"Belgium's multilateral politics 2010-2015"

Liegeois, Michel

Abstract
This article argues that multilateralism is especially well-suited for small states such as Belgium because it allows them to increase and promote their presence in international forums, which in turn allows their positions on different international issues to reach a broader audience.

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MICHEL LIÉGEOS

Prior to the last five years, Belgium was quite active in multilateral politics. The country chaired several international bodies and institutions such as the Council of the European Union (from July 2010 until December 2010, after Spain and before Hungary) or was involved in many of these organisations, as when Belgium was a member of the United Nations Security Council in 2007-2008. After such an exceptional era – some diplomats call it ‘the five glorious’ – the return to a normal course of action might inevitably appear as a slight setback when it comes to the Belgian influence in international arena.

Nonetheless, this setback tends to be corrected through proactivity within the multilateral forums that remain the preferred channel for conducting Belgium’s foreign policy. Indeed, this article will argue that multilateralism is especially well-suited for small states such as Belgium because it allows them to increase and promote their presence in international forums, which in turn allows their positions on different international issues to reach a broader audience.

Michel Liégeois is a Professor of International Relations at the Université catholique de Louvain and Director of the CEGRI. This article benefited from the valuable support of CEGRI trainees Vanessa Vvor and Lucas Martin, who assisted in gathering information and writing the preliminary draft.

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Multilateralism: an ideal vector for conducting Belgium's external policy

A channel adapted to solve global problems

International cooperation seems to be more crucial than ever for solving global problems such as terrorism, global warming or migration flows. Generally speaking, multilateralism is particularly useful for states that are considered as "small" countries. For them, the relative added value of multilateral policy is higher than it is for more powerful states; multilateralism provides these countries with a forum and more room to manoeuvre for political action. It is especially noticeable in an arena such as the United Nations General Assembly, where the ‘one State one vote’ rule has the clear and immediate effect of not just equalizing power, but also of providing "small" countries with the collective capacity to balance powerful ones. One additional advantage of multilateralism concerns the commitment of states within multilateral organisations: membership does not come without obligations, which means that support cannot be based on voluntary premises. However, the main added value of organised multilateralism is undoubtedly the coordination of collective actions to tackle global challenges that neither individual states nor informal cooperation are capable of coping with. In the area of development, for instance, fragmented approaches have long proven inefficient. Multilateral organizations offer a coordination framework that enables more stable funding and a less scattered approach. In general, they also allow for a reduction of bargaining costs, especially compared to bilateral relationships for issues such as global warming, migrations and other global problems that require a multilateral forum of discussion to be resolved. For its part, Belgium have long claimed to consider the United Nations as the most legitimate player on the international stage, not only due to its universal character, but also because the organisation embodies values promoted by Belgium. These include the promotion of human rights, the rule of law and the right to peace, security and dignity. These priorities represent the driving force of Belgium's external policy.

It is important to keep in mind that even though participating in international organisations may increase a country’s influence on decision-making processes, the voting process does not represent the only way to impact the way that international policy is conducted. Providing informal influence, technical
expertise on the issue at stake and negotiation skills are other assets that can make a difference. Belgium proved in several instances that it is rather well equipped in this regard as shown for instance by its praised performance as EU Council presidency, UN Security Council member or by the frequent appointment of Belgian personalities for prominent international positions.

In issues of high significance for Belgium – such as the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness and the Millennium Development Goals – Brussels tries to be involved as much as possible in the decision-making process with the view of shaping the agenda as well as being part of the decision. Multilateralism seems to be the best if not the only way to achieve that goal. Finally, Belgium believes that multilateral organisations allow for a better coordination of different strategies, avoid the useless duplication of work and constitute an important pool of expertise.

Therefore, Belgium articulates its foreign policy through multilateralism and international organisations because Brussels considers those resources the most valuable for exercising its international influence and securing its interests.

The principles of Belgian multilateral politics

Belgium’s multilateral action is based on the respect for the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, respecting these principles alone cannot constitute an external policy for Belgium. As a result, the Belgian government has defined some strategic issues in order to exert an influence on the definition of multilateral organizations policies.

Belgium is particularly focused on the effectiveness of the multilateral action. Due to its size and its limited contributing capacity, Belgium also limits the number of international organisations that it partners with in order to ensure a proper concentration of the resources as well as efficient follow-up and control procedures.

Another important aspect of Belgium’s strategy within multilateral bodies consists of a regular application to the board of directors or to favour the appointment of national personalities in prominent positions, such as top executive manager, chairmanship or secretary general, in order to secure influence.

See the contribution of Molensers in this issue.
in the organisation itself. In situations where Belgium does not hold a prominent position, its representatives try to sustain a dynamic and proactive attitude that usually translates in a proactive commitment in the upstream work of the international organizations (IO). For example, Belgium might compose draft strategies and publications in order to move towards issues of particular attention, thereby contributing to a favourable agenda-setting process. Moreover, Belgium has proven efficient in building networks of partnerships in order to foster shared priorities in a particular organisation. This strategy does not apply to the United Nations, but rather to international financial institutions.

Belgium is also traditionally interested in reforming working methods and practices of the multilateral organisations in order to gain transparency, efficiency and legitimacy. Of course, Belgium follows the long-lasting debate on the reform of the UN Security Council, but because no concrete outcome is expected in the foreseeable future, Belgian diplomacy shifts its attention to more modest developments that might contribute to lesser yet immediate results that regard the day-to-day procedures of several international bodies. Furthermore, Belgium disagrees with the normative commitment visible in many statements and does not always implement them on the ground. Therefore, Belgium advocates for an increased follow-up to the work of international organisations and for a strengthened link between the normative and operational aspects of IO’s work. Belgium pays attention to the architecture of international aid, often considered as too complex, and calls for a better coordination between the different international organisations involved in multilateral aid. Belgium holds the view that each organisation must have a strict and well-defined mandate for which it brings real added value. Thus, Belgium seeks to avoid the unnecessary duplication of work and calls for additional synergy between the stakeholders. Again, size and resource constraints are key determinants of the importance Brussels attaches to the rationalisation of efforts, efficiency and to the prevention of overlaps. This rationalisation has to lead to a greater efficiency and a cost reduction. In that sense, the coordinating role of the United Nations Development Program (UNPD) is considered as paramount, especially through its presence on the ground in developing countries. The Belgian focus on rationalisation also concerns the multiple funding mechanisms. Indeed,

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3 In 2007, Gilles de Kerchove was appointed EU counter-terrorism co-ordinator. In 2017, Koen Vervaeke was appointed as Senior Coordinator for the Great Lakes and Director for the Horn of Africa, East and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean in the European External Action Service. In 2012, Peter Praet was appointed to the chief economic role on the European Central Bank’s (ECB) executive board.
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Belgium favours existing mechanisms and usually shows reluctance to the creation of new funds or additional structures in the area of multilateral financial help.

The multilateral development policy of Belgium is strictly linked to financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank. Thus, some Belgian personnel are delegated to Washington in order to follow the conduct and approaches of the Bretton Woods' institutions. Moreover, Belgium aims at mixed representation (Finance and Cooperation) in the managing bodies of the World Bank. Finally, the Belgian Ministry of Development and Cooperation often participates to the Development Committee of the World Bank and the IMF (DGCD, 2011). In order to allow for a faster reconstruction of war-torn countries, Belgium supports a reinforcement of the links between the World Bank and the United Nations for better coordination in developing countries during a crisis or in a post-crisis situation.

From a more general point of view, Brussels tends to consider multilateralism as the best way to take part to a globalised community of interests, which seems at least as important as its national agenda. Consequently, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) tries to adopt a defragmented approach of its foreign policy. Bilateral and multilateral actions must be considered in the framework of a coherent and comprehensive approach. Belgium believes that it has to specialize where it can bring expertise and that multilateral policy has to be more present in areas where bilateral relations prove insufficient. Belgium can count on a significant amount of knowledge on international organisations, and can therefore suggest new methods or standards. Conversely, Belgian skills may be very useful and contribute to the actions of international organizations, as in the case of the international efforts to stabilise the Great Lakes region, about which Belgian expertise is fully recognised.

Federal entities: Belgium as a model for a new type of diplomacy?

With the 1993 State reform, the Belgian Constitution entitled regional entities with enlarged prerogatives regarding the external aspects of their respective area of competence: that is, if a regional entity is competent in a given area domestically, it will be entitled to external action in this specific area. This external capacity encompasses the opening of diplomatic representations and the conclusion of binding international agreements. Even though the external
action of the Belgian Regions is being conducted in full autonomy from the Federal MFA, areas of cooperation and coordination with the latter still exist. Regional and federal representations abroad may sometimes share the same premises; they often take part in multilateral discussions together, forming ‘the Belgian delegation’ within international organisations. This original model is attractive, but it can also lead to some difficulties. Indeed, considering the unique principle of equalising norms that governs the Belgian process of regionalisation, the federal state and all sub-federal entities have to engage in complex coordination procedures in order to enable Belgian representatives to hold clear positions in various multilateral arenas where the issues at stake might belong either to the federal or to the regional level of competences. This difficulty is especially visible in the EU, but other instances, such as negotiations on climate change issues, are equally touched by this problem because the economy and environment are part of the various non-homogeneous competences that are at the origin of the problem. In this context, the cohesion and the efficiency of Belgium’s foreign policy relies heavily on consultative bodies whose role is to allow an alignment of the respective interests of all federal and regional stakeholders. The failure to reach a full agreement between the three Belgian regions in order to present a solid Belgian position at the COP21 meeting held in December 2015 in Paris, dramatically highlights the potential harm the Belgian model of federalism can cause to its external credibility.

The fact that Wallonia attaches a particular importance to issues such a culture or education is also beneficial to Belgium, especially when knowing that these challenges are central to Belgium’s multilateral politics. The same tendency can be noticed in development cooperation, which is an important dimension of the foreign policies of both Flanders and Wallonia. Differences between Flanders and Wallonia can also represent something positive. For example, Wallonia can promote French language whereas Flanders can promote Dutch. In the same way, the Belgian federal government can develop different diplomatic approaches considering the different working methods employed by both federal entities. Flanders’ model appears much more centralised than the Walloon one. With this specific diplomatic model, Belgium has established a network of diverse contacts and can now count on multiple instruments for multilateral diplomacy. Federal entities’ possibilities allow more flexibility than “classic” and “traditional” structures and appear less

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4 Unlike most federal States, the Belgian Constitution does not establish any hierarchy between the norms produced by the Federal level vs. the ones produced by the regional level.
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constraining. Indeed, Belgian federal entities look very advanced in the area of multilateral politics and could be a model for other European regions. The most emblematic example is probably the cooperation between the French-speaking Community and the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF). The OIF is an important international platform whose role tends to expand well beyond cultural and linguistic issues. Belgian regional bodies also participate in various international structures, such as the International Labour Office (ILO), the UNESCO or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). For its part, the Flanders Region improves its ties with the Council of Europe and OECD and, given the services-based economy of Flanders, cooperates with the WTO. Remarkably enough, the Flanders Region is the only regional body that is an associate member of a multilateral organisation (the World Tourism Organisation).

Belgian diplomatic priorities for today and for the future

Presence in the multilateral system

First of all, in the area of global security, Belgium has put a special emphasis on conflict prevention, the consolidation of the rule of law and the emergence of civil society in destabilised countries. In January 2015, during his speech on the priorities of Belgian diplomacy, Didier Reynders, Belgium’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, mentioned various important issues in this regard. The situations in Ukraine and Syria have been discussed in the same way as the Sahara-Sahel area, the Horn of Africa, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of the main and older geographical priorities of Belgian foreign policy remains the Great Lakes region. Belgian government dedicated not less than 1.679 000 euros to the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUSCO (La Chambre, 2012). Belgium’s long-lasting commitment in the area has been officially acknowledged and was praised by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on May 28, 2015. In the area of peace and security, it is worth noting the contribution of Belgium to the United Nations Peace-building Commission, which has counted Belgium as an important supporter from the onset of this body since its creation in 2005. As far as peace and security are

5 Named Federation Wallonia-Brussels, this institution exercises cultural and language related competencies in the francophone part of Belgium as far as in Brussels as far as French-speaking institutions are concerned.
concerned, the UN Security Council (UNSC) is undoubtedly the main multi-
lateral actor. Since the founding of the United Nations, Belgium has been
elected five times for a two-year term in the UNSC⁶. These ten years within
the Council enable Belgium to rank among the top ten countries with the most
frequently elected non-permanent members. The last Belgian mandate, in the
years 2007 and 2008, has been widely praised as a successful one (Bispoc,
Drieskens & Wouters, 2009). Almost immediately thereafter, Belgium identi-
ﬁed the next window of opportunity to consider a new term in the UNSC. In
the course of 2013, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that
2018 would be the target year for the election by the UN General Assembly for
a two-year term as non-permanent member of the Council from 2019-20 (La
Libre. 2013). As for now, two other countries of the ‘Western Europeans and
Other Group’ (WEOG) have announced their intention to run for the two
seats available: Germany and Israel.

Belgium’s commitment to conﬂict prevention and crisis management is not
limited to its involvement in the United Nations because Belgium also commits
itself to other organisations specialised in this area. Another interesting case is
OSCE in which Belgium has long been playing a signiﬁcant role through its
permanent representation in Vienna and its participation in the Permanent
Council. Belgium appreciates not only OCSΒ’s multifaceted approach to secu-
rity, but also its inclusive aspect. In 2013, Belgium stated that Libyan applica-
tion to join the group of Mediterranean Partners had to be taken into account.
According to Belgium, the OSCE has to play an important role in the defence
of human rights and the consolidation of democracy. This explains the connec-
tion made by Belgium between the OSCE and the Council of Europe. In addi-
tion, Belgium assumed the presidency of the Council of Europe from November
2014 until May 2015, which allowed Brussels’ diplomacy to increase its inﬂu-
ence on the international stage. From the Belgian point of view, the Council of
Europe and the OSCE are two complementary organisations that should there-
fore reinforce each other. In this regard, Minister Didier Reynders observed in
March 2015 that the OSCE has to ﬁght against radicalisation and extremism,
while the Council of Europe is competent in respecting human rights and bat-
tting against intolerance (Reynders, 2015). Similarly, commenting on the
situation in Ukraine, the MFA stressed the role played by the OSCE in the
reduction of tensions and drew attention to other instruments of the Council of

Europe, such as the Venice Commission for the reinforcement of democratic institutions, decentralisation, the fight against corruption and the organisation of local elections. As a result, it is logical that the Belgian Council presidency prioritises the application of democratic principles and the enhancement of relations between the Council of Europe and other multilateral institutions.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in 2010, Belgium exercised the chairmanship of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM 8) (de Crombrugghe, 2011).

Niche diplomacy and cluster commitment

The Belgian government repeatedly reaffirms that the core value underlying its multilateral politics is the promotion of inalienable human rights. Belgium wants to build a safer, fairer and more prosperous world. Belgium is also involved in multilateral treaties about disarmament and non-proliferation for human security. Belgium remains a dynamic actor in the promotion of the Ottawa Convention on the prohibition of anti-personal mines as well as the Oslo Convention on Cluster munitions, which entered into force in 2010. Such an involvement is coherent with the Belgian policy in peace and security, which includes a significant dimension on human rights. Indeed, the fight for human dignity is one of the most important lines of Belgian multilateral diplomacy. This component contains two interconnected issues: the respect of fundamental human rights and the fight for sustainable development, both topics of the Millennium Development Goals. These goals are part of an international political consensus about the necessity to make substantial progress in the area of human development, which requires multilateral actions. In this regard, Belgium aims at leading an ambitious multilateral policy of supporting agricultural productivity through investments in the relevant United Nations specialised agencies. Intrinsically linked to the latter, health-related issues such as child mortality or major epidemics also represent priority concerns for Belgium. The Belgian federal government calls for the implementation of a complementary multilateral and bilateral approach. In this way, Belgium wants to increase its contributions to the core funding of organisations dedicated to health issues while taking part in the monitoring of the different policies from within the board of directors. In keeping with Belgium’s aforementioned attention to the respect of human rights – especially those of children and women – Belgium increased its contributions to UNICEF activities and continues to draw attention to the protection of children in armed conflicts in international
debates. The respect of women’s rights – another priority for Belgium – fosters particular attention to the promotion of equality between men and women in all agencies financed by the Belgian government. The importance of the Human Rights Council for Belgium is illustrated by its motivation for participating in this multilateral structure. In the course of its 2009-2012 mandate, Steven Vanackere, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced the candidacy of his country to the Human Rights Council for the period 2015-2018, with the objective to ‘make the principle of non-indifference a reality (La Libre, 2011). Belgium had nevertheless to reconsider its aspiration as confirmed by Minister Didier Reynders in March 2012. Belgium will run for the 2016-2018 period. The elections took place in New York on 28 October 2015. Belgium was brilliantly elected with 172 votes. Such a success will certainly constitute an excellent launch pad for its aforementioned candidacy to a non-permanent seat in the UNSC.

The issue of sustainable development constitutes the other great priority for Belgium within the Millennium Development Goals. The action of Belgium in this area is still channelled through the United Nations and its Special Climate Change Fund. At the Climate Summit of Warsaw in November 2013, Belgium pledged 3.25 million euros to this fund, which finances programs in developing countries (La Libre, 2013). This amount is split between the federal government and the three regions of Belgium. However, this effort and the result of the Warsaw summit seem to be insufficient from the Belgian perspective, as expressed by the Energy Secretary Melchior Wathelet two days after the conference. In December 2014, the country announced the contribution of 51.6 million euros for the Green Climate Fund\(^7\), which would allow the Fund to reach the symbolic ten-billions dollar barrier, a figure still well below the $100 billion per year needed to help developing countries by 2020. In addition, pledged amounts do not always turn into actual payments. Belgium pledged 150 million euros for the period 2010-2012, but only paid 92 million (Rigot, 2015). Late payments and internal disputes about how to share the burden between the various components of the Belgian State tend to alter the effectiveness of the Belgian financial contribution to the Climate Fund. On the other hand, Belgium is following one of its favourite tracks by supporting nationals when

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\(^7\) The Green Climate Fund will finance projects and programmes in the public and the private sectors that promotes new models for climate finance, channelling investment from both the public and private sectors. It aims to maximize the impact of public finance in a creative way, and to attract new sources of private finance to catalyse investment in mitigation and adaptation projects in the developing world.
they run for prominent international executive position. Belgian diplomacy was therefore fully committed in supporting Professor Jean-Pascal van Ypersele’s candidacy for chairmanship of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Le Soir, 2014). Nevertheless, on 6 October 2015, despite this resolute support, van Ypersele was defeated by 78 votes against 56 in the second round of voting by the South-Korean economist Hoesung Lee.

**A clear willingness to participate in financial and commercial institutions**

Belgium, in line with European Union, is attached to multilateralism based on World Trade Organization (WTO) principles and argues that all initiatives have to be part of this framework. Didier Reynders justified this Belgian support to the WTO by stating that the policy of the organisation promotes the integration of the least-developed countries into the international trade. In 2013, after the Bali Agreement, the Minister of Foreign Affairs also declared that the adopted measures provide a reduction in administrative costs, which is beneficial for developing countries. Belgian political policy in the area of trade could be resumed by a will for more inclusive, transparent and sustainable multilateral rules.

As in the other domains of multilateral politics, Belgium aims to consolidate its presence within different institutions in order to influence the decision-making process from its origin until the final stage. Thus in 2010, Didier Reynders, who was then Minister of Finance, called for a Belgian representation in G20 with a rotational presence with the Netherlands or Luxembourg, in the same way as in the IMF (La Libre, 2010). However, this suggestion was not taken into consideration and the topic has not been raised recently. By contrast, Belgium successfully reached an agreement in June 2015 to become a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)\(^8\) created in October 2014, although not as a founding member (7sur7, 2015). The objective of this organisation is the stimulation of Asian economic growth. According to Johan Van Overtveldt, the Minister of Finance, such cooperation also benefits Belgium as a result of the growing importance of exchange between Belgium and Europe with Asia. Belgian accession could be effective in 2016.

\(^8\) For some odd reasons, Belgium was one of the very few EU members that did not join the AIIB as a founding member.
The fight against terrorism brought to the agenda

The fight against extremism and terrorism has developed into an important ground for multilateral cooperation. Even though this matter is not new, it has suddenly become a top issue for Europe and for Belgium. On May 24, 2014, Belgium was the theatre of a major attack on the Jewish museum in Brussels. In the course of the following months, the events that took place in Paris in January and November 2015 had a direct impact in Belgium, where preventive neutralisations of terrorist cells were performed by the Belgian police in January and a significant upgrade of security measures were decided in November. The attacks in Brussels in March 2016 confirmed the need to take action. In addition to a series of internal measures dedicated to the fight against terrorism and radicalism, including the use of military units to execute static surveillance missions of potential targets, the federal government called for enhanced international cooperation, especially in sharing information and intelligence, but also at the level of security forces, police and magistrates of European countries. The Minister of Foreign Affairs also stressed the need to make decisive progress in view of the adoption of the Passenger Name Records (PNR), which was finally adopted in early 2016 after a long opposition from the European Parliament based on privacy concerns. As part of an emergency multilateral agenda to prevent further terrorist attacks, Didier Reynders also highlighted the reinforcement of the Schengen Information System and of the control of European borders and an increased use of EUROPOL lists to control foreign fighters.

Belgium contributes to the fight against terrorism in various multilateral organisations. Indeed, Belgium is a member of the United Nations Counter Terrorism Centre’s (UNCTC) advisory board. Founded in 2012, this centre is in charge of supporting the implementation of the Counter Terrorism Strategy around the world. Belgium is also involved in the UN group that supports honest and fair sanctions against terrorist acts. Brussels is also aware of the interest of a stronger presence and influence within Interpol, as demonstrated in July 2015 when Catherine De Bolle, the Chief of Belgian Police, announced her candidacy to one of the thirteen seats of the Executive Committee of the organisation (La Libre, 2015). The Minister of Home Affairs, Jan Jambon, supports this initiative. Even if Interpol Executive Committees only meet three times a year, they play a crucial role because they are in charge of supervising the Interpol Secretary General and of developing the organisation’s strategic
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orientation. Catherine De Bolle stated her will to give priority to the fight against terrorism and cybercrime. In the area of cybercrime, she wants Interpol to develop a real knowledge centre, able to support member states with reduced capacities.

Finally, Belgium's fight against extremism also requires a particular attention to radicalisation. Belgium aims to develop a communication strategy and counter-discourse against radicalisation and insists on the important role of the judicial system, all instruments of multilateral bodies such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

Conclusion

Belgium's foreign policy attaches major importance to multilateralism by conviction as well as by interest. This commitment dates from the end of WWII, when Belgium relinquished its neutrality policy that proved inefficient twice in the span of less than forty years. This major shift towards multilateralism in terms of security policy was soon followed by similar moves in the field of trade, economics and other areas. What has been described here is nothing else than the contemporary manifestation of an uninterrupted multilateral trend that has represented the backbone of Belgian foreign policy for the past seven decades.

If Belgium wants to keep up on the same path, it should be cautious to secure essential assets, without which significant problems could emerge. The first asset is the Belgian diplomatic network. While remaining rather large, considering the size of the country, the Belgian network of embassies has been gradually reduced during the last decade due to budgetary constraints. However, the degradation of the Belgian network cannot follow a similar trend in the coming years without having an impact on the overall diplomatic performance of the MFA, which relies heavily on the flow of information and on the effect that only a dense network is able to produce. Another important asset is the quality of Belgian diplomatic workforce, which is a direct consequence of a highly competitive selection process. The reform of the diplomatic status adopted in August 2014 by the Belgian government aims at introducing more flexibility in the MFA personnel deployed abroad by merging three previously distinct statuses – diplomat, consul and cooperation attaché – into a single one. The future will soon tell whether this reform has an impact on the quality of the Belgian representatives around the world. The military is the last asset that
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has to be considered. Belgium is among the European countries that have most dramatically reduced their military spending after the end of the Cold War. Yet, Belgium has been able to take part in almost all EU military operations while being present under the UN flag in various operations. After the withdrawal of its contribution to UNIFIL in 2015, Belgium has almost disappeared from the list of military contributors to UN peace operations. This is not an ideal signal to send from a country that will soon compete for a non-permanent member seat on the UNSC.

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