ATLANTIC LOYALTY, EUROPEAN AUTONOMY
Belgium and the Atlantic Alliance 1949-2009

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Introduction

Myths colour the past and Belgium's history in NATO is no exception.

Contrary to what is often thought, the Cold War did not start when the Second World War ended. The war coalition against Nazi Germany was to hold out for several more years and give rise to a number of international initiatives, which all the allies would endorse, with the establishment of the United Nations at the top of the list. Only in 1947 did the war coalition turn into confrontation and a cold war. Misperceptions, incompatible security designs and ensuing diverging interests between the United States and the Soviet Union had reinforced each other and finally transformed the former allies, both of whom had been crucial in the defeat of Nazi Germany, into new geopolitical adversaries.

In those first post-war years Belgium emerged as a convinced supporter of Western European defence arrangements under British leadership. Only in 1947 did Belgium gradually discover a privileged partner in the United States, though initially only at the economic and financial level. It would take till the summer of 1948 before Belgian diplomacy shelved its post-war project for European defence and signed up to an Atlantic alliance.

In the decades that followed, Belgium proved itself a loyal NATO partner. Nevertheless, the good relations between Brussels and Washington did not prevent profound crises disturbing the calm now and then. Moreover, unlike some other member states, Belgium was to make its own original contribution to détente between East and West.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, and the implosion of the Soviet Union, in 1991, brought an end to the Cold War and to the bipolar world order. This led to a debate about new European defence architecture in all the NATO countries, including Belgium, now the continent was no longer divided between East and West. In Belgium the debate was settled fairly quickly when the body politic, across party borders, returned to the original European defence option Paul-Henri Spaak had championed from 1945 to 1948. Combining European

primacy and autonomy in the field of defence with Atlantic loyalty became a balancing act that turned out not always to be easy.

Rik COOLSAET[1]

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1. Belgian blueprint for a global security architecture

6 December 1944. For Belgium the Second World War is almost over. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paul-Henri Spaak, is back in Brussels after four years of exile in London. He presents parliament with his plans for a new post-war world order for the first time.

This was a very different Spaak from the one who had been the symbol of the pre-war neutrality policy. Soon after his arrival in London, in 1940, he had been forced to embrace the vision of his former critics who, since 1936, had warned him constantly that his policy of rigid neutrality would turn out a fiasco. The outbreak of war had proved them right. They were present in force in London. Fairly quickly their discussions resulted in a concept of a multi-level security architecture. At the highest level they envisaged a new global organisation, an improved version of the League of Nations, to take care of collective security. This new United Nations should then be reinforced by powerful continental organisations. Finally, the third level would be formed by regional organisations. For the European continent they had two regional groupings in mind, one in Western Europe centred on Great Britain and another in Eastern Europe round the Soviet Union. These regional groupings were expected to work together closely. Internally each of them would set up far-reaching military, monetary and economic cooperation.

On his return from London at the end of 1944 Spaak became the spokesperson for these London ideas. He was not particularly interested in the highest level, the United Nations, nor in the mid-level, the continental pan-European organization, either. What interested him most was the ground level, the regional grouping of Western European countries and he put his political energy into that. He saw it as a new, enlarged Locarno Pact, whereby the participating states promised each other political and military support in the event of new aggression by Germany. He envisaged concrete military cooperation, in terms of the standardisation of arms systems, the coordination of armed forces, an exchange of military information, the development of joint bases, and such like.[2] Great Britain should, in his view, assume the natural leadership role: 'The solidarity that develops between the two countries may thus become even closer than that which unites the members of the British Commonwealth.'[3]

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2. DE VOS, L., et al, *Documents diplomatiques belges 1941-1960*. Volume 2: Défense, n° 72, pp. 205-207 (hereafter referred to as: *DDB*).
3. VAN LANGENHOVE, F., *La sécurité de la Belgique. Contribution à l'histoire de la période 1940-1950*. Brussels, Editions de l'ULB, 1971, pp. 129-136.

What was original about the Belgian vision was that it linked a political and economic dimension to political-military cooperation. International political and military agreements only made sense in Spaak's eyes if they rested on strong economic foundations. For this reason he considered the vision of his Dutch colleague, Van Kleffens, whose approach to the post-war problem was from an exclusively (Atlantic) perspective of security, too narrow.

Spaak's vision for Europe owed its origins to Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's *Pan-Europa* (though Coudenhove-Kalergi himself was not much loved by the Belgian community in exile in London).[4] Spaak thus considered Europe as a political project whose purpose lay firmly within itself and which, moreover, would make its way as an autonomous 'third force' between the new superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

However, this original Belgian project never really got off the ground. Great Britain was not too interested in the leading role Spaak wanted to foist on London. Winston Churchill had always been particularly critical of this kind of continental cooperation. Indeed he considered the small continental states too weak to back up Britain's position in the world: 'The Belgians are extremely weak, and their behaviour before the war was shocking. The Dutch were entirely selfish and fought only when they were attacked, and then for a few hours. Denmark is helpless and defenceless, and Norway practically so.'[5] To guarantee British global influence Churchill opted, on the contrary, for close Atlantic ties between his country and the United States – with Great Britain in the role of a junior partner – coupled with good relations with the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin.[6]

France, for its part, was divided in its reactions to the Belgian project. While the Soviet Union proved to be distinctly antagonistic.

From the end of 1944 the Soviet Union began to wage a strikingly bitter campaign against Belgium. It accused Spaak of wanting to establish an anti-Soviet bloc,[7] though that was not the case. Since the summer of 1941 Spaak had pur-

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4. BITSCH, M.-T., *Histoire de la construction européenne de 1945 à nos jours*. Brussels, Complexe, 1996, pp. 24-25. For the London Belgians' views of Europe, see: GOTOVITCH, J., 'Perspectives européennes dans la Résistance et à Londres durant la guerre', in: DUMOULIN, M. (ed.), *La Belgique et les débuts de la construction européenne. De la guerre aux traités de Rome*. Louvain-la-Neuve, Ciaco, 1987, p. 40; Snoy in: ibid., pp. 159-160; *DDB*, I, n° 55, pp. 194-196.
5. Cited in: WIEBES, C., ZEEMAN, B., *A star is born. Militaire alliantievorming in de Atlantische regio, 1945-1948*. Mededelingen van de subfaculteit der algemene politieke en sociale wetenschappen, no. 31, Amsterdam, 1983, p. 37 (hereafter referred to as: *A star is born*).
6. WIEBES, C., ZEEMAN, B., *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances, 1940-1949*. Leiden University, doctoral thesis, Theology, 1993, p. 28.
7. WILLEQUET, J., *Paul-Henri Spaak. Un homme, des combats*. Brussels, La Renaissance du Livre, 1975, pp. 135-136.

sued friendly relations with the Soviet Union and the appointment of his Chief of Cabinet, Edouard Le Ghait, as ambassador to Moscow was an expression of this.[8] He wanted to avoid the development of antagonistic blocs in Europe.[9] Spaak's finance colleague, Camille Gutt, also saw a worthy ally in the Soviet Union and showed notable understanding for the 'price' that must be paid for it: 'If all the countries and all the heads of state attacked by Germany had behaved like the Russians and Stalin, we would not be where we are. Obviously there is a price, a piece of Poland (…) but can we reproach him for having brought the line forward to where it would take the first shock? In fact it was a good move.'[10]

According to Ambassador Le Ghait the Soviet Union feared that the project Belgium cherished would lead to a purely Western defensive organisation. This would, it is true, secure the countries concerned against renewed German aggression, but would also tempt them to watch passively in the event of difficulties to the east of Germany, as they had in the second half of the 1930s: 'One might anticipate', he reported to Spaak in February 1945, 'that any policy that might result in Belgium and the Netherlands being turned into a mere defensive outpost of Great Britain and France would not meet with approval from the Soviets.'[11]

But there was probably a second reason that played a role in fuelling Soviet mistrust of Belgium, too: Belgium's participation in the U.S. Manhattan Project. Since September 1942 Union Minière, the key Belgian mining company operating in the Congolese province of Katanga, had been supplying the United States with uranium ore from the Belgian Congo for the development of nuclear weapons. Washington was afraid, even, that Germany had begun to develop atomic weapons. But the military head of the Manhattan Project, General Leslie Groves, had an additional objective in mind. He wanted to bring all the uranium ore deposits in the world under American control, thus creating an American uranium monopoly. Groves belonged to a minority in the United States that had, from the start of the project, understood the nuclear programme in the light of what he considered to be an inevitable clash between the United States and the Soviet Union, once the war against Germany was over. The Katangese uranium deposits were pivotal to his plan, because they contained the world's most important and richest sources of the ore.

8. DUMOULIN, *Spaak*. Brussels, Racine, 1999, p. 275 (hereafter referred to as *Spaak*).
9. SMETS, P.F., *La pensée européenne et atlantique de Paul-Henri Spaak (1942-1972)*. Brussels, Goemae re, 1980, part 1, p. 42; GOTOVITCH, *Perspectives européennes*, p. 43-44.
10. Cited in: CROMBOIS, J.-F., *Camille Gutt. Les finances et la guerre (1940-1945)*. Gerpinnes-Brussels, Quorum-Ceges, 2000, p. 352.
11. *DDB*, II, n° 170, pp. 407-409.

It was a long time before the Belgian government was informed of these plans, and the contacts and contracts between the Union Minière and the Manhattan Project. That would only happen in March 1944 and even then only partially and sporadically. Unaware of their potential role in Groves' plans, the government ratified the agreements made previously to supply ore, in September 1944.

The Manhattan Project was intended to remain secret, but the Soviet Union was aware of the project from the summer of 1942. In 1943 it, too, decided on a similar project. Contrary to the United States, however, the Soviet Union scarcely had the necessary ores at its disposal. It was aware of the Congolese contribution to the Manhattan Project though. Stalin probably saw the Belgian government's policy as two-faced. Brussels claimed to be working for good relations with the Soviet Union on the European continent, but was simultaneously supplying the raw materials for an American nuclear monopoly, directed against the Soviet Union. In his inner circle Stalin declared repeatedly that the United States were using its nuclear monopoly to put pressure on the Soviet Union to accept the American plans concerning Europe and the rest of the world. The Soviet leadership of the time could hardly be expected to believe that a private Belgian company had engaged in this kind of key dossier largely off its own bat and that the Belgian government was almost continually ignored both by the company management and by their American ally, despite the agreement of September 1944.[12]

Repeated attempts by Spaak and Belgian diplomacy, between 1945 and 1947, to reach a Belgian-Soviet friendship treaty were invariably left unanswered by Moscow, despite Spaak's publicly conciliatory and obliging attitude towards the country.[13] After the war Belgian diplomacy constantly underlined the fact that its regional efforts should certainly not be interpreted as anti-Soviet bloc forming. As far as Spaak and most Belgian politicians were concerned this Western European grouping was meant to become a third force between the United States and the Soviet Union, relations with both being friendly. In March 1947 Spaak went as far as declaring to the Soviet Ambassador in Brussels that Belgium would never join an alliance that might be directed against the Soviet Union.[14]

12. GADDIS, J.L., *Now we know. Rethinking Cold War history.* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 95-97.
13. SMETS, op cit, part 1, pp. 89-90; WIEBES, *A star is born*, p. 69.
14. DUMOULIN, *Spaak*, pp. 403-404.

2.   1947 the turning point

In his famous speech on 5 June 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall sketched a sombre picture of the decline of Europe. To offset this, he called for a one-off recovery programme of limited duration. He asked the Europeans to take the initiative for it and invited all European countries to participate.

Marshall had cited the Benelux Customs Union as an example of the economic cooperation in Europe which was supposed to form the basis for the envisaged recovery programme.[15] Nevertheless, the initial reaction in Belgium was not enthusiastic. The Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hervé de Gruben, wondered how Washington envisioned its credit policy. If the Marshall offer applied to Eastern Europe, too, the scheme might not be viable; if, on the other hand, Eastern European participation were excluded, it would contribute to the division of Europe, which was not desirable. With Spaak's approval he rejected a Dutch proposal to undertake a joint démarche in Washington, in which the Marshall offer would be welcomed and the positive contribution that the Benelux could make to European recovery would be underlined.[16]

For Belgium the United States was, it is true, a friendly nation, but nonetheless, as Spaak had declared during the war, it was too far away to take on the role of leader of the West.[17] Almost all the London Belgians had looked exclusively towards Great Britain to exercise leadership over a Western economic and political grouping if it came to it. Only a few Christian Democrats, like Paul Van Zeeland and Frans Van Cauwelaert, had argued for an Atlantic union, the first for mainly economic reasons and the second for reasons of security and political independence.

A week later, however, Spaak had shifted his position completely. He had begun to realise how advantageous the Marshall Plan might be for Belgium and now described it as 'world shaking'.[18] When the Belgian Ambassador in Washington, Robert Silvercruys, informed him that Washington did not want the Soviet Union to participate, Spaak said he regretted it. But he concluded then, too, that the plan should only apply to Western Europe without, however, wishing to exclude the possibility of Soviet participation at a later date.[19]

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15. MELANDRI, P., *Les Etats-Unis face à l'unification de l'Europe 1945-1954*. Paris, Editions E. Pedone, 1980, p. 97.
16. WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances*, p. 123.
17. SMETS, op cit, part 1, pp. 12 and 19.
18. Ibid., p. 123.
19. WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances*, p. 123; SMETS, o.c., tome 1, pp. 81-85.

Spaak's about-turn had everything to do with his view of Belgium's national interests. By the end of 1946 the Belgian view of Germany had already shifted from a vigorous control over Germany to a policy of rapprochement and the gradual reintegration of Germany in Europe. Indeed, the recovery of the German economy was obviously crucial to the economic resurgence of Europe. Besides, Belgium had always advocated close European political and economic cooperation. The Marshall Plan offered the first strong external leverage ever for these objectives. The plan would thus respond to the most urgent and vital problem facing Belgian social stability, namely the threatened strangulation of Belgian trade with its direct trading partners, which was putting Belgian economic recovery at risk.

In the course of discussions on the Marshall Recovery Programme, Belgium and the United States steadily grew closer. The United States used the excellent bilateral contacts with the Benelux countries to fine-tune the details of the programme.[20] The Benelux – and especially Belgium – oriented the plan towards greater intra-European economic cooperation, which they considered necessary. In parallel, the distance between Belgium and Great Britain gradually grew, firstly as a result of British Commonwealth preference and subsequently as a result of the British refusal to give greater political competences to the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), which was to supervise the distribution of the Marshall funds.[21]

The Marshall Plan smoothed the way for a military alliance between the participating states. Initially, however, Spaak was not interested. He stuck to his original preference for defence arrangements between Western European countries. So, when the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, proposed a Western Union in February 1948, Spaak's reaction was enthusiastic, because there now seemed for the first time to be a possibility of achieving this close political-military cooperation between West European states under British leadership.

On 25 February 1948, before the first negotiations for the Western Union had begun, a communist coup took place in Prague. In contrast to public opinion and the press, Western chancelleries' reactions to the events were rather low-key. Most officials of Western diplomacy, including Spaak, considered the Prague

20. KURGAN-VAN HENTENRYK, G., 'La Belgique et le Plan Marshall. Les négociations belgo-américaines juin 1947-juillet 1948', in: *Le Plan Marshall et le relèvement économique de l'Europe*. Symposium 21 to 23 March 1991. Paris, Commission pour l'Histoire économique et financière, 1993, p. 77.
21. GODTS-PETERS, S., 'Le rôle des Belges dans l'élaboration d'un système de paiements en Europe de 1947 à l'Union Européenne de Paiements', in: DUMOULIN, *La Belgique et les débuts de la construction européenne*, pp. 89-90; KURGAN-VAN HENTENRYK, G., 'La Belgique et le plan Marshall ou les paradoxes des relations belgo-américaines', in: *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, LXXI, 1993, 2, pp. 305-308 and 333.

coup as a mere confirmation of the existing situation, that is that Czechoslova-kia was part of the Soviet sphere of influence.[22] At no point did Spaak look upon the coup as a forerunner of Soviet action against Western Europe. In the same sense as the influential American diplomat, George F. Kennan, described the coup as a 'defensive reaction – and one foreseen by ourselves – to the success of the Marshall Plan Initiative', Spaak also saw the events in Czechoslovakia as an expression of anxiety rather than as agression on the part of the Soviet Union.[23]

On 17 March 1948, after two weeks of negotiations, the British plan was adopted by five European foreign ministers (the United Kingdom, France and the three Benelux countries) as the Brussels Treaty, providing for 'economic, social and cultural collaboration and collective self-defence'. Canadian diplo-mats described the Western Union as 'Spaakistan' because of the enthusiasm and the energy with which Spaak had worked to ensure its success. Article 1 of the treaty described the economic objective, namely to organise and coordinate the economic activities of the participating states in the most efficient manner. Arti-cle 4 described the automatic mutual security guarantees that member states undertook towards each other.

However, what Spaak did not suspect at the time was that the British considered the Brussels Treaty only as a step towards broader Atlantic cooperation, in keep-ing with Churchill's junior partnership idea with the United States. Indeed, from the end of 1947 Washington had made it clear to London that it was not willing to engage in Atlantic cooperation before the Europeans had proved that they were capable of organising themselves.

In June 1948, when Washington decided to start negotiations for an Atlantic pact, Spaak was reticent. In March and April 1948 he had declared that there was no need for formal American commitments towards Werstern Europe: 'In contrast to the pre-1939 situati on, the Soviets had no desire to fight in Europe.' A treaty between the United States and the Western Union could create the impression, according to Spaak, that the rest of Western Europe was being writ-ten off and could lead to an increase in Soviet pressure on precisely those coun-tries. Spaak's scepticism gave rise to the question in Washington as to whether it was desirable to continue with the intended pact or whether it would be pref-erable to limit themselves to a unilateral American declaration, whereby West-

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22. WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances*, p. 172; YERGIN, D., *Shattered peace. The origins of the Cold War and the national security state*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co, 1977, pp. 343-345. See also: CO GELS, F., *Souvenirs d'un diplomate. Du gâteau avec les duchesses*. Brussels, Hervé Doux champs, 1983, p. 96.
23. KENNAN, G.F., *Memoirs 1925-1950*. New York, Pantheon, 1967, p. 379; *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*). Washington, GPO, 1947:1, p. 773; WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alli-ances*, p. 172.

ern Europe was assured of American support coupled with American military aid in the event of a Soviet attack.[24]

Right through the summer Spaak continued to stress that a military pact was superfluous and premature, and would be seen as provocation by the Soviet Union. To him that was not wise considering the limited military capacity of Western states at the time. Belgium, like France for that matter, was only interested in agreements for eventual emergencies – in the form of arms supplies, for example.

In the negotiations at ambassadorial level the Belgian delegation played no role whatsoever in terms of content. 'The contributions of the French and Belgian members of the Working Group to its discussions have so far been exactly zero. They have come forward with no positive or constructive ideas whatsoever, nor have they had anything to say about ideas that have been put forward by other people that contributed in any way to their develop ment.'[25] At the end of August Belgian and, in particular, French reticence almost led to a breakdown in the negotiations in Washington.[26]

But by September 1948 Spaak's scepticism seemed to have been overcome. On numerous occasions, both the American Secretary of State and the British Foreign Secretary had shown their displeasure at the Belgian position. In fact Spaak himself would not deny his *volte face*. Fear of the Soviet Union, though, was not the reason. Spaak did not expect another war any more than the other members of the working group in Washington preparing the North Atlantic Treaty. Europe was not on the eve of a third world war, said Spaak, outlining the international situation at the beginning of February 1949.[27]

That Spaak had shifted positions was due mainly to the balance of power in Western Europe. Great Britain, which he had always hoped would assume the leadership in Western Europe, had renounced this ambition time and again. Since 1947, however, the United States, from which Spaak initially expected little support, had followed a policy whereby their interests in the area of European unification and German integration were almost identical to those of Belgium. So, from then on the United States rather than Great Britain had increasingly become the point of reference for Belgian foreign policy. But Washington favoured an Atlantic Treaty – whilst Belgium was still advocating some form of

24. *FRUS*, 1948:3, pp. 46-48 and 76; KAPLAN, L., *The United States and NATO. The formative years*. Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1984, pp. 73-74; DUMOULIN, *Spaak*, p. 416.
25. REID, E., *Time of fear and hope. The making of the North Atlantic Treaty, 1947-1949*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1977, p. 116.
26. WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances*, p. 252.
27. National Archives (Washington), Young to Secretary of State, 16 February 1949 (855.00/2-1649).

third force or bloc that would take a neutral position between the United States and the Soviet Union.

This became clear when the Belgian Ambassador to Canada visited the Minister of External Affairs, Lester Pearson, reportedly on the instructions of Spaak himself, with a suggestion to that effect. If Western Europe were militarily equipped and politically united it could remain neutral in a conflict between the two superpowers. According to the Belgian Ambassador Western Europe would not be possible without West Germany, since that country could provide most troops. A Western European military structure was considered preferable, according to the ambassador again, because of the fear many harboured that 'the United States would not be equal to the task of working out any great coalition which would defeat the Soviets. It had neither the wisdom nor the experience to bring about such a grand design; [it] too often acted on impulse with only short-range objectives in mind,' wrote Escott Reid, the Canadian Deputy Under-Secretary for External Affairs, later.

From the summer of 1948, however, the United States had made it clear that countries that wished to take such a position could not count on American support in the event of a crisis.[28] America would only consider supplying arms to countries that 'offered practical guarantees that these weapons would not be wasted by outdated policies' and which were prepared to deliberate and coordinate their military policy in a 'defence council with enough authority to ignore internal political considerations and take the military decisions necessary without local limitations.'[29]

Continued Belgian refusal to go along in the direction of the proposed Atlantic pact would, in other words, have incurred only disadvantages and not one single advantage. The Atlantic pact might differ from the original concept of a British-led Europe, nevertheless, in the end it was the only choice left to secure Belgium's national interests.

On 10 September 1948 the Belgian Ambassador in Washington, Robert Silver-cruys, informed the American government that Belgium had, after all, given the green light to the North Atlantic Treaty. Two weeks later, on 28 September 1948, Spaak delivered his famous 'We are afraid' speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. Thus Paul-Henri Spaak confirmed his strategic change of course. As Belgium had decided to join an Atlantic defence alliance under American leadership, the concept of Europe

28. *FRUS*, 1948:3, pp. 233 and 281.
29. *DDB*, II, n° 118, pp. 289-290; WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances*, pp. 303 and 389.

as a third force with its own defence, which was dear to him on his return from London, was abandoned.

On 4 April 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in Washington by the two North American countries, the five member states of the Western Union and Italy, Denmark, Norway, Portugal and Iceland. One day later the members of the Western Union formally requested military material support from the United States. In Belgium the Chamber of Representatives ratified the North Atlantic Treaty on 4 May, with the exception of the Communist members of parliament and the Socialist, Isabelle Blume. The Senate followed a week later, with a similar vote.

The traditionalist interpretation that the North Atlantic Treaty was born out of fear of the military intentions of the Soviet Union does not tally with reality. On the contrary, every one of the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty had its own specific reasons, primarily of an economic and internal political nature, for endorsing it. At the same time, what united all the countries concerned under American leadership was the social instability that would have resulted from continued economic depression, from which only close cooperation with the United States seemed to offer a way out. Guaranteeing social stability was in the most vital interest of all European countries concerned. The United States could offer a substantial contribution to this end, whereas the Soviet Union had almost nothing to offer in this respect.

As in the other participating states, in Belgium motives concerning military security were never at any time a priority between 1947 and 1949. Neither the events in Prague nor the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb, in 1949, made Spaak believe in a military threat from the Soviet Union. In the spring of 1948, when rumours were going around about a possible encounter between Spaak and Stalin, Victor Doré, the Canadian Ambassador in Brussels, summed up Spaak's ambivalence as follows: such a meeting would be 'logical, taking into account Spaak's well known friendly attitude towards Russia proper in spite of his energetic condemnation of Communism.'[30]

For Spaak the North Atlantic Treaty was a consecration and an offshoot of the choice that Belgian foreign policy had made in 1947 in response to the Marshall Plan. Spaak saw the United States as the most reliable and – from his perspective – least 'interested' lever and ally for the development of close economic and political cooperation amongst European states.

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30. Cited in: WIEBES, *Belgium, the Netherlands and alliances*, p. 172.

That the development of an Atlantic Europe brought with it a rift in the continent of Europe was not what Spaak wanted. On the contrary even. But if this was the price that had to be paid for the Europe he was aiming for, then this disadvantage was nothing compared to the advantages in terms of the economy, ideology and domestic politics. In the second half of 1947, with American and Belgian interests increasingly running parallel, Belgian interest in continuing to work towards a Soviet-Belgian friendship treaty disappeared.

Not only did Spaak's 'We are afraid' speech of September 1948 not accurately reflect his assessment of Soviet politics, it did not result from objective incidents in international relations at the time either. It should be seen primarily as a confirmation that the diplomatic turnaround, begun in 1947, now also entailed Belgian foreign policy increasingly endorsing the American perception of international reality and subscribing to the American view of the world.

An example of the increasing attunement of Belgian policy to American positions was the cooperation, patronised by Spaak himself from the summer of 1947, between the recently established American CIA and the Belgian State Security (through the Administrator-General, Robert de Foy). According to Spaak, the two services had a 'common task' to carry out concerning communist activities in Belgium and neighbouring countries. This would lead, two years later, in 1949, to discussions on the establishment of a resistance network (stay-behind network) in case of a new war in Europe.[31] Belgium's alignment with the American vision of the world had now become an important premise in Belgian foreign policy.

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31. National Archives (Washington), Millard (US Embassy Brussels) to Secretary of State, 2 December 1947 and Lovett's reaction to Millard, 4 December 1947 (855.00/12-247); DUMOULIN, *Spaak*, p. 431.

3.   The era of the Atlantic Community

Understanding between Brussels and Washington was to grow closer and closer in subsequent decades. Nevertheless the good relations between Brussels and Washington during the Cold War did not mean that Belgium always endorsed all American policies with the same enthusiasm and neither did they prevent profound crises disturbing the calm every now and then.

On 25 June 1950 North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel which, since the Japanese defeat, had divided the Korean peninsula into Soviet-backed North Korea and US-backed South Korea. The ensuing Korean civil war became the first theatre of the Cold War because this local conflict was projected into a global power struggle between Washington and Moscow. To a large extent, the Belgian government shared the American assessment of the conflict. The Belgian Permanent Representative to the UN, Fernand Vanlangenhove, took up the American charge that the Soviet Union was behind the North Korean assault and that the aim of the conflict was to weaken and divide the West.

Like the majority of other European allies, however, Belgium was much less willing to send troops to the peninsula. At the end of July the Belgian government had promised air support in the form of some transport planes, but the United States had continued to push for a battalion, at the least, to be made available. Belgian reticence led to criticism of Belgium in the American press. It was accused of contributing too little to collective security despite its economic power and of wanting to leave it all to the United States to take care of.

On 26 August the Belgian government finally decided to contribute a battalion of volunteers to the UN force. At the same time it tried to reduce the air support. In total 3500 Belgian volunteers took part in the war and 106 lost their lives. Arriving at the end of January 1951, the last of them left in June 1955. There was minimal interest either from public opinion or the body politic and it was pushed to the background, certainly at the start of the conflict, by the abdication of Leopold III and the ensuing domestic political crisis.

A second difference of opinion between the two countries emerged in the summer of 1951, when France and the United States presented a joint project for a 'European army', known as 'European Defence Community' (EDC). The United States waged an active campaign for the Western European states to endorse the project. However, the Pholien government in Belgium, with Paul Van Zeeland as Foreign Minister, had strong objections to the erosion of its sovereignty as a result of the supranational impact of the proposal. Moreover Belgium made every effort, on the one hand, to limit as far as possible the number of Belgian

military it made available to the EDC and, on the other hand, for maximum integration of the EDC into NATO. The EDC, remarked Van Zeeland at the end of October 1951, is only an experiment 'in the framework of the Atlantic Pact, the European conception serving only as a sort of staging post.'[32] As far as Belgium was concerned the European force was an integral part of NATO. The Atlantic Alliance formed, in the words of Paul Van Zeeland, the 'backbone' of Belgian foreign policy and 'the European idea is part of the Atlantic policy'.[33]

By the end of 1951 Belgian opposition had become so great that the EDC project was threatened with failure.[34] One of the German participants in the negotiations complained that Belgium rejected everything that was European about the EDC. There were increasing calls to pursue the project without the Benelux countries. Officials from France and Germany advised the United States to put pressure on Belgium, which was considered by all to be the most anti-EDC country within the Benelux. The United States did indeed threaten to exclude Belgium from the EDC discussions. It let it be known that those who did not sign should not count on American economic and military aid.

Isolated in Europe and under severe pressure from the United States, the Belgian government gave in. On 27 May 1952 the six ECSC countries signed the EDC Treaty. Nonetheless, as it had previously with the ECSC, Belgian opposition had borne fruit. Once again the supranational competence was much less far-reaching than in the original project. There was no mention any more of a supranational defence minister, but of a 'collegial commissariat' of nine members, with significantly fewer competences than the High Authority of the ECSC, since it was essentially an executive body of the Council of Ministers which held the real key to decision-making and in which all the member states had a right of veto if their national interests were threatened. On the other hand, Belgium had had to accept that the largest part of its troops came under the EDC, but had succeeded in having a proviso included in the draft treaty that countries could continue to have their own troops at their disposal in particular circumstances, e.g. in the colonies. In the end, the EDC units were subordinate to NATO, as Belgium had demanded. The EDC had, essentially, to organise the contingents at the disposal of the European NATO Supreme Command. It was the NATO's Supreme Allied Commander who was in command of the EDC troops and as long as NATO

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32. *DDB*, II, n° 121 and 122; DE VOS, L., 'La Communauté Européenne de Défense, une occasion manquée?', in: DUMOULIN, *La Belgique et les débuts de la construction européenne*, p. 109 (hereafter referred to as: *Occasion manquée*); DELOGE, op.cit., pp. 163 et seq. Initially Belgium only wanted to make 6000 men available. Later the number was raised to 12,000 men.
33. *DDB*, II, n° 103, p. 264.
34. ROTHSCHILD, *Une certaine idée de l'Europe*, p. 53; *DDB*, II, n° 142, p. 350.

existed, there could be no question, as far as Belgium could see, of setting up their own European Supreme Command.[35]

Nevertheless the draft treaty did include a supranational objective, expressed in article 38. This gave the future EDC Assembly the task of designing within six months a 'federal or confederal structure', which would encompass not only the EDC but also the other existing Communities. In this way the future European army would be framed by a political Europe which would ensure democratic control.[36] But the French Assembly's rejection of the EDC in August 1954 meant the prospect of rapid European political integration disappeared. Instead, with the 1957 Treaties of Rome, in which the Benelux countries played a crucial role, an indirect path to political union was chosen, via the supranational organisation of a common market.

The Atlantic Europe of 1947 and the supranational Europe of 1957 were closely interlinked projects, with the first prevailing over the second. The 1957 EEC Treaty made no mention of a common foreign or defence policy nor of a joint monetary policy either. For the latter there was absolutely no need, since monetary stability was guaranteed by the Bretton Woods system anchored by the American dollar. The former, as far as the architects of the European Community of 1957 were concerned, belonged to the exclusive competence of the Atlantic Alliance. Political consultations regarding global problems belonged, according to Spaak a few months after the 1955 Messina Conference, to NATO, which was supposed to develop into the political centre of the West.[37]

In 1955 Paul-Henri Spaak would declare explicitly that 'the European idea is necessarily a limited idea' and that the European structure should be considered as part of an 'Atlantic commonwealth'.[38] The construction of Europe was supposed to ward off the demons of the past, in other words nationalism and Franco-German antagonism, while NATO had to deal with present and future dangers.[39] Thus European policy always had to be tested for its compatibility with Atlantic loyalty and cooperation.

The development of an Atlantic commonwealth became Spaak's leitmotiv when he was appointed Secretary-General of NATO, in December 1956. In his last few months as Foreign Minister he had strongly advocated the need for political con-

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35. DE VOS, *Occasion manquée*, pp. 108-109; *DDB*, II, n° 141 and 142.
36. BRUGMANS, H., *L'idée européenne 1918-1966*. Brugge, De Tempel, 1966, p. 160.
37. SMETS, op cit, part 1, p. 470.
38. *FRUS,* Volume 1955-1957: 4, p. 19.
39. SPAAK, P.-H., 'De politiek van West-Europa', in: *Textes et Documents*, 195, January 1965; PAULUS, D., *Les milieux dirigeants belges et l'adhésion du Royaume Uni aux Communautés européennes*. Brussels, ULB, Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie, 1971, p. 212 n42.

sultations within NATO in response to the Suez Crisis. After the Egyptian President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, on 1 July 1956, Spaak adopted an even tougher position than the British and the French. He compared the nationalisation of the canal to Hitler's actions, which no one had resisted. Spaak's opinion was that Nasser should be stopped – 'broken', he wrote to a friend – and he tried to have the International Court of Justice censure Nasser's behaviour.[40]

When France and Great Britain started their military intervention in Egypt on 1 November 1956, they were criticised within NATO by, amongst others, Norway, which labelled the operation as an expression of colonialism from which NATO should distance itself. Spaak took it upon himself to defend France and Great Britain. He saw the events in Egypt as proof that the fundamental Soviet policy, which consisted of making things difficult for the West, had not changed.[41] The loss of French and British influence in the Middle East would be a setback for the West in the global East-West confrontation.[42] To combat this new, indirect form of Soviet aggression more consultation and cooperation were needed within NATO, including on events outside the Atlantic Treaty area, according to Spaak. He feared above all that the Suez incidents and the negative American reaction would lead to a rift in NATO.[43] After all, in the face of a global Soviet policy, there also needed to be a global Western policy.[44] He told his Chief of Cabinet, Robert Rothschild, to set up a discrete working group of Belgian, Portuguese, British and French officials to coordinate their policies in Africa. As in other countries, however, in Belgium the Ministry of Colonies was not keen on international coordination and there was no follow-up to Spaak's idea.[45]

As Secretary-General of NATO Spaak devoted himself to what Van Zeeland had already advocated during the war, namely an Atlantic economic union. To this he added a political component, as well, in order to achieve an Atlantic Community. In his view this should become the centre of the West's political decision-making, with the NATO Council as a sort of 'board of directors of the free world', with regard both to the politics of peaceful coexistence in East-West relations and the problem of the developing countries. Economic questions should be dealt with there, too.[46] Since the West was caught up in a global

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40. SPAAK, P.-H., *Combats inachevés*. Paris, Fayard, 1969, deel 1, p. 229; MUÛLS, F., *Quarante années au service de l'Etat 1919-1959*. S.l., 1994, p. 365; DUMOULIN, *Spaak*, p. 538.
41. *FRUS*, 1955-1957:4, pp. 107 and 116.
42. MUÛLS, op cit, p. 365.
43. SPAAK, *Combats inachevés*, part 1, p. 229.
44. SPAAK, P.-H., *Pourquoi l'OTAN?* Paris, Plon, 1959, pp. 35-37.
45. ROTHSCHILD, R., *Un Phénix nommé Europe. Mémoires 1945-1995*. Brussels, Racine, 1997, p. 198.
46. SPAAK, *Combats inachevés*, part 2, p. 214; JORDAN, R., *Political leadership in NATO*. Boulder, Westview, 1979, p. 72; REID, op cit, p. 250; WINAND, P., *Eisenhower, Kennedy and the United States of Europe*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1993, p. 198-199.

power struggle with the Soviet Union, it needed to present a solid economic and political common front, so that the Soviet Union could not exploit divisions amongst NATO member states.[47] Because the existing NATO Council, which took decisions unanimously, was not capable of dealing with urgent situations, he had already demonstrated in 1955 that he was in favour of abolishing the unanimity rule in favour of 'almost complete political integration within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance'.[48]

Spaak's mandate as Secretary-General was not a success. He said himself that he had felt the displeasure of various member states with his standpoints.[49] In April 1961 he brought his mandate to an abrupt end and again took up his function as Foreign Minister in the Belgian government, which was once more caught up in a serious dispute with the United States.

The third major Belgian-American row of the Cold War had its roots in Congo. In 1960-1961, the turbid period of Congolese independence, a Katangese leader, Moïse Tshombe, declared the independence of his province. Belgium had assured Tshombe in advance that it would recognise Katangese independence quickly. But at the request of the Congolese Prime Minister Lumumba, who threatened to ask the Soviet Union for military support and broke off diplomatic relations with Belgium, the UN Security Council ordered Belgium, in mid-July 1960, to pull back its troops from Congo, where UN blue helmets took their place. Belgium was extremely irritated with the American government for having supported the resolution and threatened retaliatory measures, such as the non-purchase of new American Starfighter warplanes and a review of its financial obligations to NATO. But these threats never materialised. Spaak, too, initially shared Belgian dissatisfaction with the American position, but did everything he could to normalise Belgian-American relations again after his return to Belgian politics.

So, in the first half of the fifties the three guiding principles that would characterise Belgian foreign and defence policy during the Cold War had taken definite shape: Atlanticism as a central frame of reference for foreign policy; the development of a European construction, essentially limited to the economic sphere; and, within it, the supranational method for hedging the position of small states against their more powerful neighbours.

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47. SPAAK, *Pourquoi l'OTAN?* pp. 35-37.
48. SPAAK, P.-H., 'The atom bomb and NATO', in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 33, no. 3, April 1955, pp. 357-358.
49. SPAAK, *Combats inachevés*, part 2, p. 217.

4.   Belgian 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.[50] 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.[51] 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.[52]

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50. *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.
51. Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 16 June 1966, pp. 22, 31 and 38; Senaat, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 21 June 1966, pp. 1363-1369.
52. Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 16 June 1966, p. 27.

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.[53] 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 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.'[54]

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

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53. 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.
54. Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 14 June 1966, pp. 15; *La Cité*, 6 September 1966. On Pierre Harmel, see also: DUJARDIN, V., *Harmel*. Brussels, Le Cri, 2004, pp. 823 pp.

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,[55] so that European member states could coordinate their positions, before tabling

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55. *FRUS 1964-1968*, XIII, n° 264 and 330.

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.'[56] Original suggestions for 'freezing' the arms race in Europe were tested in the Belgian-Polish discussions too, which was not much to Washington's linking.[57]

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*.

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 Secu-

56. 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.
57. *FRUS 1964-1968*, XIII, n° 300.

rity 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.

5.   Diverging paths: Europeanism versus Atlanticism (1970s-1980s)

With the signing of the Final Act of Helsinki (CSCE), 1975 was the apogee of détente politics, but it was also then that they started to get bogged down, although that was not clear at the time. In Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union, increasing frustrations with its results led to a chilling of the East-West climate, which turned into a new cold war in 1979.

In contrast to the Spaak and Harmel period Belgian foreign policy became grey and routine again in both content and style. Subsequent Foreign Ministers, Renaat Van Elslande (1973-1977), Henri Simonet (1977-1980) and Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb (1980-1981) confined themselves mainly to following the existing NATO consensus, without making any proposals for significant initiatives or leaving any personal mark. With the change in style, the Harmel tradition of bilateral dialogue with like-minded Warsaw Pact countries got bogged down rather rapidly. In November 1974 Van Elslande had to defend himself in the Chamber against the reproach that Belgium no longer attached importance to having its 'own responsible policy': 'It is true that Belgium acts less as a separate star than it used to, because the government is convinced that European integration is the primary goal of our foreign policy and that we are succeeding, in the process, in speaking with one voice, and that in so doing we will have more influence on world affairs.'[58] His successor, Henri Simonet, dismissed the essential instrument of Harmel's policy in more abrupt terms: 'They used to show off around here with Belgian diplomacy's so-called rapprochement shuttle. I do not expect much good to come of that. Pepping up the hand-shaking dynamic can also be a pretext for not having to devise one's own policy. Those who concentrate on a mediating role need never take a position. I reject that kind of laziness.'[59] The number of bilateral contacts with East European countries dropped and reached an absolute low point under Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb.[60] Harmel's policy sank into oblivion and was no longer referred to either in Belgium or at NATO.

Under Henri Simonet, Belgium started to push human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as the foremost issue in the CSCE negotiations, in line with the similar position President Carter took, for reasons including satisfying con-

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58. Kamer, *Parlementaire Handelingen*, 26 November 1974, p. 381.
59. Cited in: VAN DE MEERSSCHE, P., 'Bilan Belgisch buitenlands beleid 1979', in: *Res Publica*, XXII, 1980, pp. 468-469.
60. ADAM, B., et al, *Sécurité de l'Europe et relance de l'UEO*. Brussels, GRIP, Notes et documents, 72-73, 1984, p. 7; *De Morgen*, 17 April 1980.

servative critics.[61] Belgium was also, with Denmark, the only NATO member state that complied for a while with the annual three percent increase in the defence budget that was agreed in 1977.[62] Moreover, throughout the 1970s, Belgium was the only NATO country that underwent a constant annual increase in its defence budget as a percent of the gross national product and as such made the greatest defence effort, relatively speaking.[63] The low diplomatic profile that Belgium adopted, coupled with its steadily growing defence budget, earned the country the image of a 'loyal ally'.

This development led to a rapidly growing divide within the Belgian political class and public opinion, in the course of the 1980s, between 'Atlanticists' – who, in the eyes of their critics, wanted to hang on to an antiquated and out-moded American-led framework – and 'Europeanists' (also called 'European Gaullists') – whose goal was an, otherwise never clearly defined, post-confrontation Europe, a 'European Europe' with its roots in the European détente policies of the 1960s and 1970s.[64] That this split could develop illustrated clearly, for the first time, that the consensus on an Atlantic Europe, in which Atlantic cooperation and European construction had always coincided, had become liable to erosion.

What exactly the difference between Atlanticists and pro-Europeans meant became clear when NATO decided to deploy new intermediate-range nuclear missiles (INF) in Western Europe, in response to a similar deployment of Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe.

In December 1979 the NATO Council had taken the decision to deploy a new generation of American nuclear weapons in Europe. Implementation of this decision quickly became an article of faith regarding Atlantic loyalty. In Europe, as well as in Belgium, however, resistance to the deployment of these weapons was widespread.

From 1980 onwards nuclear weapons in Belgium became pawns on the political chessboard. The INF debate led, once again, to significant political division in Belgium, against the background of regular mass demonstrations that brought a hundred thousand Belgians out on the streets. The Christian Democrats were

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61. DEAN, J., *Watershed in Europe*. Lexington, Lexington Books, 1987, p. 185.
62. BARNET, R.J., *The Alliance. America, Europe, Japan. Makers of the postwar world*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1983, p. 369.
63. Based on: SIPRI, *World armaments and disarmament. Yearbook 1983*. London, Taylor & Francis, 1983, p. 171 (table 7A.4).
64. CRAMER, B., *Le discours européen entre l'atlantisme et l'européisme*. Brussels, GRIP, Notes et documents, 120-121, 1988, *passim*; McARDLE KELLEHER, C., 'America looks to Europe', in: *Washington Quarterly*, winter 1984.

divided, with the labour wing and the right wing on opposite sides of the fence. French-speaking and Flemish Social Democrats perceived the issue somewhat differently. The former, although they too opposed the deployment of nuclear missiles on Belgian soil, were clearly more susceptible to the view expressed by the French President, François Mitterrand, in Brussels in October 1983: 'The Euromissiles are in the East and the pacifists in the West.' The Flemish Social Democrats, for their part, were more inclined towards the détente-oriented standpoint of the West-German Social Democrats. Within the Liberal family, too, a fault line existed along generational lines. On one side, the younger generation of Flemish Liberals, with Guy Verhofstadt as their President, shared the peace movement's standpoint, while the upper echelons of the party were mostly on the other side.

Supporters and opponents started from a very different security concept and a very different political philosophy. The supporters, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Leo Tindemans, as their standard bearer, pointed to the military imbalance, the ideological threat emanating from the Soviet Union and the need to present a unanimous front against it – which implied that the central and irreplaceable role of the United States and NATO was once again heavily emphasised. The opponents, with the Flemish Social Democratic leader in the Chamber, Louis Tobback, as their standard bearer, emphasised the need to make greater efforts in the field of disarmament and arms control and saw more danger in the arms race than in the behaviour of the Soviet Union. They reproached the government, and especially the Foreign Minister, Leo Tindemans, that they were no longer pursuing an active policy of détente, and pleaded for a more active European role in the restoration of détente based on 'mutual security', inspired by the eponymous concept of the Swedish and West German Social Democrats, Olof Palme and Egon Bahr.

The debate was to drag on for nearly five years. From the end of 1979 the peace movement organised huge national demonstrations at regular intervals. At one in October 1983 more than 300,000 people took to the streets. Flemings especially participated in very large numbers. Parliamentarians from all the opposition parties took part, as well as several dozen Flemish Christian Democratic MPs. Indeed, within this party there was a strong trend, mainly in its labour wing, in favour of deferring a decision to install the missiles in Belgium.[65]

On 14 March 1985 the Belgian government finally approved the deployment of American nuclear weapons in Belgium. This meant a setback for the 'pro-Europeans', but it would soon be obvious that their ideas had become mainstream in

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65. MABILLE, X., *La Belgique après la seconde guerre mondiale*. Brussels, CRISP, 2003, p. 224.

Belgian thinking on security and defence – to the detriment of traditional Atlanticist thinking.

In the same week as the new American nuclear weapons were deployed in Belgium, Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded Konstantin Chernenko as the new Soviet leader, the third in less than thirty months. Only a minority of Western Kremlin watchers was of the opinion that a more or less radical change of direction was in the offing. Although Gorbachev rather quickly took a number of major initiatives regarding disarmament and détente, officials at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, like NATO for that matter, continued to believe that Gorbachev did not signify any real change in Soviet policy, that his more moderate behaviour was actually more destabilising, and that the Soviet Union was still intent on keeping Eastern Europe under control and neutralising Western Europe. To avoid the West reacting in a divided fashion to this Soviet policy, close cooperation with the United States was needed, according to this thinking. Three decades earlier Khrushchev's attempts at rapprochement had led to the same warnings within NATO.

This formed the background for the last significant Belgian-American crisis of the Cold War. In Decem ber 1987 the United States and the Soviet Union had concluded the INF Treaty, whereby this new generation of nuclear weapons, against which the peace movement had demonstrated in vain, was to be eliminated. To compensate for the military capability lost through the treaty, NATO wanted to modernise the remaining short range, tactical nuclear weaponry.

Within the Belgian government the Defence Minister, the French-speaking Social Democrat, Guy Coëme, was the first, at the end of September 1988, to express reservations about the planned tactical nuclear modernisation. It seemed not only inopportune, bearing in mind Mikhail Gorbachev's policy, it was also in contradiction of the coalition agreement in which negotiations on these weapons systems had been championed. Moreover, a decision to modernise seemed even less advisable because Guy Coëme had been informed via parallel channels that the German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, harboured similar objections, although he was not able to convince his government at the time.

On 21 October 1988 Belgium officially declared that it was premature to make any decision about the proposed modernisation. When this government decision was communicated to the NATO allies, NATO officials were perplexed. In their eyes Belgium had completely unexpectedly abandoned its familiar attitude of silent acceptance of modernisation. Reactions were not slow in coming. Inside NATO there was extremely strong criticism of Belgium. Manfred Wörner, who

was Secretary-General of NATO at the time, was seething and the American Secretary of Defence would ignore his Belgian colleague for quite some time.

On the home front, some of the Belgian media also expressed strong criticism. Some called it great clumsiness and a rather inglorious about-turn. Leo Tindemans, the Foreign Minister, lashed out publicly against his defence colleague. But Belgian reservations, as expressed by the Minister of Defence, had turned this from routine business into a politically relevant dossier. In West Germany, Dietrich Genscher, the Foreign Minister, latched on to it. He turned up the pressure on Chancellor Kohl. Three months later Germany adopted the same position as Belgium, thus signing the end of the planned tactical nuclear modernisation.

6.   Farewell to the Cold War

In 1947 Belgium got caught up in the Cold War against its will. When the East-West tension began to slacken four decades later, Belgium rediscovered the Harmel policy. The Europeanists from the 1980s formed the nucleus from which a new version of Belgian *Ostpolitik* grew.

In November 1989 the Defence Minister, Guy Coëme, decided to initiate bilateral military talks with like-minded Warsaw Pact countries. Since March 1988 the American military had engaged in similar discussions with their Soviet colleagues. At the end of July 1988 the idea of such dialogue was first raised within the Belgian Ministry of Defence out of a conviction that rapprochement between the alliances should not continue to be a matter for the two superpowers alone, since this would only increase their respective leadership positions. So from the end of October 1989 Belgium began to develop a 'structural military dialogue' with a series of Warsaw Pact countries, and finally with the Soviet Union itself.

Coëme's 'military diplomacy' was explicitly inspired by the Harmel policy, whereby Belgium's own national initiatives were supposed to make it possible to gradually push the Alliance in the direction of greater, pan-European rapprochement towards Eastern Europe. The fact that these initiatives originated from the Ministry of Defence rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was entirely due to the Atlantic loyalty that still dominated Belgian diplomacy at that time – contrary to the Europeanist tendency that was particularly evident in the armed forces, especially in the army.

However, this active bilateral Belgian *Ostpolitik* was soon overtaken by events during 1990. As a result of the political democratisation of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, East-West rapprochement gathered more and more momentum and finally resulted in the reunification of Germany.

Like everyone else, Belgian diplomacy was surprised by the speed of the events. In July 1989 Belgian diplomats still believed that the 'German question' was not imminent and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mark Eyskens, who had succeeded Leo Tindemans, himself warned in that period that all the 'talk of German reunification' was only undermining Gorbachev's position in his own country.[66] In January 1990 the political director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jan Hollants Van Loocke, was still talking of the 'possible' amalgama-

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66. *Humo*, 27 September 1989.

tion of the two Germanies and the 'hypothesis' of a fusion between the two countries.[67]

But by February 1990 Belgian diplomatic and military circles realised that German unification was irrevocable and would take place within a short space of time. Belgium had never been opposed to reunification as such – in contrast to some other European countries. However, what did cause some concern in both military and diplomatic circles were the possible consequences. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Ministry of Defence the question was how German reunification could be reconciled with West Germany's membership of the EU and NATO. It was feared that, if Germany had to choose between reunification and keeping its Western anchor, it might well choose the former and withdraw from the EU and NATO.[68]

For this reason, too, a debate developed in Belgium, as in all the NATO member states, about the most suitable security architecture to accompany German reunification. Three scenarios were going the rounds in Belgium.

The first advocated institutionalisation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) as a pan-European security system, encompassing both the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as all the European countries. In West Germany, this enjoyed the support of the Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FDP), and the Social Democrats. In Belgium the (mainly Flemish) Socialists, in particular, and the peace movement were in favour of this project. Indeed they realised that Gorbachev's central concept of a 'Common European House' paralleled Harmel's pan-European 'total Europe' and the Gaullist 'Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural'.

Founded on this basic structure the proponents of this option envisaged close political and economic cooperation developing between the EU countries and their neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe, in the form of a rapid expansion of the EU to include states that were economically fit for it – not excluding, in the long term, the Soviet Union even. In this very complex structure the military dimension was given only a subordinate place. Military competences in the European Union meant there was a risk it would evolve into a classic super-power, which did not seem a desirable evolution. For this reason the choice was made – by default – to 'Europeanise' NATO, via the establishment of two pillars, one American and one European, as President Kennedy had suggested in the early 1960s.

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67. HOLLANTS VAN LOOCKE, J., *Vogelvrij. Herinneringen van een diplomaat*. Leuven, Van Halewyck, 1999, p. 275.
68. EYSKENS, *Buitenlandse Zaken*. Tielt, Lannoo, 1972, pp. 99, 104 and 106.

Pan-European concepts, however, were regarded with suspicion in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tindemans' successor, Mark Eyskens (Flemish Christian Democratic Party), did not like the look of Gorbachev's Common European House. He attributed the idea to the 'sly' Andrei Gromyko who had launched this idea in the Brezhnev era, at the height of the Cold War. Anyone entertaining that concept did so, according to Eyskens, in a 'Don Quixote-type attempt to replace Atlanticism with a kind of Uralism.'[69] He opted, therefore, for a deepening of the European Community and the expansion of the EC as an 'anchor' in a fast-changing world. French-speaking Social Democrats on the whole subscribed to this scenario, too, albeit with different motives, namely greater autonomy for Europe in relation to the United States, which they had advocated since the mid-1970s.[70]

The EU, according to Mark Eyskens in 1989, 'is a winning concept, and it is not at the moment that we become aware of this that the concept and the reality it embodies should be allowed to atrophy. (…) And the danger of seeing the Community weaken is a very real one. The danger is mainly an internal one. It is a threat to the Community that has existed from its very inception. A number of Member States still balk at the transfer of any measure of sovereignty. To achieve '1992' – economic and monetary union – will still require a great deal of effort and willingness to compromise among Member States. It is far from certain that all Member States will apply and interpret the Single Act uniformly. And yet, the Single Act clearly sets forth political union as the ultimate goal of the Community. Furthermore, once economic and monetary union has been achieved, political union between the Member States will become almost indispensable (…) It is urgent that the leaders of the Community define the scope of political union.'[71]

A minority of diplomats, however, doubted that the 12 EC member states would ever manage to muster enough political will to act jointly in matters of security and defence. So they also advocated keeping them within NATO, with the Western European Union (WEU) as, at the very most, a sort of 'informal caucus' within NATO. This should happen with the utmost discretion and not be too noticeable. Like Van Zeeland and Spaak in the 1950s and 1960s, this group continued to consider NATO as the foremost forum for trans-Atlantic political dialogue on global problems. Politically this third option was marginal however.

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69. EYSKENS, *Buitenlandse Zaken*, p. 22.
70. DELWIT, P., *Les partis socialistes et l'intégration européenne*. Brussels, Editions de l'Universi té de Bruxelles, 1995, p. 223-224.
71. EYSKENS, M., *From détente to entente. An alliance in transformation. A Greater Europe in Creation*. London, Brassey's, 1990, p. 22.

The Gulf War of 1990-1991 settled this debate in Belgium. The European Community had reacted fast and coherently when the Iraqi army invaded neighbouring Kuwait on 2 August 1990. On 13 August Prime Minister Martens called his colleagues back from their holidays for an extraordinary Council of Ministers on the Gulf crisis. The government had already frozen Kuwaiti assets on 3 August and the Foreign Minister had made the ports of Antwerp and Zeebruges available for the transit of American troops and had called for a meeting of the Western European Union. Nevertheless, there was initially great uncertainty as to the American intentions, as there was in every country. Was Washington really only interested in protecting Saudi Arabia or did it, on the other hand, want to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait unilaterally *manu militari*? Moreover, all the parties remembered the earlier Gulf War of 1980-1988 and the debates in parliament. The Social Democratic opposition parties had at that time felt strongly about unilateral Western action and the absence of a United Nations mandate to intervene.

This time, however, there were talks in the UN Security Council about the use of military means to enforce the embargo. In anticipation of this, the government decided on 13 August to send two mine hunters and a support ship on 'exercises' to the eastern part of the Mediterranean. If the UN Security Council did indeed approve the announced resolution, the flotilla would set sail for the Gulf region. The Prime Minister outlined the principles of Belgium's international position: the need for a UN mandate, a definite preference for a peaceful solution, maximum European coordination and apprehension about the European-Arabic dialogue. In addition, the Belgian government supported the refusal of Paris and Madrid to allow NATO to play a role in the Gulf conflict.

After 6 months of crisis, 6 weeks of air war and 100 hours of ground campaign (Desert Storm) the weapons fell silent. On 25 February 1991 Baghdad announced that it had pulled out of Kuwait. Three days later the American President declared that the military objectives had been reached. The military operations were ended. The Gulf War was the first war of the post-Cold War era. Americans and Soviets were on the same side. Almost every government considered this crisis the first test of the 'New World Order', in which not confrontation and military might, but the United Nations and collective security would play the central roles.

Belgium emerged from this crisis with mixed feelings. Until the very end, the government had defended its stated principles rather coherently, but it was still left with a 'sense of diplomatic fiasco'.[72] Though this was not immediately obvi-

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72. *International Herald Tribune*, 26-27 January 1991.

ous to either observers or participants, this war had nevertheless crystallised the new strategic change of course in Belgian security policy.

On the one hand, Belgium had discovered a new central benchmark for its security policy in the United Nations. During the Gulf War the Belgian government wanted to fit each of its decisions as clearly as possible into a UN Security Council mandate. This expressed a pristine willingness within the Belgian body politic to promote the United Nations as the central organisation in the post-Cold War governance of world politics. Belgian government leaders repeatedly and explicitly expressed their regrets that the military operations were not carried out under the leadership of the United Nations itself, via the Security Council's Military Staff Committee. As a result of this new pro-UN stance, Belgium started to increase its participation in UN peacekeeping operations. With its participation in the UN operation in Namibia in 1989, followed by operations in the Western Sahara (1991), Cambodia (1992) and subsequently in Somalia, Yugoslavia and Rwanda, Belgium took part in more UN operations in a short period of time than in the whole post-war period.

On the other hand, the course the Gulf crisis had taken, led to a consensus within the Belgian body politic on the desirability of equipping the European Community with military competences. From November 1990, as the conflict acquired an increasingly pronounced military dimension, the European Community disappeared into the background. It could not substantiate its more global view of this geopolitical crisis because it was not in a position to offer an alternative to a self-feeding military logic and found itself confronted with *faits accomplis* in the matter. This was the analysis of Flemish Social Democrats, too. Their president, Frank Vandenbroucke, drew the conclusion from the Gulf War that the European Community would only be able to make its influence felt in world politics if the member states were to give it competences to develop a common defence and security policy.[73] As part of an encompassing common foreign and security policy military decisions would, as it were, be encapsulated in the entirety of diplomatic, economic and political factors – and no longer be taken in isolation as was the case with a military alliance like NATO.

When West Germany and France opted jointly for a more pronounced European profile in defence matters, by turning the Western European Union (WEU) into the 'defence arm' of the EC, Belgium immediately supported this initiative. On 4 October 1990 – one day after the reunification of Germany – the Ministerial Committee for European Affairs had defined Belgium's standpoint that it was undeniably part of the EC's *raison d'être* to develop a security policy and 'that

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73. VANDENBROUCKE, F., 'Tien lessen uit de Golfoorlog', in: *De Standaard*, 1 March 1991.

this security policy cannot exclude a defence component'. A non-paper, meant to complement an earlier Belgian memo on the European Political Union from March 1990, stated that the European Council of Heads of State and Government should be able to instruct the WEU to carry out its military decisions. Moreover, according to Belgium, ultimately the WEU should be fused with the EC.

In the course of 1991 Belgian defence officials engaged in their first discussions with the French and Germans on a Belgian participation in a European army corps. Germany had launched the idea out of apprehension that the United States might in the future be less ready to participate in conflicts in Europe. For this reason the choice was made not to integrate the envisaged army corps within NATO command, so that it could operate in an (autonomous) European context as well as in a NATO context. France saw a first real step towards European defence in the German proposal and immediately subscribed to it. When, in mid-October 1991, Kohl and Mitterrand proposed to open this corps to other European countries, to form an embryonic European army, the Belgian military were the first to show interest. This was to lead to discrete and later official talks between the Defence Ministries and the Chiefs of Staff of Belgium, France and Germany with a view to Belgian accession to the Eurocorps.

Within the WEU, Belgium became a supporter of generalising such multinational army units as the instrument of 'political and military cohesion at the heart of the future Europe', as General José Charlier, the Chief of Staff of the Belgian army, put it. This was not at all to the liking of the United States, which feared that it would pave the way for the EC to develop into an autonomous global actor.

In the run-up to the Treaty of Maastricht, when discussion about the European security architecture was raging in all European countries, Belgium fell in behind those who supported military competences for the European Community. The debate was concentrated on the role of the Western European Union. Supporters, like Belgium and France, saw the WEU as the 'EU's military instrument', whilst opponents of the WEU preferred to see it as the mere 'European pillar' of NATO.

At a WEU Council of Ministers in Bonn, on 29 October 1991, the Minister of Defence, Guy Coëme, stated the government's position in terms largely inspired by General Charlier: 'A politically unified Europe should have a security and defence policy of its own that is not subordinate to any other organisation.'

With this Belgium came full circle. Atlanticism had given way again to Europeanism. Europe once more became the primary framework for Belgian defence and security policy, while NATO dropped to the second row. For Belgium this was a return to its roots, in other words to Spaak's original project of an autonomous European position in world politics, with its own defence and foreign policy, and operating within the normative and legitimising framework of the United Nations. This marked out the new frame of reference of Belgian security and defence policy. It replaced the three principles from the first half of the 1950s that had steered Belgian foreign policy throughout the Cold War.

7. Belgium and NATO in the multipolar world (1991-2009)

When Maastricht was signed many were convinced that enhanced cooperation in the area of foreign and security policy would make it possible for the European Union to act effectively on the international scene. The civil war in Yugoslavia was the first test for the new Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

The conflict erupted in full force in June 1991, when two Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and Croatia, seceded from the Yugoslav federation and the army intervened to restore unity. Croatian and Yugoslav units became entangled in ongoing fighting interspersed with countless – usually short-lived – local ceasefires, after which the fighting resumed and continued to spread further. As befitted its new orientation in terms of European defence, Belgium played a conspicuous role in the early months of the conflict.

When the civil war in Croatia escalated, Germany was the first to call for a European intervention force. On 6 August 1991 the Twelve asked the WEU to study how this could be organised, whereupon the French Foreign Minister, Roland Dumas, argued unequivocally in favour of a WEU military force. The Chiefs of Staff of the WEU member states got down to business. Spurred on in particular by the French Chief of Staff, Jacques Lanxade, and his Belgian colleague, José Charlier, four scenarios were worked out within the WEU, going from a small protection force of a few thousand military to an offensive intervention force of 10,000 to 30,000 men. In Charlier's eyes such a force should help stabilise local ceasefires, so that these zones would gradually spread like patches of oil and merge until finally they included the whole of Croatia. This would prevent the fighting spilling over to neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina. The military who worked out these scenarios assumed that these operations could be carried out more or less entirely with European means, without having to call on the United States or NATO infrastructure.

However, at the end of October 1991 Great Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal vetoed WEU action, not for military, but for purely political reasons. The three countries were of the opinion that military operations came under the exclusive competences of NATO and felt that European initiatives would be an erosion of NATO.[74]

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74. *Une organisation opérationnelle pour l'UEO. La crise yougoslave*. Report presented by Mr. De Hoop Scheffer on behalf of the commission for defence. WEU Assembly, no. 1294, 27 November 1991; DUMOULIN, A., REMACLE, E., *L'Union de l'Europe occidentale. Phénix de la défense européenne*. Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1998, pp. 235-236; LANXADE, J., *Quand le monde a basculé*. Paris, NiL éditions, 2001, pp. 105-107; BOTH, N., *From indifference to entrapment. The Netherlands and the Yugoslav crisis 1990-1995*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2000, p. 110.

Since WEU decisions had to be unanimous, this rendered the envisaged preventive WEU operation impossible. As predicted the conflict spread a few months later, in March 1992, to Bosnia-Herzegovina and escalated to a level that went beyond the capabilities of the EU. The European Union involved first the CSCE and then the UN, but to no avail. The EU's lack of military capability – but more to the point, its internal political division about the desirability of this goal – prevented Europe from playing an effective leading role in the Yugoslav crisis. This led to the ambitious pre-Maastricht plans for a common foreign and security policy being shelved and scepticism about the military capacities of the EU became widespread. The vacuum was filled by the one organisation that was originally considered not to play a role in the Yugoslav conflict, NATO.

It took a decade for European defence to be tabled again. Frustration at the absence of Europe in the Yugoslav civil war and, particularly, in Kosovo moved the French President Chirac and the British Prime Minister Blair to give European defence new impetus at St Malo in 1998.

This transformed European background gave the new (purple-green) government led by Guy Verhofstadt, in 1999, the opportunity to reaffirm the pro-European course Belgium had set previously. It was going to be done very explicitly this time. 'I don't want to be the United States' servant,' said the new Foreign Minister, Louis Michel, in one of his first major newspaper interviews.[75] To his diplomats he stressed that the European Union should become an '*Europe puissance*' – as the former Chief of Staff, General José Charlier, had done ten years previously – in order to contribute to 'reconstituting a multipolar world where the unilateralism of one single superpower does not predominate.'[76]

The Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, systematically advocated this standpoint, too. He repeatedly referred to the 'autonomous role' of the European Union regarding defence and security policy.[77] A note to the Belgian Council of Ministers at the end of 2002 states explicitly that a possible increase in Belgian defence efforts can only be considered in the framework of a build-up of European defence capability. The Belgian government's most concrete initiative in this area was a European defence summit in April 2003, scornfully labelled the 'pralines summit' by its critics. A series of concrete policy options for strengthening European defence capacity and the EU's operational autonomy were discussed with France, Germany and Luxembourg. The most controversial of these was the possible creation of an operational headquarters for European operations with-

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75. *Financieel Economische Tijd*, *Le Soir*, 4 September 1999.
76. Speech by L. Michel at the opening of the Diplomatic Contact Days, Brussels, 4 September 2000.
77. 'Een visie op Europa.' Speech by G. Verhofstadt for the European Policy Center, 21 September 2000.

out recourse to NATO assets ('a collective capability for planning and conducting operations for the European Union').

Irritation was palpable in Washington and some other NATO member states. It stemmed from the fear that European autonomy and Atlantic loyalty – and American leadership – were not compatible, notwithstanding the arguments by the Verhofstadt government that this would be to NATO's advantage, too. But Belgian scepticism about the evolution of NATO was nonetheless tangible: 'It looks very likely that NATO will cease to be an alliance in the future. The US seems to be pushing NATO in the direction of a loose coalition that will be formed differently and will deploy different resources depending on the enemy.'[78] In the run-up to a NATO summit in Prague, in November 2002, Verhofstadt showed himself worried about what observers called the 'instrumentalisation' of NATO, the transformation of the alliance into a mere 'toolbox' to be used when it suits Washington and as a basis for a series of varying 'coalitions of the willing'. Belgium did not consider this kind of strategic arrangements, based on temporary coalitions of willing states, a stable basis for the international system.

As of 2003, to counteract this instrumentalisation of NATO, Guy Verhofstadt re-introduced an idea that the Foreign Minister, Pierre Harmel, had advocated without success three decades earlier, namely a 'New Atlanticism', an alliance based upon two 'strong, balanced pillars, one North American and the other European'.[79] This assumed, said Prime Minister Verhofstadt, that the EU would increase its cooperation in the area of security and defence policy in order to achieve a European defence power that had the capacity to take decisions autonomously and to be able to implement them. This new Atlanticism, said Verhofstadt, fits the multipolar world we are evolving into. The EU, according to the government declaration in 2003, 'will only become a credible partner and player if it, too, possesses its own European defence capability in the framework of a strategic partnership between the EU and NATO.'

This Belgian emphasis on European autonomy went down equally badly in Washington, which feared that a structured European defence would constantly confront the United States with *faits accomplis* and render the traditional American tendency to play into European divisions inoperable. This difference of opinion added to the disputes that already existed between Belgium and America and contributed to the decidedly anti-Belgian atmosphere in Washington in 2003.

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78. VERHOFSTADT, G., in: *Knack*, 12 June 2002.
79. 'Pleidooi voor een nieuw atlantisme.' Hofstad Lecture by Guy Verhofstadt, The Hague, 21 February 2003.

When, in 2003, negotiations were taking place to form a new Belgian government, there was also an unmistakable hypersensitivity to 'anything that might rub the Americans up the wrong way'.[80] From 2004 efforts were made on both the Belgian and the American side to normalise relations between the two countries, based on the pragmatic principle: 'agree where we can, agree to disagree where we can't'. Initially, however, this did not imply that things would revert to the way they had been before. The policies of the Bush government were far too removed from the Belgian mainstream for that. At a congress in Ghent, in 2004, Louis Michel put it as follows: 'Yes to a fellowship, no to a followship'.[81] His successor, Karel De Gucht, who continued to work for normalisation with Washington, adopted the same position of critical distance concerning the United States: 'In the last two decades the United States as a whole has shifted in a more conservative direction. The America of the New Deal does not exist at this moment.'[82]

The Belgian view of the American role in the world

In the run-up to the American invasion of Iraq (with a coalition of willing nations) the Verhofstadt government reacted in almost exactly the same way as the Martens government had in 1990 with the advent of the Gulf War. The Belgian Council of Ministers on 6 September 2002 saw the role of both the UN and the EU as crucial benchmarks. It affirmed that no country – read the United States – has the right to act outside the UN. Prime Minister Verhofstadt also reconfirmed the Belgian desire for a common European position. For NATO, on the other hand, Belgium saw no role at all. The use of military means was seen as a last resort. Finally, a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was especially close to Belgium's heart. In the end, Belgium did everything it could to try to force a diplomatic solution, as was clear from the bilateral meeting between Louis Michel and Tarek Aziz in February 2002.

The Iraq War, along with the Belgian law of universal jurisdiction[83] and the Belgian plea for European autonomy in defence matters, involved the Belgian

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80. Bert Anciaux, in: *De Morgen*, 22 July 2004.
81. *Studia Diplomatica*, LVII, 2004, 3, p. 20.
82. See also: Karel De Gucht in: *Knack*, 22 November 2006.
83. The Belgian law of universal jurisdiction is the result of a Belgian Parliamentary initiative unanimously adopted by both Chambers in 1993. The law confers on Belgian judges universal jurisdiction to deal with war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide, regardless of where the crime was committed, the nationality of the victim or the location of the presumed perpetrator. Originally it was acclaimed as a significant advance in terms of international law but, following international criticism and what was judged to be its surrealistic invocation against Louis Michel and José Happart, it was radically amended by the second Verhofstadt government in July 2003.

government in its most serious collision with the United States since the end of the Cold War.

In the United States the question was raised publicly whether Belgium could still be considered an American ally.[84] Belgium became the subject of an intense American campaign, in the media as well as by political leaders. In the press Belgium was relegated to the '*Axis of Weasel*'[85] and branded as a classic example of countries that 'are strategically irrelevant, unfit to contribute in any way whatsoever to allied operations, profiteers in terms of defence spending, and infected with hypocritical pacifism.'[86] The Democratic member of Congress, Gary Ackerman, submitted a bill in May 2003 that was soon known as the 'Belgian invasion act' because it proposed to give the American president the power to deploy 'all the necessary means' to come to the aid of any Americans who might be summoned before a Belgian court on the basis of the law of universal jurisdiction and secure their release.[87]

In particular, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's threat, in June 2003, to withdraw NATO headquarters from Evere made a big impression both in Belgium and elsewhere. It was the last straw, declared Louis Michel, and made the Belgian government decide on radical changes to the law of universal jurisdiction.[88]

Belgian Europeanism in defence matters has never been driven by anti-Americanism. Opposition to American action in Iraq stemmed from the very basic Belgian aversion to international imbalance and unpredictability. A great power that possesses military superiority and states that it wants to use it as the preferred policy instrument and, in addition to that, declares that it does not want to be bound by existing rules is ultimately a source of unpredictability and thus instability in the international system. It is precisely this which, since the creation of Belgium, has been inculcated in Belgian diplomatic tradition as a Doomsday scenario.

Since literally the first day of its existence the country has felt itself surrounded by larger powers that constantly felt called to decide on the fate of the new state over the heads of Belgian decision-makers. In contrast to the Netherlands, from the moment of its inception Belgium had its nose rubbed in the fact that it was a small state with little power. Caught between the varying fortunes of its big neighbours, its existence was always threatened when the international status

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84. *Wall Street Journal*, 15 May 2003.
85. *New York Post*, 12 January 2003.
86. *Wall Street Journal*, 7 February 2003.
87. House of Representatives, 108th Congress, 1st Session, HR 2050, 9 May 2003.
88. *Le Soir*, 24 June 2003.

quo was under pressure. So securing Belgium's autonomy vis-à-vis its mightier neighbours constituted, from the beginning, part and parcel of the vital interest of this country.

This helps to explain why throughout its whole diplomatic history Belgium abhorred the idea of powerful countries having too much influence over small states, and international unpredictability, which reduces small states to pawns in the game of power politics. Belgium has thus always endeavoured to limit, as far as possible, the power and influence great powers have over it. This is the only way to at least partially shield a small country, lacking the very instruments of power, from a return to the bullying of the balance of power and the unpredictability of great powers' politics. Since the inter-war era and especially since the Second World War, Belgium has translated this into the maxim that the elaboration of a rule-based international system is of the most elementary importance for a small state, in a European context as well as on a global level.

The German academic, Josef Joffe, has clarified this objective, which is also behind the Common Foreign and Security Policy and its ensuing European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) as follows: 'Its [ESDP] purpose is not to oppose the United States outright, but to enhance Europe's relative power vis-à-vis the United States with an asset that might increase European autonomy or diminish U.S. preponderance.'[89]

Just as the then president of the Flemish Social Democrats, Frank Vandenbroucke, had concluded at the time of the Gulf War in 1991, the Iraq War of 2003 strengthened the conclusion in Guy Verhofstadt's view that, in order to be credible internationally, the EU needed to possess its own autonomous defence capacity. His blueprint for world architecture is a multipolar world, with the European Union as one of the supporting pillars.[90]

Belgium's basic position with regard to the trans-Atlantic relationship boils down, in fact, to the search for a 'counterbalance' – even if this term is not officially used because of the misunderstandings it evokes.[91] Better than the controversial word 'counterbalance' it is perhaps more correct to speak of a 'corrective mechanism' in a world of unequal partners. Some are less cautious. The former Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene, for example, affirmed in December 2001 that Europe should take the same far-reaching steps in the second and third pillars as in the first, so that the EU could grow into a 'counter-power' of

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89. JOFFE, J., 'Who's afraid of Mr. Big? Global Relations with the United States', in: *The National Interest*, Summer 2001
90. Speech by Guy Verhofstadt to the European Parliament, 31 May 2006.
91. MICHEL, L., 'We blijven vrienden', in: *De Standaard*, 17 January 2004.

the United States on the world stage.[92] The same idea can be found in the former Defence Minister, André Flahaut's, Strategic Plan 2000-2015: 'Striving to maintain American engagement does not mean that there can be any place for hegemony. The obvious counterweight to this is to strengthen the European dimension within NATO'.[93]

During the first Bush administration the United States was seen as too dominant, especially as, in addition, the country had chosen unilateralism as its preferred method. Belgium never changed its opinion that the position it had taken in the Iraq dossier was the right one either. For this reason, too, in the run-up to the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006, Belgium put great emphasis on the need to respect article 7 of the NATO Charter, which confirms the primacy of the UN over NATO.[94]

It will then come as no surprise that Belgium was reluctant when, starting in 2002, a debate arose on NATO's global ambitions. 'Out of area or out of business' could already be heard in the United States in the 1990s as a warning against the creeping irrelevance of NATO after the end of the Cold War. Involvement in Iraq and subsequently in Afghanistan was also seen by some member states as the start of this kind of global role for NATO. The former Prime Minister, Verhofstadt, it is true, endorsed the principle of a global role for NATO ('new transatlantic global security network'),[95] but linked it directly to two conditions which limited the impact of this evolution: an autonomous European pillar and the primacy of the UN above all other security organisations. This last point implies in Belgian eyes that all NATO operations outside the actual treaty area must in principle be covered by a UN mandate.

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92. *De Morgen*, 10 December 2001.
93. Het strategisch plan voor de modernisering van het Belgisch Leger 2000-2015. Concrete voorstellen om in de XXIste eeuw te stappen.
94. See also: Ambassador Dominique Struye, 'België en de transformatie van de NAVO', in: *Studia Diplomatica*, LX, 2007, Suppl., pp. 96-97.
95. Guy Verhofstadt, European Parliament, 31 May 2006.

Conclusion

By 2008 transatlantic relations between Brussels and Washington were largely normalised. This was partly thanks to the American turn-about under the second Bush administration regarding European autonomy in defence matters. In February 2008 the American Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, stated for the first time that the United States was now supporting a 'stronger' Europe with, moreover, its own autonomy. This standpoint was confirmed afterwards at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008.[96] Moreover, despite the earlier harsh criticism within NATO, most of the initiatives that were discussed at the controversial European defence summit of April 2003 have been implemented in one form or another in the years that followed.

This change of American attitude makes it easier for Belgium to combine European primacy and autonomy in defence matters with Atlantic loyalty. In past decades that was sometimes a delicate balancing act.

For this reason it is also all the more remarkable that in 2009 the Belgian consensus on pro-European primacy in defence matters seems to be under pressure, according to some observers. In the long government negotiations following the elections on 10 June 2007, the Flemish Christian Democratic MP, Yves Leterme, who was charged with forming the new government, presented texts that no longer mentioned European 'autonomy', but seemed at first glance to imply a return to Atlantic primacy. That impression was further increased by the apparently more pronounced pro-Atlanticist position of the Defence Minister, Pieter de Crem. During a visit to the Pentagon, in June 2008, he declared that he was 'carrying out part of the [Flemish Christian Democratic] Party programme', namely that 'transatlantic relations should be resumed urgently and parallel diplomacy abandoned.'

There does not seem, though, to be any question of a new pro-Atlanticist strategic change of course. It should indeed be mentioned, for example, that the policy note that the Minister of Defence, De Crem, submitted at the end of 2008 referred explicitly to the 'construction of a real European army' as a long-term goal for Belgium and to the 'capacity to act on its own' that the EU should have. That is a more explicit stand even than was taken in the recent past.

These apparent contradictions probably reflect mere changes of emphasis rather than a new strategic change of direction. Indeed everything points to the maintenance of the European primacy in Belgian security policy, especially now that

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96. http://nato.usmission.gov/ambassador/2008/Amb_Nuland_022508.htm.

it is becoming obvious that the political centre of gravity of trans-Atlantic relations has been shifting away from NATO to the United States and the European Union.[97] NATO is no longer *the* forum for political debate between Europe and North America. On many issues dialogue takes place directly between 'EU Brussels' and Washington (e.g. Galileo and Iran). Many of the priority issues on today's agenda are only indirectly related to security and defence. NATO has little or no expertise to offer in the financial crisis, climate change and energy, for example. Even where security is concerned there is great unanimity nowadays regarding a comprehensive approach in which numerous non-military policy areas are involved. And in some dossiers, such as relations with Russia, NATO appears moreover part of the problem rather than the solution.

Because of this NATO is in fact evolving into a two pillar alliance, in which the EU (and its member states) and the United States are the primary level of decision making. They can wage a holistic foreign policy that goes from trade and development, through human rights and democracy, to diplomacy and defence. An additional strength of the European Union is that, in contrast to NATO, it is more than just a purely intergovernmental organisation.

Abroad Belgium's unambiguous plea for greater European autonomy in the area of foreign policy and defence is often made out to lack credibility. In the opinion of some, Belgium is not well placed to act as an advocate for European defence because it is lagging behind in terms of defence spending. This criticism is not completely deserved – but it is perhaps unavoidable. After all, since the country was founded, Belgian political history has always been characterised by a manifest antimilitaristic tradition in every Belgian political family without exception, albeit for different reasons.[98] The weight of this tradition will put limits on decision making in defence matters for every Belgian government, whether it opts for a pro-European or a pro-Atlanticist course of action.

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97. BISCOP, S., 'Preparing for the NATO Summit: From Allies to Partners', 2 February 2009. www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/preparing-nato-summit-allies-partners.
98. LEHOUCK, F., *Het antimilitarisme in België 1830-1914*. Antwerp, Standaard, 1958.