

No. 143  
April 2021

## SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

## What Belgium Can Do: Proposals for the National Security Strategy

*Sven Biscop & Nina Wilén*

Belgium has never had a National Security Strategy: a single strategic vision outlining how to safeguard its national interests from external threats and challenges and to prevent the exploitation of its internal vulnerabilities. Many in Belgium intuitively feel that none is needed: Are we not shielded by the EU and NATO? And what could the world expect from this small country anyway? But the fact is that the Kingdom of Belgium is not such a small player. The geopolitical heart, and the host, of the EU, it ranks 9th out of 27 in terms of population and GDP; worldwide, it is the 12th exporting country. Hence recurring tensions between Belgium's own – often low – level of ambition as a security actor and the expectations of its allies and partners.

On many international threats and challenges Belgium evidently cannot, and should not, act alone. In many cases it will act as a member of the

EU, or through NATO or the UN, or sometimes through an ad hoc coalition. But if Belgium wants these multilateral players to act timely and adequately, and take specific Belgian interests into account, it must push them into action. It must define its priorities for these international organisations, identify the right course of action, and convince likeminded states to join initiatives under the most relevant flag. However, other states and organisations will only rally around a credible actor: one who first of all takes his own security and defence seriously. On specific issues, or when international organisations fail to act, Belgium will, of course, still undertake national action. That is why Belgium too needs a National Security Strategy.

At times, Belgium has played a leading role in security and defence. On issues that clearly concern its interests, on which it has expertise, and on which it is willing to make a significant contribution, it can be in the vanguard, including on the international scene. But for more than a decade now, it has not been, mostly because it was absorbed by domestic issues. The security environment has changed, however, and internal vulnerabilities are now immediately exploited by

external powers. Therefore, even as the pandemic has created enormous domestic challenges, Belgium cannot afford to be only inward-looking.

In its 2020 coalition agreement, the federal government clearly intended to mark a new start; hence the initiative to adopt a National Security Strategy, for the first time ever. In this policy brief, we outline Belgium's interests, role, objectives, and capabilities against the backdrop of the current security environment, pointing at what the National Security Strategy could, and ultimately should, encompass.

### WHAT IS A NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY?

A National Security Strategy operates at the level of "Grand Strategy": it concerns the internal cohesion of our society and the very survival of our chosen way of life – which is based on democracy, equality, human rights, and the rule of law. Such a strategy has five components:

(1) *Vital interests*: The starting point is the definition of the interests that have to be guaranteed to ensure our societal cohesion and way of life.

(2) *The security environment*: Next comes an assessment of the threats and challenges to the country's vital interests. This analysis looks ahead to the longer term (10 to 20 years), taking into account that "black swans" may occur: unexpected events with major consequences.

(3) *Role*: The Strategy then outlines the type of long-term role that the state seeks to play as a security actor on its territory and on the international scene, in order to safeguard its vital interests from these threats and challenges. For example, states can see themselves primarily as faithful allies or independent players; as bridge-builders or antagonists; as value-based or transactional; as defensive and reactive – focused

on resilience – or assertive and proactive, with the ambition to shape the international environment.

(4) *Objectives*: Arguing back from that long-term vision, the Strategy next translates it into a set of short and medium term, concrete objectives, both for the next 5 years, i.e. the current legislature, and for the next 10 years. It allocates responsibility for each objective to a specific actor, and sets deadlines.

(5) *Capabilities*: The Strategy outlines the types of instruments that the government plans to put to use, within and outside Belgian territory, in order to pursue these objectives. On that basis, it then gives an indication of the budgets, personnel, civilian and military capabilities, and other means to be allocated to the relevant departments during the current legislature and of the long-term budgetary growth path.

A National Security Strategy is not a catalogue or wish-list: it does not need to say something about every imaginable item of policy. A short and sharp National Security Strategy focuses on a few priorities: the big projects that this government aspires to sustain, complete or set on the rails. Within its framework, departmental strategies can be elaborated, such as an updated Strategic Vision on Defence and perhaps a Diplomatic Strategic Vision. The details are for the annual policy statements of individual Ministers.

Such a National Security Strategy would basically offer a narrative, for the Belgian public and parliament, for its allies and partners, and for all potential adversaries: What are Belgium's priorities, and what can they count on Belgium *doing* about them?

## BELGIUM'S INTERESTS

The vital interests of Belgium are:

- (1) The physical security of our citizens and territory;
- (2) The democratic and sovereign nature of our political system;
- (3) Our economic prosperity and how that is equitably shared between citizens;
- (4) A rules-based international order, so as to create a stable environment;
- (5) The effective functioning of the EU, in which we have pooled key elements of our sovereignty.

The first four are, in fact, the vital interests of the EU as a whole as codified in the 2016 *EU Global Strategy*. For Belgium, the consolidation and, where necessary, further deepening of EU integration as such must be added as a vital interest.

Vital interests are what we must be prepared to take risks for when they are threatened, for otherwise our entire society and way of life will be at risk. If necessary, this is what we are ready to *fight* for.

## THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Security is a continuum; internal and external threats are closely interlinked and at times overlapping.

There are, however, threats that are primarily internal, for which the domestic security services are the first responder. Examples are crime, domestic political extremism and violence, and domestically inspired terrorism. When necessary, our domestic security services cooperate with their foreign counterparts, for example to address international crime. These internal threats are primarily addressed by the [Framework Note on Integral Security](#) (which is in fact due for an update itself).

The National Security Strategy concerns threats that are primarily external, as well as the exploitation of

internal vulnerabilities by foreign actors for strategic purposes. Examples are subversion, coercion, and aggression by other states (including in cyber space), international terrorism, and armed conflict, but also transversal challenges such as climate change, epidemics, economic crisis, and resource shortages. National, regional, and global analyses of the security context are regularly updated: Belgium conducted a [Security Environment Review](#) in 2019, and the EU just finished an assessment in November 2020, as the first step towards the drafting of a “Strategic Compass” for its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). NATO systematically monitors the security environment too. Taken together, these analyses enable Belgium to situate its national security needs and assess threats and challenges on both the national and the regional level.

Undergirding any proactive approach to address security threats across the entire internal-external continuum, is resilience: the ability of the state and society to continue to function and remain relevant in the face of sudden shocks as well as structural changes in the environment. Building strong cyber defences, for example, is a question of resilience, and protects against both a criminal gang hacking bank data and Russian or Chinese induced cyber activities. Actively putting an end to these threats will further require a domestic policing strategy for the former; and a Russia or China strategy in the context of the National Security Strategy for the latter.

The existence of a single National Security Council and its subordinate bodies, the Strategic Committee and the Coordination Committee for Intelligence and Security, ought to ensure full transparency and coordination between these three overlapping dimensions: dealing proactively with internal and external threats and challenges while ensuring resilience.

The vital interests and the broad security threats are more or less identical for all EU Member States. Yet,

it is important to note Belgium's specific interests and vulnerabilities, which ought to determine its priority objectives. Belgium notably is the host country of EU and NATO institutions; one of the world's most open economies, with relatively few important national economic decision-making centres left, but with major centres of excellence in specific sectors; a forerunner in human rights (notably on gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights); a federal state with complex decision-making procedures; and a former colonial power in Central Africa.

### **BELGIUM'S LONG-TERM ROLE**

Which role does Belgium see for itself in a world that is dominated by increasing tensions between continent-sized great powers and a weakening of multilateral cooperation, as well as by a decline of respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law? Belgium could play three broad roles:

(1) *A resilient state and a "good host" for the EU and NATO:* Belgium must protect democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law, including within the EU and NATO as a whole. To that end, Belgium should aspire to be at the forefront of creative and resolute measures to protect not only national but also EU and NATO decision-making from attempts at subversion by outside powers. Overall, in every policy, domestic or foreign, Belgium ought to uphold and promote these values.

(2) *A reliable EU Member State and NATO Ally:* The coalition agreement states that Belgium "resolutely chooses for an explicitly pro-European attitude". Belgium's role should be that of an active promotor of EU integration. Integration is not an end in itself but must be pursued where the EU and its Member States are otherwise no longer capable of governing effectively or of defending their interests vis-à-vis the outside world. On defence specifically, the coalition agreement adds that "Belgium will continue to reinforce its commitment to an effective European defence. This contributes to a real European strategy

and autonomy and thus reinforces the 'European pillar' within NATO". Belgium should therefore assume a leading role and invest in its armed forces while advancing EU defence integration.

(3) *An active bridge-builder for global peace and stability:* Brussels is one of the diplomatic capitals of the world, which provides Belgium with a unique opportunity to promote dialogue and cooperation between the great powers, whose leaders regularly meet with the EU and NATO. Making use of the opportunity for bilateral contacts that these meetings imply, Belgium should make a consistent plea at the highest level for multilateralism and constructive great power relations. Under the heading "Fostering Consensus, Acting for Peace", the motto of its 2019-2020 Security Council membership, Belgium should continue to actively pursue multilateral solutions for specific international threats and challenges.

### **BELGIUM'S OBJECTIVES**

A concrete objective that the National Security Strategy could set is a review of Belgium's resilience, paying special attention to its host nation role. The base-line national resilience requirements that NATO has set in 7 sectors can serve as benchmarks: continuity of government, energy, population movement, food and water resources, civil communications, transport systems, and the capacity to handle mass casualties. In a next step, priority actions to remedy the most important gaps must be identified. This is especially important as all areas are interconnected: deficits in one area may affect another. The country will also have to make choices about which degree of autonomy it desires in terms of decision-making, expertise and technology, and production capacity, in which specific sectors, at the national or the EU level. The coronavirus pandemic highlighted the lack of autonomy in certain medical areas, for example.

A worldwide level economic playing field and productive trade and investment relations are crucial for Belgium's vital interests. At the EU level, the first common measures have been taken to prevent foreign actors from gaining undue influence and from distorting the market (such as investment screening), while pushing for reciprocity in market opening with countries like China. As an open economy, Belgium should aim to put proposals on the table for further firm but balanced measures. In both the EU and NATO, Belgium should contribute to the debate on how to apply deterrence to subversion, or how to retaliate when it fails. It could promote a solidarity-based approach: a cyber-attack on one should be seen a cyber-attack on all, for example, and ought to imply a joint reaction.

As a bridge-builder in international politics, Belgium should enhance its profile within the [Alliance for Multilateralism](#), a network of states created by France and Germany that seeks to promote strong and effective multilateral cooperation. Belgium could take the lead on specific issues and use its convening power to host results-oriented seminars in Brussels. Might Brussels, the diplomatic centre of Europe, become the hub of the Alliance for Multilateralism?

In the area of defence, the Belgian armed forces must maintain significant contributions to expeditionary operations in an EU, NATO, UN, and/or coalition framework to support collective security. The annual review of Belgium's operational deployments, which should be a joint undertaking of Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Development, must not only focus on which ongoing operations to contribute to, but also on which operations ought to be ended or reoriented, and which potential future crisis scenarios might demand new deployments. Where necessary, Belgium must open the debate in the EU or NATO.

The National Security Strategy will have to address the overall balance between, on the one hand, Belgium's high-profile bilateral military cooperation

(such as with Niger) and, on the other hand, joining in multinational operations, to ensure that they reinforce rather than undermine each other. Military engagement only goes so far, however. Any review must include the political and economic dimensions as well, including development cooperation; in these too, Belgium should continue to play its part, and implement a comprehensive approach where possible.

At the same time, in view of increasing great power rivalry, deterrence and territorial defence have regained importance again. The National Security Strategy ought to state that (collective) territorial defence and collective security through expeditionary operations are the two core missions of Belgian defence, therefore. "Help to the nation" in emergencies remains a supplementary task, which is undertaken when necessary with the capabilities available, but for which no specific defence capabilities are acquired.

Another dimension that the National Security Strategy could look into is the freedom of access to the global commons (the seas, the skies, space, and cyber space). Does Belgium have a specific contribution to make, for example in the area of maritime security, given that the port of Antwerp is the second-largest European seaport?

In the short term, Belgium must play an active role and promote its national preferences in the debates about the EU's *Strategic Compass* and NATO's new *Strategic Concept*, both of which are due in 2022. This way, Belgium ensures that its national interests are embedded in multilateral structures for the long term.

### **BELGIUM'S CAPABILITIES**

Heeding the unanimous call from all branches of government for a comprehensive or integrated approach, the National Security Strategy must address the capabilities of all relevant departments.



The Strategy should envisage an increase in Belgium's diplomatic capacity, which has been suffering budget cuts for many years, as well as in the capacity of development cooperation, including the Belgian development agency, ENABEL. The intelligence services also stand out as deserving renewed attention: when compared to other European countries, Belgium's capacity is woefully small. The focus on resilience, and the need for the armed forces to re-prioritise territorial defence while maintaining expeditionary operations, will demand a reassessment of the role and organisation of the police, and a reinvestment in civil protection.

Implications for the private sector and academia must be assessed as well, notably in the context of strategic autonomy in research and technology. The coalition agreement also highlighted the importance of the security and defence industry. The National Security Strategy should put forward how Belgium seeks to draw on the EU's European Defence Fund (EDF) and announce the necessary national mechanisms to that end. Furthermore, the Strategy could stress the role of Belgium's national think-tanks in supporting decision-making by providing policy-relevant research and influencing the international debate.

The National Security Strategy certainly has to address the development of Belgian defence. The benchmark for Belgium's current budgetary target of 1.3% of GDP by 2030 was the average of the non-nuclear European members of NATO – but that average has meanwhile already surpassed 1.5%. Given that Belgium's defence expenditure is only just above 1% of GDP, the Belgian growth path will have to be re-assessed, therefore, to ensure that Belgium can stay militarily relevant. At the same time, a percentage of GDP is a very arbitrary metric, particularly in times when the GDP has shrunk in the wake of the corona crisis. The real aim should be to ensure sufficient funding to meet Belgium's agreed capability targets as well as to use the capability whenever needed to remain a credible partner.

In terms of military capabilities, Belgium maintains a combat capacity in each of the components of the armed forces. This allows the country to act whenever the government wants to act; not alone, but in all possible scenarios, Belgium ought to remain able to make an important contribution to a coalition. Far-reaching cooperation and integration with partner countries have been a pre-condition to maintain the current range of forces. The National Security Strategy should make a principled choice to deepen cooperation and integration, such as in the context of Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation, the CaMo project (*Capacité Motorisée*) between the Belgian and French land forces, and the Belgian-Dutch-Danish Special Operations Command, but also for the future F35 capability.

Belgium's investment in major new platforms for all components is an opportunity to pursue further integration from a position of strength and thus play a leading role in Belgium's areas of choice. Such military integration between states could be building-blocks of the EU's goal of building a comprehensive full-spectrum force package via Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). By investing in its armed forces and in their integration with partners, Belgium could contribute some of PESCO's core building-blocks and assume a prominent role in its further development.

The updated *Strategic Vision 2040* and future iterations of the *Military Programming Law* will need to detail these commitments.

### WHO IMPLEMENTS A NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY?

The adoption of the first National Security Strategy is an opportunity to reinforce the decision-making apparatus and facilitate coordination and cooperation between all relevant branches of government, with an eye to decisive action. This demands a change in mindset on the part of all involved: interagency should be a permanent mode of operating, not something that one may think of when one's "own" work is finished.

The core of the system is the National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister – national security is indeed *Chefsache*. The Royal Decree of 22 December 2020 added the Chief of Defence to the Coordination Committee under the Council as a permanent member. In view of the need for a comprehensive approach of the international dimension, the Minister for Development Cooperation should be added to the Council so that diplomacy, defence, and development (the “three D’s”) are all directly represented. Furthermore, the Regions and Communities must be involved in a more structural way, for example by planning regular meetings and/or creating working groups on specific topics. Their contribution to resilience in particular is indispensable.

For the first time, the Prime Minister’s private office (*cabinet*) includes a *chef de cabinet* for foreign and security policy. This de facto “national security advisor” acts as the linchpin for policy preparation; the position ought to become a structural feature.

A section in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister assures the secretariat of the National Security Council. The secretariat could be reinforced, notably with a capacity for strategic foresight analysis, in order to systematically feed the National Security Council with a permanent rolling analysis of the security environment, thus ensuring continuous finetuning of policy and action while building an institutional memory. In the future, a regrouping of existing bodies, such as the National Crisis Centre, the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) and others may have to be considered.

### **CONCLUSION: WHO WRITES A NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY?**

Committing to writing a National Security Strategy implies committing to reviewing the Strategy every 5 years; a one-off exercise would be pointless. While finetuning of implementation ought to be continuous, a 5-yearly review must

ensure the validity of the objectives and a new impetus by each successive government. The first Belgian National Security Strategy will set an important precedent, therefore, not only in terms of substance but also in terms of the drafting method. Key to the success of a strategy is that all those who have to contribute to its implementation, feel ownership of it.

On the one hand, there can in the end be only one pen-holder, appointed by the Prime Minister, with a small drafting team drawn from relevant parts of the government, in particular the intelligence services, foreign affairs, development, and defence. The regional governments must naturally be involved as well.

On the other hand, however, the drafters must consult broadly and stimulate public debate. The cohesion of society is a key element of national security. Making sure that the National Security Strategy is representative of all Belgians is not only important from the point of view of democratic decision-making, therefore; trust in the public institutions also directly strengthens the capacity to address security crises. A debate in the federal parliament seems evident. Representatives from academia, the private sector, and civil society could be involved in a series of closed and informal thematic roundtables during the drafting process, which the Egmont Institute could organise in support of the pen-holder. Once approved, the National Security Strategy ought to be publicised broadly; a high-profile launch event is a must.

\*\*\*

The seemingly most simple questions are always the most difficult ones: What is Belgium’s policy? The National Security Strategy ought to answer that.

*Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College, is Director of the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and lectures at Ghent University.*

*Prof. Dr. Nina Wilén is Director of the Africa Programme at Egmont, Assistant Professor at the Department of*

*Political Science at Lund University, and a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).*

*The authors warmly thank their colleagues at Egmont and the many officials, diplomats and military officers who commented on the draft version of this policy brief for their valuable contribution.*



The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

[www.egmontinstitute.be](http://www.egmontinstitute.be)

© Egmont Institute 2021. All rights reserved.