

## **In Memoriam Pierre Harmel (1911-2009)**

On Sunday March 11, 2009 Pierre Harmel passed away. With him, an imposing *commis d'état* disappears, who combined extraordinary vision with a human touch and openness. His tenure as foreign minister of Belgium (1966-1973) coincided with an era of burgeoning East-West détente, in which he himself took no small part. Replying to those who linked him with the elaboration of a 'doctrine', he invariably responded: '*Je ne suis pas l'homme d'une doctrine. Je suis l'homme d'une politique*' – a most crucial distinction according to him.

### ***Harmel's Ostpolitik (1966-1973)\****

Early in March 1966 a new crisis arose yet again within the Atlantic Alliance as a result of de Gaulle's decision to pull France out of NATO's integrated command structure, which entailed the departure of NATO installations from France. Within NATO a proposal was made to transfer NATO installations to neighbouring Belgium.

In Belgium the move was not so obvious.<sup>1</sup> For months the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pierre Harmel, a French-speaking Christian Democrat, avoided all parliamentary confrontation while he discreetly got in touch with the Socialist opposition. He stressed resolutely his intention to plead within NATO for a more explicitly political role, to promote détente between East and West.

In June the transfer of Shape was discussed in the Chamber. Leo Tindemans took up the defence of NATO on behalf of the Christian Democratic fraction. It needed to be preserved in order to give the United States 'good advice' and to keep it 'on the right track'. Moreover, if one wanted to engage in a policy of détente, then membership was just as important in order to achieve 'organised consultations between East and West'. Tindemans accused de Gaulle that his policy made it impossible for Europe to speak with one voice and reproached those who opposed the Shape transfer with 'intellectual infantilism' and an 'appalling lack of familiarity with the basic facts of politics and defence'. His fellow party member, Raymond Scheyven, on the other hand, referred to NATO as an alliance between a giant and fourteen dwarfs, and the Belgian policy as one of 'standing to attention', afraid to incur the displeasure of the United States. In this he was close to the standpoints of the left within the Belgian Socialist Party which, in both the Chamber and the Senate, rejected the Shape transfer out of hand, describing the United States as the 'gendarme of the counter-revolution' and demanding the simultaneous dissolution of both alliances.<sup>2</sup> On 16 June Spaak made his last parliamentary intervention in defence of NATO and the foreign policy he had implemented for decades, explicitly referring to the standpoints taken previously in the debate by the Flemish Christian Democrat, Leo Tindemans.<sup>3</sup>

Spaak and Spinoy, in the Chamber, and De Groote, in the Senate, were the only Socialists that supported the government decision. The rest abstained or voted against, like the Flemish and French-speaking Nationalists. With one third of parliament refusing to approve an important government decision, the body politic was divided on an important part of foreign policy for the first time since the ECSC and EDC debate.<sup>4</sup> Still, in the debate most of the speakers had stressed that NATO should make a greater effort towards détente and disarmament. This was in line with Harmel's own convictions that 'the détente and peace effort is even more

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\* La version française de ce texte figure dans: Rik Coolsaet, 'La Belgique dans l'OTAN (1949-2009)', in: *Courrier hebdomadaire*, CRISP, Bruxelles, 2008, n° 1999.

important than the defence effort' and that 'working out détente is the number one job of an alliance concluded with a view to security (...). We know that the only really solid element of security is détente.'<sup>5</sup>

### *The Harmel exercise*

European détente rapidly became the key objective of Harmel's foreign policy. The need for individual national initiatives, the need to address the 'German question' as the key issue in European security, the priority of a political over a military approach to European security and, in particular, the future of NATO after the partial withdrawal of France and the prospect of 1969 (the year that all member states would have the right to leave the alliance with one year's notice), were some of the ideas that Harmel had broached with his American colleague, Dean Rusk, and which he presented in NATO in December 1966. For Harmel the time had come for thorough reflection on the future of NATO, without any preconceptions, since many things had changed in the world in the last twenty years. Harmel was thereupon charged with what was referred to as the 'Harmel Exercise', a study into what he himself described as a 'new bible' for NATO.

For a year working groups busied themselves with various aspects. All sorts of different proposals were tabled, such as an Atlantic Community, for example, which had been Spaak's aim as Secretary-General of NATO, or a two pillar alliance, like President Kennedy had suggested. The final result of all these deliberations, however, took another direction. It was set down in a document that was approved by the NATO Council in December 1967 as 'The Future Tasks of the Alliance' – the 'Harmel Report' for short. Besides Harmel himself (and his Chief of Cabinet, Etienne Davignon), the most important authors of it were the American Under-Secretary for Political Affairs, Eugene Rostow, and the French Foreign Minister, Couve de Murville.

If the Alliance was to have a future, said the report, it must fulfil three requirements: it must promote détente, recognise the right to national initiatives and overcome the division of Europe. Some have reduced the report to a so-called doctrine, articulated in article 5, in which it was affirmed that besides defence, NATO should also pursue détente. Pierre Harmel himself, however, has always stressed that détente was not a doctrine and even less an objective in itself. According to him the final objective behind détente was embodied in article 9, the central article of the report for Harmel: 'The relaxation of tensions is not the final goal but is part of a long-term process to promote better relations and to foster a European settlement. The ultimate political purpose of the Alliance is to achieve a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe accompanied by appropriate security guarantees.' In the pursuit of this goal, all the member states should make a contribution, according to article 7: 'As sovereign states the Allies are not obliged to subordinate their policies to collective decision. (...) Each Ally should play its full part in promoting an improvement in relations with the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe (...).'

The balance that Harmel sought was not simply one between defence and détente, but between, on the one hand, the preservation of NATO as an instrument for the defence of Western Europe and, on the other, making it less prominent through political rapprochement between Eastern and Western Europe. 'European settlement', which was the object of the Harmel exercise and which, with article 9, became NATO's proclaimed purpose, was defined by Harmel as enabling a 'total Europe'. This clearly pan-European concept was, without

explicitly referring to it, identical to de Gaulle's Europe from the Atlantic to the Ural – also called 'Global Europe' by de Gaulle. Because of the emphasis on overcoming the European divide, it also implicitly implied Europe acting as a third force, which European federalists (and Paul-Henri Spaak until the summer of 1948) had advocated after the Second World War.

In contrast to Paul-Henri Spaak, Pierre Harmel spoke remarkably little of an Atlantic 'Community'. Indeed in his eyes Americans and Europeans formed an 'alliance', whilst the term 'community' referred to the European project. He was also an outspoken supporter of a 'European caucus' within NATO,<sup>6</sup> so that European member states could coordinate their positions, before tabling them in the North Atlantic Council, where the United States had a dominant voice.

### *Harmel's policy*

The central position that the politics of détente were to take up in Harmel's foreign policy led to a review of the traditional Belgian attitude towards Gaullist France. Upon becoming Foreign Minister in 1966, Pierre Harmel encountered a strong anti-French current in Belgian diplomatic circles. It was not only the concept of a pan-European order, mentioned above, that Harmel borrowed from the Gaullist rapprochement towards Eastern Europe. Gaullist politics, often assessed as mere French self-centred ambitions, also contained an instrument through which consensus could be restored in Belgium on foreign policy matters, namely national initiatives that NATO member states undertook in their own right without necessarily submitting them to prior approval from NATO. In other words, Belgian diplomacy had to take its own initiatives in the area of détente since, as an organisation, NATO would be ill-equipped to launch such a policy because of its intergovernmental character.

Harmel thus opted for the activation and systematisation of the bilateral dialogue with like-minded Warsaw Pact countries which Spaak had started before him. By defending the Gaullist goal of rapprochement towards Eastern Europe within NATO, Harmel immediately legitimised his own intention to engage in a privileged dialogue with some of the member states of the Warsaw Pact. This 'new look' for Belgian diplomacy was intended, amongst other things, to test the possibilities for arms control and disarmament in Europe, which various fractions in parliament were pushing for in the form of a reduction in the length of the draft and a review of tasks within NATO.

Harmel first visited Poland in September 1966. In their joint communiqué Harmel and his Polish colleague, Adam Rapacki, confirmed that such contacts would continue to take place at various levels, including between officials of both countries, to investigate the possibility of developing joint initiatives regarding multinational arms and troop reductions in Europe. But both ministers also confirmed that a Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) was a positive objective. This was Belgium's first demonstration of support for the Soviet proposal for regional recognition of the post-war territorial status quo in Europe. For his part NATO Secretary-General Brosio described the proposal as 'possibly the most perfect political instrument for the Soviet Union to establish its hegemony in Europe. (...) a new collective European security system would quite simply mean Soviet domination.'<sup>7</sup> Original suggestions for 'freezing' the arms race in Europe were tested in the Belgian-Polish discussions too, which was not much to Washington's liking.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, in accordance with article 9 of the Harmel Report, Harmel's policy was not in the first instance aimed at disarmament or arms control, but at the search for a means of solving the 'German question'. Pierre Harmel, just like the West German Social Democrats of the SPD, considered that this issue constituted the very core of the Cold War. Thus he distanced himself from the view of the West German Christian Democrats, who still insisted upon German unification via the integration of East Germany in the West. Political détente, in other words the 'European settlement' mentioned in the Harmel Report, was the jewel in the crown of the politics of détente. So from 1969 onwards Harmel, too, gave his support to Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* – contrary to some within NATO who feared that Brandt was intent on the reunification of the two Germanies and would even be prepared to withdraw from NATO for it. Because the German question could only be solved with German support and because an internationally isolated Germany would indeed be forced to choose between loyalty to the alliance or normalisation with the 'other' Germany, the *Ostpolitik* needed to be accepted within NATO. From 1969, Harmel made the Belgian *Ostpolitik* an extension of Brandt's, as a contribution towards the 'Europeanization' of the German *Ostpolitik*.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding Belgian support for the Soviet backed idea of a Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), Belgian *Ostpolitik* did not just fall into line behind the Soviet view of European security. On the contrary, it was aimed at linking the Soviet demand for recognition of the territorial status quo with the Western demand for arms control and disarmament in Europe. In this way the West would respond to the primary source of the Soviet sense of insecurity and the Soviet Union would meet Western security concerns. So the link between military and political détente introduced by Belgium was supposed to translate into parallel negotiations in which both aspects were dealt with simultaneously. Although the parallelism and timing were much less strict than Belgian diplomacy had hoped, this policy nevertheless resulted in a certain link between the political negotiations in the framework of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) and the military negotiations in the forum of the Mutual Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR), both of which started in 1973.

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<sup>1</sup> *Le transfert du Shape et du Conseil de l'OTAN en Belgique*. Brussels, CRISP, CH 357, 1967; VINCINEAU, M., 'Le parlement belge devant la crise de l'Alliance atlantique', in: *Chronique de politique étrangère*, XXI, 1, January 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 16 June 1966, pp. 22, 31 and 38; Senaat, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 21 June 1966, pp. 1363-1369.

<sup>3</sup> Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 16 June 1966, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Struye in *La Libre Belgique*, 27 June 1966. Cited in: STRUYE, P., *Problèmes internationaux 1927-1972*. Bruxelles, Larcier, Travaux de la Faculté de droit de Namur, 1972, part 1, pp. 71-74.

<sup>5</sup> Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 14 June 1966, pp. 15; *La Cité*, 6 September 1966. Sur Pierre Harmel, see also: DUJARDIN, V., *Harmel*. Brussels, Le Cri, 2004, pp. 823 pp.

<sup>6</sup> *FRUS 1964-1968*, XIII, n° 264 and 330.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in: VAN DER VELDEN, H., VISÉE, H.A., *Ontspanning in Europa. De Conferentie over Veiligheid en Vrede in Europa*. Baarn, Het Wereldvenster, 1976, pp. 102-103. Over de Belgisch-Poolse bilaterale dialoog, see: COLOT, L., 'La politique belge en matière de détente et de coopération en Europe', in: *Chronique de politique étrangère*, XXII, no. 1, January 1969, pp. 73; *NRC-Handelsblad*, 29 April 1968; P. Harmel in: *Knack*, 14 May 1980; *La Belgique et la CSCE*. Brussels, CRISP, CH 707, 1976, pp. 6-7; HAYOUL, M., 'L'Europe de l'Est, le groupe des Neuf et M. P. Harmel', in: *La Revue Nouvelle*, 15 June 1967, pp. 637-638.

<sup>8</sup> *FRUS 1964-1968*, XIII, n° 300.

<sup>9</sup> BRANDT, W., *My life in politics*. New York, Viking, 1992, pp. 165 and 167