



Report on the talk given by François de Kerchove

Belgian Ambassador to France on 16 June 2023, École Militaire, Paris

François de Kerchove began by touching briefly on the current unsettled geostrategic situation created by the war in Ukraine and the fundamental issues faced by Europeans and their NATO allies as a result, not least that of security, in the broadest sense of the term. While strategic security was of major concern, other aspects, namely economic, industrial, technological and energy sovereignty, were also at stake, to say nothing of EU structures in the face of large-scale enlargement and the inevitable ensuing paradigm shift.

Belgium's main strategic thrusts

The Belgium's position was deeply rooted in the country's Euro-Atlantic convictions and its belief in the need for even greater European integration, particularly with regard to defence, a concept that had inspired the Union's founding fathers, notably Paul-Henri Spaak, for whom political Europe was central to the European project, and attachment to the Atlantic Alliance. This explained why the Belgians had always support the idea of Europe as a pillar of NATO, irrespective of the coalition in power. For historical and geographical reasons, Belgian welfare and security basically had to include a multilateral dimension. As with the weather, Belgium was threatened by storm clouds coming from all sides, the issue being not one of neutrality but of the robustness of the Alliance.

Another vital factor in the case of Belgium was the need for consensus. All military procurement operations had to be vetted by the political parties and by Parliament.

Operationally, Belgian policies translated into major involvement in external operations supported by the UN (see paper circulated during the talk): the EU, NATO and the UN, and the "coalitions of the willing", particularly in the Levant and the Sahel, where Belgium was considered a serious and reliable partner.

Security challenges created by the war in Ukraine.

For the Belgian ambassador, Ukraine's fate and that of Europe were closely intertwined. If Ukraine were to be defeated, this would also be a defeat for the West, and the final nail in the coffin of the European

security structures the Russians had been trying to bring down for years, without the Europeans, caught between Washington and Moscow, having any say in the matter.

Be it in NATO or in the EU, it was vital to offer Ukraine a maximum of support while treading the delicate line between aid and aggression. It would be a great mistake to underestimate the Russian bear, since going too far would drag the Alliance into the conflict. Comments made on television about the likelihood of nuclear warfare were shockingly naïve, since even the most dangerous scenarios could not be ruled out. So far, Putin had stuck to conventional warfare but who could predict the reactions of a wounded bear?

Belgium had already provided aide for Ukraine to the tune of over €320 million. The nature of this aid had changed to match developments in Ukraine's needs, starting with automatic small arms and heavy weapons, ammunition, heavy mortars, anti-tank missiles and moving on to anti-aircraft defence and artillery equipment. In addition, Belgium had provided medical and protective equipment and training for more than 700 soldiers (mine clearance, combat training, special forces). It was also committed to participating in the training of F-16 pilots.

François de Kerchove mentioned his recent meeting with Belgian soldiers undergoing special forces training during the King's visit to Kourou, French Guiana, for the latest Ariane launch, a clear illustration of the similarities in the French and Belgian approaches to combat.

Future of European Defence

The war in Ukraine had given NATO a new lease of life, Putin having managed to achieve what everybody else had failed to do, notably in prompting Finland and Sweden to apply for membership.

NATO's resurgence must be exploited and EU involvement enhanced. NATO could longer operate as it did in the days when it was first founded and during the Cold War, when there was a superpower on one side of the Atlantic and little or nothing on the other. It was no longer possible to count on the United States as an ally. The Trump administration had been an eye-opener in that it had revealed America's detachment from Europe and its more transactional approach. For its part, the EU was now an economic and geostrategic force in itself and, as such, must learn better to defend its own security and interests, with all that this entailed, not least in budgetary terms. For this, it would be necessary to strike a better functional balance within the organisation, notably as regards its leadership. Whence the need for a European pillar of NATO that would need to be established gradually to avoid making waves. If there were suddenly to be two decision-making clusters, one being the United States, the other the EU, this would be problematic for the other allies, namely the United Kingdom, Norway, Turkey and Canada. The other sensitive issue was that of market access, where a power struggle would be inevitable and keeping calm and clear-headed would be vital (while we wanted greater sovereignty, we were nevertheless a market economy). The Belgian arms industry had substantial transatlantic involvement, as did the other European partners.

Belgian defence capability policy

Belgium's defence capability had vastly improved from a poor start. In 2014, when François de Kerchove took up his position as Ambassador to NATO, only 0.93% of the country's GDP was earmarked for defence. The figure now stood at 1.26% and was set to reach 1.54% in 2030. €10.2 billion was to be spent in new investment, staffing issues remaining however crucial.

François de Kerchove emphasised the importance of consensus and parliamentary approval, which explained why Belgium had always had to strike a balance in the spread of investments placed with its major allies.

He concluded his talk by repeating the need for caution and clear-headedness, since the many uncertainties over the outcome of the war in Ukraine would be decisive for the future of Europe. In the longer term, Europe needed better to secure its strategic sovereignty, not in opposition to the Americans

but, as far as possible, in association with them. This had been Belgian's leitmotiv since the concept of European defence was first mooted.

Q&A

The ambassador then responded as follows to issues raised during the Q&A session:

Q. What would count as a victory for Ukraine?

A. It would depend on the weapons, on a victory for Ukraine that would prompt it to engage in negotiations, possibly with the support of other nations, hopefully including Europe. As for NATO membership and security guarantees, it would be necessary to wait for the conclusions of the Vilnius summit and the outcome of private talks. At all events, the guarantees must be stronger those in the Minsk agreements.

Q. EDTIB?

A. Yes: the Europeans needed to step up their capability efforts, while at the same time being able to meet immediate needs or Europe would lose face.

Q. Future Combat Air System (FCAS)

A. The ambassador had had the opportunity to discuss this matter with Éric Trappier and was convinced that FCAS should be the preferred European system. While, technically, Tempest remained feasible, politically it would be impossible to have two combat air systems in Europe. Although the issue went beyond mere disputes among arms industry rivals, Germany's determination to manufacture its own products should not be underestimated, without mentioning the problems of jobs and union relations.

Q. EU enlargement.

A. In the event of further EU enlargement, it would be impossible for it to continue to operate on existing bases. If Ukraine joined the union, common agricultural policy, for example, or the Structural Funds would be unworkable as they stood.

Q. European sovereignty

A. This was more than just a defence issue and concerned areas such as the economy or energy supplies.

Q. What of Poland's decision to procure arms from Korea?

A. This was a sovereign decision that begged the question of whether or not there was a European alternative in this particular case. More generally, it should not be forgotten that Europe was a market economy, in other words a free trade area. As for a "Buy European Act"? Whatever you called it, it was our actions that would count.

Q. What of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union next year?

A. It was too early to say what its priorities would be. Obviously, the "Versailles Agenda" would be part of these and, thereby, the European Council's terms of reference for defence, energy, climate transition and digital technology. But presidencies never went to plan. For example, Belgium thought it would have to deal with immigration issues but vital progress had already been made in this area during the Swedish presidency.