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Editorial

Belgium : Cornerstone Cooperation

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The original dossier devoted to Belgium's defence, in French, was published in November 2023 (RMS+ No. 6/2023). This digital PDF online edition, translated into English, was developed with the support of the Swiss officer's society. The international edition of RMS+ has achieved strong success in a very short time, with over 11'000 downloads since June 2023.

These international editions are intended not only to present the defence and security policy aspects of a given country. In our opinion, they also serve to draw parallels and develop constructive reflexions on contemporary issues in Switzerland.

Belgium is often compared to Switzerland with regards to size, human geography, and history. But in many aspects, the two countries' very different experiences during the Second World War can arguably explain the contrasted paths taken since. While Switzerland remained neutral and maintained a strong autonomous defence policy until the end of the Cold War, Belgium committed itself to cooperation and integration - with NATO and the European Union, respectively.

While this strategy and partnerships were clearly purposeful and successful during the Cold War, the 'Dividends of Peace' period was characterised by a dwindling political support, a general disinterest, and

in parallel, shrinking budgets. Here too, cooperation and integration was hoped to bring solutions to the plummeting budget and equipment issues of the Belgian armed forces. As a percentage of annual GDP, the defense budget dropped from nearly 3% in 1988, to less than 1% in 2014.

This subcritical situation in turn led to the abandonment of many military capacities altogether - such as artillery and tanks - while others would only be possible in close cooperation with other countries - as agreements with the Netherlands or France would allow the formation of combined arms units.

Today, faced with a deteriorating international security context, increasing demands at home and abroad, and under considerable pressure from its partners, Belgium's defence will need to work hard to broaden its capabilities, widen its spectrum of operation from traditional stabilisation missions to high intensity warfare, once again. This will also require an increase in size of the forces, in order to limit and possibly resolve at least some of the contemporary strategic, operational as well as tactical dependancies and limitations.

A+V

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MAJOR GENERAL Mathias Tüscher, President, ARMS



Below : Belgian and French military cooperation: An "alarm battalion" has been deployed in Romania as part of the NATO reassurance mission.

Belgium

The Rebirth of Belgian Defense – A Plan for a Secure Future

Major General Guy Vallat
Defense Attaché - Belgium - France - Luxembourg

Following a long period of disinvestment, marked by the Jürgen Conings affair, and the ousting of the Commander of the Service Général de Renseignement et de la Sécurité (SGRS), Belgian defense found itself in a particularly difficult position at the end of 2021. These events, combined with the evolving geopolitical context, were important factors in the approval, in January 2022, under the impetus of Minister Dedonder, of the ambitious STAR (Security, Technology, Ambition, Resilient) recovery plan. This plan, allocates an additional €10.2 billion for new investments in defense, in addition to the €9.2 billion previously committed by the strategic vision of 2016 adopted by the Michel government.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities by Russia, the Belgian government understood and anticipated certain high impact changes capable of affecting the international security environment, and consequently recognized the imperative of upgrading the capabilities of its armed forces. Without seeking to rebuild former capabilities, especially those no longer available to the Belgian Army such as battle tanks or armored artillery howitzers, the ambitions set out in STAR should enable Belgian defense to "catch-up" and modernize. A true shift in paradigm, STAR and its ensuing decisions represent a complete overhaul in mentality, and is symbolic of the importance now placed on defense by the Belgian government and its political parties. Since 2018, no fewer than five ministers have held the defense portfolio.

Symbolic of this change is the increase in budget for the Belgian armed forces which is set to reach €6.9 billion by 2030. This would set the defense effort to 1.54% of the GDP. Under the impetus of Prime Minister De Croo, a cross-party agreement has even set a target of 2% of GDP by 2035.

All components will benefit from these budget increases. A cybercommand, endowed with both offensive and defensive capabilities will be created, and play a central role.

The Army, Navy, and Air Force will all benefit from new equipment programs such as a new helicopter fleet, several additional American MQ-9B *SkyGuardian* UAVs, for which its armament is the subject of much debate, more than 700 AKERON MPs (MBDA's anti-tank weapon) to equip its EBRC *Jaguar* armored reconnaissance vehicles, and 19 CAESAR artillery systems, in addition to the 9 already ordered.

STAR also provides €1.8 billion to support the Belgian defense industry, in particular its research and development programs for new technologies. Simultaneously, following an extended absence from major international industrial programs, Belgium is showing a renewed interest in joining them. Indeed, they recently announced their participation as an "observer" in the 6th generation SCAF fighter aircraft project.

In a mindset of pooling acquisitions, Belgium is seek-

