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Deep cooperation by Belgian defence: absorbing the impact of declining defense budgets on national capabilities

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Since the end of the Cold War, Belgian Defence has been used by the Belgian government as an important tool for foreign policy. The accompanying strategic plan 2000-2015, however, that was aimed to adapt the capabilities of the armed forces to the new reality has never been seen as an essential guidance by the Belgian decision-makers. Instead, the Belgian armed forces have been adapted due to budget cuts, and only in a minor way because of strategic considerations. This has resulted in an imbalance between the budget for personnel, operating costs and investments. The result is a smaller but still broad force adapted to collective security/crisis management with land forces specialized in (medium and) light infantry tasks. The air and naval capabilities have been made suitable to the lower intensity of collective security operations although they were designed for the higher part of the violence spectrum. Interestingly, the small Belgian navy has been able to maintain its two major capabilities - maritime mine counter measures vessels, and surface combatants -. In contrast, the historically more important part of the Belgian armed forces, the land forces, have seen merely a change of capabilities adapted from the higher part to the lower part of the violence spectrum.

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In this article, the deep defence cooperation of the Belgian navy with their Dutch counterparts is referred to as a model for European defence cooperation. This Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation could become a role model in times of lasting budgetary austerity, and has already been used as the reference model within the in 2012 revamped Benelux Defence Cooperation.

**Belgian operational engagement within a multilateral framework**

The Belgian armed forces have participated in operations in Somalia, Ruanda, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Congo, Chad, the Indian Ocean and the coasts of the Horn of Africa, Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, Iraq (2014) and many more. After the Cold War the first crisis response operations (CRO’s) were conducted under the UN flag, but from 1995 onwards they have been predominantly conducted within a NATO and EU framework. Belgian Defence ought not to be too humble with an average of more than 900 military personnel any time in operation during the last ten years. Nevertheless, since the average engagement reached a peak in 2009 with 1,269 it has known a steep decline towards 598 in 2013, and this tendency continues in 2014. At this moment (end 2014) the (theoretical) ambition level of the Belgian armed forces is still to be able to have, at a given moment, 1,000 personnel in Crisis Response Operations (CRO) out of a force of approximately 32,000 military personnel (that will be reduced to 30,000 in 2015)(De Crem 2012, p.2). Additional structural budget cuts decided by the new government will be reflected in the new strategic plan 2015-2030.

The nature of the Belgian contribution for CRO has evolved from stabilization forces to also training (both for prevention and state building) in the framework of Security Sector
Reform (SSR).\textsuperscript{2} It shows the willingness of the Belgian government to share the responsibility and the burden of international security. The Belgian government also tries to contribute forces to the whole conflict spectrum. For example, the Belgian air force contributed in a substantial way to the bombing operations in the conflict in Libya, and the Belgian land forces have been contributing to the higher risk Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT) in Afghanistan after the arrival of new protective vehicles.

Belgian defence tries to support the three solidarity principles of a fair contribution within a multilateral framework: sharing of responsibility (political support), burden sharing (costs) and risk sharing (capabilities for the whole violence spectrum)(Flahaut 2003a, p.16). An important military contribution to international security can also be expected from a country such as Belgium whose wealth\textsuperscript{3} is based on one of the most open economies of the world.\textsuperscript{4} This open economy is in large part dependent on maritime trade, with Antwerp as the third largest European and the world’s fifteenth largest container port (World Shipping Council 2014). Nevertheless, because of historical reasons the navy has always been the smallest of the different branches of the armed forces.

Belgian security policy during the Cold War was very much pro-NATO and the Belgian forces were focused on defending given sectors on land, in the air and at sea. The Belgian

\textsuperscript{2} This corresponds to a more general trend lowering the direct implication of ‘Western’ troops in crisis management to a more supportive and stand-off posture, for example providing close air support for local forces next to training and educating local forces.

\textsuperscript{3} Belgium is the 31\textsuperscript{th} richest country of the world in relative terms (per capita). (CIA 2014).

\textsuperscript{4} Belgium is the sixth most economically globalized country (according to the KOF Swiss Economic Insitute) and the most globalized country in the world, also taking into account social and political globalization. (KOF 2013). Belgium is the world’s 13\textsuperscript{th} export nation and 13\textsuperscript{th} import nation. (World Trade Organization 2013, p.33).
government changed this posture after the Cold War. The five pillars of the Belgian security policy are currently: 1) maintaining the transatlantic connection through an authentic partnership within NATO as a collective defence alliance and a regional security instrument with additional tasks, adapted military capabilities and a capacity for planning; 2) strengthening the European identity for security by deepening the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union, including the structures and means that are necessary for decision making and intervention; 3) support for a stronger role for the United Nations (UN) for international peace and security; 4) support for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and especially the issues of human rights, non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament; and 5) the cooperation with European and African countries in a multilateral and bilateral context (Belgian Chief of Defence 2014, p.7).

Belgian defence policy, which in theory should be part of an overall national security policy, has always been a combination of collective defence and collective security. While the goal of collective defence dominated during the Cold War, defence capabilities today are mostly used for collective security, e.g. crisis response, stabilization operations and humanitarian interventions abroad. The general security policy supporting the main international security organizations can be perceived as a lack of national inspiration, but

5 The Belgian foreign policy tries to keep Central Africa and especially the Great Lake region with some success on the international agenda. Still, a permanent international mobilisation let alone real progress of the security situation in this region remains a policy goal to be fulfilled. The contribution of the Belgian defence effort for this region is limited partly due to the reluctance to operate in former colonies.

6 Currently an overarching national security strategy is lacking while all neighboring states have introduced such a strategy for some time.
supporting a multilateral approach makes sense for a small European military power. Support for more European cooperation and integration (both within the framework of NATO and of the EU) has been a leitmotiv for Belgian politics since the Second World War. Even formerly strictly national tasks such as non-combatant evacuation operations and support to the nation (Belgian Chief of Defence 2014, p.11) are nowadays being Europeanized.7

Belgian defence thinking basically follows the main line of thinking in Paris, London, Berlin, The Hague, and Washington DC. These visions are all pointing in the same direction as the threats are becoming more and more Europeanized and internationalized. In this light, a real strategic framework for EU defence and security could give a more substantive direction to the Belgian defence policy.

Although general strategic reference documents of the military also refer to the importance of new military domains such as space and cyber (ACOS STRAT 2013, p.7), there is little enthusiasm to take the lead for (or even to invest in) these issues due to the stretched budget. There is neither much governmental support for the already down-sized national defence industry, especially in comparison to the neighbouring states.

**Belgian defence budget**

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7 In the Libya operation in 2011 the coordination of NEO-operations was for the first time ever done by the EU while the Lisbon Treaty supports the use of the European militaries as a whole for natural and man-made disasters (but also terrorism) within EU member states through the solidarity clause (EU 2008, p. 148). The other four strategic tasks defined by Belgian defence are even more clearly seen in a multilateral framework: collective defence, the collective protection of the vital and essential interests of the NATO and/or EU, security operations, and humanitarian operations. (Belgian Chief of Defence 2014, p.13.)
In general, defence is not regarded as an important issue in Belgian society, nor at the political level. This is a general trend within Europe (European Commission 2011, p.14), but in Belgium there are some additional national explanatory factors. Belgians have the impression that they live in a small country that is not able to influence security issues. This is reflected in the low allocation of financial means for a pro-active foreign policy instrument such as defence. Secondly, Belgium is a historical European battlefield. Certainly the First and Second World War contributed to a pacifist culture. At the same time, this also created a strong ethical basis for the use of the Belgian military for the support of building secure and stable states, where the population can live in freedom of fear and want. The military mission in Libya made a connection to the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ principle and consequently got the support of all political parties, also those of the opposition. Thirdly, and lastly, the majority of the Belgian population (including policy makers) do not see the utility of strong armed forces when there is not a clear and imminent threat. Even the use of (and further threatening with) Russian military power in Ukraine has not stirred up a national debate on the necessity of defence nor a reappraisal of the utility of defence. As we will see, this mindset is underlined by the further decrease of the defence budget while in most other Western European countries the military tensions in Eastern Europe were sufficient for stabilizing or increasing the defence budget.

The different reforms of the armed forces since the end of the Cold War all have in common that they never reached their original objectives before being revised again. All reform plans talked about a stabilization of the budget, necessary for proper defence planning, but never succeeded in implementing this aim. These reforms and revisions are all connected to the constant shrinking of the national budget that is allocated to defence. In real terms, the defence budget gradually diminished since the beginning of the 1980s. According to the numbers of the Ministry of Defence, Belgium spends 1.07% of its GDP on defence (in
corresponding to 3.96 bn euro, well below the European NATO average of 1.6%. 2.69 bn euro (or only 0.73% of the GDP) of this amount is allocated to the ministry of defence; the remainder are defence expenditures by other government budgets. These are mostly pensions and other personnel costs accounting for approximately 1.21bn euro. The two numbers (3.96 and 2.69 bn) create confusion. The number of 3.96bn is mostly used within NATO, while within the EU (EDA) and nationally the net defence expenditures amount (2.69bn) is mostly used. Also, when the Belgian government communicates about the percentages of the defence budget dedicated to personnel, operating costs and equipment, the 2.69 bn number is used, not taking into account the other personnel costs. The available defence budget for 2014 will be around 2.56 bn, but the new government has decided to further reduce it in a structural way to 2.18 bn in 2019, saving 1.6 bn euro during the current government’s term.

In official statistics, based on the 2014 numbers the Belgian Ministry of Defence allocates 67% of its defence budget to personnel, leaving 24% for operating costs (training, daily functioning (utilities, maintenance, spare parts, ammunition,…), and operations) and only 9% for investment (major equipment, small investments in equipment, infrastructure). If one would take into account the additional personnel costs in other departments, then the percentages are 77% for personnel, 17% for operating costs, and as little as 6% for new equipment and infrastructure. If the limited amount of the government budget spent on defence is not a good example of burden sharing among allies, the large amount that goes to personnel costs only aggravates the overall picture. Especially the extremely bad ranking of Belgium for major investments is a well-known criticism within NATO.

At the end of the Cold War (1989-1990) the Belgian defence budget was divided along a 50-25-25 partition (Poncelet 1996, p.24). The first major restructuring of the armed forces drastically lowered the defence budget and at the same time raised wages of the professional soldiers. Both measures had larger repercussions than the savings because of the abolition of
conscription and the associated reduction of equipment. In 1995, the situation changed to a 60-23-17 ratio. Because of the rising costs of operations, the budget needed for operating costs also went up. In 2000, the ratio was 59-27-14, leaving almost nothing for the renewal for equipment, which at the same time has been used more due to the growing number of operations. The strategic plan 2000-2015 intended to rebalance the defence budget in 2015 towards 45-27-28 (Flahaut 2000, p.82), but further budget reductions prevented this with a peak in 2007 (69-21-10) and 2010 (65-23-12). There was neither a political willingness to discharge military personnel (Poncelet 1996, p.19) nor to change the level of ambition. The recent budget cuts seem not have changed this mindset. Current plans foresee to absorb them by further decreasing operating costs and bringing investments almost to zero. In reality, it is a direct disinvestment in terms of equipment for future operations. It will further decline the possibility to participate in operations. Belgium already declined two times to participate in EUFOR RCA in 2014 while before it had always participated in EU operations by principle. Indirectly, it calls into question the reason of existence of the Belgian armed forces, especially a defence policy that almost exclusively focuses on participating in foreign military operations. It is clear that without bringing Belgian defence again in budgetary balance, the future of the whole of defence is at stake.

With respect to personnel, during the Cold War conscripts were the main source of young soldiers needed for combat units. Since the end of the Cold War there are not enough young professional soldiers and too many older personnel (mostly in the category of the officers and warrant officers, the former chiefs of the conscripts). Personnel statistics show that this

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8 The costs for operations went almost constantly up since 2000. Nevertheless, this part of the defence budget has been kept below 25%.

9 The level of ambition describes the capabilities of the Belgian armed forces that can contribute to different scenarios within the conflict spectrum.
problem can only be solved in the long run, i.e. within fifteen years (DG HR 2011, p.34-35).

If insufficient short-term contract personnel are recruited and only the current level of recruitment (approximately 1,400 over the last five years)(DG HR 2011, p.53) can be maintained, the number of military personnel will drastically decline. This is also due to the high level of attrition during the first years of the career. In 2012 this number was 66% for volunteers, 46% for warrant officers and 48% for officers. A prognosis taking into account a relatively high recruiting level of 1,750 shows that the military personnel within Belgian defence will shrink to approximately 24,000 in 2025. In reality, it will probably be less due to the more limited recruitment because of a lack of budget. A smaller number of military personnel would allow a better balance between personnel and equipment expenditure if the budget gains remained within the defence budget, which was not the case until now. This prognosis means a drastic lowering of the operational capabilities and therefore the utility of Belgian defence as a foreign policy tool.

The fact that defence is used more intensively as a foreign policy tool after the Cold War is in contradiction to the declining willingness to provide sufficient financial resources to the Belgian defence apparatus. When defence no longer is a matter of vital national interest and just another tool of Belgian foreign policy next to diplomacy and development policy, it became a means to balance the overall budget. Examples are the Belgian efforts to join the European Monetary Union in the beginning of the 1990s (Ponelet 1996, p.5) and, more recently, its efforts to overcome the financial crisis.

**Belgian defence capabilities and Belgian acquisition policy**

The changes in the force structure and the capabilities of Belgian defence after the Cold War are the result of a combination of budgetary restrictions and the transition of a defence posture that moved from collective defence to collective security. Belgium was the first
continental state to abolish conscription after the Cold War. The decision was taken in 1992 and was gradually implemented until 1994. A professional force was also necessary because the mission changed from defence of the national territory to crisis response operations. Belgium made important contributions to the first UN-led crisis response operations after the Cold War. The Belgian government used its expeditionary para-commando brigade (supported by an important air transport capability) as contributing forces for the out-of-area crisis response operations in Somalia and Rwanda. During the Cold War these forces had as its main task non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) of Belgian and European citizens from Central Africa. The less mobile land forces that centred on armoured infantry and armoured brigades were used for the crisis response operations in the Balkans. Gradually, the capabilities of these two components of the Belgian land forces converged.

In the immediate post-Cold war era the light para-commando brigade became the most important Belgian asset (as Immediate and Rapid Reaction Forces) for NATO. The first post-Cold War NATO Strategic Concept stated that it was no longer necessary to have a massive amount of troops ready for a big conventional war on a linear front, but expressed the need for a smaller number of highly mobile troops that were able to act rapidly wherever a smaller threat against the territory of the Alliance would arise (NATO 1991; Ministry of Defence 1994, p.113), a situation remarkably similar to current thinking to counter Russian ‘little green men’ in Eastern Europe. The light Belgian forces, however, were found to be too lightly protected. The disastrous events in Rwanda and the operations in Somalia showed that these forces did not have sufficient means for their own protection. In 1997, the Belgian government therefore decided to buy 54 airmobile light armoured Pandur-vehicles for the para-commando brigade (Belgian Senate 1997). But at the same time the para-commando brigade was also too light to fit in a conventional deterrence concept, which needed robust armed forces. For both deterrence and crisis response operations there was a need for
deployable and mobile forces with sufficient protection and firepower to act within the whole conflict spectrum.

These needs became the starting point for a new plan in 2000 to adapt the Belgian armed forces to the expected military environment of 2015. The plan included the transformation of the tracked mechanized capability (armored infantry and armor) into a motorized capability based on wheeled vehicles (using the same platform) that are lighter, more mobile and easier to project instead of tracked vehicles. The new vehicles would also provide better protection and more firepower. By 2015 the two motorized brigades (nowadays called medium brigades) should have sufficient Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicles (AIFV)s, Mobile Gun Systems replacing tanks, Wheeled Fire Support systems replacing artillery, armored jeeps and light jeeps. Also Ground Based Air Defence (GBAD) vehicles were considered as a priority. The plan saw the para-commando brigade almost entirely transform into light, airmobile and better protected combat units with Pandurs, armored and light jeeps and 10-15 medium transport helicopters for in-theatre transport of two companies¹⁰ in one lift and as a fire support means. Both land capabilities would be suitable for all sorts of crisis response operations and would be supported in their strategic mobility by a roll-on/roll-off ship with autonomous loading and unloading capability (Flahaut 2000, p.39, 44-45, 47-49, 55).

Due to budget restrictions, the 2000-2015 plan was already watered down in December 2003. The two most important cuts concerned capabilities that would make the forces more mobile: the roll-on/roll-off ship was cancelled, and the number of transport helicopters (which could only be acquired within a multinational program) would diminish (Flahaut 2003b, p.14-15, 18). The 2000-2015 acquisition plan materialized in the form of the Dingo II, a vehicle with capabilities between an AIV and an armoured jeep; the IVECO Light Multi-role Vehicle, an armoured jeep and the Piranha III, an AIV. The Pandur was transformed into

¹⁰ Approximately 250 military personnel.
a reconnaissance vehicle. All vehicles would receive a battlefield management system and new Software Defined Radios (DG IPR 2006, p.53-55). A limited number of the AIVs have a direct fire capability of 30mm and 90mm cannons, but both calibres cannot be seen as a replacement for tanks.

Due to further budgetary restraints the acquisition of AIV’s was limited and the foreseen acquisition of some hundred light jeeps planned for 2013 - Rapid Reaction Vehicles adapted to operational conditions in Africa in support of the para-commando forces of the light brigade - has been postponed and their acquisition could fall victim to the new defence budget cuts (Rabaey 2014). The in the strategic plan foreseen replacement of the tanks, artillery or GBAD is not planned anymore, although NATO still asks for bigger efforts for artillery as well as the replacement of the current GBAD system. The motorized artillery has disappeared from the plan, and the current artillery (howitzer 105 mm and mortar 120 mm) is limited in its use because Belgium does not have precision ammunition necessary for limiting collateral damage. The current GBAD (of which the life cycle of the ammunition was limited to 2014 without replacement planned, but which got life extension through an ammunition swap with France) can only be used on an operational level when integrated with the equivalent French system because it has no radar or command and control system. In reality, the Belgian artillery unit is mostly used as light infantry for crisis response operations. The current tactical RPAS-capability (B-Hunter) for reconnaissance in support of land operations will also end in 2017 without replacement planned until 2025, while RPAS are in general seen as important enablers for todays and certainly tomorrow’s battlefields.

Compared to the initial intention, the two mechanized brigades are transformed in one medium brigade with some combat support capabilities on the brink of usability/existence, a situation that could lead to losing NATO’s recognition as a brigade ). The Para-commando

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11 The range of both artillery systems is also limited compared to what NATO requires.
brigade has not been transformed into the planned airmobile brigade but has become a better protected light infantry unit with a remaining parachute capability. Belgian defence is acquiring 8 NH90 medium transport helicopters with an option for two more, but in reality only four (with an option of two) NH90 will serve as troop transport helicopters as the four remaining ones are configured for use as frigate helicopters. In fact, the latter will replace the current Sea Kings and will be mostly used for the Search-and-Rescue tasks, a limited use of these state-of-the-art frigate helicopters. The few medium transport helicopters that are earmarked for the land forces do not meet the needs for expeditionary use. The only possibility is to pool them with equivalent means of other nations. The Netherlands, France and Germany are the ‘natural’ partners in this case.

The current concept of a medium brigade that is able to adapt to ground operations in the whole conflict spectrum (although limited in the highest part of the conflict spectrum) is probably the best option for a small military power. This medium brigade is also in line with thinking in current Belgian military strategic documents that underline the fact that the force structure has to be tailored to the mission (ACOS STRAT 2013, p.13) and that at the same time the conditions during a mission can change and troops have to address different tasks with different levels of military force within a mission. The current medium brigade that is adapted to operating in less demanding environments and with further limitations for the

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12 With four NH90 TTH helicopters approximately 60 soldiers and equipment can be transported or approximately two platoons, being a half company.

13 The Strategic Framework document of Belgian Defence talks in general about « the level of equipment of its units that is not ideal anymore for offensive operations in a conflict of high intensity ». (Belgian Chief of Defence 2014, p.11.) But for the moment being this is mostly valid for the Belgian land forces.
inter-arms land operating is a specialization (partly by default) towards a medium infantry ‘plus’.

The burden sharing for operations in the higher part of the violence spectrum - while limiting the possibility of casualties mostly connected to land operations - has to be delivered by the air force and the navy, with F16s and multi-purpose frigates. The expeditionary ability of the Belgian air force was sufficiently demonstrated with operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq and by the expeditionary concept of the BENELUX Deployable Air Task Force. A negative point is the fact that this expeditionary action is highly dependent on non-Belgian supporting capabilities such as air-to-air refuelling planes and logistic support ships. The new Belgian government has announced in the government agreement that it will take a decision during its term for a successor for the F-16 (Belgian government 2014, p.208). The strategic plan 2000-2015 foresees 48 successor fighter jets for the F-16 (Flahaut 2000, p.51), a number that is considered by many as unrealistic due to the budgetary restraints. Also the number of 40 new fighter jets proposed by former Minister of Defence Pieter De Crem is seen by experts as a relatively high estimate compared to the position of equivalent countries as well as the budgetary reality. that number was not supported by the whole government either (Belga 2013). The navy has been able to secure two multipurpose frigates, while the strategic plan only talked about two multipurpose escort vessels (Flahaut 2000, p.55). By buying two second hand Dutch multipurpose frigates, and thanks to very deep levels of cooperation with regard to education, training, operational support, maintenance, and logistics, it has been able to link a future successor capability to the Dutch partner. Nevertheless, the current government agreement is less decisive about the replacement of the capabilities of the Belgian navy than that of a future air combat capability (Belgian government 2014, p.208).
The F-16s and the M-frigates are intended for full scale conventional wars but they have also been adapted to be more useful for crisis management. The F16s have always been multi-role fighter planes but their capability for close air support of troops and the connected precision bombing has been improved and will further improve with new sniper pods (De Crem 2011). The multipurpose frigates have been adapted to maritime security operations (police-like maritime tasks) such as anti-piracy with Rigid-Hulled Inflatable Boats (RHIB) and are in the process of receiving new sensors able to detect and track asymmetric threats and very small objects such as small boats, swimmers and periscopes (Thalesgroup 2010).

Although Belgium is not likely to be confronted with an immediate territorial threat with conventional military means for the coming twenty years, the Belgian armed forces will also continue to contribute to collective defence of the Alliance’s member states territory (ACOS STRAT 2013, p.6,9,12). NATO itself has taken the road of combining a collective defence and collective security vision with the 2006 redefined level of ambition that stated that besides Article 5 operations (collective defence) NATO should be able to concurrently conduct two Major Joint Operations (MJO) and six Smaller Joint Operations (SJO) within a collective security framework (crisis management\textsuperscript{14})(NATO 2012). The Belgian multi-role fighter jets are for instance also capable of contributing to NATO's deterrence policy. On the other hand, the Belgian government is under societal pressure to actively support the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from Europe (Sauer and Van der Zwaan, 2012).

\textsuperscript{14}Crisis management in a military framework are all actions of military forces that are not connected to collective defence nor to defence diplomacy, but in response of crises all over the world that could or are leading to insecurity. Most of these crisis management operations (crisis response operations) will happen in coordination with civilian security actors and can be adapted to every part of the cycle of a crisis.
To conclude, the Belgian armed forces adapted itself after the Cold War by specializing its land forces for medium and light infantry tasks with further declining combat support capabilities, and by making its air and naval capabilities that were designed for the higher part of the violence spectrum also suitable to the lower intensity of collective security operations. Belgium wants to focus its forces on crisis management operations while being able to operate in crises in the whole violence spectrum at land, at sea and in the air. Interoperability with partners and allies is a key requisite for the Belgian forces as the engagement of national armed forces is almost exclusively seen in a multilateral framework (ACOS STRAT 2013, p.5). Since the arrival of the new vehicles (AIV and Dingo II), the Belgian ground forces have also been operating in Afghanistan as Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams in support of, and side-by-side of, Afghan ground forces (De Morgen 2009). This is a clear example of the willingness of the Belgian government for risk sharing with its allies. However, it also shows that this risk sharing depends on sufficient cost sharing, especially with respect to the protection of personnel within operations. A lack of investments in the capabilities of the Belgian armed forces will ultimately lead to a diminishing ability of the government to take up its responsibility for risk sharing, regardless of its willingness and the willingness of the Belgian population to support the idea of responsibility to protect.

Case study: The Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation: avoiding national capability choices through comprehensive multinational cooperation

One cannot expect a small European military power to possess all military capabilities. Dependence on other partners for land operations (but also for air-to-air refuelling or for logistic support ships) should not be seen as a problem as such, certainly not for crisis response operations. Crucial in this regard is to find credible partners. The real problem is
that cooperation for crisis response operations is arranged ad hoc and not in a structural way on a European capability level.

If every European country follows the Belgian example for land forces, even more important European capability gaps would arise. To circumvent free riding, a top-down coordination is necessary among different states. Despite declaratory policy, military capability planning within Europe remains almost purely nationally orientated. Cooperation is seen as a necessity, but the first priority apparently remains to build up one's own national capabilities from a national point of view. The armed forces will a posteriori take into account existing capability shortfalls within NATO and the EU. The capability steering processes on EU and NATO level, respectively the CDP (Capability Development Plan) and NDPP (NATO Defence Planning Process) have limited influence on the national decisions. Especially, the NDPP puts forward clear objectives for Belgian defence, but these are sometimes also extremely out of line with the Belgian budgetary and defence management reality.

The example of the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation shows us another approach to securing national military capabilities in support of retaining a place in international security, while making use of economies of scale through multilateral defence cooperation/integration. The development of the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation should be seen as one of the most important contributions of Belgian defence policy (and also Dutch defence policy) to international security. It shows how to set aside an almost purely national vision on defence. The Belgian navy, the smallest component of the armed forces, felt the consequences of the end of the Cold War. The Belgian navy made the strategic choice to maintain the support functions for the national maritime capabilities on a bi-national level together with the Netherlands. In so doing, it increased the economy of scale without touching the autonomous
use of the operational units directly. In contrast to the Belgian land forces, the Belgian navy has been able to maintain broad capabilities and adapt them to crisis management operations.

This deep and comprehensive cooperation was only possible because both navies lay the foundation for cooperation on education, training, maintenance and logistics and operational command during the Cold War. In 1994 the Dutch and the Belgian navy chiefs aimed for deeper bilateral cooperation. For the Dutch it was an opportunity to reduce the influences of the peace dividend on the Dutch navy because the envisioned bi-nationalization of supporting tasks made personnel available to be placed on board. The latter made it possible to keep as many navy ships as possible. From the Belgian perspective it was an important initiative to guard the capabilities of the Belgian navy, and more specifically the escort/surface combatant capability (the frigates), against further reductions and a possible abolishing of this capability as a whole. The example of the Belgian maritime mine counter-measures (MMCM) school – bi-nationalized already in 1965 with both Dutch and Belgian staff - was used to turn the Dutch Operational School in a bi-national structure for military education and training for both Belgian and Dutch frigate crews, and to bi-nationalize the Belgian catering and logistic support school, both in 1996. In the same year a bi-national operational command structure, Admiral Benelux, was set up in Den Helder in the Dutch naval base, incorporating an important part of the Belgian operational staff that would take over Dutch positions. All the people in the bi-national operational command work for both national navies. The ships are under the command of the Dutch Admiral Benelux and his Belgian Deputy Admiral Benelux, respectively the naval chiefs of both countries. The decision of the Belgian and the Dutch government to update their MCM vessels bi-nationally (2006-2010) as well as the decision of

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15 This is also the view the Nordic countries have on their Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). (Stoltenberg 2009; NORDEFCO 2009, p.3;; NORDEFCO 2011, p.2-3.

16 All descriptions of the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation are based on Parrein (2011a)
the Belgian government to acquire two Dutch multipurpose frigates as replacements for the two existing Belgian frigates (decision in 2005, operational in 2007 and 2008) also cleared the way for deeper cooperation on logistics and maintenance, resulting in common operating procedures and common logistic support, and even in task specialization for maintenance and partly for equipment management and technical military education (Belgium MCM, the Netherlands the multipurpose frigates).

The Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation is an organic bottom-up deepening of cooperation through spill-over and the result of a relationship of trust (Parrein 2011a, p.104-105). The mutual dependence for MCM vessels and frigates is central in this relationship of trust and is further enhanced by exchanges of personnel (Parrein 2011b, p.18). This model also makes clear that deep forms of defence cooperation within Europe preferably consist of a limited number of participant states.

The bottom line of the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation is a gradual redefinition of the relationship between armed forces and national sovereignty. This vision departs from a strict exclusive decision power on the national level, and instead adopts the idea that it is more important for the national state to retain military policy options open through cooperation. The Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) made the best description of this principle of shared sovereignty17 from a Dutch angle but equally valid for all Benelux countries:

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17 Although pooled sovereignty would in fact be a better term because it reflects more the current situation in which the states remain the central power institution for defence. It remains the sovereign decision of states to cooperate intensively for a certain domain of defence (capabilities) going to the level that they are bringing a part of their defence effort on an almost supranational level (integration) to increase their possibility to act in international security. Bringing individual national parts of sovereignty together is more in line with the
The AIV notes that contemporary thinking on the concept of sovereignty places much less emphasis on a strictly legal approach to the preservation of the state’s exclusive power of decision – freedom of action – and much more on the capacity of the state to act by cooperating effectively in international forums and to participate with authority in international contexts. For the Netherlands this means that only through participation in bilateral and multilateral configurations and through structured European cooperation can international influence and military effectiveness be maintained. From this perspective the importance of shared European sovereignty is in reality greater than that of (unshared) national sovereignty (Advisory Council on International Affairs 2012, p.49).

The deepening of the bi-national naval cooperation further develops in a way that also influences the operational units in a direct way. Recently, a general agreement has been adopted for personnel exchanges between the Belgian and the Dutch navies during operations. During the Libya crisis the task specialization for maintenance also had as implication that Belgian technicians had to intervene for repairs on the Dutch minehunter, which was active in Libyan waters, while operating the Belgian and Dutch ships in the area remained under national authority (Parrein 2011a, p.72). This evolution will ultimately necessitate a parallel direct political cooperation on (naval) defence policy (capability, operational) because of the depth of the military-technical integration.

The European dimension within Belgian defence thinking: from ideology to pragmatic integration

concept of pooling. Shared sovereignty would be when a supranational institute (such as the European Commission) would become the power center for defence or a domain of defence. But the boundary between the two concepts is small and depends on how one wants to look at examples of deep defence cooperation.
Where the first part of this chapter had a critical undertone on the subject of the leading role of Belgium for defence policy, the permanent Belgian push for a European defence dimension after the Cold War is probably the second major contribution of Belgium to defence policy thinking, next to the novel approach of defence cooperation within the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation. And as we will show, both issues have recently been connected within the renewed BENELUX Defence Cooperation (from 2012).

Belgium has always tried to give teeth to the European ambition to be an autonomous international security player. During the 1990s, Belgium was an important supporter of a more unified European dimension within NATO (that remained the centre of multilateral security thinking) able to support the EU with independent European military operations while making use of the existing NATO command structure (Ministry of Defence 1994, p.115). The Belgian government also saw a European military pillar connected to NATO as a possibility to bring France, an important Belgian ally and defender of European defence, closer to NATO and as such strengthening the European position within NATO. After the Maastricht Treaty was signed, the Western European Union (WEU) was seen as an instrument to implement the military aspects of the CFSP (the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU). The latter would only be used if NATO as a whole did not wish to participate to a European operation. In that case, the WEU would make use of the NATO command structure and NATO instruments (Ministry of Defence 1994, p.29, 115). Belgium decided to participate in the Eurocorps that was established by France and Germany on the basis of the already existing French-German brigade, on the condition that the Eurocorps would also be connected to NATO and the WEU in order to build a credible European pillar within NATO, what happened in 1993 (Ministry of Defence 1994, p.29, 116). This European pillar within NATO became known as the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI).
After the Saint-Malo summit between France and the United Kingdom in 1998 the idea of a European pillar within NATO changed to a more independent vision on European defence cooperation/integration. When in 1999 the EU also effectively decided to commit to military crisis response, Belgium immediately declared that the Belgian forces dedicated to NATO (that could also be used by the WEU) would be at the disposal of the EU (Flahaut 2000, p.14). This was the start of Belgium balancing its military contributions between EU and NATO (operations, command structures, capability development, and initial response forces). During the Belgian EU Presidency in 2001, the EU declared an initial operational capability for its military crisis response tasks (Rutten 2002, p.110). In 2003 Belgium together with France, Germany and Luxembourg showed again its voluntarist ambition for an autonomous European defence capability during what is known as the ‘Chocolate Summit’. This summit pushed ideas such as a permanent structure of European defence cooperation, a European Defence Agency, a European Security and Defence College, European rapid reaction forces (EU Battle groups), a European Air Transport Command, common European training centres and an EU Operational Headquarters (Missiroli 2003, p.76-79). The Lisbon Treaty that entered into force in 2009 gave the EU the tool of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to connect the political and the capability side of European defence on an EU wide level and to push more integration and cooperation between policy and capabilities (EU 2010, p.276; Belgian Presidency 2010). However, during the Belgian EU presidency in 2010 it became clear that no consensus could be reached on the meaning of this Permanent Structured Cooperation. Although the Lisbon Treaty gave the European Union the framework and tools to become a global strategic player and the ability to fulfil an ambition already announced in the 2003 European Security Strategy, the lack of interest for the CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) since 2010 and the lack of European unity in the field of Foreign Affairs (e.g. during the war in Libya and Syria) dominated. The European
Council summit on defence in December 2013 was important to bring the defence domain again more centrally into EU thinking but delivered only limited and rather open and provisional results (European Council 2013). CSDP created mostly EU military and political-military structures alongside national ones without making progress in the improvement of European military capabilities as a whole.

The 2010 Belgian EU Presidency encouraged a pragmatic change of policy, abandoning the holistic project of a Permanent Structured Cooperation. The Ghent Initiative of September 2010 was the basis for the capability oriented push at the EU level: the EDA Pooling & Sharing Initiative (EDA 2012). Soon afterwards, also NATO started a similar program under the name "Smart Defence". 18

Nevertheless, in the past, European level capability programmes (either in the EU or NATO) have shown limitations. Hence Belgium like the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, the Visegrad countries and France and the UK (Lancaster House) moved towards a comprehensive 19 regional approach towards defence cooperation next to other more one-

18 Contrary to less positive examples of duplication between both security organizations, these are exemplary efforts to coordinate both multilateral capability programs in order to get real complementarity.

19 Underlining the novelty of comprehensive cooperation is essential as cooperation combining different lines of development of a capability (DOTMLPF: doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership & education, personnel, facilities) and/or different cooperation domains (capabilities, armament, industry, R&T, operations, policy,…) makes it possible to go much further in the reduction of overhead in the national defences because it makes it possible to build up a very deep and comprehensive form of defence cooperation by making associations between these lines of development and domains.
sided\textsuperscript{20} defence cooperation projects with other European partners such as the Command and Control cooperation within the Eurocorps; training of Belgian pilots in France; the European Air Transport Command; the technical, logistic and operational cooperation within European Participating Air Forces (EPAF) for the F16 fighter jets. Regional defence cooperation in Europe can be a relevant mechanism linking small groups of equivalent countries (with respect to capacities and mind-set towards defence cooperation) and, as such, create new entities for defence policy, while at the same time limit the number of entities on a European level and create a greater level playing field.

For instance, on 18 April 2012 a Benelux declaration on defence cooperation was signed by the three Ministers of Defence of the Benelux countries. The major idea of this declaration is to widen and deepen the already existing defence cooperation between the BENELUX countries,\textsuperscript{21} to improve the efficiency of the BENELUX defence efforts and to increase the output in favour of the operational capabilities. The Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation is presented as the foundation and example for such cooperation. Cooperation in general is foreseen for domains such as procurement, military education and training, logistics and maintenance, the execution of military tasks and for political coordination next to more specific projects (Benelux 2012). The management structure of the permanently structured BENELUX defence cooperation manages the current projects and future possibilities for

\textsuperscript{20} Contrary to comprehensive forms of defence cooperation, only focusing on one specific domain/line of development.

\textsuperscript{21} Being in the first place the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation, and further the close cooperation between Belgium and Luxembourg for the land forces, the Belgian-Dutch cooperation for the F16 fighter jets and the recently started Belgian-Luxembourg cooperation for the air transport fleet.
deeper cooperation between the Benelux nations. Some projects are again pushing the
dboundaries of the relation between defence and national sovereignty such as the project that
should lead to a common airspace surveillance for the Benelux from 2016 onwards. This
project has also a national importance because it gives the Netherlands (and possibly also
Belgium) the possibility to retain an expeditionary air combat capability (Dutch Ministry of
Defence 2013).

Limited defence budgets push similar (size, geographically, historical) European countries
to creative solutions to maintain national capabilities by increasing economies of scale
through defence integration. Still having some budgets left to invest in new common

22 For more information on the BENELUX Defence Cooperation structure, see the website
www.militarycooperation.eu. Different projects are studied, elaborated and some almost
finalised within the different Working Groups of the BENELUX Defence Cooperation:
(Working Group (WG) 1) A Combined Joint Helicopter Command, (WG 2) Far-reaching
cooperation in the area of Air Defence Control and QRA, (WG 3) a BENELUX Para
Training Centre, (WG 4) Cooperation for professional education and training - Land, (WG 5)
Cooperation in the area of army tactical and shooting exercises, (WG 6) Cooperation between
Special Operations Forces, (WG 7) Exchange of staff officers, (WG 8) Cooperation for
medical support, (WG 9) Cooperation for ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target
Acquisition and Reconnaissance), (WG 10) Cooperation for basic and continued officer
education, (WG 11) OSCE cooperation (Confidence and Security Building Measures), (WG
12) Cooperation for professional education and training - Air., and within the already existing
Working Groups of the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation (such as those on the pooling of the
NH90s of both countries and the common studying and acquisitioning of the replacement
capabilities for the current bi-national MCM-ships and bi-national multipurpose frigates) that
were incorporated in the BENELUX Defence Cooperation structure.
capabilities and to be able to have a common configuration policy during the whole of the life cycle of a capability is an important requirement to be an attractive partner country. The prospect of a Belgian defence with almost no room for investment the coming years is already questioning the reliability of Belgium as an important partner country within the Benelux framework.

Conclusions

Despite very tight budgetary constraints, the Belgian armed forces are still performing relatively well from an output angle (in terms of expeditionary operations). The number of military interventions in which Belgium participated since the end of the Cold War is substantial. The picture from an input angle - investment in capabilities - is less comfortable. The Belgian air force and navy have been able to retain their basic war fighting capabilities after the Cold War. In the case of the navy this was only possible through a deep comprehensive defence cooperation with the Dutch navy. The land forces have lost and continue to lose capabilities because of a lack of strategic anchoring (retaining (national) capabilities together with (a) strategic partner country/countries), although the first positive signs are visible for more cooperation within the Benelux cooperation framework and through the Netherlands also with Germany. With an ongoing negative trend in budget and in personnel numbers more Belgian military capabilities could come under pressure and, as such, Belgium’s continuing ability to participate in the full spectrum of international military operations remains in doubt. There is no public support for a budget increase, so the only solution is more efficiency through internationalization and economy of scale. This is a necessity for European defence as a whole.

23 Deeper cooperation with France for the land forces is also a Belgian defence policy aim.
The Belgian contribution to international and European defence thinking is to be found in the innovative approach towards defence cooperation/integration within the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation. This cooperation is generally acknowledged as an example for European defence cooperation as it increases efficiency of military capabilities taking into account national sovereignty of the operational units. The Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation is a model for maintaining national capabilities and a possibility for the Belgian government to have a substantial military toolbox for its foreign policy in the future without increasing defence spending. The defence ministers of the BENELUX countries have declared that the renewal of BENELUX defence cooperation will be based on this bi-national example. Nevertheless a further decline of the Belgian defence budget (certainly if it is not coordinated with the cooperation partners) could hamper efforts to stabilize the national capabilities through BENELUX cooperation because it would make Belgian defence a less attractive partner. A deep comprehensive defence cooperation on a BENELUX level will also make it necessary to further align the defence policies of the three BENELUX countries both politically and capability-wise. The BENELUX is already acting increasingly as one actor on the political level of international security (for instance in the UN, Friends of Libya, Friends of Syria, a common Benelux delegation to Ukraine) and the declaration of 18 April 2012 also specifically foresees more political cooperation for new crisis response operations (Benelux 2012, p.2).

In its turn, the sub-European BENELUX defence cooperation could be an example for Europeanizing the generating and use of military capabilities in order to make the EU (as the political voice of Europe) a strategic actor in a multipolar world as an insurance of national wealth and security. Of course, a more capable European defence leads also to a better burden sharing within NATO.
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