The impact of the European Union Common Foreign and Security Policy on the foreign policy of Belgium and the Netherlands

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Introduction

The support of Belgium and the Netherlands for European co-operation efforts goes back as far as the inter-war period. From the fifties onwards, they are the two small European countries at the core of European integration. Both countries thus have a long record of active support for supranational arrangements within the EEC/EC/EU. One should therefore expect that the two countries would be quite happy to adapt their foreign policy to that of the EU as a whole, even if this means the loss of national autonomy in the conduct of their own foreign policy. Whether the former European Political Co-operation (EPC) and the current Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), indeed had such an impact on the foreign and security policy of the two countries is the central question we address in this chapter from two different national perspectives.

Foreign policy change - adaptation and socialization

Before both the Netherlands and Belgium joined the EEC as two of the six founding member states, the Atlantic Alliance and NATO in particular has been for both countries the main point of reference in the conduct of their foreign policy. Dutch and Belgian EEC membership and their participation in the EPC have not really changed this fundamental pattern of the foreign policy behaviour of both countries. For many years successive governments in Belgium and the Netherlands managed to reconcile the two conflicting loyalties to NATO and the EEC by making a distinction between the country's membership of the EC and its participation in NATO. While the EC membership served their economic interests, NATO membership provided the countries the necessary security. That way support for the ultimate goal of a federal Europe had never to be at the expense of being a faithful ally within the Atlantic Alliance.

When the EC members started to deal with foreign policy issues in the early 1970s within the EPC framework, Dutch foreign policy makers insisted on keeping security matters out of the EPC agenda to avoid any conflict of interest between the EC and NATO. The Dutch attempt to integrate the CFSP into the institutional framework of the EU during the intergovernmental negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty represents therefore, on first sight, a basic change in the former Dutch foreign policy pattern. However, closer examination of the Dutch endeavour learns that it simply originated in the Dutch conviction that the creation of the EU offered a unique opportunity to bring about a merger between the economic external relations and the CFSP. This would have caused a unitary institutional structure instead of two separate institutional frameworks for the external economic relations and the CFSP. Moreover, the Dutch support for the revival of the WEU as the defence arm of the EU and the building of a European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI), has more to do with the removal of the Soviet threat which has changed the entire European security environment. A revised NATO remains

the cornerstone of Dutch security, as the most recent 'policy paper' on Dutch defence policy indicates .[1]

Compared to the Netherlands, at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, Belgium was much more outspoken in its pursuit of détente between East and West. One of the arguments used at the time was that détente would provide for a more favourable environment for a more autonomous European role in world affairs. The latter, in turn, was considered necessary in view of the American involvement in Vietnam and the unilateral American dollar policy that led to the demise of the Bretton Woods system between 1971 and 1973.

The Treaty of Maastricht, as well as the expected enlargement of the EU, brought some modifications in the traditional policies of both countries towards the EU itself and towards other member states. These modifications were somewhat different in both countries. The Netherlands, like Belgium, has traditionally resisted tendencies within the EU to establish institutional structures that would erode the principle of supranationality. The Netherlands, as mentioned above, campaigned for a supranational Union when it presided over the last stage of the intergovernmental negotiations over the Maastricht Treaty. But it took a more realistic attitude towards the basically intergovernmental decision-making structure of the CFSP, when it chaired as President in office the final intergovernmental negotiations over the Amsterdam treaty. Particularly significant in this connection is the fact that the Dutch government actually has given up its traditional strategy of arguing in favour of supranationalism to escape a *directoire* of the larger states and accommodated itself to the coalition building realities within the EU. In an enlarged EU the Netherlands clearly wants to be part of the core, grouped around the French-German tandem. This has the consequence that the Netherlands pursues a good understanding with the French-German axis instead of ganging up against it, even if this is at the expense of the traditional support for Anglo-American positions.

Belgium has remained quite 'orthodox' and rather unswerving in its original European orientation. Despite the fact that the end of the eighties saw an adherence to diverging opinions among the Belgian political elite, the government positioned itself as a advocate of a more forceful European player in defence matters, even that were to be realised at the expense of NATO primacy. This was demonstrated both in the discussions concerning the second pillar in the Maastricht Treaty (and its WEU annex), and in the Belgian advocacy of a WEU-led operation in the Yugoslavian civil war. In the event, the latter was cancelled in September 1991 as a result of the opposition of a rather small number of more Atlantic-oriented countries, including the Netherlands and the UK.[2]

After thirty years of co-operating with the other EU member states within the EPC and CFSP frameworks, Dutch and Belgian foreign policy makers have fully internalised the habits of working together. This relates not only to the practice of informing and consulting each other on international issues, but also to the definition of Dutch and Belgian foreign policy positions in terms of agreed European common positions. Dutch and Belgian foreign policy-makers still try to convince their partners to accept their views on certain foreign policy issues during the political decision-making process leading to such a common position. But once agreement on a common position has been reached both governments will adopt it as their own national position. Any attempt of 'going alone', where preference is given to a national position over a common European position, is out of question.

In this respect it should be mentioned that Dutch foreign policy makers have always been reluctant to argue in terms of 'egoistic' narrow national interests.[3] They prefer to define the national interest in a broader sense and to see it as serving a greater good. Thus, promoting an international legal order is a declared long term crucial foreign policy goal, while the preservation of the national level of prosperity is considered to be a short term vital national interest. Being a small trading nation Dutch policy makers have actually always regarded a stable international legal order a basic pre condition for achieving prosperity. This notion is re-emphasised in a recent review of Dutch foreign policy that says, that promoting such a global interest does not imply that the government has lost sight of its own national interests and its duty to represent the concrete interests of individuals and companies abroad.[4] European integration, for example, has advanced peace and stability in Europe but also serves Dutch interests both in Europe as world-wide. It has boosted Dutch trade with its EU partners and has strengthened the economic role of the country as an international transit and distribution centre.

Enlightened self-interest' was a primary source for the original European orientation of Belgium during the inter-war years. This also continued to be the driving force in the current definition of the Belgian position on European matters. Membership of the EC/EU is seen as a means to reducing the power and influence of the great member-states over the smaller states, thus enhancing the relative weight of the smaller member-states in the decision-making process. In the economic as well as in the CFSP domain, Belgium uses its EU membership as a means to levelling the playing field. This explains the outspoken Belgian hostility towards the idea of 'Contact Groups' or *directoires* of the greater member states, which hollows out CFSP policy-making.[5] Belgium has endorsed only reluctantly the possible future concept of a core-Europe, since this might be the only alternative to a Europe *à la carte*. The latter form of European construction is considered to be detrimental to the influence the smaller states acquired laboriously through the institutional set-up of the EEC/EU. The renewed 'agressive bilateralism' which seems to be growing lately in the external commercial and economic policies of some countries, is still largely absent in Belgium.

In addition, in view of domestic political and constitutional rearrangements, nowadays advocates of an increased role for the sub-state units (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) consider Europe as a convenient and comfortable terminal station for the train of successive state reform efforts in Belgium. As Europe takes over many of the functions of the central Belgian state and others are being devolved to the sub-state political actors, an ideal scenario is thus presented for coping with tensions rising from the perceived diverging interests and policies of the communities. According to opinion polls[6] and academic research[7] this scenario, however, is a view held by a minority of the public opinion at large, both in Flanders and in Wallonia; among political elite on the other hand, especially at the (sub)state level, it is endorsed quite strongly.

Foreign policy process – domestic and bureaucratic

Although European integration in general and the CFSP in particular is still an undisputed issue in the domestic Dutch debate, in recent years some Dutch politicians have become much more reluctant to transfer national sovereignty in the area of foreign policy to the EU.[8] These political leaders have began to express some second thoughts about how far the European integration should go, especially in an enlarged Union where the Netherlands is one of the twenty to twenty six members. The cautious attitude is echoed in the reluctance of some Dutch political leaders to give up veto power in CFSP matters. It is also reflected in their opposition to replace the Presidency by a directorate which would secure the involvement of the larger states in CFSP matters. Since this would probably imply that the Netherlands would have to rotate with the

other two Benelux countries in such a directorate, the Netherlands would not always be present at the making of decisions that might touch upon vital Dutch interests.[9]

The Dutch government, on its part, has not adopted openly such a position, which basically holds the view that the only way to defend Dutch interests is to be present when the decisions are taken. It realises that institutional innovations that would lead to more efficiency in EU decision-making in an enlarged Union, are inescapable. However, in an attempt to limit the extension of the powers of the large states at the expense of the smaller members, the Dutch government has suggested to replace the Presidency by a team of member states so that both large and smaller member states will have more opportunities to sit behind the 'driving wheel' of the Union. In a Union of 20 members each member state would have to wait under the current system 10 years before it can act as president in office. The government also believes that qualified majority voting contributes to the effectiveness of decision-making and has to be applied to most policy areas, including at some point the CFSP, before the next enlargement round. To appease its domestic opponents, the government demands a larger number of votes in the event a reallocation of votes takes place. The Dutch government has already tried to do so during the intergovernmental negotiations over the Treaty of Amsterdam and it will certainly repeat its demand for alarger number of votes during the next revision of the current institutional arrangements within the EU.

One of the most basic institutional changes Belgium seeks in the European integration process, is the substitution of the unanimous decision-making in the Council for qualified majority voting. This includes CFSP, where Belgium hopes gradually to achieve the same decision-making procedures as in the first pillar. This emphasis follows from the original Belgian objective of European integration, namely reducing the power of the larger neighboring states, even at the expense of one's own right of veto.

Dutch membership of the EC/EU had almost no impact on the way the making of Dutch foreign policy making is organised. The two basic principles underlying governmental policy making in the Netherlands: namely, departmental autonomy and collective decision-making in the Dutch council of ministers, have determined the making of the country's foreign policy throughout the long period of membership. As a consequence of the Dutch adherence to the principle of departmental autonomy, it is not the foreign ministry but the responsible ministry that deals with the relevant issue in the EU or any other international organisation. The foreign ministry was given in 1972 the leading role in the preparation and formulation of the national negotiation position on EC/EU matters in the Council of Ministers. It is also the State Secretary for European Affairs, located in the foreign ministry and supported by its officials, who chairs the crucial meetings of the inter-ministerial Co-ordination Committee for European Integration where the negotiation positions are drafted. But the preparation of these drafts remains actually within the specialised ministry. This means that in practice the foreign ministry, besides its overall responsibility for the preparation of a coherent Dutch negotiation position, carries the sole responsibility only for CFSP issues. But even here it has to share this responsibility with the ministry of defence when the concerned issue involves security matters. Despite the increased involvement of the Prime Minister in the framing of the CFSP as a consequence of the Prime Minister's participation in the European Council, the foreign ministry has kept its primary responsibility for the formulation of Dutch positions regarding the CFSP. However, the decisions taken by the European Council with respect to CFSP issues, have become the main points of reference for Dutch foreign policy makers. Departmental autonomy ends nevertheless

at the cabinet level where every negotiation position taken by a Dutch minister or prime minister at the EU or any other international organisation is decided collectively in cabinet.

The Dutch foreign ministry has recently been subjected to a rigorous reorganisation, but this had more to do with domestic politics than with EU membership, let alone the introduction of CFSP. Moreover, the department within the foreign ministry which is responsible for the co-ordination of a Dutch negotiation position in the Council of Ministers, was not touched by the reorganisation. Also the decision-making procedures which regulate the preparation of such a negotiation position have not been affected by the reorganisation.

In Belgium, historical research[10] supports the view, paraphrasing von Clausewitz, that foreign policy is the continuation of domestic policy with other means. The Belgian elite's original choice for European co-operation (and even integration) in the inter-war period followed naturally from its economic and ideological interests. First, the neighbouring countries' markets have always constituted the necessary foundation for the commercial and industrial interests of the Belgian social elite. Secondly, a multilaterally organized Europe (from the 1920s onwards) offered a more stable and predictable international environment for those interests. Thirdly, the degree to which the larger neighboring countries were linked by international arrangements, was considered commensurate to the freedom of movement available to the smaller countries in the commercial, economic and also diplomatic fields. Fourthly, the supranational *economic* organization of Europe from the 1950s onwards made it possible (for the center-right wing of the political elite) to pursue the classical liberal policy of limited political interference in economics. Finally, and from the seventies onwards, the supranational *political* organization of Europe provided the political elite (and especially its center-left wing) with regulatory mechanisms with regard to issues of which the distinction between domestic and foreign dimensions had become blurred.

In its narrow sense, CFSP has virtually been untouched by domestic variables. Security and foreign policy (as distinct from commercial diplomacy) never ranked as high a priority in Belgian foreign policy since its independence in 1830. Moreover, there exists a rather strong consensus on the CFSP in the Belgian political elite as a result of the broadly accepted view (since the mid-1950s) that supranationality strengthens the influence of small states in foreign policy-making. Moreover, even most adherents of a enhanced importance for the sub-state actors, still generally accept that 'high politics' remain the competence of the national government. This has preserved the major role of the (federal) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Ministers office, in the CFSP-field.

As a result, however, of the continuous constitutional reforms since 1970, policy areas other than the strict CFSP domain have required a much more systematic adaptation. The sub-state actors, called the 'federated entities' (Communities and Regions) acquired in this process far-reaching 'sovereign' powers, some of which including an important international dimension. Since, contrary to other federal states, there exists no legal hierarchy between the national and the sub-state levels, the federated entities now retain exclusive rights in specific domains. As a consequence, the Communities and Regions acquired in 1993 international treaty-making power over matters in which they have exclusive competence. Only in very specific and clearly defined circumstances, the central state may act temporarily in lieu of the bodies of the Communities and the Regions.

This necessarily led to new *sui generis* arrangements for policy and decision making in a number of fields, such as culture, education, industry and research, environmental and health policies, energy, agriculture and even the internal market. Partly in contrast with the Netherlands, Belgian policy positions on European matters are defined in a twofold process. They are first

prepared in the so-called 'European co-ordination', a crucial consultative body set up at the European desk of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The final decision then lies with the so-called 'Interministerial Conference on Foreign Policy'. Both bodies meet regularly and comprise all departments with a stake in European matters, including the sub-state actors. Decisions concerning the Belgian position have to be reached by consensus. It is important to note that representatives of the Communities and Regions are always invited, even if the subject at hand deals with federal competencies (such as the agenda of the General Affairs Council or Ecofin). This original set-up (which includes more bodies than the ones listed above and which is now legally codified) makes it possible for Belgium to arrive at European Council meetings with a position which has been dealt with on beforehand by all relevant departments (thus in accordance with article 146 of the Treaty of Maastricht stating that 'the Council is comprised of a representative of each Member State'). If such a domestically negotiated position needs urgent adjustment, the Belgian representative will either consult with the relevant federal or federated authorities, or he/she can, exceptionally and *ad referendum*, take a provisional line, which has then to be confirmed or invalidated within three days.

This institutional set-up also makes it possible for Belgium to be represented in the Council by a sub-state Minister. In order to do this, the configurations in which the Council meets, have been classified into four categories according to whether the subject matter falls entirely or mainly under the federal jurisdiction and entirely or mainly under the jurisdiction of the federated entities. After some initial difficulties, this set-up has been working rather smoothly. This is above all due to the goodwill and the pragmatism of all partners concerned. It also implies, however, a rather small foundation for Belgian foreign policy in terms of the long-term sustainability of its decision-making mechanisms. It is open to reasonable doubt whether the goodwill displayed by the various entities so far will remain available in the future, in the event that the different government levels would be directed by governmental coalitions of a different composition. Domestic tensions could easily translate into a deadlock in the foreign policy field, since all partners involved have de facto the right of veto. Especially in the so-called 'mixed treaties', where competencies of both national and sub-state actors are involved, decision-making could become hostage to purely domestic policy calculations.

Moreover (but this is not typical for Belgium alone) foreign policy decision-making in European matters will probably come under increased pressure in the years ahead, since European policy can no longer be called 'foreign' while it cannot be labelled entirely domestic either. European decision-making carries important domestic consequences. A first obvious result is that the role of the heads of state and government on the diplomatic scene has increased significantly following from their role as core referees in domestic affairs and the latter's increasing crossing borders in terms both of content and instruments. A second consequence is that the influence of the ministry of Foreign Affairs decreases in proportion to the increasing autonomy of other, so-called technical, ministries. Within the European context, this evolution expresses itself institutionally in the decreasing role of the General Affairs Council. A possible result of these changes could be the reduction the ministry of Foreign Affairs to a sheer technical ministry accepted by other ministries at best in a role of an 'escort service': Foreign Affairs puts its services (international infrastructure) at the disposal of other ministries which otherwise develop their own autonomous diplomacy. This evolution seems inescapable as the border line between domestic and foreign policy will undoubtedly continue to wane, at least in European affairs.

Foreign policy actions – with or without the EU

As the CFSP still has a voluntary character, the extent to which the CFSP really presents a limit on the freedom of a member state to make its own foreign policy choices, depends of course on how seriously a member state takes the obligations under the CFSP provisions. Some member states don't hesitate to pursue their own interests, independently of the CFSP. Other members simply obstruct further decision-making on a common position or a joint action. Since the Netherlands is very committed towards its obligations under the EU treaty, the CFSP provides from time to time a constriction on foreign policy choices. As common positions and joint actions can only be taken by consensus, it repeatedly faces situations where it has little other choice but to line up with its European partners along the lowest common denominator although the government would have preferred another outcome.

A good example of such a dilemma is the implementation of human rights norms, which is given a high priority in its foreign policy. The Dutch government had to experience on several occasions that in spite of the CFSP rhetoric about the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, most of its partners are not willing to subordinate the common foreign policy to the promotion of human rights when the protection of human rights clashes with economic interests. When the government tried to use its Presidency to conduct a more assertive common policy towards countries that violate human rights, it was forced by its partners to back down on the question of human rights. The main argument was that such a position interfered with the economic relations of some member states with the country concerned. The Dutch foreign minister was, for instance, heavily criticised by France when he made some remarks during the Dutch presidency about the violation of human rights in China.

But the need to conduct a foreign policy in agreement with the CFSP may also offer an opportunity for policy action. It is obvious that Dutch diplomacy has much more leverage when it acts in name of the EU as such, especially when the country occupies the Presidency. This applies of course to every other small member state as well, but it is much more relevant for the Dutch who are eager to play an active role on the international stage. Thanks to its EU Presidency, Dutch diplomacy, for example, was able to leave its fingerprints on the EC involvement in the crisis in Former Yugoslavia. The Netherlands initiated the EC conference on Yugoslavia in The Hague, and set up the EC Monitoring Mission which was a novelty in the EPC practice.

On several occasions the Dutch government has used its participation in the EPC (which has been replaced by the CFSP) to legitimise a modification in its traditional foreign policy pattern. The common position towards the Arab-Israeli conflict agreed upon within the EPC framework after the October war of 1973, served as a perfect cover-up to overcome the domestic uneasiness over the shift in the Dutch position towards that conflict in the mid-1970s. The Dutch government had to change in the 1970s its one-sided pro-Israel image to appease the Arabs and to protect the Dutch economic interests in the Middle East. The CFSP offered the Dutch government also the opportunity to hide behind the common positions when it wanted to escape difficult choices on controversial issues. So was the initial inability of the EPC partners to agree on severe economic measures against South Africa to support the international anti-apartheid campaign used by successive Dutch governments to legitimise its reluctant policy at that time towards the implementation of full-scale economic sanctions against South Africa. The most important argument the government used in the domestic debate over the implementation of such measures, which would have damage the economic relations between the two countries, was that the implementation of full-scale economic sanctions would have make sense only when they were taken by all EC members.

In Belgium, CFSP is largely seen as a 'multiplicator' for Belgian foreign policy possibilities and influence. Until now, CFSP has been no major constriction for the foreign and security policy-making of Belgium. In positive terms, participation in the CFSP has made it possible for Belgian foreign policy-makers to be involved in foreign policy issues without having to elaborate a national position where such a position would have been of insignificant value (Albania, Cambodia, the Western Sahara provide good examples). More importantly, CFSP enables a small country as Belgium to pursue foreign policy objectives, which it would be unable to achieve on its own.

For instance, during the crisis preceding the Gulf war (1990-1991). Belgium consistently insisted upon a European framework in order to achieve the joint European down playing of an exclusively military option - considered to be the preferred American, but not the preferred Belgian option. By positioning its effort inside the EC (and WEU) framework and by trying to forge a distinctive European approach, the Belgian government believed it could pursue a broader political agenda.[11] It included recognition of the political nature of the Palestinian question and the maintenance of a European-Arab dialogue - both traditional Belgian objectives. Through the EC framework Belgium was able to liase with like-minded countries, including the larger member-states such as France and Germany and thus to increase the efficacy of its effort. As a small country in a military coalition (NATO), it would have been much more difficult for Belgium to raise these points.

Another example is the issue of European defence. In the run up to the Maastricht Treaty, Belgium stressed its preference for a more autonomous European defence, with the strengthening of the WEU as a first step towards its realisation. This would have provided an alternative to NATO, which at that time was seen as a Cold War relic. Reinforcing the French and German view of the WEU as primarily the military arm of the European construction, Belgium helped to define the terms of the formulation of the 'WEU-compromise' in the annex to the Maastricht Treaty, defining the WEU both as an integral part of the European construction and simultaneously as a European pillar of NATO, thus leaving both options open. Belgium was also an active participant in the drafting of article J.4.1. of the same Treaty which states the goal of 'a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence'.[12]

From the beginning of the 1990s, Belgian foreign policy makers have additionally used the CFSP, along with other multilateral and bilateral channels, to increase the effectiveness of its own foreign policy towards Central Africa. This has been done especially through the Council Working Group on Africa and the Council meetings themselves. Working from the general principle of keeping Central Africa on the agenda of the EU, Belgium has succeeded at several occasions in rallying the EC/EU behind its own position. This was the case, for instance, at the end of 1994, when Belgium pursued an active bi/multilateral diplomatic exercise organized around four key issues. First, organising the return of the refugees; second, encouraging national reconciliation and establishing the rule of law in Rwanda; third, maintaining stability in Burundi and forth, promoting international co-ordination (as opposed to the then fragmented approach of the international community towards this region). The General Affairs Council of November 1994 and the subsequent Essen Summit in December endorsed the Belgian policy, thus giving it a much broader international base. However, it is obvious that the so-called 'europeanization' or multilateralization of the Belgian Africa policy also implies the possibility of 'dumping' the intricate and intractable situation in Central Africa into a more anonymous European decision making process. This offers a Belgian government, if it should wish to do so, the opportunity of pretending to search for a broad supporting base, while in reality the europeanization is a screen for non-activity.

Besides the largely advantageous character of CFSP for Belgium, there are some, albeit minor, examples of what might be called 'constriction', examples which demonstrate how Belgian foreign policy was forced in a direction which it did not want. This was the case in the 1980s, when Belgium was forced to endorse the trade sanctions against South Africa. Until then, Belgian foreign policy-makers had maintained that trade sanctions against South Africa were not in the best interest of the black majority. From the moment that a majority within the EC choose the opposite view, Belgian foreign policy-makers could no longer argue that unilateral trade sanctions would be of no avail and contrary to Belgium's national interests. As a result of its EC-membership Belgium had thus to abandon its implicit pro-South African diplomatic stance.

It can be expected that the CFSP extending to 'hard' military matters in the future, the instances of constriction will increase. Since Belgium champions European decision-making in foreign affairs, including defence, it will be impossible to withdraw from participating in operations decided under CFSP. This has already happened in the case of former Yugoslavia. In the past, Belgium has demonstrated a conspicious lack of interest in Eastern and Central Europe. It has always abstained from any concrete engagement in the region, which was never considered relevant to Belgian national interests. However, as Yugoslavia entered European decision making in 1990, Belgium has become increasingly militarily involved in this region for the first time in its history.

Tiers of exclusivity

Within the Union no tiers of exclusivity exists as far as the Netherlands and Belgium are concerned, comparable to the Bonn-Paris axis. The actual absence of tiers of exclusivity within the EU reflects a long standing Belgian and Dutch habit of eschewing any such relationship with its neighbours. This would not only hinder relations with the other neighbouring countries, but would also result in a form of dependency of a small country upon a larger neighbour.

Some observers of EU politics consider the Benelux, however, as a privileged relationship or a 'subsystem' between three small EU member-states. But for quite some time, reality has shown a rather different picture. The Benelux started during the Second World War (after some initial hesitation in both the Dutch and Belgian governments in exile) as a reaction to the pending marginalisation of small countries in the post-war organisation of Europe. In the early years the Benelux functioned both as a laboratory for economic multilateralism and a co-ordination mechanism for the three member states in multilateral negotiations in order to defend their position more effectively. This was the case in the negotiations on the Marshall plan of 1947 and in the Conference of London of 1948, which gave birth to the Federal Republic of Germany. In the 1950s however, the former function was taken over by the trade liberalisation effort within the GATT as well as the EEC frameworks, whereas the latter function gradually disappeared.

From then on, the Benelux merely offers an irregular and informal meeting place, without a specific agenda or objectives. However, the mere fact that it exists, offers the member-states on specific occasions a ready starting point for political co-ordination and common initiatives, if they wish to do so. Irregular formal Benelux-demarches are undertaken within the EU, such as in the run up to Amsterdam, especially when the position of smaller states within the Union are being marginalised.

However more recently, as a result of such more or less successful attempts to heighten the visibility and efficacy of the three small countries' common position, the Benelux has tended to become a more permanent preparatory decision-making level for the countries evolved. Meetings in order to straighten out joint positions have become far more regular, on the level of the ministers involved as well as on the officials' level. Even high level summits at the prime

ministers' level have become more institutionalised than ever before in the Benelux' past. This is no guarantee of success, as the attempts in forging a common Benelux-position in the IGC leading to the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 demonstrates. Important divergences on institutional reform, especially a Dutch proposal for a reweighting of Council votes which would have favoured the Dutch, prevented the Benelux-countries from acting jointly during the endgame. [13]

The Netherlands has no special relations with other countries or regions outside the EU. Until the end of the cold war successive Dutch governments considered the Atlantic relationships to be a cornerstone of its foreign policy. As mentioned above, the Atlantic Alliance led by the US provided the country the security it needed. This has very much affected its relationship with France and its willingness to follow the French ambition to make the common European foreign policy independent of the United States. Although the Dutch supported the French effort to flesh up the process of European integration, the major orientation in the foreign and security policy remained an Anglo-American one. The Netherlands, for example, responded to the French veto of British accession to the EC, with a veto over the French ambition in the 1960's to create a political union, the so-called Fouchet plan. In the continuous clashes between France and the United States the Dutch openly sided with the United States. With Germany the Netherlands had to balance repeatedly between the conflicting foreign policy views of the US and France, seeking a European middle road, usually along the lowest common denominator. However, the intensity of these conflicts has been reduced with the end of the cold war that has placed the American – European relationship on a new footing.

In the commercial tradition of the golden age, the Dutch seek a good relationship with almost any country that offers the Netherlands new markets to extend its trade. This was, for instance, clearly proven when the Dutch did not hesitate to shift the balance in its special relationship with Israel in the 1970s towards the Arab world. At that time the oil exporting Arab countries offered enormous opportunities for trade and investments, given their new acquired oil wealth. The Netherlands feels, nonetheless, a special obligation towards the less developed countries. Like the other colonial powers, the Netherlands feels a special responsibility towards its former colonies, Indonesia and Surinam. But generally speaking, one may say that successive Dutch governments have considered it their obligation to offer all kinds of development aid to the less developed countries without any discrimination between their location in Africa, Asia or Latin America. The real criteria for development help have actually been their poverty.

As far as Belgium is concerned, the only really distinctive 'special relationship' concerns its former colonies. As far as the link between CFSP and this relationship is concerned, the Belgian view can be summarily described as follows: within CFSP if possible, without CFSP if necessary. Until the end of the 1980s, the Belgian Africa policy was largely seen through bilateral eyes. Inside this bilateral relationship the commercial dimension prevailed. From the end of the Cold War onwards, however, Belgium deliberately opted for a more multilateral and political approach. The first channel was the troika-formula (United States-France-Belgium) which was at times rather effective in its decision-making concerning the specifics of the former Zaire. At the beginning of the 1990s however, the troika-formula became somewhat vacuous because of the divergent views held by France on the one hand, and the United States and Belgium on the other. The EC/EU then constituted the second channel, which was, however, less specific and more declamatory. In short, and dependent on the situation, Belgium thus used alternatively a bilateral, CFSP or troika-framework to pursue its objectives in central Africa.

To a lesser degree, Belgium also cherishes a special relationship with the Middle East in general and Algeria in particular. Initially (in the 1970s) Belgian-Algerian relations were

influenced by the discourse on the new international economic order, securing for both countries a predictable relationship in the energy field. This relationship explains the efforts of the Belgian EC-presidency in 1986 to strengthen again the EPC role in the Middle East conflict. It also marked the Belgian attitude during the Gulf war.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion we may say that both the Netherlands and Belgium categorise as states with an extensive network of external relations outside the EU. Both are active members of the UN, NATO and a large number of other international organisations. At the same time however, both the Netherlands and Belgium represent the type of member states that act in concert with the EU. Especially after the end of the cold war both countries consider the CFSP as their main point of reference. Even NATO had initially lost its exclusivity, as the two countries were ready to consider new institutional arrangements for the organisation of a common European defence within the EU framework. This has of course to do with the fact that the two countries realise very well that their foreign policy gains more effect when it is exercised as part of an overall EU foreign policy. But it has also to do with a basic commitment of the two countries to the European integration process. As the EU promotes collaboration and co-operation in new policy areas, the two countries are ready to shift their bilateral and multilateral co-operation arrangements towards the EU. The Netherlands, for example, who ranks as a large contributor to the third world, used to channel its aid and help programmes through bilateral and multilateral channels. But since the Treaty on European Union has intensified the common development and co-operation policy of the member states within the first pillar, the Dutch government has also increased its participation in this common policy. Like the German-French tandem, the Benelux considers itself the motor behind the European integration process, including the CFSP. It was therefore not surprisingly that the two countries were the only ones who supported during the intergovernmental negotiation on the Treaty on a European Union, an EU institutional structure where the CFSP was integrated into the EC. The two countries still support in principle the merger of the first and second pillar, although the Netherlands, more than Belgium, have learned to live with the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP. Belgium, however, still thinks of itself as the ultimate gauge of the post-war supranational European integration effort, as launched by Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet in the early fifties.

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[1] Based on the Ministry of Defence Policy Paper: Hoofdlijnennotitie voor de Defensienota 2000, Ministry of Defence, the Hague, January, 1999.
[2] Based on direct participation in military decision-making as deputy chief of cabinet at the Ministry of Defense from 1988 till 1992.
[3] This observation is based on the yearly debate on Dutch foreign policy in Dutch Parliament.
[4] The Foreign Policy of the Netherlands: A Review (1995) The Hague: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
[5] Since 1997 this frustration is regularly expressed by Foreign Minister Erik Derycke, most recently at his 1999 annual press conference (February 8th, 1999). For an official statement, see the common Benelux-letter of April 27th, 1998
[6] A.o. poll by Marketing Unit (1996), published in: Humo, 24 September 1996
[7] Kerremans, Bart (1997), "The Flemish identity: nascent or existent ?", in: Res Publica, 39:2, pp. 303-314
[8] These views were clearly expressed on several occassions in recent years by the leaders of the Liberal and Labour faction in Dutch Parliament. See also: A.G.Harryvan en J.van der Harst (1997) 'Verschuivingen in het Nederlandse Europa beleid', Transaktie, volume 26, no.3, pp.356-377.
[9] Based on own interviews.
[10] Coolsaet, Rik, België en zijn buitenlandse politiek 1830-1990 (Belgium and its foreign policy 1830-1990), Leuven, Van Halewyck, 1998
[11] On the attitude of the Belgian government in the Gulf war, see: Coolsaet, Rik, Chronique d'une politique étrangère. Les relations extérieures de la Belgique (1988-1992). Brussels, EVO, 1992, pp. 27-38
[12] Ibid., p. 47
[13] Devuyst, Y., "Treaty reform in the European Union: the Amsterdam process", in: Journal of European Public Policy, 5:4, December 1998, pp. 622