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SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

Why Belgium Needs a Special Operations Command

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The setting up of a Special Operations Command (SOCOM) constitutes a key element of the ongoing Belgian defence reforms. This Policy Brief aims to put the present demand for special operations forces in its historical context and engage in the discussion on how to structure and employ this special instrument of policy. Building on the legacy of the paracommando regiment, the future Belgian SOCOM constitutes a critical capability within an adaptive force structure. This new entity must be able to deliver results in a variety of unconventional missions that require high readiness, intellectual flexibility and maximum discretion or surprise. At the same time, special operations forces do not constitute a substitute for having a comprehensive security policy. They function best when used as force multipliers alongside other instruments of power towards joint effect. As the proverbial tip of the spear, they must lead the way for Belgian defence regeneration in general.

Special operations forces (SOF) are in high demand. As Europe finds itself confronted with a rapidly deteriorating security

environment and defence establishments worn out by budget cuts, policy-makers across the continent are turning to their elite soldiers to save the day. Trained in all forms of unconventional warfare, special operations forces constitute a versatile tool for countering terrorism and training partners abroad. Across Europe strategic-level SOF-structures have boomed. A NATO Special Operations Headquarters was stood up in 2007, and a long list of European nations followed suit in establishing joint SOF entities, including, most recently, Denmark, Estonia, Norway and neutral Sweden.

In this context, the setting-up of a Special Operations Command within the Belgian armed forces makes eminent sense. It allows the Ministry of Defence to upgrade the role and position of its Special Forces Group (SFG) and to make best use of its scarce resources by reorganising the paracommando units into a Special Forces Support Group (SFSG). As such, a SOCOM creates a single joint entity devoted to unconventional warfare in all its forms. In conceptual terms, this entity is meant to provide a maximum difference to the combined arms motorised capabilities and therefore constitutes a key element of the reorganisation of the force structure (Mattelaer

2015). The adoption of this proposal by the Belgian government as part of the *Strategic Plan 2030* therefore deserves applause.

This Policy Brief seeks to put this decision into a broader context and to offer recommendations for guiding its subsequent implementation. The argument is organised into four parts. First, we explore the historical origins of special warfare and the early development of Belgian special operations forces. Second, we zoom in on the geopolitical environment and the increasing relevance of special operations forces as a strategic instrument therein. Third, we discuss what such a special operations command would look like and how it would relate to the overall structure of the Belgian armed forces. Fourth and finally, we offer an overview of the various scenarios in which Belgian special operations forces could be employed. This also includes a reflection on the proper mechanisms for politico-military control and oversight. Taken together, this Policy Brief makes the case for a commensurate Belgian contribution to the emerging global SOF network. In a context of increasing volatility both within the European continent and beyond, this special ability to act and shape the future is key.

HISTORICAL ROOTS IN THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE

While the role of the hunter-warrior has existed throughout centuries, modern special operations – including the Belgian ones – find their origin in the conduct of the Second World War. At the insistence of Winston Churchill, the UK set up special Commando units for raiding the German-occupied coasts. It also created the Special Air Service (SAS) for launching parachute-enabled operations behind enemy lines. Critically, both organisations were organised to welcome volunteers from the occupied European

countries in their midst with a view to liberating the continent. It is in that context that the SAS *D Parachute Company 2nd Battalion Belgian Fusiliers* (later: 5th Squadron SAS Brigade) and the *4th Troop of the Nr 10 Inter-Allied Commando* were stood up in 1942. Ever since, the Belgian paracommando regiment constituted the intellectual home for preparing for unconventional warfare in all its forms. To the present day, the Belgian Special Forces Group fights under the SAS motto ‘Who Dares Wins’, which it inherited from 1 Para Battalion when the latter was disbanded in 2010.

These historical roots are important, as they serve to highlight a number of characteristics about the use of special operations in general. First comes their *complementarity to conventional military operations*. While it is tempting to think of contemporary special operations as stand-alone endeavours, they have been historically developed as enablers for the wider military campaign (Mitchell 2014). From 1944 onwards, Belgian parachute units were dropped behind enemy lines in France and Belgium to collect intelligence and to disrupt the German defences. As part of the operations *Noah* and *Brutus* in August 1944 Belgian SAS volunteers were the very first Allied troops to enter into occupied Belgian territory and link up with various resistance groups. While special operations forces can work independently, they function best when supporting a broader campaign plan and comprehensive inter-agency effort (cf. Lamb 2014).

Second, special operations constitute an instrument for times of great need and therefore require an *inherent readiness to assume risk*. As one could expect, many volunteers gave their lives in the airborne raids of 1944-1945. But also afterwards, the paracommando units were on permanent standby for high-risk

operations. The illustrious evacuation operations in the aftermath of Congolese independence constitute a clear example. In 1964, for instance, Belgian paracommandos fought their way through the communist Simba rebellion in Kisangani and liberated some 1,800 Belgian and other Western hostages (*Operation Red Dragon*, see Quanten 2014). This willingness to assume risk continued in the post-Cold War era, as the paracommandos were the first to be deployed to UN peacekeeping operations. In Somalia they were tasked to ensure that the port of Kismayo remained open for humanitarian supplies in a fiercely contested environment. In 1994, ten paracommandos serving in the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda paid the highest price when trying to prevent the assassination of Rwandan Prime Minister Madame Agathe Uwilingiyimana. While the employment of SOF is often high-risk, they undeniably constitute a strategic instrument in support of Belgium's international influence. However, like any such instrument, they require careful attention and political calibration.

Third, the engagement of special operations forces often *involves deep multinational cooperation*, based on trust as well as common operating procedures. Not only do the Belgian special operations forces find their origin in the Second World War: the same is the case for their Dutch, French, Norwegian and Australian counterparts. The close ties between all these forces and the US Office of Strategic Services constitute the historical roots of today's NATO SOF community. Even the larger evacuation operations typically involve close multinational cooperation: *Operation Red Dragon* may have been executed by Belgian paracommandos, but they were airlifted and dropped into theatre by American C-130s. This multinational dimension is also very much in the contemporary spotlight, as both the United

States and various like-minded nations are building up a global SOF network geared towards cooperative security solutions (cf. McRaven 2013).

THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Experts will point out that special operations have evolved enormously since their early origins. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks, the special operations community has led the way towards notable counterterrorism successes as well as a wider renaissance in unconventional warfare (Thomas and Dougherty 2013). On the one hand, this entailed a revolutionary fusion of special operations and intelligence work for neutralising violent extremist networks. On the other hand, it implied the pursuit of indirect approaches geared towards building the security capacity of local partners. Yet the spectacular successes achieved in the field have not gone unnoticed. In eastern Europe, Russia is in the process of exploring new forms of hybrid and ambiguous warfare – using its own 'little green men' – in response to what it perceives as the increasing use of information warfare and special operations forces (Gerasimov 2016). Following the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, European SOF are increasingly called upon in a domestic counterterrorism context. As military competition in and around Europe evolves further, the importance of SOF therefore continues to increase.

In contemporary NATO doctrine, special operations forces serve three principal tasks. First, they can be used for *special reconnaissance*. Across the full range of operations, SOF provide military commanders and political decision-makers with discreet or covert situational awareness within any given theatre. Second, they can be used for executing *direct action* against specific targets or for achieving

specific objectives. Such missions can range from hostage rescue and evacuation missions to sabotage and counterterrorism raids. Thirdly, they can be used for a wide range of *military assistance* duties. This includes the training and mentoring of local security forces. As such, military assistance constitutes a continuum that ranges from the special to the conventional. All three tasks are executed by small teams of highly trained operators. These are often supported by extensive intelligence links, civil affairs specialists and commando units, all tailored to meet what the specific mission requires. Also, they rely on state-of-the-art equipment, especially with regards to secure communication links.

In recent years, the Belgian Special Forces Group and paracommando battalions have engaged in all three of these tasks. While open-source operational details are scarce, a few examples help illustrate their use. In 2008, Belgium deployed its special forces to eastern Chad to ensure a proper intelligence picture for the EUFOR Tchad/RCA operation. For several months, it provided the combined joint special operations component command within the mission (Clerix 2009). In 2010, a team of special forces was sent to the Ivory Coast with the task of protecting the Belgian embassy (Knack 2010). At the time, heavy fighting was taking place in Abidjan and all borders and airspace were officially closed, thus requiring a covert insertion operation as well as the potential exfiltration of embassy personnel. In 2015, Belgian special operators trained together with their counterparts from over 20 Allied and various African countries as part of the US AFRICOM-led *Operation Flintlock*. In addition, the extensive training that the paracommando units have provided to the rapid reaction units of the Congolese armed forces is well known. In 2009, 3 Para Battalion provided the first instructors for the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team that Belgium contributed to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Last but not least, valuable

experience was acquired by posting staff officers in multinational headquarters, such as the NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (Van den Bogaert 2013).

As irregular warfare becomes more prevalent, the relevance of special operations forces is rapidly increasing. While they cannot serve as a substitute for conventional military force, they are especially adept at working through and with local state and non-state partners. This makes them an attractive tool that provides a proverbial bridge between diplomatic action and full-blown military operations (cf. Bilo and Weuts 2013; Madden et al. 2016). Whether it is in the ongoing struggle against violent extremism in Europe's southern neighbourhood, or in the ambiguous Russian campaign for geopolitical influence in Europe's eastern neighbourhood, special operations forces are proving ever more to be indispensable. If they are well trained and carefully employed by leaders who understand their strengths and weaknesses, they can offer a high return on investment.

While one can only speculate about the future, there is little reason to believe that these recent trends are about to turn around. As the struggle to secure Europe's easternmost and southernmost border regions intensifies, the future roles of special operations forces are set to widen. The emergence of anti-access and area-denial bubbles covering swathes of European territory constitutes a particular point of concern, as they complicate a swift reinforcement of Europe's eastern flank. The hypothetical disruption of such networks, as well as the countering of *Spetsnaz* infiltration, could become a critical mission if scenarios similar to that in eastern Ukraine were to unfold within EU member states. At the same time, the growing needs for security assistance across North Africa and beyond are not hard

to fathom. On both geographical flanks, unconventional low-signature capabilities will be needed in greater numbers. The most troubling scenario, however, undoubtedly concerns the potential emergence of a terrorist insurgency that stretches Belgian domestic law enforcement beyond breaking point. The suicide bombings at Brussels airport and Maalbeek metro station in March 2016 constitute a stark reminder that this nightmare scenario cannot be wished away. The question remains: what should a Belgian contribution to a global SOF network look like?

HOW TO STRUCTURE A BELGIAN SOCOM

It is received wisdom that having a dedicated national special operations structure is a critical ingredient for optimising the use of SOF (NSCC 2008). At the same time, various models are available as to how this can be put into practice (cf. Gehem 2015, Kristoffersen 2015, Mitchell 2008). The key challenge is therefore to design a structure that provides the appropriate and necessary stewardship within the national defence establishment. For Belgium, this would suggest the setting up of a two-star command overseeing the education, training and tactical engagement of the Special Forces Group and the future Special Forces Support Group. It would also provide a dedicated joint entity for plugging in various enablers and aviation assets required for special operations. Such a SOCOM would report directly to the Assistant Chief of Staff responsible for Operations and Training, and constitute a single focal point for the politico-military interface on all SOF-related matters. At the same time, the different service component commands remain administratively responsible for the different members of the SOF community so as to keep the SOCOM as lean and agile as any command structure can be.

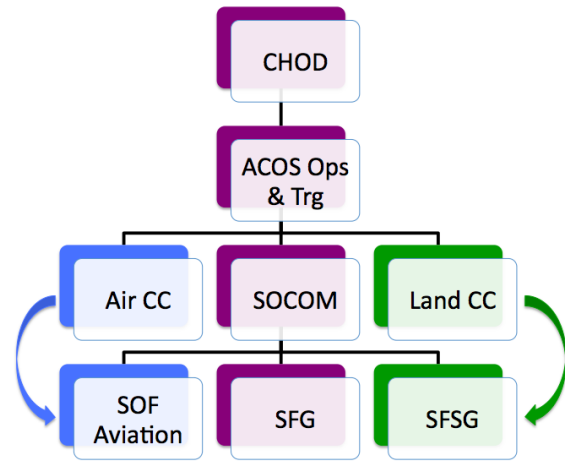


Figure 1: SOCOM command and control

Setting up a special operations command led by an experienced flag officer constitutes the best mechanism for overseeing the development of these forces. This goes beyond the provision of unified direction at the operational and tactical level. It also includes a more strategic role in terms of advising the defence leadership on the role of special operations and establishing resource requirements. Such a structure needs to remain light and nimble to serve as command element for national special operations and immediate reaction tasks. Yet it must also be sufficiently substantial to contribute to a composite special operations component command. For meeting the latter capability shortfall Belgium could team up with partners such as the Netherlands and Denmark, or with France (as in Chad). This means that the SOCOM emerges as the hub for nurturing a community of SOF-savvy staff officers and non-commissioned officers. At the same time, the service components remain the resource providers and ultimate stakeholders of all national capabilities, including SOF. Building on best practices as learned in other countries of similar size such as Norway, the service components play a key role in terms of supporting processes (such as personnel matters and career development) so that the SOCOM can focus to the maximum on its operational tasks. The different component commands and the SCOM will

therefore have to work hand-in-glove to make this into a joint success.

The Special Forces Group (SFG) will form the elite unit of the wider SOF community. Following the decisions of the government with regards to the *Strategic Plan 2030*, the Special Forces Group will be expanded numerically to some 225 full-time equivalents. It will be organised around a staff element for commanding the most sensitive operations through a dedicated Task Group Headquarters, different troops of operator teams, support personnel and instructors. With their land, sea and air insertion skills and their ability to operate in all environments, they are capable of performing the full spectrum of SOF operations. Rigorously selected and trained to the highest standards, SFG operators are prepared to cope with whatever challenges the future security environment may bring. As such, the Special Forces Group remains the top tier of Belgian special operations capability and is set to grow significantly in the years ahead. As far as administrative support is concerned, a special arrangement should be envisaged for ensuring the SFG is treated as truly joint entity.

The Special Forces Support Group (SFSG) will constitute a new unit modelled on the British equivalent with which it shares the name. It will act as a quick reaction force for SFG operations and provide the immediate reaction capability for larger operations. For the former role, it must be capable of ‘take-and-hold’ tasks, secondary assaults and diversionary raids alongside SFG operators. As such, it also provides a wider force pool for training and mentoring foreign militaries – arguably the SOF task in highest demand. For the latter role, it needs to be able to rapidly project multiple companies into contested environments, making full use of strategic surprise effects so as to enable follow-on forces to arrive. It bears emphasis that this is as applicable to an eastern European context as it is to central Africa (cf.

Hooker 2015). For this reason, it is imperative that the SFSG reassembles all the existing paracommando companies and their enablers. Between the SFG and the SFSGs there exists a symbiotic relationship. Not only do the paracommandos constitute the primary recruitment pool of the SFG, but the SOCOM can also build on the strong commonalities of SFG and SFSG operations in terms of readiness requirements, command and control, and materiel. In terms of its organisation, the SFSG can be structured around companies specialised in different missions and operating environments (see Bilo and Weuts 2013). In practice, this would mean two companies for counterterrorism, urban and desert operations, two companies for amphibious and cold weather operations, plus two support companies including snipers, mortars, engineering and joint fire combat support. Such an unconventional structure also serves to underscore that the SFSG should not be used as a substitute force pool for taking on conventional tasks.

Special operations require more than just shooters and bayonets; they are critically dependent on enablers. Special forces aviation constitutes a case in point. As the Belgian Air Force is set to retire its C-130 Hercules transport aircraft in the years ahead, the need for tactical mobility complementary to the new Airbus A400M fleet is set to grow significantly. A small number of dedicated special aviation assets would offset this capability gap. One cost-effective option in the near term would be to earmark the existing NH90 tactical transport helicopters for such a purpose, the rotary wing capability being particularly suited for direct action. Short take-off and landing aircraft would provide a new capability that is extraordinarily useful for missions in remote areas. Equally important, however, is that the SOCOM can make full use of supporting networks in terms of psychological operations, civil affairs and intelligence links. Specialised

medical support and cooperation with naval forces is also required. Successful special operations are ultimately driven by a long process of mission analysis, intelligence fusion and joint planning (cf. Madden et al. 2016). Any special operations command must therefore develop and maintain strong relationships with all parts of the defence establishment. This requires both continuous effort and adequate staff resources.

A GUIDE TO EMPLOYMENT SCENARIOS AND EXERCISING CONTROL

A dedicated command must provide centralised stewardship for the entire national SOF community and advise the defence leadership on the use thereof. Only an officer of flag rank can provide the necessary stature and exercise the required influence in the budgeting process to turn this into reality. But if special operations are meant to serve policy, the question remains what is the appropriate corollary in terms of political guidance and oversight. This section therefore considers the various employment scenarios under which special operations forces could serve the Belgian population.

As a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union, Belgium's security policy is primarily geared towards making a proportional contribution to these organisations. This not only includes participating in collective security operations, but also (and more importantly) the latent ability to ensure the collective defence of all members. The ensuing quest for military readiness includes the development of special operations forces that are well trained for the tasks of special reconnaissance, direct action and military assistance. It would also be highly desirable for Belgium to contribute staff personnel to the NATO Special Operations Headquarters and other structures in order to stay plugged into the global SOF network on a permanent basis. Within the European External Action Service, the position of the Special

Operations Adviser must be reinforced.

Yet apart from these three tasks, the Belgian SOCOM would have a wider remit for meeting strictly national requirements. One core task is to protect Belgian citizens abroad and to conduct hostage rescue and non-combatant evacuation operations when required. While the character of this task may have changed as a result of the shrinking size of the Belgian community in Central Africa, its fundamental nature has not. In case of dire need, citizens can and will expect their government to rescue and protect them. Recent attacks on Western tourists in holiday resorts prove that such scenarios are anything but fantasy. The ability to react professionally – by generating an immediate response, ensuring proper information security and exploiting strategic surprise – therefore remains of paramount importance. Such future operations may well unfold in urban terrain and contested environments. The SOCOM should therefore prepare accordingly by sizing the Special Forces Support Group for operating above company-level. Precisely because Belgian forces are likely to find themselves outnumbered in such scenarios, they must mentally gear themselves for a distinctly unconventional fight.

Another debate concerns the use of special operations forces for homeland security and counterterrorism operations. The infamous 'Brussels lockdown' in November 2015 drove home the message that domestic security forces are easily overwhelmed when facing the risk of multiple and simultaneous incidents. Yet it cannot be the duty of Belgian military personnel to cater for domestic security permanently. This runs counter to the decision to demilitarise the *gendarmérie* in the 1990s and the corresponding transfer of financial resources from the Ministry of Defence to the Ministry of the Interior. While military forces can be made available on an exceptional basis – in case of *force majeure* – the aim must be to

transfer domestic security roles back to the federal and local police as soon as possible. It is precisely in this context that special operations forces can play a meaningful role. Their discrete and intelligence-led employment can be geared towards *regaining the initiative* over potential terrorist networks, so that static guarding duties and large-scale reactive lockdowns – with enormous cost to the economy – are not required. In order to be properly prepared to act in such an interagency context, special operations forces need to be able to work hand in glove with the federal police and other national security actors such as the Ministry of Justice and intelligence agencies.

The employment of special operations forces requires careful political deliberation and democratic control, both in multinational operations and even more so in a domestic context. For that reason it is important to be clear about decision-making procedures and civilian oversight. Like all other military operations, the use of special operations would need to be authorised by the government in its nucleus format (the so-called *kern*), involving the prime minister, vice prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs and defence. Given their sensitive nature, it is imperative that the *need-to-know* circle is kept as small as possible. At the same time, the Belgian parliament will want to exercise its role of oversight. For this purpose, it would be advisable to set up a restricted format of the defence committee to review special operations retrospectively and on a strictly confidential basis. In that sense, setting up the SOCOM would provide political leaders with more direct control *and* the duty to exercise this control with the required sense of responsibility and discretion.

CONCLUSION: WHO DARES WINS

Defence planning is about looking far ahead, for it takes many years to develop or regenerate capabilities. Establishing a Belgian SOCOM

provides a mechanism to retain and transform the longstanding legacy of the paracommando regiment and to grow and nurture that special set of forces that are in highest demand. Their usefulness and contemporary relevance stands beyond question. Both in NATO and EU contexts these forces of the highest readiness constitute a capability shortfall. In addition, they meet a critical requirement for purely national reasons, ranging from non-combatant evacuation to domestic counterterrorism in extraordinary circumstances. The Special Forces Group and paracommando units together form one of the crown jewels of the Belgian defence establishment. Putting them under a single, unified structure is about keeping up with international best practices and fostering that capability with the highest return on investment in a context of austerity.

A dedicated SOCOM would provide the necessary stewardship to the military community specialised in thinking unconventionally about defending Belgian interests and values wherever they come under threat. At a time when the Belgian armed forces are witnessing a dramatic transformation in terms of personnel numbers and equipment modernisation, this is exactly the capability set that is needed the most. The present *Strategic Plan 2030* puts forward a commendable argument for reversing the decline of the Belgian military level of ambition and providing the next generation with the necessary tools to ensure their security. Yet for several years to come, the Belgian defence establishment will continue to downsize as a result of a coming retirement wave amongst military personnel. This means that genuine regeneration of the force will only materialise in the late 2020s and beyond. This scenario carries significant risks. Consolidating and expanding special operations forces is a prudent hedge to mitigate negative surprises in the coming ten years and have at least one versatile instrument to cope with these risks if they materialise.

In the longer run, however, the trend of downsizing the armed forces cannot continue. Special operations forces cannot substitute for the numbers that only conventional forces can provide. Providing wide area security on land, securing lines of communication at sea, or controlling airspace: those are critical tasks that only conventional forces in sufficient quantities can accomplish. In terms of sheer numbers, the *Strategic Plan 2030* still eyes a force structure that falls significantly short of the *Strategic Plan 2015* that was approved in the more benevolent security of 2003: 34 fighter and 7 cargo aircraft instead of 90 and 11, respectively; 2 frigates and 6 mine-hunters instead of 3 and 7; and, most importantly, a single brigade plus special operations forces instead of two mechanised brigades and one paracommando brigade. Upgrading special operations forces can help offset some of the drawbacks of a smaller force, but in order to remain 'special', they do need to constitute a selected elite. The draining of the total force pool also saps the defence establishment of the possibility to recruit and train special operations forces. A SOCOM structure is therefore an essential but ultimately insufficient mechanism to cope with an environment in which security risks proliferate and come closer to home. Yet in the face of such risks, it is the unconventional mentality that one needs the most: *who dares wins!*

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