



BELGIAN DEFENCE: PUT YOUR TRUST IN PEOPLE



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (20 July 2021)

In Commentaries (https://www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_parent/commentaries/)

EU strategy and foreign policy (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/eu-strategy-and-foreign-policy/>),

European defence / NATO (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/european-defence-nato/>)

On the eve of the National Day, Sven Biscop reflects on Belgian Defence: budget, capabilities,

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This article was also published in De Morgen (<https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/defensie-bestaat-uit-mensen-net-het-aspect-dat-jarenlang-politiek-verwaarloosd-werd~b537c67a/>).

(Photo credit: Wikipedia)

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Problems such as those exposed in Belgium's military intelligence service ADIV/SGRS cannot find a structural solution unless Defence can hire sufficient personnel, with the right qualifications, to fulfil all of its tasks.

For the Armed Forces first of all consist of people. Alas, that is precisely the aspect that has been politically ignored for years. Recently, Defence fortunately can recruit more people again, but the fact is that this came too late. Important gaps had already fallen in the structures.

"People our Priority", Defence Minister Ludivine Dedonder's plan that puts people front and centre, is more than necessary, therefore. A core dimension, a general salary increase, is but normal. Defence was lagging too far behind (notably as compared to the police) to attract qualified people on a highly competitive job market.

Putting people at the centre also means putting trust in people, though. In an organisation in which men and women can be asked to put their lives at risk, the role of the "chief" is crucial, at all levels, including at the top: the generals and admirals.

Of course, not every general is top. But a real top general inspires his or her people and enjoys their confidence, including or perhaps even especially when he or she has to make difficult decisions and ask for sacrifices. Such generals, Defence ought to cherish. They must be given the means and the leeway to craft and implement plans, in order to achieve the objectives set by the Government and the Minister.

Those objectives, and the tasks of Defence, must be clear, therefore. The single most important reason why people join the military is the job itself. Nobody signs up if the task mostly consists of patrolling the streets at home. That the police should be capable of "Aid to the Nation" as it is called, is a task that Defence certainly takes to heart, but it is not the core mission.

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In a crisis like the pandemic or the floods, everybody obviously does what he can. And of course, those who see a rescue boat of Defence appear, rejoice. But citizens first of all expect measures to prevent floods. Similarly, people demand that homes for the elderly can take care of their guests themselves, even though they are happy when in an emergency Defence lends a hand. Defence cannot be a permanent alibi for underinvestment in other government services (such as civil protection).

That is why the expected updated of the Strategic Vision for Defence is very important for recruitment as well. This must refocus the core tasks again – which constitute the real motivation of our military personnel. First, collective defence, through NATO and the EU, of our own territory. “Territory” today obviously includes cyber space. The Armed Forces must also contribute to building resilience against so-called “hybrid” threats, such as espionage, sabotage, and disinformation – that requires a performing intelligence service. Second, continuing to contribute to collective security through significant deployments abroad.

To implement those two core tasks, our Armed Forces are lacking essential capabilities. The report of the Strategic Committee on Defence, of which I am a member, offers a menu of options for new equipment in all Components, without recommending one or the other option – it is up to the Defence Staff to elaborate a balanced range of capabilities

Moreover, 25,000 troops, the current target, will not suffice to make a significant long-term contribution in the Baltic states (to collective defence) and in the Sahel and Central Africa (to collective security) at the same time if and when required. The Belgian Armed Forces must increase beyond that number again. That once more demonstrates the importance of personnel and recruitment policy.

The coalition currently discusses the update of the Strategic Vision, with the same time horizon as the current version: 2030. For the Armed Forces, however, 2030 is tomorrow. From the political decision to the putting in the field of a capability easily takes a decade. Conclusion: the Belgian Government must decide in 2021 where our Armed Forces must be in 2040.

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Century (<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/grand-strategy-in-10-words>) (***Bristol***

University Press, June 2021).
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