

The vision of Flanders/Belgium regarding military missions abroad from a political perspective

Bezoek Vlaams parlement door Apostolat Militaire International (AMI)

Dear [...]

I have been asked to speak to you today about '*the vision of Flanders/Belgium regarding military missions abroad from a political perspective.*' An interesting topic that I have to address on a very symbolic day – September 11. Although this tragic event happened more than ten years ago, I assume that most of you will agree that the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York created a shockwave through the international system, aftershocks of which can still be felt today. Some directly - like the fact that Belgium, my country, still contributes to the NATO-operation in Afghanistan - some indirectly, like the drastic increase in safety-costs for travelling and transport in the past decade.

Terrorism was off course not new in 2001, but the scale of the attacks, the willingness of the perpetrators to sacrifice their own lives and the idea to use civilian aircrafts as weapons, horrified the world. The recent elimination of Al Qaida-leader Osama Bin Laden has not stopped the continuing threat of terrorism and radicalism, nor has it bridged all existing socio-economic gaps and socio-religious tensions between Europe and other parts of the world.

Moreover, although peaceful popular protest has shown to be a stronger force than terror in many parts of the Arab world, the recent Arab Spring has also confronted the international community with great dilemmas. The escalation of violence from autocratic regimes against their own civilians in countries like Libya and Syria – deliberately targeting and terrorizing the defenseless part of the population - has shown to create extremely complex issues for which no easy solutions can be formulated. Rwanda, Ex-Yugoslavia and Kosovo have shown that we can no longer be bystanders and that, in some specific cases, military interventions can be part of the solution, but the aftermath of these conflicts (as well as the recent events in Syria) also show that such conflicts are rarely black and white.

My party, the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) believes that in our ever changing world, military missions are the core business of Belgian (and European) defense. There is – according to us - no point in sustaining an expensive national defense if soldiers and military material are not deployable for stabilization and peacekeeping missions abroad. Security in the 21st century in Europe no longer depends on the protection of national borders or the preparation for large scale invasions from the East. The end of the Cold War has changed that paradigm. In the near future security will depend on many, very divers factors with military power being a small – yet essential - part of the toolbox.

Over the past four years my party has – as member of the ruling coalition (and holding the departments of Foreign Affairs and Defense as well as the office of Prime minister) – supported missions in Libya, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Africa (Democratic republic of Congo and Somalia).

In 2011 Belgium participated in the NATO-led operation against Kadhafi's regime in Libya in order to avoid further violence against the Libyan civilian population. Belgium also contributes to the NATO

Mission in Afghanistan under the UN-mandate. Until very recently, Belgian soldiers were responsible for the protection of Kabul airport while a squadron of Belgian F16's provide air support to the NATO troops on the ground, and infantry troops participate actively in the training of the Afghan military forces through an Operational Mentor Liaison Team (OMLT).

In Lebanon our country supports the demining efforts under the supervision of the United Nations. It is no coincidence that demining is an area of expertise for the Belgian army. As many of you will know, particularly the Western part of our country witnessed some of the most brutal battles of the First World War and unseen loss of human lives. And although this battle has long ended and though we will soon 'celebrate' the 100 year anniversary of this great tragedy, old bombs and mines are still being found and dug up in 'Flanders Fields' on a daily base.

A third of kind mission that I would like to emphasize here today, is the current military partnership with the Democratic Republic of Congo through which our country is trying to reinforce Congolese armed forces by training, educating and coaching individual battalions. The aim is not only to improve the efficiency, reliability and discipline of these Congolese troops but also to educate them regarding their obligations towards the civilian population and the need to respect human rights. In order to do this, Belgian trainers are not only 'on the ground' in the DR Congo, but also makes sure that these soldiers are well housed, properly fed and regularly paid. Experience in Congo shows that troops who lack these things, very quickly start looting and terrorizing the local population – often becoming its greatest enemy.

A last important international operation that I would like to mention here, is Belgium's participation in the EU naval operation ATALANTA against piracy along the coast of Somalia. Later this year, a frigate of the Belgian navy will for the third time start patrolling in the waters along the Horn of Africa to protect and escort merchant ships. With Antwerp as one of the biggest harbors in the world and considering the importance of maritime transport for trade as a whole -and for Belgium's export-driven industry in particular-, this engagement is not illogical.

I have mentioned these four examples deliberately because these missions combined give a complete overview of the different tasks that the Belgian army should be able to perform, according to my party. This is because some of these operations could be described as more military with the emphasis on intervention, stabilization and – consequently – security. Other interventions focus more on peacekeeping, peacebuilding and (socio-economic) reconstruction. Still others are less driven by concerns for development and the civilian population, but by hard economic facts. Our party believes that a small country like Belgium should always make sure that the operations in which it participates consist of such a mix. Allowing a narrow focus to determine a country's Foreign and Defense Policy, in which one opts for purely peacekeeping missions or for purely offensive missions, should always be avoided.

However, I also want to stress immediately that our party – in contrast maybe to what some opposition parties might argue – does not believe that armed intervention is the miracle solution for every conflict and in every situation. The past two decades, since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, we have seen an increase in short military interventions and peace keeping operations. It started with the bloodshed in Ex-Yugoslavia after the collapse of this country, and seems to have remained on the agenda of the international community ever since, with the continuing violence in Syria being the latest example.

Yet, for a Minister who has to take the final decision (or for a politician who has to give his or her approval to such a decision), any armed intervention, any participation of the national army, any deployment of our own military men and women, poses very difficult questions. Despite what we might sometimes like to believe, there is no such thing as a risk-free military mission abroad. There are differences and gradations of course, but the decision to deploy its own army remains a difficult one – certainly in a fully-fledged democracy like ours where politicians and policymakers have to explain their decisions to the population and regularly have to face the judgment of these voters.

But when is an intervention justified? How great must the bloodshed or the security be to justify a military operation against a regime, a group or an organization? And can a war actually be just? Speaking as a Christian Democrat for an audience of specialists, how do we match our Christian values (and the strict rules regarding killing) with a decision of going to war?

These questions are of course very old and far from new. Much greater philosophers and thinkers than I have tried to answer these. Therefore I shall not be trying to engage in a philosophical discussion with these thinkers tonight. You do not need to worry. Obviously mainly because time is limited. However, I shall try to share with you some of the main lessons that I have learned as a member of the defense commission in the Belgian Parliament these past years.

Firstly, there is the need of a mandate. Before any decision is taken, there has to be a legal framework allowing the military operation. Although there have been some exceptions in the past (namely the NATO-operation above Kosovo), there is a broad consensus in Belgium that a mandate from the UN Security Council is crucial before any engagement can be defended in Parliament. If Belgium - under a caretaker government (during the forming of the new coalition that took more than a year) - took the decision to participate in the operation against Kadhafi's regime, it could only do so because of the UN Mandate and the call from the Arab League. A mandate guarantees a multilateral approach which has been the cornerstone of our country's foreign policy since the end of WWII.

Secondly, it is important to communicate extensively to the population why a certain intervention is important or even crucial. This demands straightforward and clear leadership as well as intense debates in the commissions and Plenary Session. Some might argue that the former government did this too little, but we strongly reject that claim. In our view, discussions and debate are a crucial condition to ensure public and political support for a certain operation and intervention. Yet, in order to achieve this, Belgian policymakers should also realize and acknowledge that such debates should be about the content, about facts, and about pro and cons. In Belgium, too often these debates tend to become very personal or purely ideological, undermining as such the credibility of the Parliament through petty politics. Moreover, once the decision to send troops abroad is taken, the debate regarding this engagement should be conducted serenely, out of respect for the soldiers in action.

Thirdly, rhetoric needs to be met by action. In our view, one cannot state that human rights and the protection of innocent civilians should be the focus of our foreign policy, if we are not prepared to support this policy with tougher means when we are faced with regimes (or organizations) that have no respect for human life and basic rights – not even towards their own population. Although, once more, I would like to stress that a military intervention should be the final instrument in the toolbox, only to be used when all other options have run out and when it is agreed that the intervention will stop the conflict and not further complicate it by opening the box of Pandora.

Furthermore, and linked to the former topic, the link between security and development remains extremely complex and should be further studied and debated extensively the coming years. Our party is very weary to avoid an overlap between military operations and development efforts executed by international organizations and NGO's. A too close a link between both, could endanger the neutrality and heighten the risks for these organizations to become legitimate targets. Yet, recent experiences – in Afghanistan, but also elsewhere – indicate that in places where there is no security, most help organizations are absent or barely staffed, blocking any humanitarian aid and development from the start.

In addition, politicians should also be aware of the burden of history. Belgium for example is formed by the two brutal wars at the beginning of the 20th century and a history of foreign rulers as well as by more recent trauma's in the aftermath of the decolonization (namely Rwanda - where the killing of ten Belgian soldiers marked the start of the horrible massacre). Politicians need to take such sensitivities into consideration while debating important decisions. However, being aware of a country's history and taking into account its sensitivities, is not the same as completely basing one's foreign policy on it.

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