

February 2018



SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

Belgian Defence in 2018: Regeneration Time?

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The Belgian defence budget for 2018 increases by a factor of 4.7 in commitment credits. Not only does this allow for offsetting the significant investment shortfalls of the previous years, it also provides a window of opportunity for regenerating the Belgian armed forces with a view to meeting future challenges. This Security Policy Brief makes the case that the long-awaited modernisation of the major weapon systems needs to go hand in hand with a significant recruitment effort to address the critical human resources situation the Ministry of Defence finds itself in. Yet adding up personnel and equipment, the 25,000-strong force structure outlined in the Strategic Vision still risks being insufficient for meeting future requirements as they emerge in both the national and the international context (NATO/EU). As such, defence planners will need to engage with the question how best to redevelop the force structure from this minimum baseline in function of how the strategic environment evolves. For strengthening Belgium's national security and diplomatic position in the twenty-first century the present window of opportunity is not to be missed.

The year 2018 promises to be the moment of truth for the Belgian Ministry of Defence, at least as far as the present legislative term is concerned. In 2014, the Federal Government Agreement stipulated that the Belgian government would “again provide the armed forces with the means to execute its missions”. It also highlighted the need to reserve sizeable investment space for equipment modernisation. The debate over what the latter should look like became the object of a Military Programming Law, adopted on 11 May 2017. Despite deep initial cuts in the defence accounts, the 2018 budget approved by parliament now features a dramatic increase of commitment appropriations for investing in military equipment. Over 12 billion EUR of commitment credits have been allocated in order to provide each military dimension and capacity with adequate equipment, while the corresponding payments will be spread over the period 2020-2030. What is one to make of these recent budgetary developments? Is the debate on the future of the Belgian armed forces now settled, provided that these budgetary promises are fulfilled?

The turn of the tide in defence resourcing does not occur in a political vacuum. While the fundamental force behind this change is the deteriorating security environment, the timing is far from coincidental. Firstly, in July 2018, Belgium will host the first fully-fledged

NATO Summit in over a decade. As the Allies already agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014 “to halt any decline in defence expenditure” and aim to increase defence outlays in real terms, Belgium is under intense pressure to make good on the promises Prime Minister Charles Michel made in 2016 and 2017.¹ Secondly, in December 2017 Belgium signed up to the Council Decision establishing Permanent Structured Cooperation amongst 25 participating EU member states (PESCO). Correspondingly, the commitments to regularly increase the defence budget and to spend 2% and 20% of defence expenditure on research and technology, and on capability investment, respectively, are now enshrined in EU law.² Thirdly, in the spring of 2019 Belgium will be gearing up for its next federal elections. This means that 2018 remains the last full year to deliver on the remaining promises of the Government Agreement, most notably but not exclusively the decision to replace the F-16 air combat capability and other major platforms. Fourth and finally, these considerations are driven by a steadily deteriorating security environment and a growing sense of ‘strategic unease’.³ The 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels have made clear that security problems do not necessarily remain ‘far away’ problems. Moreover, the operational tempo that the Belgian armed forces have maintained in response to these challenges is not sustainable based on present resourcing parameters. Ultimately, the budgetary debate therefore reflects a fundamental matter of national security.

To help inform this debate, this Egmont Security Policy Brief previews the strategic outlook the Belgian armed forces face in 2018. After more than three decades of budgetary restraint and organisational downsizing, the regeneration of the armed forces has become imperative. The first section discusses the modernisation of the major weapon systems. This constitutes the debate for which the 2017 Military Programming Law and the 2018 budget have now set the stage. The second section deals with the human resources challenge the Ministry of Defence faces. While the age structure of the Belgian force structure has been scantily discussed in the context of raising the retirement age, the need to recruit much higher numbers of young men and women in uniform will constitute the key challenge for the coming decade. The third section then turns to the relationship between the force structure and the future security environment that Belgian governments will face. Even a fully-funded, 25,000 strong military is likely to be inadequate for meeting future obligations to Belgian citizens and their international partners. The reason is straightforward: the present and future force structure is based on a logic of peacetime, whereas the possibility of major conflict on the European continent is perhaps still remote, but surely no longer inconceivable. The deepest challenge for Belgian defence planners relates to the question of how to respond to future contingencies that could be vastly more challenging in operational terms than the experience of recent decades.

Fiscal Year	Commitments	Expenditures
2014*	2.458.544	2.580.762
2015*	2.327.688	2.460.484
2016*	2.414.361	2.518.168
2017°	2.550.998	2.480.751
2018°	12.040.820	2.519.099

Evolution of the Belgian defence budget

(all figures x1000 current EUR; limited plus variable credits; * as realised or ° as budgeted by Parliament; source: parliamentary budget documents n° 54 1352/001, 54 2109/001 and 54 2690/001)

MODERNISING THE MAJOR WEAPON SYSTEMS

In the run-up to the 2014 federal elections, a debate emerged on the future of the Belgian armed forces.⁴ The incoming Minister of Defence Steven Vandeput was tasked to deliver a strategic orientation on the future capability portfolio, the required human resources and the associated budgetary framework. To this purpose, a series of consultations with the defence staff, the academic community and other stakeholders took place.⁵ On 29 June 2016, the Belgian government took note of the resulting *Strategic Vision for Defence*.⁶ This document offered the armed forces a perspective on growth, most notably by committing to a budgetary envelope of 9.2 billion EUR in major equipment programmes over the time horizon 2020-2030. With a view to consolidating political support for this budgetary commitment, the Belgian Parliament adopted a Military Programming Law for the timeframe 2016-2030.⁷ Although Belgian national budgets are only legally binding for one year, as the Council of State observed in its parliamentary advice, the proposed law was approved with broad support, namely with 82 votes in favour, 50 against and 3 abstentions in the plenary session.⁸ Against this background, initial steps towards the procurement of major weapon systems could be taken. As in any long journey, the question is now: are we there yet?

The capability portfolio outlined in the Strategic Vision and the Military Programming Law is built around four dimensions: land, air, maritime and intelligence (including the cyber domain). These accounted for roughly 2.21 billion, 3.94 billion, 2.05 billion and 0.74 billion EUR respectively.⁹ Key highlights included the acquisition of a new land combat vehicles, a successor for the F-16 fighter fleet as well as two frigates and six mine-hunting vessels. To this purpose, the Belgian government authorised a strategic partnership with the French government by participating in the *Scorpion* land warfare

programme.¹⁰ This should result in the acquisition of 60 Jaguar and 417 Griffon vehicles in the timeframe 2025-2030. It also authorised the release of a Request for Government Proposal inviting different partners to propose a future air combat capability to the Belgian Air Force.¹¹ In response, the US and UK governments responded with initial offers built around the Eurofighter Typhoon and the Lockheed Martin F-35 programmes, with ‘best and final offers’ submitted on 14 February 2018.¹² Pending the technical assessment phase, this process will enable the Belgian government to take a decision for procuring thirty-four new fighter jets in time for the planned phase-out of the F-16 fleet starting in 2023. Finally, the Belgian and Dutch Ministers of Defence signed a letter of intent and programme arrangements for a joint replacement of the current M-frigates and Tripartite-class mine countermeasure vessels. These new ships are to be developed under Dutch and Belgian lead, respectively, and are set to enter service in 2025. Finally, an important effort in improving Belgium’s position in the intelligence and influence domain is planned. The latter includes the acquisition of Medium Altitude Long Endurance drones, participation in the French *Composante Spatiale Optique* satellite imagery project and a wide-ranging update of the IT-network architecture of the military intelligence service.

The choice to regenerate the Belgian armed forces by building deep partnerships with different international partners – with France in the land domain, with the Netherlands in the maritime domain and, presumably, with an Anglo-Saxon partner in the air domain – indicates a distinct preference for balanced alliances and multilateral cooperation.¹³ It commits Belgium to maintaining a balanced force structure that is fully embedded in European as well as transatlantic frameworks. What is now important is to make full use of the window of opportunity the 2018 budget offers to translate these choices into

contractual commitments. The NATO Summit in Brussels and the accompanying PESCO dynamic constitute a moment in time not to be missed. This relates not only to the medium-term future – namely to ensure the continued availability of key combat systems in the 2020s – but also with the long-term future beyond the 2030 horizon. Most notably, the focus on increasing funding for research, technology and development offers a major opportunity for consolidating and expanding the Belgian and European defence technological and industrial base. In the timeframe of the 2040s, this may lead to the emergence of a genuinely cross-European option for air combat capability, which is presently not on offer.

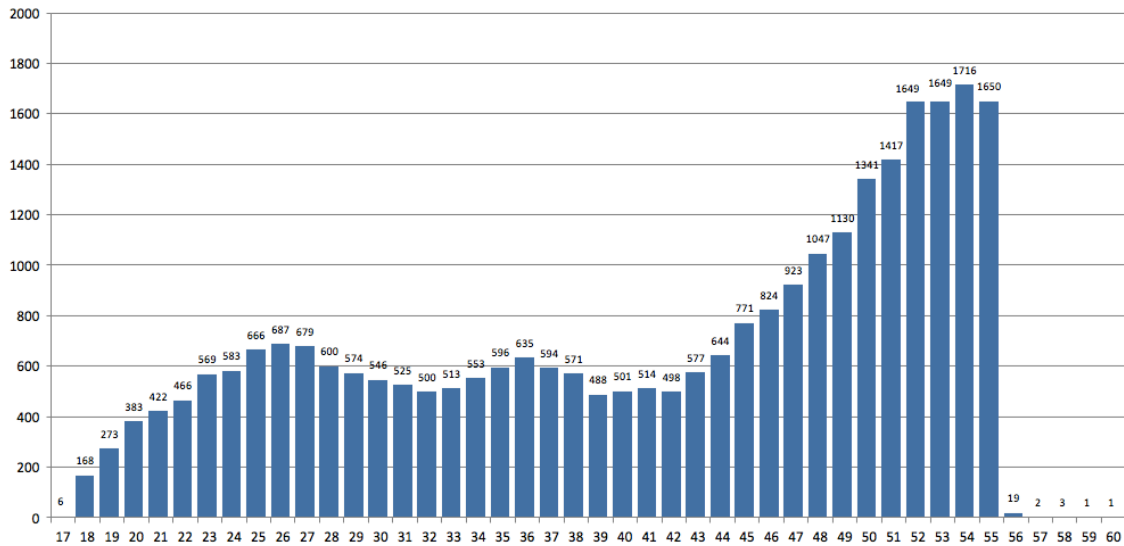
If these programmes proceed as planned, the regeneration of the Belgian armed forces is belatedly coming on track as far as the modernisation of its principal weapon systems is concerned. Should contractual commitments fail to materialise during this legislative period, however, it becomes very likely that major equipment shortfalls will materialise in the 2020s. In turn, this would further undermine the already tenuous condition of Belgium's national security and diplomatic position. These investments constitute a necessary precondition for maintaining a skeleton force that can be beefed up and adapted by future governments as circumstances dictate. Yet having modern equipment available is by itself not enough. Any defence establishment is critically dependent on sufficient numbers of well-trained and motivated personnel. It are the men and women wearing the uniform that breathe life into the force structure. Yet in this regard, the outlook at the start of 2018 is far from promising.

HUMAN RESOURCES AS THE CRITICAL BOTTLENECK

The lack of balance in the age pyramid of the armed forces will constitute the Achilles heel of the Belgian defence well into the 2020s and possibly beyond. Successive downward revisions of the targeted end-strength of the

military after the suspension of conscription in 1994 have led to a personnel structure heavily dominated by those close to retirement. The budget cuts and pension reforms during the present legislative period have substantially aggravated this problem. During the year 2016, for instance, recruitment was initially capped at 700 military posts (eventually revised upwards to 900), whereas no less than 2,458 employees left due to retirement, death or termination of contract.¹⁴ Given this quasi-freefall in human resources, the challenge is not how to downsize the force from its 2018 level of 29,225 men and women in uniform to the 25,000 level the Strategic Vision puts forward (including 1,000 defence civilians). Rather, it is to avoid crashing through this objective and sinking to far lower numbers. Such an implosion of the personnel structure would have grave consequences as far as operational output capacity is concerned. A constant focus on recruiting much higher numbers of young men and women for flexible and attractive career paths in the defence sector will therefore be key for the future, especially when the economic climate starts to deteriorate.

At present, barely more than a third of the force is under the age of forty. In turn, the largest age cohorts are in their early fifties. During this legislative term, much ink has been spilled on the proposal to raise the retirement age for military personnel (i.e. from fifty-six to sixty-three, although exact details remain unclear). Yet the future potential of Belgian defence depends not so much on the 'right half' of the age pyramid as on the 'left half': it is the yearly inflow of young and motivated personnel that will steer the course of developments over the longer term. Bluntly put: postponing retirements will only add limited capability, whereas decreasing recruitment will have a major impact on output capacity. Limited recruitment and retention difficulties thus pose a clear danger, namely that the 25,000-structure envisaged by the *Strategic Vision* risks not being fully staffed. In this regard, it needs to be kept in mind that an



Age pyramid of the Belgian armed forces

(as of January 2018, active military personnel, source: Belgian Defence Staff DG Human Resources)

important number of men and women in uniform are not available to the organisation, because of educational requirements and contributions to international organisations, for instance. In real terms, the body of effectively available military personnel risks shrinking to critical levels from the early 2020s onwards.

The logical solution is to dramatically increase recruitment and to limit attrition as military career paths progress. After the recent dip in recruitment, from 2018 onwards recruitment is set to accelerate back to cruising speed of over 1,500 vacancies per year.¹⁵ Yet this will not suffice to offset the upcoming retirement wave. Human resources projections indicate that a continued build-up to 2,100 new recruits per year or more will be required in the 2020s in order to stabilise the force around the 25,000 target. Should such numbers prove difficult to achieve, it will become necessary to adapt what military career paths may look like with a view to increasing their societal attraction. In addition, a considerable share of recruitment under short-term (i.e. eight year) contracts will need to be extended into long-term contracts. Finally, the outflow of younger personnel needs to be kept within limits. To

that purpose, it is essential that the force does not get worn out due to an unsustainable operational tempo, a lack of training or a general lack of recognition. The experience of homeland operations constitutes a double-edged sword in this regard: Operational Vigilant Guardian has greatly increased the societal visibility of the armed forces, yet it also exercised a negative impact on readiness for other tasks, as well as on motivational levels inside many units. Simply put: everyone in uniform needs to remain an ambassador for a military career, yet this is critically dependent on the armed forces having sufficient confidence that their political neglect will be reversed.

MILITARY MOBILISATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The interplay between human resources, military equipment and training efforts gives rise to a force structure that is ready to deliver operational output as instructed by the political level. The force structure that the *Strategic Vision* outlines, and of which the 2018 budget is the first fiscal enabler, is constructed around the 25,000-strong personnel envelope and the equipment projects listed in the previous sections. This yields a future Belgian defence

apparatus principally built around (a) five motorised manoeuvre battalions on land, (b) a joint special operations regiment composed of the tier one Special Forces Group and two supporting paracommando battalions, (c) a multi-role air combat capability built around the F-16 platform and its successor and (d) a limited naval warfare capability built around frigates and mine countermeasure vessels. In terms of quantitative output capacity, it bears emphasis that this force structure will be able to do substantially less than what the Belgian armed forces have done in recent years, even if in some respects they will become more technologically advanced and supported by an increasingly agile, influence-enabling intelligence apparatus.¹⁶ Is this enough to meet Belgium's national security requirements and international obligations in the future? As it is difficult to answer this question in a positive sense, this force structure should be considered as a peacetime baseline. The most fundamental challenge confronting the Belgian defence, is how to make use of this skeleton force structure as an instrument enabling military expansion and mobilisation when this should prove necessary. This relates not so much to the requirements of the conflicts of the past, but rather the exigencies that future contingencies may pose throughout the 21st century.

Even if the security environment were to remain stable, it will prove difficult to meet Belgium's national security requirements and international obligations. In the framework of the NATO defence planning process, Belgium already cannot meet the capability targets it gets assigned, such as the ability to deploy and sustain a brigade in the land domain as well as to field a higher number of future combat aircraft.¹⁷ This relates not just to crisis management tasks, but also to collective defence scenarios. To the extent that the EU has a codified military level of ambition, furthermore, Belgium will equally struggle to pull its weight. In international terms, Belgium is thus well on its way of becoming a mere

provider of token contributions rather than a credible and trustworthy partner. Even in a purely national context, it is easy to imagine scenarios in which the Belgian armed forces would not be able to deliver the operational output that is required. The number of troops deployed on homeland duties in the immediate aftermath of the March 2016 terrorist attacks, for instance, will become impossible to sustain in the years ahead, as the land component continues to shrink.¹⁸ Yet is it truly inconceivable to imagine future circumstances in which similar or even higher numbers may be called for? In the same vein, the security of Belgian airspace or territorial waters may not be ensured should procurement programme delays or recruitment difficulties occur. The bottom line is that the envisaged force structure is designed as a minimal baseline during peacetime.

The fundamental purpose of the armed forces is to serve as an instrument for defending the community from which they spring during times of conflict. If the level of ambition of NATO and the EU is going up, it is precisely because the continuation of peacetime is no longer guaranteed. Once one recognises that large-scale future conflict has become a distinct possibility – perhaps still remote, but no longer inconceivable – military requirements increase significantly, as factors such as combat attrition, security of supply and industrial and societal resilience need to be accounted for.¹⁹ The purpose of the enhanced Forward Presence battalions in Baltic States, for instance, is to serve as a tripwire for deterrence purposes. Yet that tripwire is only as credible as the ability to quickly send conventional reinforcements or to contemplate options for nuclear retaliation. Without a credible deterrence posture, our European partners and allies in Central and Eastern Europe may well worry about the possible risk of abandonment in case of conflict. In turn, this fosters intra-European fragmentation, which runs counter to the Belgian interest, and strengthens Russia's leverage for intimidating its much smaller

neighbours. To the extent that the security environment continues to deteriorate, it is the hypothetical ability of the armed forces to engage in high-end conflict that will matter the most in the years ahead. After all, credible deterrence depends on being ready to ‘fight tonight’ if necessary.

While one can debate what military mobilisation would look like in the twenty-first century, the political deliberations on the future of the Belgian armed forces have not yet internalised this challenge. True enough, a larger force structure will come at a higher cost. Yet at the same time it is hard to see how the skeleton structure currently envisaged would be able to cope with conditions of conflict if this should ever materialise. The key issue is therefore to consider the future structure not as a static target that will suffice to meet the requirements of the Belgian government irrespective of the international context, but rather as a dynamic minimal baseline from which the armed forces can be redeveloped in function of how the security environment evolves. This could mean deeper integration with different international partners when political ambitions converge, but also serve as a bulwark for defending the security interests of all Belgian citizens if the international political architecture continues to fracture. At a minimum, this would require redeveloping the system of professional reserves, yet it is also conceivable that a larger professional structure may again be required to address the emerging gaps in both combat and support units. In case of serious recruitment difficulties, one could even raise the question under what circumstances a twenty-first century version of conscription could be considered appropriate.

CONCLUSION

In the years ahead, the overarching challenge for the Belgian armed forces is not so much to arrest the post-Cold War organisational

decline, as to start regenerating for the uncertain future that is yet to come. The 2018 budget provides the initial window of opportunity to start this process, namely by increasing recruitment numbers and reserving commitment credits to start the modernisation of key weapon systems. Of course, the heavy lifting on the budgetary front is yet to come, as actual expenditures must rise in lock-step with contractual payments coming due. To a significant extent, this recapitalisation is itself the product of the choice to progressively hollow-out the force during many years of the past. Correspondingly, the cost of providing for Belgian national security will continue to increase – perhaps exponentially – the longer the turn of the tide is postponed. It is therefore essential that the 2018 window of opportunity is not missed. This would not only strengthen the diplomatic position of the Belgian government in both the Atlantic Alliance and the EU. More importantly, it would also safeguard the ability of all future governments to adapt Belgium’s defence posture and to help preserve the security interests of all generations yet to come.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This is especially relevant as Belgium is the only nation in the Alliance that continued to systematically cut its defence expenditure since the Wales Summit. See 'Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)', Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division Press Release 111, 29 June 2017.
- ² 'Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participating Member States', *Official Journal of the EU*, 14 December 2017, L 331/57.
- ³ Cf. Johan Verbeke, 'A World in Flux', Brussels: Egmont Institute (Security Policy Brief No. 92), November 2017.
- ⁴ See e.g. Alexander Mattelaer, 'Strategic Insurance: The Future of the Belgian Armed Forces', Brussels: Institute for European Studies (Policy Brief 2014/04), May 2014.
- ⁵ See the report 'De toekomst van Defensie: Horizon 2030', Brussels: Private Office of the Minister of Defence, 2015.
- ⁶ Renaud Flamant and Pieter-Jan Parrein (eds.), *The Strategic Vision for Defence*, Brussels: Ministry of Defence, 29 June 2016.
- ⁷ Belgian Parliament, 'Wetsontwerp houdende de militaire programmering van investeringen voor de periode 2016-2030', Brussels, document n° 54 2137/009, 11 May 2017.
- ⁸ This broad support relied on a significant amount of earlier parliamentary work. In 2015, the Belgian parliament adopted a resolution on the future of defence (doc n° 54 0988/007) that backed the choice for a balanced force structure spanning across all geospatial domains. In 2016, another resolution on the NATO Warsaw Summit agenda (doc n° 54 1881/007) confirmed parliamentary support for halting the decline of defence expenditure and progressively raising outlays with a view to confirming Belgium's military and political credibility. It also bears mentioning that several members of the opposition either abstained or joined the majority in voting for the Military Programming Law.
- ⁹ All the amounts mentioned in the Military Programming Law are expressed in constant euros 2015, whereas national budgets are expressed in current euros (every year adjusted for inflation). The commitment credits included in the 2018 budget thus need to account for payments that will need to be made throughout the 2020s, of which the actual amounts will be nominally higher, even if the actual purchasing power remains constant. For a more detail, see the parliamentary hearing with Colonel Harry Van Pee, Brussels: Belgian Parliament, 20 April 2016, doc n° 54 1782/001, p. 14.
- ¹⁰ Belgian Council of Ministers, 'Overheidsopdracht voor de wederuitrusting van de interwapen-gemotoriseerde capaciteit van Defensie', Brussels, 22 June 2017.
- ¹¹ 'Belgian Defence Air Combat Capability Program: Request for Government Proposal', Brussels: MOD, 17 March 2017.
- ¹² Much has been speculated about the prospects of the Dassault Rafale as a possible third contender. What is clear is that the French government deliberately chose not to submit a formal proposal responding the RFGP-procedure, but instead proposed a partnership akin to the one in the land domain. This went accompanied by a high-profile outreach campaign via Belgian media (see e.g. Florence Parly, 'Hele Belgische industrie profiteert van militaire samenwerking met Frankrijk', *De Tijd*, 5 December 2017). It is hard to see, however, how the Belgian government can now disown the procurement process it so painstakingly constructed with a view to allow for open and transparent competition.
- ¹³ For discussion, see Marc Thys, 'De toekomst bouwen: welke capaciteiten voor welke Belgische defensie?', *Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift / Revue Militaire Belge*, N° 14 (June 2017), pp. 1-7.
- ¹⁴ Steven Vandeput, 'Algemene Beleidsnota Defensie / Note de politique générale Défense', Brussels: Belgian Parliament, 9 November 2015, document n° 54 1428/013. Personnel outflow figures obtained from the Belgian Defence, Directorate-General Human Resources.
- ¹⁵ Steven Vandeput, 'Toespraak: Defence goes to war, the war for talent', Heverlee, 11 October 2017.
- ¹⁶ To give but one illustrative example: in 2011 the Belgian Air Force fielded twelve fighter jets for flying combat operations over Libya and Afghanistan. This illustrated the maximum output volume that could be sustained over several months by a fleet of 54 technologically mature and fully-optimised airframes. The new fleet of 34 aircraft will allow for only half the high battle rhythm output. Similar projections can be put forward for most other capabilities. See also Alexander Mattelaer, 'Why Belgium Needs a Special Operations Command', Brussels: Egmont Institute (Security Policy Brief No. 70), April 2016.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Peter De Lobel and Christof Vanschoubroek, 'België, de 'Madame Non' van de Navo', *De Standaard*, 27 May 2017.
- ¹⁸ The number of troops on homeland operations in 2016 peaked above 1,800 military personnel deployed on the streets of Brussels and other cities, which proved to be an absolute maximum in combination with other ongoing operations. When taking the requirements for rotation into account (day/night, week/week etc), it becomes clear that the structure of seven battalions (five motorised plus two airborne) leaves no margin for downsizing the personnel envelope without severely affecting this already limited output capacity.
- ¹⁹ See e.g. Guillaume Lasconjarias, 'Deterrence through Resilience: NATO, the Nations and the Challenges of Being Prepared', Rome: NATO Defense College (Eisenhower Paper n° 7), 31 May 2017.