a coordinating body, bringing together representatives from regional and federal agencies. This committee could oversee investment screenings, export controls, and counteracting unfair competition, but also industrial policy for strategic industries and diversification efforts to reduce critical dependencies, ensuring a cohesive response across all governance levels. Such a mechanism would also help mitigate internal political disputes and prevent fragmentation in economic security policies.

With the Minister of Defence, Theo Francken, in the new government holding additional responsibility for International Trade, Belgium can leverage this dual competency to align economic policy with national security objectives. Strengthening trade

defence instruments, enforcing fair competition rules, and diversifying supply chains should be pursued in coordination with European partners. Moreover, Belgium must advocate for stricter enforcement of European trade and investment policies, particularly regarding reciprocity and foreign subsidies.

Economic security is not merely a defensive endeavour; it also presents an opportunity to enhance Belgium's competitive edge. This should be executed in complement to an industrial policy, especially for technologies essential for the green transition. Although less prominently featured than in the government agreement of 2020, the Green Deal can still serve as catalysts for innovation, provided that Belgian enterprises are equipped to compete on a level playing field. The government should support investment in critical technologies, reduce regulatory burdens, and ensure that sustainability policies reinforce rather than undermine industrial competitiveness.

The era of relying solely on European mechanisms or regional goodwill for economic security is over. A robust national strategy, supported by regional and federal cooperation, is essential for Belgium to navigate an increasingly uncertain global landscape. By taking coordination ownership of economic security, the new federal government can protect the country's economic sovereignty while continuing to play a central node in the world economy as a trade hub.

ANNE-MARIE DEDENE ON CHINA POLICY

In 2020, the coalition agreement of the then centre left De Croo government, mentioned the need to pursue "a relationship with emerging powers that takes into account shared interests but is nonetheless in line with our strategic interests". In doing so, focus was to be put on the principles of international law and universal human rights.⁶ The foreign policy section in this previous agreement was rather country-agnostic, not mentioning China (nor Russia) by name even once. The new coalition agreement, in comparison, includes seven mentions of the People's Republic of China.

At first glance, this new agreement seems to adhere to the European Commission's approach of defining China as a partner, competitor, and rival, similar to the De Croo government in the past. However, there is a noticeable shift towards a more security-based focus. The document only briefly mentions mutual dependence with China and the need to collectively address global challenges. More extensively, the document argues that "by use of unfair subsidies and regulations, the People's Republic of China is playing it economically unfair" and advocates for more quick and efficient EU interventions in this regard. This is linked to the use of trade defence instruments. In the security domain, the document highlights threats to digital security and critical infrastructure from Chinese interference and espionage.⁷ It also expresses concern over the strategic relationships between Russia, Iran, and China, which aims to undermine the rules-based international order.⁸ Finally, the European Global Gateway is mentioned several times as an alternative to "the geostrategic opportunism of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China".⁹ This last idea was echoed by the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, Maxime Prévot, who emphasized that "we should not be naïve" in parliamentary discussions on the coalition agreement.¹⁰

This more explicit security-based approach is unsurprising, as it reflects the electoral programs of the Arizona coalition parties. All five parties discussed economic dependence on and competition with China, with only some mentioning the need for cooperation on global issues. Most parties also refer to systemic rivalry and geopolitical competition in the Global South. Critically, one might question how Belgium will provide a viable alternative to China in partnerships with Global South countries while cutting the development cooperation budget by 25%. Nevertheless, the new coalition agreement also creates opportunities. One specific example is the creation of a publicly available China strategy, supported at both federal and regional levels.

The EU created its current China-strategy in 2019, as did the Netherlands.¹¹ Other European countries, such as Germany, have since followed.¹² Although Belgium’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs developed an elaborate China policy in 2019, no public document of this type exists as of 2025. The new coalition agreement commits to a coherent and strategic European approach and improved and efficient cooperation between federal and regional levels with regard to Belgium’s foreign policy.¹³ In a country with a fragmented division of competencies like Belgium, a publicly consultable framework agreed upon by political authorities at both the federal and regional levels could be valuable for private actors such as firms and educational institutions in their interactions with China. Besides clarifying areas of caution, such a framework could reassure these actors about remaining pathways to promote cooperation and dialogue. However, designing such a strategy requires political actors at different levels to transcend interregional competition and speak with one voice in favour of Belgian long-term security interests. Appetite for a more explicit position on China at the federal level is not enough. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the more explicit discussions on China in this coalition agreement will lead to a publicly available, tangible Belgian China strategy.

KAREN DE VOS ON ADVANCING CYBERSECURITY

“Belgium is at the frontline of modern hybrid warfare, with headquarters of various international organizations, as well as crucial hubs for international payment traffic, logistical gateways to the European market, and much more critical infrastructure”.¹⁴ The coalition agreement of the new Belgian government explicitly acknowledges these vulnerabilities, dedicating several sections to cyber defence and security. This heightened focus reflects a growing recognition of cybersecurity as a national priority – an evolution from the previous agreement, which treated the issue more peripherally.

The prior coalition agreement had limited cyber commitments, focusing primarily on compliance with the (then) NIS1-directive of the European Union (EU) and basic legislative measures to prevent foreign interference.¹⁵ It relied on broad statements on cooperation without substantial investments in cyber resilience. Belgian Defence’s commitment to cybersecurity was only mentioned in passing.¹⁶ Nonetheless, despite these initial modest ambitions, the government of Prime Minister Alexander De Croo implemented several key initiatives. Notably, Belgium became the first EU member state to fully implement the NIS2-directive,¹⁷ established the Cyber Command as the fifth branch of its armed forces,¹⁸ adopted a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy,¹⁹ and prioritized cyber issues during its 2024 presidency of the Council of the EU.²⁰

The current coalition agreement builds on this heightened awareness, embedding cybersecurity – albeit briefly – within broader digital transformation policies, particularly in healthcare, elections, and artificial intelligence governance. The core of this government’s cybersecurity agenda, however, is concentrated within National Security, Defence, and, to a lesser extent, Foreign Affairs. The agreement emphasizes the role of the Centre for Cybersecurity Belgium (CCB) and introduces a more centralized governance model, consolidating responsibilities under the Minister of Internal Affairs and Security – an important structural improvement.²¹ Additionally, the agreement recognizes the rising threat of cybercrime and outlines measures to strengthen the Federal Judicial Police’s capabilities.²² Computer Crime Units will be expanded, facilitating the recruitment of “cyber volunteers” and “flexible cyber workers”.²³

Geopolitical developments, particularly Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, have prompted Belgium to reassess its defence strategy, with cybersecurity now playing a central role in collective deterrence efforts.²⁴ The coalition agreement frames cyber resilience within the broader context of hybrid warfare, outlining plans to expand not only defensive but also offensive cyber capabilities through the Cyber Command – a trend echoed across the EU and globally.²⁵ The government has pledged substantial investments in cyber defence, electronic warfare, and artificial intelligence, supported by a newly

established Defence Fund.²⁶ Furthermore, protecting critical infrastructure is mentioned as a central concern, recognizing the interconnected nature of military, cyber-, and information security.²⁷ Finally, to enhance resilience, Belgium aims to deepen cooperation within the Benelux region, NATO, and the EU.²⁸

While the coalition agreement represents a decisive step forward in Belgium’s cyber posture, its successful implementation will require overcoming significant challenges. Firstly, one of the most pressing concerns is the availability and recruitment of cybersecurity professionals across various policy domains.²⁹ The shortage of specialized experts in the labour market remains a persistent issue, with fierce competition between public institutions—such as the military, law enforcement, and governmental agencies—and private sector actors.³⁰ Cybersecurity strategies are inherently complex and demand high levels of coordination across organizations, making the recruitment, training, and retention of skilled personnel a critical factor in their effectiveness.³¹ While the agreement acknowledges this challenge in the context of the Federal Judicial Police, it remains unclear whether the proposed measures will be sufficient to address the broader recruitment deficit across all relevant sectors. Secondly, effective cybersecurity policy requires an integrated, synchronized and adaptive approach at all levels. Belgium must ensure robust coordination between federal and regional authorities, align its efforts with allies and international partners, and foster closer collaboration between public and private stakeholders. Within Defence, cybersecurity cannot be siloed; it must be embedded across all operational domains to ensure a comprehensive and resilient security posture.³²

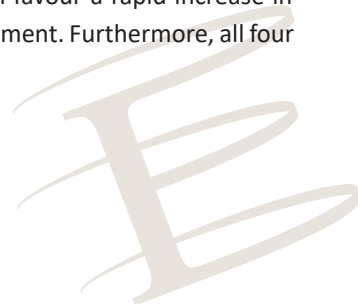
In short, while the coalition agreement sets an encouraging framework, its long-term success will depend on the government’s ability to maintain strategic coherence, secure the necessary human and financial resources, and continuously adapt to the evolving cyber threat landscape.

THOR GEUNENS ON THE PARTY POLITICS OF THE NEW COALITION AGREEMENT

The new national government has pledged to drastically strengthen Belgian defence. They plan to increase military expenditures – 2% of GDP by 2029 and 2.5% by 2034 – and acquire heavy military equipment such as a third frigate and additional fighter jets. Furthermore, the De Wever-government aims to explore lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), arm drones, and expand the army through a territorial reserve. Also, NATO remains the cornerstone of the Belgian security strategy. But is this increased focus on defence merely a response to an increase of geopolitical threat? Or also due to the ideological composition of the new government?

A structuralist reading would emphasize the increase in geopolitical threat in our strategic environment as the prime driver of current defence plans. This structuralist logic is already present in the first two sentences of the defence chapter of the new coalition agreement. It states that “since the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical situation in Europe has changed dramatically”, continuing that “the threat is no longer implicit, but acute”.³³ Hence, investing in the military is a logical necessity following the changes in our strategic environment. But are these decisions merely to be attributed to structure, fully independent of ideological considerations?

A partisan reading, in turn, could argue that this shift in defence policy is mediated through the ideological composition of the government. In general, right-of-centre parties tend to more strongly favour the military, especially when geopolitical threat increases. When analysing the coalition partners’ party manifestos, N-VA and MR are very explicit about strengthening military capabilities, followed by CD&V and Les Engagés.³⁴ All of them favour a rapid increase in military expenditures – exceeding the STAR-plan – and the acquisition of heavy military equipment. Furthermore, all four consider NATO as Belgium’s primary strategic alliance.



Vooruit, in contrast, is the only left-of-centre coalition partner and seeks to merely execute the STAR-plan, and if necessary, adjust it. Furthermore, Vooruit aims to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), ban LAWS and build European defence cooperation over NATO. Left wing opposition parties echo Vooruit. As a start, the PS argues to execute the STAR-plan – without mentioning an additional increase in military expenditures – and primarily emphasises investing in military personnel and their working conditions. Additionally, the PS also wants to ban LAWS and prefers European defence cooperation over NATO. Ecolo and Groen, in turn, also express no specific ambitions to increase military expenditures or invest in heavy military equipment. Furthermore, both favour signing the TPNW and banning LAWS. Lastly, PVDA/PTB is explicitly opposed to NATO and any increase in military expenditures. Moreover, they perceive NATO as an offensive alliance and aim to sign the TPNW.

Clearly, a partisan approach shows the differences in defence positions between left-wing and right-wing parties. This begs the question whether the current defence plans would have come about in another party constellation and whether it will hold up under a different and more left-of-centre government. Especially considering domestic constraints such as budgetary scarcity and public trade-offs. Hence, the decision to reinvest in the Belgian military might be more fragile than a structuralist analysis might suggest. Therefore, if this government wants to achieve a lasting focus on military resilience, it should clearly communicate the necessity of these investments to the electorate. Otherwise, current defence investments could easily become contested by next elections, and possibly even be reversed.

JULIEN GODFROID ON THE POLITICAL MEASURES AGAINST THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S THREATS

The coalition agreement of Belgium's new "Arizona" government underscores the nation's intention to confront the multifaceted threats posed by the Russian Federation. Central to this policy is the recognition that authoritarian regimes—especially Russia and its allies, China and Iran—seek to challenge and undermine the international legal order, fundamental freedoms, and democratic values.³⁵ This analysis aims to summarize the key measures outlined in the agreement, highlight potential gaps, and offer recommendations for strengthening Belgium's strategy.

Russia's approach to the West, perceived in Moscow as defensive, involves "hybrid warfare" or "political warfare".³⁶ The government's emphasis on enhancing structural defense is both timely and necessary. However, the agreement should extend beyond structural improvements to address Russia's exploitation of systemic weaknesses in Western democracies. Belgium's foreign and defense policies prioritize promoting democratic values, international law, and human rights. Yet, framing these priorities without sufficient pragmatism risks alienating potential partners in regions such as Africa and Asia, where national interests often take precedence over abstract ideals. A more nuanced approach that balances values with realpolitik may strengthen Belgium's ability to offer credible political and economic alternatives to the Russian-Chinese alliance.³⁷ Moreover, a values-based foreign or defense policy that emphasizes human rights and democracy loses credibility if it is applied inconsistently. Entering strategic agreements with regimes such as Azerbaijan or Saudi Arabia undermines these principles and exposes Belgium to accusations of double standards—an opportunity adversaries like Russia are eager to exploit in their information war campaigns.

Strategic communication and the fight against disinformation are also highlighted in the agreement.³⁸ An effective "name and shame" policy is indeed critical. Closely observing the various Russian disinformation campaigns reveals that their strategy hinges on leveraging the sheer volume of messages to overwhelm and confuse. Moscow's true objective lies in analyzing our reactions and methods of countering these threats, which serve as valuable sources of intelligence. Therefore, it is crucial to adopt a measured response and avoid the pitfall of attributing Russian influence to every perceived threat,

as doing so risks both overextension and strategic miscalculation. The case of Romania and its recent presidential election serves as a highly illustrative example.

The ongoing war in Ukraine underscores Russia's broader strategy of "*dissuasion by fear*" (*ustrashenie*).³⁹ Belgium and the West face a strategic dilemma: prepare for high-intensity warfare or accept Moscow's terms. The government's commitment to significant defense spending is a step in the right direction, but financial resources alone are insufficient. High-intensity warfare challenges not only the physical resilience of armed forces but also their psychological endurance. Belgium must prioritize the development of an information warfare doctrine that includes both defensive and offensive psychological operations. Ultimately, Belgian soldiers must be prepared to endure the same physical and psychological hardships faced by the resilient Ukrainian forces on the eastern front.

In sum, the government agreement demonstrates Belgium's determination to counter the Russian threat comprehensively. However, it lacks the depth of analysis needed to fully anticipate and respond to Russia's evolving strategies. A more sophisticated understanding of Russian tactics and vulnerabilities will be essential for refining Belgium's foreign and defense policies.

MARION JACQUES ON A THIRD MILITARY PROGRAMMING LAW

In 2016, the "Swedish" coalition (2014-2018) launched the Strategic Vision for Defence,⁴⁰ followed by the 2016-2030 Military Programming Law (MPL),⁴¹ both planning major military investments. In its 2020 agreement,⁴² the "Vivaldi" coalition (2020-2024) committed to updating both documents, resulting in the STAR Plan (2022)⁴³ and the 2022 MPL.⁴⁴ Prior to 2017, defence acquisitions followed an ad-hoc process largely varying by the minister and chief of defence in office. Despite different political compositions, both previous governments adopted a similar decision-making process, suggesting an effort toward formalization. Given this precedent, what does the "Arizona" government agreement reveal about its intention for a new MPL, and what might it include?

The Defence section of the "Arizona" coalition agreement⁴⁵ is significantly more detailed than its 2020 counterpart.⁴⁶ The government explicitly states its intention to revise the existing strategic plan — the STAR Plan — and the MPL⁴⁷ continuing the previous administrations' approach of drafting a strategic document followed by a legislatively sanctioned MPL. If enacted, this would be its third iteration, signalling further formalization of the decision-making process in defence spending, budgeting, acquisitions, and personnel policies. The "Arizona" agreement provides insight into the potential content of these documents.

(1) *Defence Personnel*. The government agreement places particular emphasis on defence personnel. Therefore, the forthcoming strategic plan may align with Minister Dedonder's policies, which focused on personnel, as emphasized in the STAR (2022) and POP (People Our Priority) (2021) Plans. Key objectives remain consistent: maintaining recruitment efforts,⁴⁸ enhancing the profession's appeal, including for reservists,⁴⁹ and expanding opportunities for young people.⁵⁰

(2) *Equipment Acquisition*. The "Arizona" agreement provides an unusually detailed outline for heavy equipment acquisitions, including a third frigate, additional drones, and extra fighter jets,⁵¹ announcing what will undoubtedly be the central investments of the upcoming MPL. While further purchases may be added, most of the announced acquisitions were negotiated but ultimately rejected during the previous legislature. This level of detail could accelerate the process, as preliminary negotiations have already been conducted, but it may also limit flexibility in formal MPL negotiations or reduce adaptability to evolving strategic conditions.



(3) *NATO's 2% guideline.* The “Arizona” coalition outlines a more ambitious budgetary trajectory than its predecessor. While the STAR Plan projected defence spending at 1.55% of GDP by 2030,⁵² the Arizona agreement targets 2% before the end of the decade and 2.5% by 2034.⁵³ Given the intensification of investments, the forthcoming strategic plan will likely propose a highly precise budgetary framework to ensure the effective allocation of resources. Both the nature of the planned equipment acquisitions and the accelerated push toward the 2% threshold align with the government’s objective of “reestablishing itself as a model ally to safeguard its international position”.⁵⁴

While the Arizona coalition is set to advance beyond its predecessor regarding budget allocation and equipment procurement, it does not constitute a fundamental shift in defence policy over the past decade. The focus remains on personnel, equipment modernization, and budget increases. Whether this continuity stems from path dependency—where prior policy decisions shape subsequent choices—or a broader political consensus on key priorities, it aligns with the long-term nature of defence planning. Likewise, the systematization of the MPL decision-making process allows defence stakeholders to anticipate future legislatures. However, this framework remains informal and could be discontinued under future governments. In the context of potential state reform, establishing clear guidelines could ensure institutional continuity.

MAGALI MICHIELS ON MARITIME SECURITY

The North Sea provides Belgium with an economic lifeline. Belgium boasts the 2nd largest port in Europe and ranked 17th in global ship ownership in 2020.⁵⁵ Next to commercial value, the North Sea proves of strategic value as it is increasingly often the theatre for hybrid warfare. Russia’s shadow fleet lingering near vital infrastructure illustrates a trend whereby espionage might escalate into outright sabotage. Recognizing this critical vulnerability, the new governmental agreement reflects a strategic recalibration towards safeguarding maritime security through continued investment in naval capabilities.

The Vivaldi coalition failed to adequately address Belgium’s maritime interests. Although it recognized the North Sea’s potential in terms of renewable energy and environmental protection, it did not include a robust policy for enhancing Belgium’s maritime position.⁵⁶ Admittedly, hybrid threats in the maritime domain were only embryonic at the time with maritime security predominantly focusing on counter-piracy. It was the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline in 2022 that exposed the vulnerabilities of the undersea infrastructure. The subsequent Balticconnector incident in 2023 only heightened concerns about maritime security in the North Sea. Internationally, shipping came under serious pressure with the attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf requiring a show of the flag by the Belgian Navy.

These security developments called for a more proactive maritime security agenda. The new agreement acknowledges Belgium’s strategic position as a maritime nation with attention for enhanced naval capabilities and the protection of critical infrastructure.⁵⁷ The agreement comprised the intention of ordering a third frigate.⁵⁸ Frigates are multi-mission platforms that are key to secure sea lanes and shipping abroad. A third one is required to ensure continuous operational availability as vessels go through a three-phased cycle of training, deployment and maintenance. While this is a crucial enhancement for overseas deployment, a timeline is yet to be determined for the order.

Additionally, it prescribes a further specialization in mine-countermeasures (MCM).⁵⁹ These MCM vessels are deployed for clearing unexploded ordnance from previous world wars but could also be used in, for example, the Black Sea. The unmanned systems on these MCM vessels that are used to detect and identify mines can also monitor underwater infrastructure such as cables or pipelines. The effectiveness of these capabilities remains contingent on the integration of



stationary sensors to expand constant maritime domain awareness networks – elements that are currently not mentioned in the agreement.

Further regional defence cooperation is also underlined, which fits in Belgium’s overall strategic outlook towards multinational cooperation.⁶⁰ Especially for the maritime domain is this crucial as the seas are inherently free and open making the challenges to maritime security transnational by nature. Naval exercises, intelligence sharing and shared patrolling responsibilities could be beneficial to ensure that this cooperation is translated into tangible security improvements.

The Arizona agreement reflects a growing maritime security agenda with enhanced naval capabilities. This is evident in a context with increased hybrid sabotage actions and tumult along the sea lanes. Hopefully, this government succeeds in translating its maritime agenda to secure Belgium’s maritime interests amid an increasingly volatile security landscape.

JULIE ORLIANS ON THE EVOLUTION AND RELEVANCE OF SANCTIONS

It is the beginning of February 2025. We are approaching the three-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and it seems unlikely the war will be resolved in a satisfying manner in the immediate future. While a ceasefire in Gaza may have been (momentarily) established, tensions in the West Bank are rising. Simultaneously, Iran’s growing nuclear power and neglect of human rights is becoming a growing concern. All these regional conflicts pose a multifaceted threat to international peace and stability. Therefore, it is interesting to see how our new government wants to position itself and Europe in this context.

Previous government De Croo (2020) stated that “conflicts should first and foremost try to be resolved by the use of diplomatic means”.⁶¹ Almost 5 years later and in a different reality, the De Wever government recognises that dialogue and diplomacy will no longer suffice.⁶² Rather they should complement a strong independent European foreign policy.

“Once conflicts have erupted, non-military solutions should be preferred”,⁶³ as mentioned in the De Croo agreement. However, sanctions were not mentioned as a tool at that time. Currently, the EU has a sanction policy against over twenty individual states and the 2025 agreement addresses four sanctioned nations explicitly, showing the rise of sanctions as a tool to pressure nations into compliance. First, the De Wever government expresses strong support for the sanctions imposed on Russia, even proposing to strengthen them. Additionally, the coalition agreement emphasizes the need for a stronger policy to avoid the circumvention of those sanctions.⁶⁴ Second, the growing nuclear power in Iran, in addition to their violation of human and women’s rights in Iran, has driven the De Wever government to take a prominent attitude towards the Islamic Republic Iran. Our new government wishes explicitly to burden them with strong economic sanctions and place them on the terrorist listing.⁶⁵ Lastly, on the other side of the spectrum, the recent developments in Syria caused our new government to state that “this should open a pathway to a peaceful, democratic transition with equal rights for all Syrians”.⁶⁶ This aligns with the EU decision to lift certain sanctions in the region, aiming to boost the economy and improve life quality in Syria.⁶⁷ When the agreement discusses the conflict between Israel and Palestine, in addition to sanctions against colonists in the West bank being briefly mentioned, the De Wever agreement wants the EU to “strive for a leading role ... in achieving a two-state-solution through diplomatic means”.⁶⁸ Note the optimism in achieving success through diplomatic means in this situation, in contrast to the previously mentioned conflicts.



In conclusion, it is interesting to see the evolution of our government navigating itself and the EU in this complex international landscape. Each conflict is unique and cannot be addressed and resolved in the exact same way. In addition to dialogue and diplomacy, we can see our new government recognises the relevance of sanctions and the support thereof in trying to resolve these conflicts.

ALEXANDRE PIRON ON HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-SECURITY NEXUS

Foreign aid policies are increasingly relegated to the background. The humanitarian and development aid systems as a whole are facing unprecedented crises: *organisational* with a growing funding gap (crises are increasing and the means to address them are simultaneously shrinking); and a *principled* one where the independence and neutrality from political considerations are questioned. International donors are consistently and increasingly contesting the latter, making it challenging for mid-size donors such as Belgium to maintain a need-based and humanist aid policy. Geostrategic logic, both in humanitarian and development aid, pushes different international actors (US, China, EU, etc.) to redirect their efforts towards their own immediate geographic priorities (borders, historic partners, etc.). Consequently, forgotten regions and crises suffer from this geographical and political refocusing.

Belgium, in the last three decades, embraced a principled approach for its humanitarian aid rooted in humanitarian law, the practices outlined in the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative and the core principles outlined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid signed in 2007. Yet, signs of politicization of its humanitarian aid policy are also highlighted. Belgium has historically favoured the Great Lakes region, the Sahel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, capitalizing on its expertise in those areas. Such priorities remain in the new government agreement.⁶⁹ However, two fundamental points remain unclear in the new government's agreement:

Firstly, fundamental and deeply needed reforms in Belgium decision-making process of its humanitarian policy is lacking in the government's agreement. Acknowledging the increasing funding gap, international actors (States, institutional donors, International NGOs) came together in 2016 in Istanbul to commit to change the humanitarian funding schemes. Overall, Belgium included, they concluded that they should, among other things, raise direct funding by up to 25% towards local partners in the field of humanitarian crises. Since then, no progress has been made and such a reform is not explicitly detailed in the agreement: a missed opportunity to lead the way of this just and equal reform of the system. Even more compelling, the new coalition is focusing on regional concentration,⁷⁰ potentially neglecting the humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality.

Secondly, and linked to contemporary debates around the nexus between development and humanitarian aid policies, concerns were raised by key Belgian stakeholders in these fields.⁷¹ Indeed, even though the new coalition "remain(s) strongly committed to structural solutions in terms of the nexus humanitarian aid-development-peace",⁷² the reality is that the latter consequently will distort the nexus, particularly in the development policy. This can be explained by a twofold reason: (1) the new coalition plans on cutting the overall budget of the DGD (in charge of development and humanitarian aid) by up to 25%;⁷³ (2) the new coalition wishes to merge development and foreign affairs policies together, officially stating that development aid will serve Belgium's national interests priorly, leaving cooperation without a high-level political representative.⁷⁴ All of this established a clear precedent of instrumentalization of foreign aid towards other rationales (e.g. migration⁷⁵), following the United States of America's tracks, rather than promoting a European and Belgian lead replacing the disengagement of our Atlantic ally. Overall, the new coalition seems to promote security and national interests over peace and cooperation in times of crises.



ROBIN VANDERBORGH ON MILITARY AI IN BELGIUM'S NEW COALITION AGREEMENT

As the introduction of this collective discussion paper illustrates, the deteriorating and increasingly unpredictable European security environment warrants a modernisation of our armed forces in order to withstand current and future threats. Consequently, the new coalition agreement indicates that Belgium will increase its military personnel, upgrade military material, restock and expand existing ammunition stockpiles, and invest in 'new' military technologies such as capabilities of electronic warfare, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence (AI).⁷⁶

It is, however, important that the Belgian government acts responsibly in its embrace of military artificial intelligence. Sufficient guardrails should be implemented, given the well-documented practical challenges, operational risks and ethical concerns.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, the coalition agreement pays little attention to such safeguards. On several occasions, the text points out the need to invest in "disruptive" military technologies – specifically in artificial intelligence and cyber – in order to strengthen our defensive capabilities and potentially engage in offensive operations, without critical reflection on the usefulness, appropriateness or risks of the technology.⁷⁸ In only one instance, the agreement explicitly mentions the need to identify clear rules governing the use of AI. When it comes to "fully autonomous lethal weapons systems", Belgium will "collaborate at the international level to clarify the legal framework" that governs these systems, "ensuring that their deployment adheres to the principles of international humanitarian law".⁷⁹ Given the absence of other cautionary remarks, this passage suggests that the newly formed government considers fully autonomous weapons systems as the main risk of AI integration in the military. But such a view is outdated.

The ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine show that artificial intelligence is used in a variety of military practices, from planning and organising to target identification and actual combat operations, and that AI systems are rarely (if ever) deployed in a *fully* autonomous manner.⁸⁰ Military applications of AI need to be understood as complex socio-technical systems developed by different practices and people – not merely as neutral tools over which a human operator can exert a simple form of unilateral control.⁸¹ It is thus becoming increasingly clear that the entire lifecycle of *interaction* between humans and machines should be the focal point for the responsible use of artificial intelligence in the military.⁸² Additionally, states also need to broaden their understanding of the risks of military AI beyond the narrow perspective of international humanitarian law.

In contrast to what the coalition agreement suggests, fully autonomous systems are but one military application of AI in need of international regulation. Reports from Israel's war on Gaza, for instance, demonstrate that AI technologies are increasingly used in military decision-support systems to generate targets and propose courses of military action.⁸³ When AI permeates all stages of the targeting cycle, the risks of inexplicable mistakes, algorithm and confirmation biases and a loss of comprehensibility due to actions taking place at machine speed rise.⁸⁴ Apart from the serious implications for the compliance with international humanitarian law *and* human rights law, these risks also have repercussions for international stability: inadvertent escalation, due to increased speed and an unclear decision-making process, could quickly destabilise an acute crisis situation. Against the current backdrop of great power competition and nuclear brinkmanship, the careless use of AI technologies in military decision-making thus entails considerable risks.

The incoming Belgian government missed an opportunity to assume a more critical and responsible position regarding the use of AI in the military. But it is not too late. International discussions on the responsible use of artificial intelligence are ongoing⁸⁵ and Belgium's diplomatic experience could prove valuable in identifying a sensible way forward – one in which military applications of AI are recognised as complex socio-technical systems, encompassing different functions, modes of human-machine interactions and risks in a wide-ranging assembly of military practices.

WANNES VERSTRAETE ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

The changes in the nuclear threat environment over the last years are profound. Russia frequently threatens with its nuclear arsenal in the context of the war against Ukraine. China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal. North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile capabilities. Iran is getting closer to becoming a nuclear threshold state. Bilateral arms control between the US and Russia has largely eroded and the 2022 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference ended without a final document due to Russian opposition.

The nuclear language in the previous agreement stated that the NPT remained the “cornerstone” of the non-proliferation regime. A key sentence as NATO nuclear sharing Ally was “Without prejudice to our commitments and obligations within NATO, Belgium will continue to actively promote nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation at the global level”. Belgium would also play a “proactive role” in the 2022 NPT Review Conference. Moreover, the government would “explore together with European NATO Allies” how the TPNW could “give new impetus to multilateral nuclear disarmament”.⁸⁶ Subsequently, the previous centrist left De Croo government contained a compromise, whereby all coalition partners (incl. the mostly anti-nuclear greens and social democrats) would accept the status quo regarding Belgium’s role in NATO extended nuclear deterrence in exchange for a stronger diplomatic disarmament policy. As a result, Belgium was an observer during the First and Second TPNW Meeting of States Parties in 2022 and 2023. However, in the national statement of the second meeting, the Belgian representative made it clear that the TPNW is “incompatible with our commitments as a NATO member. Belgium therefore fully supports NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture”.⁸⁷

The nuclear language in the new coalition agreement states that Belgium remains “committed to disarmament and non-proliferation”, and now the issue of NATO membership is mentioned as follows, “[...] within a realistic framework of solidarity with our allies and without compromising our own resilience”. Furthermore, the document argues that “Belgium thus remains an advocate of international treaties and agreements on disarmament and non-proliferation and supports the international dialogue on these issues. We advocate a return to mutually verifiable arms control treaties”. Additionally, the usual framing of the NPT as a “cornerstone” is retained.⁸⁸ Earlier in the agreement, the new government states that the national healthcare system needs to be prepared for “every form of threat, whether chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN)”.⁸⁹ Russia’s irresponsible nuclear behaviour, the lack of transparency regarding the Chinese nuclear expansion or the further developments in the North Korean nuclear programme are not explicitly named, however, Iran is mentioned: “In coordination with our allies, we avoid the Islamic Republic of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons”.⁹⁰

The spirit of the 1967 Harmel Report – the traditional NATO approach that combines dialogue and deterrence named after the Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel – remains present and seems to be accepted across the political centre. Nonetheless, the new agreement mentions only the ‘dialogue’ or nuclear diplomacy part explicitly. A change, compared with the previous government, is the lack of reference to the TPNW. Subsequently, Belgium did not go as an observer to the 2025 Meeting of the States Parties. For the nuclear deterrence part, one needs to read between the lines. The contribution to collective deterrence is highlighted as “the primary mission of our Defence”. The agreement also states that “NATO is the basis for our collective defence” and that Belgium will “actively contribute to the core tasks of the Alliance as laid down in the Strategic Concept”.⁹¹ The new government will also procure additional fighter jets without specifying that these will likely be dual-capable F-35As, however, a higher number will result in a stronger national contribution.⁹² In contrast, other NATO Allies with nuclear sharing arrangements (such as the neighbouring states of the Netherlands and Germany) are more explicit about their role.⁹³ It is thus a missed opportunity to reaffirm the Belgian contribution.



BERK VINDEVOGEL ON THE BELGIAN CONTRIBUTION TO NATO

As one of the founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Belgium has been profiting from the collective deterrence and defence posture of the military alliance for over 75 years. Both the previous and current governments agree that NATO is the cornerstone for our country's security, yet we have consistently failed to meet our own NATO commitments.

Our nation has been stigmatised in recent years as a free-rider in the Alliance. And rightly so. We have failed to meet the 2%-guideline ever since it was first introduced in 2014. Even when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 the Belgian government pushed snooze.⁹⁴ The verdict in 2024 was uncompromising, with war on the European continent Belgium spent only 1.30% of its GDP on defence, of which 15.2% is focused on equipment expenditure, missing both NATO's spending and equipment target.⁹⁵ The STAR-plan, approved by parliament in June 2024 aimed at 1.54% of GDP for 2030, but when you have Russia at your doorstep, China across the street, and the terrorist threat hiding inside the house, 1.54% in 2030 is not considered a serious commitment. Belgium for too long has relied on the safety of NATO's Article 5 and should have instead read Article 3 of the NATO treaty, which requires us to be ready to defend ourselves first.⁹⁶

The new government is clear in its goals and ambitions. To comply with our international engagements, Belgium will move towards 2% in 2029 and will acquire more material. A positive turn but quickly outpaced by recent events. The actions and statements of the new U.S. administration on a possible 5%-guideline⁹⁷ and the future of Ukraine have made European leaders scramble together to find a way forward. Pushing Belgium to increase its commitment even more. As a result, there was a quick consensus that 2% needs to be reached by the summer 2025, together with an action plan for the NATO summit in The Hague. Even better is the fact that the European Commission will not only look to increase public spending in defence, but that it has agreed that countries can increase their defence expenditures without triggering the excessive deficit procedure.⁹⁸ A gift for countries such as Belgium, which simultaneously need to keep their overall spending in check.

In conclusion, we needed a boatload of international pressure and world-changing events before we could move in the right direction. Belgium hid behind the idea that we were not capable of spending more, but in fact we were not willing. How can we make sure that we don't lose momentum? Other than countries in the East of the Alliance, Belgium does not have a recent history of conflict with Russia. How can you sell a product that people barely feel the need for? The Belgian government needs to increase the IQ of our population by acknowledging the threat. I propose two avenues. First, showcase the diversity and possible effect of the Russian hybrid threat to our daily lives. Second, let people realise that a Russian attack does not only come from the East but also from the North, specifically the Arctic. Belgians regularly visit the coast, yet don't realise that when they look North, they look at the Arctic region where Russian submarines and bombers roam freely and have the capacity to strike us in a moment's notice. Sapere Aude.

EDOUARD XIA ON A MULTIDIMENSIONAL AND COORDINATED FOREIGN POLICY

The Federal Coalition Agreement (2025-2029) identifies a pivotal moment for the global order in which Belgium operates. In short, the international system is becoming more multipolar and less multilateral, while the international legal order is being contested, and efforts must be made to combat political and trade fragmentation. To address this, the Arizona Coalition intends to make "our geostrategic interests the primary compass of our foreign policy".⁹⁹ Ultimately, the Agreement calls for "a strong and multidimensional approach"¹⁰⁰ to a "coordinated"¹⁰¹ foreign policy.

The text articulates this general orientation in three ways. Schematically, Belgium will (1) defend UN-based multilateralism by integrating it with strategic bilateralism and leveraging development cooperation as a foreign policy instrument, (2) promote open strategic autonomy, and (3) enhance internal coordination. This policy direction is worth highlighting because, while its substance remains largely in line with Belgium's traditional approach, it appears more proactive in defending a world order that serves Belgium's interests—a stance that might stem from a stronger domestic consensus.

First, at the multilateral level, Belgium continues to invest in the EU as a political leverage and reaffirms the importance of NATO as cornerstone of its national security. It also advocates for the reform of the UN Security Council to ensure better international representation and inclusivity. At the bilateral level, “we continue to develop partnerships with like-minded countries”¹⁰² (G7 members, the EU), while “also seeking to enhance our relations with emerging regions”¹⁰³ (Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East). The main framework for this approach is centred on “economic, diplomatic, and security issues, addressed in a targeted manner, without fragmentation”.¹⁰⁴

In this regard, the Coalition Agreement clearly specifies the use of development cooperation as “an important strategic tool and a key element of our foreign policy (to foster) mutually beneficial partnerships, both in principle and pragmatically”.¹⁰⁵ The most interesting vehicle appears to be the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals, a key focus in discussions with countries in the South.

Such a multidimensional approach to foreign policy seems timely. Recent events have indeed underscored that multilateralism, although fundamental for Belgium, remains an instrument rather than an end in itself. The emphasis on open strategic autonomy further exemplifies this multidimensional approach. Strengthening “our own capacity for high-value-added strategic products, in partnership with leading international actors”¹⁰⁶ could indeed enhance transactional yet principled bilateral relations. The intended alignment with the EU's “Global Gateway initiative, (which) offers (...) opportunities to collaborate with partner countries, as an alternative to the geostrategic opportunism of Russia and China”¹⁰⁷ is also valuable for engaging countries on the fence amid great power rivalry.

Nevertheless, the concept of open strategic autonomy should be clearly defined to provide an adequate roadmap. Additionally, the concepts that seem to contribute to the multidimensional approach should be clarified as well. For example, the so-called integrated, 3D,¹⁰⁸ global, and whole-of-government approaches all appear intertwined, even though they originate from distinct strategies developed at different times.

Finally, the Coalition Agreement highlights the importance of a well-coordinated policy. “The effectiveness of cooperation between the federated entities and the federal state (is indeed essential) to preserve our influence and credibility abroad”.¹⁰⁹ To that end, the 1994 Cooperation Agreements will be updated—a difficult process already in progress for several years.¹¹⁰ The government will also invest more in coordination mechanisms such as DGE and Coormulti, with the aim of fostering a more proactive and coherent approach to policy development and decision-making.¹¹¹

On a day-to-day basis, the Coalition Agreement rightly acknowledges the need for clear priorities to be communicated to foreign affairs agents, as well as more targeted objectives for diplomatic posts.¹¹² However, the forthcoming “optimization”¹¹³ of the embassy network raises ongoing debates about the relevance of a broad and generalized Belgian international footprint. It could also negatively impact efforts to establish a strong and multidimensional approach to foreign policy, centred on development cooperation and revitalized bilateral ties.



In conclusion, the budget remains the backbone of the struggle, but the Arizona Coalition has managed to present a forward-looking Agreement in a context of international uncertainty and an excessive public deficit. Belgium now needs its implementation.

CONCLUSION: THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF NEXT GENERATION SCHOLARSHIP IN NATIONAL SECURITY ALEXANDER MATTELAER, SVEN BISCOP, AND TANGUY STRUYE DE SWIELANDE

Scholarship – the pursuit of new knowledge – necessarily proceeds on what old knowledge already exists. As academics, we are but dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. This is even more salient in those fields of inquiry in which major developments typically require a long time horizon to unfold, as is the case for foreign and defence policy studies. Armies, navies and air forces take years and decades to build. Structural trends in international relations play out over decades, and often not in sync with the daily headlines in the news. Paraphrasing John Le Carré, national security establishments embody the only real expression of a nation’s subconscious – its intergenerational experiences and scars included.

Today’s cohort of young national security scholars confront a particularly daunting international environment. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has given birth to a situation in which large-scale war on the European continent has become a bitter reality again. Even in Belgium, geographically sheltered by its allies, the national security establishment has openly started speaking about preparing society for war.¹¹⁴ This inevitably changes the perspective of younger scholars, as they acutely realise that their generation may be called upon to face the gravest situation Belgium has faced since May 1940. When the previous generation concluded its doctoral degrees, the world may have been messy, but there was nowhere near the strategic urgency that is felt by many today.

Against that background, the novel insights generated by an earlier generation of scholars have become mainstream. The budgetary neglect of the Belgian foreign policy and defence establishments is now well-known, unlike ten years ago. Increasingly, this is also the case for the far-reaching consequences thereof, most notably the fact that Belgium is today altogether dependent on the goodwill of its allies and the availability of their national assets. Irrespective of the composition of future governments, the reconstruction of our own national security policy instruments as envisaged in the 2025 coalition agreement will be key to ensuring the long-term survival of our own community. If we do not defend ourselves and our own vital national interests, no one else will do it for us. Similarly, the need to re-engage with the NATO alliance and with bilateral diplomacy alongside EU policy has become widely apparent. Rather than cheerleading the narrative that national policy has been superseded by EU decision-making, it has become glaringly obvious that collective European action is only possible when underpinned by the commitment of national instruments and resources.

What is not yet fully known, however, is what new questions and challenges contemporary foreign and defence policy choices will entail and generate. It is to that purpose that this collection of essays by promising next generation scholars in Belgium has sought to contribute. Of course, their generation will not have to face this daunting outlook alone. If anything has already become clear in this emerging security environment, it is the old insight that the military may be called upon to conduct military operations, but it is society in its entirety that is called upon to face the threat of war. If scholarship can contribute to avoiding such a disastrous outcome by nurturing a vibrant and intergenerational debate about the need for strong deterrence, military readiness and societal resilience, this will have been well worth the effort.



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