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EXTERNAL POLICIES (2010-15)**

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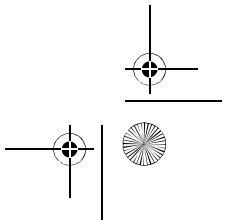
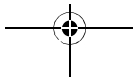
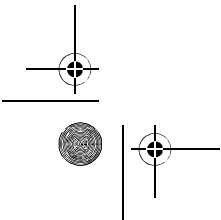
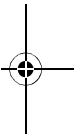
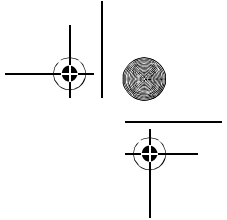
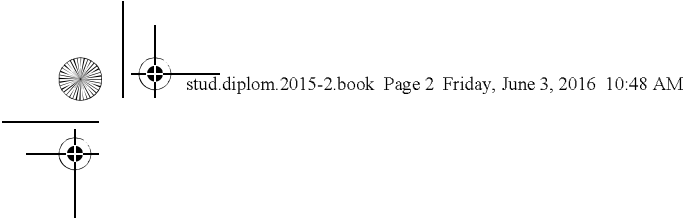
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Introduction: a fragmented external policy

THOMAS RENARD¹

The past few years have been rich in foreign policy developments. Terrorism, migration, popular uprisings, economic slowdown, climate change, or pandemics are just some of the many challenges that have caught the international agenda – in no particular order. Belgium has not been spared by any of these challenges. It has even been affected more than others (in Europe) by the plague of terrorism, drawing onto itself heavy and critical attention from international media and leaders. Belgium also drew negative attention on its diplomacy last year, when it proved unable to strike an internal agreement on carbon emissions repartition ahead of the climate negotiations in Paris.

In truth, the image of Belgium had been scorned before. Talks about the ‘failed state’ or the ‘dead nation’ are not new, particularly popular during the record-long 541 days under a caretaker government. Although such criticisms may sometimes be exaggerated or simplistic, they also reflect a growing feeling (domestically and internationally) that the Belgian system may have become too complex to function properly. It is characterised by a fragmentation of competences, resources, and responsibility.

To begin with, there is the transfer of competences from the federal state to the federated entities, which may lead at times to a degree of competition between the different state actors, as illustrated in the case of economic diplomacy.² The antidote to competition is coordination, for which the Belgian

¹ Thomas Renard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Egmont Institute and an Adjunct Professor at the Vesalius College.

² See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a key role in matters of external policies, highlighted in this special issue of *Studia Diplomatica*. In some cases, these coordination efforts may fail, as illustrated in the run-up to the Paris climate meeting. But it can also work more smoothly and be evaluated more positively by the respective stakeholders.³ Overall, however, the continuous transfer of competences to the federated entities is leading to a fragmentation of competences that is making the formulation and pursuit of a coherent and efficient foreign policy more complicated, to the detriment of all.

The fragmentation of competences leads to a fragmentation of resources. As a small state, Belgium has a limited capacity to face and respond to an increasingly demanding international environment. The terrorist threat, which is both an internal and external issue, has perhaps pushed this reality to its paroxysm, with an unfavourable ratio between the high number of radicalized individuals, on the one hand, and the limited intelligence and law enforcement capacity, on the other hand. In most external policy areas, the problem may be less visible, probably because the challenge is less acute. But it is nonetheless very real, as illustrated by the contributions on trade and aid policies in this special issue.⁴ Furthermore, the economic crisis of 2008 has left lasting scars on the Belgian public sector, deepening a chronic lack of investment. With 2% of its GDP invested in the public sector, Belgium has one of the lowest rates of public investment in Europe, according to Eurostat. This has major consequences on human and financial resources available for the conduct of its foreign policy. For instance, the budget for aid development has been slimmed down, and the staff downsized. All ministries have undergone successive budget cuts, leading for instance to the closing of some diplomatic missions abroad or to significant cuts in the defence budget. Conducting diplomacy and external relations in times of austerity is not only challenging; it is also fundamentally affecting Belgium's ability to shape the international agenda and to defend its core interests.

With the fragmentation of competences also comes a dilution of responsibility. This is a recurring criticism of the Belgian system: if everyone is competent, then no one really feels responsible for the achievement of agreed objectives, or the failure to do so. It is easier to undermine consensus and coordination than to compromise. Although not directly addressed in this

³ See the contributions of Steurs, Orbie and Delputte; and Bollen, Derous, De Ville, Gheyle, Orbie and Van Den Putte in this issue.

⁴ See the contributions of Molenaers; and Bollen, *et al* in this issue.

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special issue, this question and its implications on Belgium's foreign policy would deserve more attention.

Although not insurmountable, the challenge of fragmentation calls for a clear strategy, priorities, and method. The overall foreign policy strategy, and the priorities resulting from it seem to be largely missing, however. According to Coolsaet, the vital interests of Belgium remain undefined, and the foreign policy has become essentially reactive to the international context.⁵ To be sure, a degree of pragmatism and flexibility are key assets in diplomacy, but this cannot escape the formulation of a sense of direction. Without a strategic compass, different actors and policies will go in different directions, missing a chance to reinforce each other, and possibly even undermining each other. Several contributions in this special issue emphasize this point.⁶

Priorities are also needed due to the resources constraint. Belgium has identified a number of clusters in which it has specific interests and added value,⁷ although Belgium's ability to maintain a strong niche diplomacy, on Central Africa notably, is now increasingly questioned.⁸ Beyond niche diplomacy, priorities are needed in each policy area. In the field of development cooperation, for instance, Belgium has decided to focus its efforts on a limited number of poor countries and fragile states in Africa, as opposed to other countries that focus on either more countries, other geographical regions, or Middle-Income Countries (MICs).⁹ In its health policy as well, Belgium has made choices, to focus on limited issues and approaches.¹⁰ At the broader level, however, in spite of the priority axes defined by the Foreign Minister (European integration, promotion of multilateralism, regional crises, economic diplomacy and consular affairs),¹¹ there are no clear priorities emerging for Belgium's foreign policy, beyond dealing with the crisis of the day, according to Coolsaet.¹²

In times of fragmentation, an efficient method for foreign policy-making is in order. Domestically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acts as a hub for information-sharing, coordination and, at times, policy-making with regard to external policies. Although not perfect, as pointed out by Steurs, Orbie and

⁵ See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

⁶ See the contributions of Molenaers; Steurs, *et al*; and Bollen, *et al* in this issue.

⁷ See the contribution of Liégeois in this issue.

⁸ See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

⁹ See the contribution of Molenaers in this issue.

¹⁰ See the contribution of Steurs *et al* in this issue.

¹¹ *Note de Politique Générale*, Chambre des représentants de Belgique, DOC 54 1428/006, 30 Octobre 2015.

¹² See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue

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Delputte in this special issue,¹³ the Ministry remains central and currently largely uncontested in its coordinating function. However, the central function of the Foreign Ministry could well be challenged over the medium term, in the absence of a clear identification of Belgium's vital interests and of the best policy architecture to pursue them.¹⁴ All contributions in this special issue shed light on the complex institutional set up behind Belgium's external policy-making.

Internationally, as a small state, Belgium favours largely to act in the European or multilateral frameworks, over unilateral or isolated actions. At the European level, Belgium is a small but committed member of the European Union (EU). In addition to a successful rotating presidency in 2010, Belgium has been an active player across policy areas. In the context of terrorism, for instance, it has set up a group of 'most affected countries' by the phenomenon of radicalisation, leading discussions and policy exchanges on this issue in the Council of the EU. Belgium has also been one of the strongest supporters of the EU's trade agenda, as explained in this issue.¹⁵ As in many other policy areas, the internal divisions in Belgium (in this case between the more 'liberal' Northern part and the more 'protectionist' Southern part) constitute a mini laboratory for EU-wide negotiations. On the other hand, Belgium is not immune to criticisms from the European Commission, for instance in relation to its tax system or budget deficit. In other words, Belgium's pro-EU stance does not preclude specific positions or policies that run counter the European stream or, arguably, the European interest. A recent resolution of the regional parliament of Wallonia has called the federal government to oppose the EU trade agreement with Canada, hence undermining Belgium's supportive position on the EU trade agenda.

Belgium has also been at the forefront of the EU integration process. This process is now on hold, however, in a context of political crisis and geopolitical turmoil. In such context, promoting linear EU integration as in the past may not be an option anymore. While the EU clearly needs a new vision or project, Belgium seems no longer to be at the forefront of the European project, notably in its inability to provide new direction. Adjustments to a new form of Union (which may have plural forms) may be necessary in the future, but the ability to shape this transformation should come as a priority.

¹³ See the contribution of Steurs *et al.* in this issue.

¹⁴ See the contribution of Coolsaet in this issue.

¹⁵ See the contribution of Bollen, *et al.* in this issue

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Multilateralism is another key channel for Belgium's foreign policy. As pointed out by Liégeois in this issue, Belgium is an active multilateral player by conviction, but also by interest (as a small state) – the two being interrelated.¹⁶ All contributions in this issue emphasize that Belgium acts mainly through the multilateral system, and that it is even a major contributor to it in some areas, in terms of leadership, staff, or funding. At the broader level, however, Belgium suffers from the same lack of vision than displayed at the EU or national levels. When it comes to the reform of the multilateral system, which is needed to cope with the challenges of effectiveness and representation, in light of the emergence of new global powers, Belgium has not yet been able to articulate a clear vision. When China announced the launch of a new investment bank (the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB), Belgium was slow to react and, for a while, undecided. As a result, it was one of the few EU member states to miss the chance to become a founding member of the new multilateral institution, although it will eventually access membership later.¹⁷

About this Special Issue

The Egmont Institute has a long tradition of monitoring, studying and making recommendations on Belgium's foreign policy, either at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (to which the Institute is associated) or on its own initiative. The Institute undertakes part of its mission on its own, relying on its internal expertise, but it also regularly calls upon the broad expertise that exists in academia and policy circles in Belgium. Acting as a hub of knowledge and policy exchange is a core mission of the Institute.

In the past, the Egmont Institute published every other year a special issue of its academic journal, *Studia Diplomatica*, on the state of Belgium's foreign policy. A number of prominent academics and policy-makers, from Belgium and beyond, contributed to these issues. These publications always followed a major conference organised jointly by the University of Ghent and the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve. As this cycle of conference was paused, nota-

¹⁶ See the contribution of Liégeois in this issue.

¹⁷ See the contribution of Liégeois in this issue. See also Renard, T., 'The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): China's new multilateralism and the erosion of the West', Security Policy Brief 63, Egmont Institute, April 2015.

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bly due to the government crisis of 2010-11, the latest special issue of *Studia* on Belgium's foreign policy was published in 2009.

In 2015, after long discussions, we decided that time had come for a new special issue, which would cover major developments over the years 2010-15. In coordination with the universities of Ghent and Louvain-la-Neuve, we launched a call for papers in May 2015, which triggered broad interest in academic circles, resulting in a good number of submissions. In this issue, we have selected the best articles covering different dimensions of Belgium's external policies.

The first article from Rik Coolsaet offers a historical perspective on the evolution of Belgium's foreign policy, with a critical eye. He reflects on the (lack of) strategic priorities, and the underlying reasons for it. In the following contribution, Liégeois reviews the multilateral agenda of Belgium, its principles and its means. The article of Molenaers focusses on Belgium's development policy. It describes its aims and challenges, in light of shrinking resources and of a changing global aid landscape. In a contribution that is partly connected to the development goals, Steurs, Orbie and Delputte discuss Belgium's global health policy, its specific expertise and contribution (for instance through the Institute for Tropical Medicine), and its main priorities (including HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and health system strengthening). Bollen, Derous, De Ville, Gheyle, Orbie and Van Den Putte focus on the trade agenda, with a focus on the two main current negotiations, with the USA (TTIP) and Canada (CETA). They present the main elements of Belgium's position in those negotiations (its 'offensive' and 'defensive' interests), before explaining how this position was formed. Last but not least, Reykers and Fonck make an interesting contribution on the role of the Belgian federal parliament in overseeing military interventions, focussing on the cases of Libya and Iraq. They show how this role is limited in Belgium – compared to neighbouring countries – due to several factors, including legal constraints, but also political ones.

Thomas Renard
18 May 2016



The quest for vital interests and objectives in the foreign policy of Belgium

RIK COOLSAET¹

Belgium's foreign policy in the past five years reveals a contrasted picture. Starting in 2009-2010, an exhaustive assessment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was undertaken, resulting in significant changes in the workings and organization of the ministry. But this buoyant bureaucratic activity stood in sharp contrast to the business-as-usual approach that characterized the policy objectives that this revamped organisation was supposed to pursue. The long political deadlock that followed the elections of June 2007 is an important yardstick to gauge today's foreign policies of Belgium, since it somehow acts as a fracture between very distinctive periods in the history of Belgian foreign policy and of the MFA.

Grand schemes for Belgian diplomacy in 2007

After the parliamentary elections of June 2007, the ambitions in the field of foreign policy ran sky high. During the coalition negotiations ambitious plans were tabled for a 'Super Foreign Minister'. They were inspired by a SWOT analysis, prepared by the secretary-general of the Ministry, ambassador Jan Grauls, in May 2007. The Foreign Ministry was to be tasked with a greater

¹ Rik Coolsaet is Full Professor at Ghent University and Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont-Royal Institute for International Relations. In 2014, he published an updated edition on his history of Belgian foreign policy (1830-2015) as well as the history of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (with Claude Roosens and Vincent Dujardin).

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role in economic diplomacy, as well as given an enhanced leadership in the coordination between development, defence, and justice – in other words, in all policy areas that touched upon the international relations of the country. Among the major MFA's strengths, so it was emphasised, was its successful adaptation to the globalized world through the identification of new transversal themes as new core tasks for the MFA. In order to play this enhanced role, the diplomatic network had to remain as worldwide as possible 'in order to assume the challenges of this globalised world (De Gucht, 2007; Lefevere, 2007).

But these ambitions never became reality. Soon thereafter, Belgium entered into a protracted political stalemate. Disagreements on new institutional reforms of the Belgian state became a major stumbling block. Short-lived governments succeeded one another. Three years later, new elections only reinforced the political deadlock between the Dutch-speaking parties of the north and the French-speaking parties of the south of the country. It took a record 541 days to negotiate a new coalition government. The new government, led by Elio Di Rupo (PS), took office in December 2011, thus signalling the end of the stalemate.

This four-year long political paralysis had adverse implications for foreign policy. In September 2009, Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy emphasized the implications of the domestic turmoil for the country's foreign policy in a speech to the bilateral ambassadors of the 27 EU member states in Brussels:

The Belgian situation is a good illustration of a basic law in foreign policy: since there does not exist an hermetic partition between domestic politics and the foreign policy of a country, the latter needs domestic stability and coherence in order to be able to intervene energetically on the international scene. Also, as soon as a country enters a phase of domestic political turmoil, its foreign policy will no longer be deemed credible by the rest of the world.

Belgian foreign policy indeed lacked a coherent framework during those years, the prime minister and the political parties all being absorbed by domestic endeavours. Few innovative initiatives were launched. Foreign policy became largely reactive. This was a significant break with the preceding governments led by Guy Verhofstadt (1999-2007), whose foreign policy had been particularly pro-active and even so 'adventurous' as to harm the vital interests of the country, according to some of its critics (Coolsaet, 2003).

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Not all Belgian diplomatic efforts suffered the same blowback, though. Some of them even succeeded beyond expectations. The 2007-2008 Belgian membership of the UN Security Council was carried out with professionalism. To the surprise of its European partners, who feared the worst with a caretaker government in Brussels, the Belgian Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2010 was as successful as its previous presidencies. It won general praise, which stood in stark contrast to the 'Death of a Nation' doomsday scenarios that were circulating at the time (Buruma, 2008). Most surprising was the decision by a caretaker government of 2011 to participate in the UN-authorized Libyan war and even to take part in the offensive part of the operation. The speediness of the decision and the unanimity by which the parliament endorsed the initiative was noticed abroad. 'The gallant Belgians', the *Financial Times* dubbed the unexpected Belgian stance – without a hint of irony (Rachman, 2011). It undoubtedly enhanced Belgium's reputation in Washington.

How to explain these successes? These dossiers share some common characteristics. They all rest upon a firm fundament of elite consensus and they represent policy domains where the MFA's expertise and autonomy had traditionally been accepted by the body politic.

What are the vital interests of Belgium?

In some areas, the political deadlock definitely impacted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Within the Ministry, concerns about its position in the institutional architecture of Belgium rocketed once again. Squeezed between the increasing international role of the regions and the anticipated expansion of the EEAS, many Belgian diplomats started to question what their added value was to be in the future. On the one hand, the regions clearly ambitioned a leading role on the international scene. On the other hand, with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009, the EEAS was formally created and a real exodus from the MFA to the EEAS was feared. (Eventually, only some 15 diplomats joined the EEAS.)

Moreover, the MFA was in no position to launch new initiatives. A new Africa policy document had been announced for many years and drafts had been prepared, but a discussion was not engaged, precisely because of the political stalemate at the Belgian level. The European primacy in defense and security – one of the new accents in Belgian foreign policy since the end of the

Cold War – muted into a cautious stance emphasising the need to balance NATO and the EU. Niche themes, by which Belgium would have been able to punch above its weight, were regularly suggested within the MFA (good governance, global governance, conflict mediation), but never made into policy, due to a lack of international credibility when suggested by a country that struggled with its own domestic turmoil. After 2007, Belgian multilateral policy thus became largely reactive, dominated by the urgency of the day.

Beyond all this, especially lacking was a reflection on what constituted the vital interests of Belgium and its regions in today's globalised world. The last such major assessment in the first half of the 1990s had resulted in the identification of new core tasks and policy objectives, guiding Belgian foreign policy thereafter.

Economic diplomacy had gained a new legitimacy in the mid-1990s, when ministry officials realised that securing existing market shares, exploiting new ones, and attracting foreign investment was a task that could not be simply left to the regions alone in an era of economic globalisation. Their international clout was insufficient, especially when compared to the efforts of most other member states of the EU that were strengthening their efforts by centralising their machinery for bilateral economic diplomacy.

The country's *European policy* embarked on a systematic advocacy for a federalist organization of the EU, going beyond the original supranationalism of the 1950. Europe was called an open-ended project, to which, in principle, all national policy domains could be transferred to. A deeper, 'federal' organization of Europe, would enable the Union to tackle problems – unemployment, environment, social security – that could no longer be secured at a national level. Belgian diplomacy systematically supported the extension of policy domains where qualified majority voting would be the rule. Guy Verhofstadt's 'United States of Europe' (2005) represented the apex of this new position (Gnath, 2006).

The *security policy* of the 1990s shifted from Atlantic to European primacy and Europe's strategic autonomy in the multipolar world order was ardently advocated. Without fulling realising it, from 1991 onwards Belgium thus returned to the thrust of Paul-Henri Spaak's post-war vision of a close Western European entente, acting autonomously in world affairs (before being supplanted in 1948 by the concept of an Atlantic Europe). Elite consensus in Belgium endorsed the vision of a European Union that was no longer part of an Atlantic Community, but a community carrying its own political finality. That

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view received an additional boost in 2003 when the United States unilaterally decided to invade Iraq. In Belgium, this action revived the well engrained fear of a small state, being the plaything and the first victim of the great powers' competitive game for leadership, power and influence. Fear for the unpredictability of world politics dominated by great powers acting outside well established multilateral rules, explained the near unanimous vehement Belgian condemnation of the 2003 Iraq war. It solidified the vision of an autonomous Europe, with its own defence and security structures and capabilities, playing a unique role in enhancing the stability of a multipolar world, by promoting a rules-based multilateral order as a level playing field for big and small states.

This renewed European primacy in security policy was accompanied by a second point of reference dictating Belgium's international action: the central role of the United Nations. At the time of the 1990 Gulf War, the UN had become the benchmark for Belgium's participation in military operations. According to a widespread view in Belgium, the world organization was the sole authority that had the political and legal legitimacy to decide on the use of force. This benchmark for participation in military operations was motivated by the same consideration as the one that dictated Belgium's advocacy of a supranational and federal Europe: institutional multilateralism was seen as contributing to the stability and predictability of international relations and a safeguard against a return to the brutal power politics of the past.

The robustness of this new elite consensus on the twin requirements for its participation in military operations (UN mandate and EU framework) explains the swiftness by which a Belgian caretaker government could engage into the most offensive part of the Libya war.

Africa policy too underwent a metamorphosis in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1995 a series of new policy approaches towards the African continent became explicit: democratization and support for the rule of law; emphasis on the regional dimension, to cope with the destabilization of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi; and 'African ownership', with African elites themselves bearing the main responsibility setting out their own political and economic objectives, as well as managing crises on their own continent, with Belgium and the West in a supporting role. Belgium abandoned its purely bilateral approach, recognizing that in order to be successful the aforementioned objectives could not be pursued by Belgium alone. Belgian diplomacy thus opted for a systematic insertion of its initiatives and approaches in an international, and especially European framework.

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Additionally, in this reassessment of the axes of Belgian diplomacy, a new core task was added in 2002: the management of globalization. The MFA explicitly decided to give itself the means to effectively coordinate Belgian decision making in global issues that had a direct impact on its citizens. To that end, it established a new direction 'Globalisation' and a new coordination structure, the so-called 'CoorMulti'. The MFA hoped to become the hub between the foreign and the domestic realm, recognized as such by all domestic actors, both the federal government and the regions and also, depending upon the subjects, the relevant organisations of civil society.

Finally, Belgian diplomacy also went actively looking for specific *niches* where it could display a comparative advantage and thus exert international influence. The campaigns for a ban on landmines and cluster munitions were successful examples of niche diplomacy and became landmarks in the overall campaign for humanitarian disarmament. In March 1995, Belgium became the first country to legally ban anti-personnel mines, in response to an international NGO campaign. It co-founded the coalition of forty countries and NGOs, which then went to seek a worldwide ban. Belgium did the same with cluster munitions. In 2013, the World Future Council applauded these Belgian endeavours at UN headquarters: 'Belgium's unprecedented legislative initiatives have inspired, strengthened and shaped the international processes that culminated in international treaties banning these weapons – the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions (World Future Council Foundation, 2013: 14).

A similar role was played in the global tracking of blood diamonds and the plundering of natural resources in Central Africa. In the discussions leading the establishment of an international criminal court, in 1997 and 1998, the Belgian diplomacy took from the start of the negotiations a maximalist line.

These new policy objectives were combined with a series of far-reaching administrative changes in the 1990s, intended to transform in depth the machinery of the MFA. In order to better secure the coordination function of the MFA, services were pooled, the old directorate-general for Political Affairs was transformed into a directorate-general for Multilateral Affairs, and transparency towards the general public was enhanced. An initiative to fusion the different careers (diplomatic, consular, cooperation development, and administration) into one single service was however abandoned, as a result of criticisms of various kinds.

Au gré des vents

The new framework for Belgian diplomacy adopted in the 1990s, was a combination of enlightened self-interest and widely shared values. For more than a decade, they more or less guided the foreign policy orientations of the successive Belgian governments. But around 2010, the need for a new assessment was largely shared within the MFA, since significant changes had occurred in the international, European, and domestic environment. The 1990s objectives no longer seemed to match that environment. Simply sticking to them would be tantamount to blindly sailing into uncharted territory.

This however was more easily said than done. A first attempt to kick-start a reflection on policy objectives was attempted in early 2010, through the Egmont Institute, which is the think tank associated with the Foreign Ministry. No follow-up ensued however, largely as a result of the political deadlock in Belgium. Early 2011, Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere again referred to this need to address Belgium's strategic horizon. He mentioned the 'future anchor points for Belgian foreign policy' (Vanackere, 2011), implying that Belgium was indeed in need of a thorough assessment of the vital interests of the country and its regions and the ways to secure them.

Economic diplomacy: embroiled in persistent political bickering

Since 1994, Belgium had progressively been losing market shares in the global economy, especially when compared to its neighbours (OECD, 2013: 9). Moreover, the country was increasingly losing its attractiveness for foreign investors, which had an adverse impact on job creation (Ernst & Young, 2013). The complex institutional setup of Belgium prevented the country from following the example of its neighbours (and competitors) and enhance the coordination between its different instruments for economic diplomacy. Belgium was indeed prevented in doing so as a result of competing logics. The logic of globalisation pressed for enhanced domestic coordination between all actors involved, but the logic of domestic devolution pushed the regions into an increased assertiveness and autonomy on the international scene, to the detriment of the MFA, as in a zero-sum game.

This results in a suboptimal performance in economic diplomacy. Even if the cooperation goes rather smoothly at the officials' level, it easily gets embroiled in institutional disputes about respective competences at the politi-

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cians' level. The clashing ambitions of the federal and regional levels thus led in 2013 to a new conflict, when Foreign Minister Didier Reynders, without consultation with the regions, decided to transform the existing corps of 'advisors for Foreign Trade' into 'advisors for Economic Diplomacy'. As in the past, the regions reacted in dismay. They accused Didier Reynders of provocation and of transgressing the constitutional arrangements.

A year later, it was the Flemish government's turn to start a new round of institutional bickering in the realm of economic diplomacy. It unilaterally decided to cut its budget for the Belgian Foreign Trade Agency, thus effectively halving the number of Royals-led economic missions. This was again a purely politically motivated decision, not supported by the organisation of Flemish entrepreneurs (Unizo) and notwithstanding the economic fallout of such missions (Unizo, 2014; Dubuisson, 2014).

This politicised infighting is detrimental to the interests of the Belgian economy and thus to employment in the country. All actors involved nevertheless recognize the need for straightening this out. At the very least, this requires a revision of existing 1990s cooperation agreements in the field of bilateral economic relations outside Europe, in order to achieve a functional division of responsibilities between the different levels. Negotiations to this end however did not result in a significant breakthrough in 2013-2014 and the issue is still on the table.

European policy: maladjusted policies for a Europe transformed

Euroscepticism has been gaining ground – again. By itself it is not a new phenomenon. But in the European elections of 2014 this gap between public opinion and the European project was translated into a significant advance of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament. The European gloom of today can easily be compared to the mood in Europe around 1985, when Commission President Jacques Delors launched his 'Europe 92' project.

Over recent years, the European construction too has undergone a significant mutation. The clarity of the parallel methods to construct Europe – dividing the member states in two archetypical camps – is now history. According to Philippe de Schoutheete, Belgium's Permanent Representative to the European Union from 1987 to 1997: '[...] the difference between the two methods [is] no longer really a matter of their nature but a matter of degree. The Community method has been contaminated by the intergovernmental method,

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while intermediate methods leaning now one way, now the other. We may miss the clarity of the good old days, but we cannot afford to ignore change. [...] it has almost become necessary to abandon the word «federal» because it conjures up different concepts in London and in Berlin, not to mention the adrenalin attacks that some people suffer whenever they hear it' (Schoutheete, 2011: 24).

Furthermore, Belgian European policies used to be pursued in the comfort zone of a rather stable Franco-German axis, although this axis is no longer what is used to be. The approach to the eurozone crisis since 2009 has further deepened the distance between the two capitals, while the traditional balance of power between the two countries had evolved in favour of Berlin. This makes the once powerful engine of European construction less stable than in the past.

Confronted with these mutations in its European environment, Belgium nevertheless maintained its orthodox stance in favour of ever increased community decision-making via qualified majority voting. It never really adjusted its traditional European policy to this changed environment and remained the blatant champion of the community method. Nowadays however, this discourse and tactic fail to gather the critical mass to be effective. Alternatives do however exist. Outside the MFA, initiatives for a more proactive and more creative policies are regularly suggested (Verhofstadt, 2013; Vandenbroucke, 2014). Within the MFA too, officials realize that Europe is in urgent need of 'regeneration' projects. Ideas are explored that are reminiscent of the mid-1990s discussions on a 'core Europe'. Compared to the latter situation, prospects for a multispeed Europe are nowadays more realistic, as a result of the easing of the mechanism for enhanced cooperation since the Lisbon Treaty of 2007. Coalitions of a limited number of likeminded member states are now more likely, at least theoretically, to deepen their cooperation on specific topics (Lepoivre & Verhelst, 2013). This might make it possible to further the 'deepening' of the Union, while at the same time responding to public concerns about risks member states no longer can handle at their own. Differentiated integration can offer a new venue for overcoming the ambient Euroscepticism by offering hope for tangible progress in specific topics.

The absence of a badly needed policy adaptation in Belgium's European policy has different causes. It was partly the result of the political deadlock that monopolised all political energy and creativity until 2011. The need to react to the succession of crises (Eurozone crisis, Greek debt, asylum and refugees) is undoubtedly another cause. The inherent difficulty of identifying what exactly constitutes the vital interests of Belgium and its regions certainly is a

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third reason. Last but not least, the decrease of the specific weight of all member states since the enlargement of 2004 makes it especially difficult for smaller states to influence the future direction of the Union. Taken together, these causes explain why prospects for readjustment in Belgium's European policy appear dim.

Security policy: ominous credibility gap

From the early start in the 1990s, Belgium's advocacy for increased intra-European defence cooperation and for Europe's autonomy in world politics, have been limited by the modesty of its own defence capabilities and expenditures. However, this was partly compensated by the country's continuous conceptual input, which started with the 1990 concept of multinational forces within the framework of the WEU. The later Belgian contributions in the discussion on the European Security Strategy and the advocacy for schemes of pooling and sharing were part of this same endeavour. The systematic military participation in EU operations, both civilian and military, since the start of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) also contributed to dampen criticism of Belgium's real military efforts among member states. This allowed Belgium to sometimes punch above its weight, as was the case during the Belgian EU presidency of 2010:

The Belgian CSDP-related items resulting from a close coordination between Foreign Affairs and Defence, were passed on to Ashton's private office. The latter was eager to adopt them in order to reach a more decisive, more coherent, efficient and visible CSDP (Andries, 2011)

But in February 2014, Belgium for the first time decided not to participate in an EU operation, albeit a small one, in the Central-African Republic (EEAS, undated). At the same time, the government of Charles Michel announced further reductions in the defence budget. Taking part in the major projects of the European Defence Agency is nowadays out of the question for Belgium. As a result, the credibility gap between Belgium's discourse and policy now obviously risks totally marginalizing Belgium in discussions on the future direction of European international policies and thus undermining its ambitions.

Another ominous sign for the coherence of Belgian security policy can be detected in the suggestions in the summer of 2015 to envisage participation in

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military operations in Syria without an explicit UNSC mandate (but based instead upon an inflated interpretation of Art. 51 right of self-defence reminiscent of the U.S. justification of the 2003 Iraq war) (La Libre 2015; De Cock, 2015). Besides the critical question if bombing the Islamic State positions as envisaged is an adequate means to the desired end result, another aspect went largely unnoticed by most observers in Belgium. They indeed represent a clear break with the 1990s policies on military operations with their twin requirements of a UN mandate and a European framework. As mentioned earlier, these requirements resulted from the assessment that a rules-based international system is the most basic vital interest of smaller states. Acting outside the rules can sometimes be an option for great powers, but is always a threat to smaller ones. Only with the passage of UNSCR 2249 on 15 November 2015, calling upon Member States to take all necessary means to counter ISIS and to eradicate their safe haven in Syria and Iraq, an United Nations mandate for Belgian participation in combat operations in Syria became available. The ensuing German contribution to operations in Syria, as well as that of other EU member states, further contributed to bringing a Belgian participation in the air campaign in Syria in line with the post-1990 twin requirements for military operations.

Institutional multilateralism and the ongoing quest for an USP

Following the 2007 political deadlock, Belgian multilateral policy became largely reactive. In all fairness, the increased geopolitical competition that characterizes today's world politics, was not conducive for ambitious multilateral plans, as U.S. president Barack Obama experienced since taking office. But in the Belgian case, its domestic situation undoubtedly influenced its multilateral endeavours. Efforts to advance new niche themes, such as Good Governance in 2006, were received with mild irony by partners indicating that Belgium was not really in a position to claim expertise in this field. Global Governance, in 2002 a new core task for Belgian diplomacy, was not further explored. Reacting to the daily urgencies put the reflection on the interests of Belgium in a globalized world on the backburner. No new *unique selling proposition* (USP) replaced the endeavours in humanitarian disarmament or the campaign against conflict diamonds, in which Belgium had excelled in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Revamping the organisation

The 2007 political stalemate apparently had a larger impact on policy objectives than on the organisation. Starting in 2009 a series of initiatives were indeed launched that would have a significant impact on the workings of the MFA.

The Belgian diplomatic network around the world looked at that time quite similar to the situation a decade earlier. The number of diplomatic posts and the size of its personnel were largely the same. Significant developments had nevertheless occurred, but incrementally and without overall conceptual planning. The overall number of personnel in Belgian posts in America and Western-Europe had decreased, whereas staff in the Maghreb, the Mashrek and South-East Asia had been increased. It is fair to speak of an actual shift of Belgian diplomatic efforts from Western Europe and North America towards Asia and the Middle East – and to a lesser extent, Central and Eastern Europe and Africa.

But looming prospects of future budgetary and staff reductions, and pressing questions about the added value of the MFA triggered by the international assertiveness of the regions, stimulated within the MFA a more conceptual and integrated rethinking of its organization, regarding the central administration in Brussels as well as its bilateral network abroad. Its economic and consular importance had been recognized and strengthened in the 1990s reforms. Now the time seemed ripe for emphasizing its political role. It might seem contradictory in view of the aforementioned void in adequately reassessing the policy objectives, but the argument (albeit correct in itself) was advanced that in order to pursue a pro-active multilateral agenda, a country needs an adequate bilateral network. The argument had been advanced in the early 2000s, when indeed Belgium pursued a dynamic multilateral and European policy. But in 2011, it was again referred to in the policy statement of minister Didier Reyniers in order to explain some of the reasons behind the significant organizational reassessment that had started a year earlier (House of representatives, 2011).

For the first time in its history, the MFA methodically assessed the effectiveness and role of its entire bilateral network. One by one, based upon a set of objective criteria (economic, political, consular), all bilateral embassies were evaluated and their relevance to the Belgian interests identified. By 2014, it was thus decided that this network had to remain as globally present

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as possible (even if this often implied a skeleton staff), but that a number of posts would be fused and rationalised in order to finance the whole of the network. Nevertheless, by the end of 2014 Foreign Minister Reynders had to announce the closure of 18 bilateral posts (mostly in Europe, but also in some conflict zones (Libya, Afghanistan), as part of an overall reduction of state spending.

Parallel to this assessment of the role and functions of the bilateral network, the secretary-general of the MFA Dirk Achten again opened the discussion on the fusion of the different personnel statutes that existed within the MFA (diplomatic, consular, cooperation development, central administration). All previous attempts to merge the existing career paths, had failed (with the exception of a short-lived unique career of 1946). The latest effort, between 2004 and 2006, had met with too many resistance, in all careers. This time, the fusion was going to be limited to the three external careers, leaving the central administration apart.

The reasons to proceed to such a unification, were essentially the same as those of the earlier attempts: greater flexibility, enhanced professionalism and recognition of the increased importance of consular work, and more adequate job perspectives based upon individual capabilities. This time too, criticisms abounded but the initiative went through. In April 2014, the government endorsed the new personnel statute for the external service. Six months later, the first recruitment test based upon the new statute was launched. Public interest for the job was as high as before, with more than 2700 candidates at the start of the process.

In the meantime, organisational reforms went unabated. In September 2013, Didier Reynders (MFA) and Jean-Pascal Labille (Cooperation Development) launched a new internal reflection on the functioning and structure of the MFA. To this end, new working groups were set up: economic diplomacy, coordination of the effectiveness of external policies, aid to Belgians abroad and crisis management, and the internal organization of the department.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has experienced a dynamic of permanent change and adjustment, both in its organisation and objectives. In the 19th century, these transformations proceeded slowly. But since World War II, the pace of organizational changes tremendously acceler-

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ated. Especially since the 1990s, the MFA looked like a house in constant transformation.

Compared to the 1990s reassessment of Belgian diplomacy, which involved both organisation and policy objectives, the 2010s review was largely limited to organizational change and has neglected the policy side. The added value of maintaining a diplomatic network for any country is said to be beyond doubt. But this is only a means to an end. A comprehensive, broad-based and thoroughly elaborated vision of foreign policy in the medium and long term is still lacking today – the ‘future anchor points for Belgian foreign policy, minister Vanackere referred to in 2011. The strategic horizon of Belgian foreign policy seems thus cloaked in mist, sailing on sight, without clear beacons.

To be fair, the identification of the vital interests of a country has never been an easy undertaking. The absence of an overall policy vision is not merely a Belgian phenomenon either. Neither is it simply the MFA’s responsibility. But in Belgium, as long as no clear understanding and consensus on what constitutes the vital interests of the country and its regions exists, and agreement among all actors is not reached on the best policy architecture to pursue them, it will remain problematic to make explicit the added value of the MFA. That will in turn weaken its position in the never-ending political and institutional bickering among the many actors in the Belgian polity and ultimately result in a loss for all.

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