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Belgian Neighbours and Partners

For this year 2023, La Vigie is striving to pursue its editorial line by dealing with diversified themes and regularly alternating cross-cutting subjects but also focusing on a particular geographical area or a specific country. The latter lend themselves to cycles, for example Europe and its marches ([LV 129](#), [132](#), [135](#), [138](#), [141](#)) or the Caucasus. ([LV 159](#), [181](#), [184](#), [186](#)).

The cycle we are starting today will look at France's neighbours along its land borders. As good military servicemen respecting the customs of geography, [let us start with the North and therefore Belgium](#), with which we do share 620 km of border.

Main Features

As of 2023, Belgium is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy. With a surface area of more than 30,000km²

and a population of approximately 11.5 million, Belgium is a relatively "young" country, having only gained independence in 1830.

Genesis and British influence

The creation of Belgium is closely linked to Napoleonic history: it was Napoleon who coined the phrase "*the port of Antwerp is like a loaded gun in the direction of England*" and he was right. Even back in 1944-1945, the British were determined to capture the port of Antwerp in order to simplify their logistical lines of supply for operations in the European continental theatre of operations. But let's go back to 1815: Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo (just south of Brussels) and the Congress of Vienna, at the instigation of the British, created the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, encompassing

what is now Belgium, the Netherlands and, in a personal union, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. [The aim was to create a strategic glacis via a buffer country on the north-eastern flank of France, a country that was powerful enough to contain France and prevent it from controlling the Scheldt and Rhine estuaries.](#) Within this state, the French-speaking southerners were marginalised and even discriminated against by the Dutch whose centre of power resided in Holland, and revolutionary unrest broke out in 1830 to free themselves from the Dutch yoke. The English considered the Netherlands to be a little too powerful for their liking, and prevented them from quelling the unrest, but imposed the secession and independence of Belgium, in particular by influencing the definition of the border between the Netherlands and

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Belgium, with a division that still arouse tension in people's minds today: Belgium includes part of Flanders, part of Brabant, part of Limburg and part of Luxembourg. Divided administratively into the regions of Wallonia and Flanders, the Belgians speak three official languages: French, Dutch (Flemish is only a dialect) and German (there exists a small German-speaking community in the east). The figure of the king, a guarantee of unity at the head of the country, has since lost its importance, as in most constitutional monarchies in the world.

Format of the Belgian Armed Forces

The armed forces are simply called “*La Défense*” and the ministry employs a total of just over 26,000 people. **On all the official insignia and emblems, the European stars of the EU and the compass rose of Nato appear in every case: Belgium pledges allegiance to both alliances.** The opposite would have been all the stranger as the majority of the European institutions have taken up residence in Brussels, the headquarters of the Atlantic Alliance is in Evèr (a district to the east of Brussels) and the headquarters of Nato's military operations is in Mons, near the French border.

The branches of the military are divided into four components (land, air, sea and medical). In view of the size of these armies, there have been a number of renouncements, more or less compensated by bi-national partnerships (e.g. the Navy with the Netherlands). It should be remembered that the Belgian air force uses Nato's tactical nuclear weapons under a double American key, while its fleet is integrated with the Dutch fleet. **We will focus here on the Land component, with a force of about 8,000 servicemen** - without heavy means, Belgium having given up main battle tanks.

Capacité Motorisée (CaMo)

Belgium should be of interest to the French strategist for the choice it made in signing the CaMo partnership with France, translated as “*motorised capability*”, on November 7th 2018. On this side of the Ardennes, one hardly hears about it: mischievous spirits would speak of a typical French superiority complex in front of neighbours of a small country that one thinks one knows well but which is actually of little interest to us... From a military point of view, since the expeditions of Belgian para-commandos in Africa are long gone,

what recent operational experience can these forces boast of?

Yet the Belgian decision is unprecedented.

The Land component was looking to reform itself by 2025-2030 and had explored several possibilities, before **choosing the French option, which was in the process of transforming its land forces via the “Scorpion” program.** It seems that the price-quality ratio, in addition to the time window of opportunity, must have been attractive.

However, far from deciding on a simple purchase of equipment off the shelf (order of magnitude: 380 Griffon multi-role vehicles and 60 Jaguar light tanks essentially, for an amount of about €1.6 billion), CaMo goes much, much further.

In fact, **Belgium has decided to transform its entire land forces, i.e. about 5,000 soldiers divided into five battalions, together forming the “Brigade Motorisée”, into a Scorpion brigade à la française.** Merely the command elements of the Land component and the special operations forces are not affected by this reform.

The modernisation of the Belgian land forces is strangely similar to the method of “small steps” dear to the fathers of Europe in order to push the different European nations

towards an ever-stronger integration. Instead of setting up yet another more or less international command structure, a method usually favoured by the French, the Belgians have concentrated on their soldiers. For the time being, no joint headquarters is planned. No European rapid reaction corps commanding no troops (*aka* Eurocorps), no joint staff commanding national units (*aka* the French-German Brigade).

Full Army Model

On the other hand, the organisation of the Belgian battalions will be revised to be equivalent to the order of battle of the French units. Equipped identically, they will be organised and will fight in the same way: actually, [the Belgians participate directly in the conception and writing of the "Scorpion" doctrine](#) (insertion of Belgian personnel in the French command's doctrine and teaching centre). Joint exercises, which have been going on for several years, will soon become fully integrated; a Belgian or French infantry company or battlegroup will not only be interoperable, but perfectly interchangeable, equipped with the same weapons, using the same procedures and the same tactical processes. The Scorpion Information and Communication System (SICS) will connect

everyone. Only the colour of the uniform will change and some of the lighter individual weapons... This is far more ambitious than any other joint project we are used to.

Beyond joint exercises (Celtic Uprise), the training effort has already started. French courses are open to Belgians. France also sends trainees to Belgium (higher military education, speciality courses).

A Flexible Framework

[From an industrial point of view, a real partnership has also been found](#): Belgians participate in Scorpion's project management and several technical elements of the Scorpion program are developed in Belgium. France has acquired the Scar rifle for its snipers from the very famous "*Fabrique Nationale*", also known as FN Herstal.

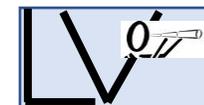
The CaMo framework was used to order some Caesar guns from France in 2022: Western armies are rediscovering artillery at the time of the war in Ukraine and the price-quality ratio of the Caesar, a flexible and manoeuvrable weapon system, is good.

Humility and Pragmatism

On the one hand, Belgium has dismantled a large part of its defence; it can now only field one brigade group for its entire Land component, which is significantly less than France, even in proportion to its population. The other Belgian military components are also suffering, the lack of personnel is dire, especially the truly bilingual commissioned officers.

On the other hand, France can only welcome the courageous choice to completely align its land army model with that of its "big" neighbour, beyond a simple choice of equipment. No empty shell with a binational command structure, but forces that have even adopted the same fighting doctrine. [Who would have such degree of humility and pragmatism?](#) Yet this is the first *real* step towards a "European army", with the *caveat* of the legal rules of engagement, which remain within the sovereign perimeter of the state.

[Let's hope that this partnership will be a great success and that it will inspire followers.](#) In the meantime, let's take a closer look at Brussels: it's worth the trip.



War Economy, Economy of War

Relationships between economics and war are many and varied. Let us put aside the notion of economic warfare, which is another area of friction and confrontation in another theatre of competition, even if it is instrumentalised in geopolitical struggles between powers (geo-economics in the strict sense). [The point here is to talk about how the economy contributes directly to war.](#) We will go from the outside to the inside.

Military-Industrial Complex

All warfare involves weaponry. These can of course be machetes, as in Rwanda, but more often than not more advanced weapons are used. Without going back to the notions of low-cost or high-cost warfare, let us note that these weapons must be available. If they can be acquired (through regular markets or smuggling), they can also be manufactured by oneself. [This presupposes economic and technological competence, but many states choose the latter solution to ensure their relative independence.](#) As the late Christian Malis wrote about the Defence technological and Industrial Base (DIB) ([here](#)), it is part of a complete defence system, not to mention

the many workshops that used to belong to the state and have been transferred to the private sector: a change in status does not mean that the primary mission is lost. Otherwise, we have no resources to mobilise when war breaks out and we are dependent on the outside.

War Economy

This explains E. Macron's speech last June on the notion of a war economy ([LV 195](#)). In his mind, it is in fact a question of "remilitarizing" this DIB and reorienting it towards its primary mission. This is aimed at the industry, of course, but also at [the State, which should review its acquisition procedures and procurement conditions.](#) Working groups have been working on this for the past six months, without very convincing results.

We are paying for having chosen a high-tech army, a means of positioning our DIB and continuing to sell internationally, while betting that technology, according to the Western model of war, would win the battle ([LV 193](#)).

However, high technology leads to two things: small series (*haute couture* rather than ready-to-wear) and complexity, on the one hand of materials, on the other of

procedures. So industrial chains do not last long, stocks (of spare parts or ammunition) are lacking and we find ourselves very much at a loss when things go sideways: we are facing disrupted and weakened global logistics chains (pandemic, Chinese restrictions, sanction regimes), we are also facing unsuitable peacetime procurement procedures, here is a choking "ecosystem".

Sanctions

The economy can influence the course of war. This idea prevails in the application of sanctions, which are supposed to hinder the enemy's war effort, especially if one does not want to engage directly against him. Basically, deciding on economic sanctions is typical of an indirect manoeuvre applied not to geography, but to the theatres of modern warfare, which are not usually reduced to fighting on the ground. It also refers to an economic reason supposedly superior to the political reason ([LV 88](#)).

The idea is an old one and dates back at least to Napoleon who invented the economic continental blockade of England in 1806, with little success. A century later, the Allies decided on economic sanctions against the Central European powers, with little effect on the conflict (but still 500,000 civilian

casualties in Germany), other than to paradoxically consolidate the powers in place. [The lesson was not learned](#): the US blockaded Cuba (but the Castro regime is still in place), North Korea, Iran, Venezuela and recently Russia. Despite the peremptory claims, which we will kindly not repeat here, none of them have worked.

To take the recent case of Ukraine, the European Union has decided on nine successive sets of sanctions. While it has blocked its own imports of Russian hydrocarbons (simultaneously increasing its imports of LNG, notably from the United States), the system has led to the blocking of trade in a certain number of globally important raw materials: wheat, fertilisers, rare metals, etc. [Moscow has put in place circumvention strategies](#) (sales to other clients, trafficking, adaptation of local production) to the point where, despite hopes, Russia's GDP is only expected to fall by 2-4% this year: the recession is obviously severe, but the figures are already improving. Basically, [while everyone was surprised by the Ukrainian military resilience, everyone should be surprised by the Russian economic resistance](#).

Industrial War

The War in Ukraine is worth observing here. It is not simply a high-intensity conflict ([LV 167, 192, 206](#)) but, as explained in O. Kempf's recently published book "*Guerre d'Ukraine*" ([here](#)), an industrial and armoured mechanised war. [Europe has rediscovered characteristics of wars that it had forgotten](#): a war that lasts, a war whose front extends over hundreds of kilometres, a war that mobilises hundreds of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of deaths, a mainly land-based conflict that gives priority to artillery but also to modern means (drones, satellites, missiles) ([LV 196](#)). A conflict in which the primary factor is no longer technology (even if technology plays a role: it is also a 21st century war) but mass. Mass of guns, mass of shells, mass of fortifications. The war economy only makes sense in a total war and this war in Ukraine is obviously a total war. A total war that requires the mobilisation of the country in the war.

Mobilisation for War

Russia, which had launched a "special military operation", finally decided to mobilise, believing initially that a brief *coup de force* would suffice to achieve its objectives. The initial 160,000 soldiers were

not enough and it took several months before Moscow took the full measure of things. This explains the decision to partially mobilise further 300,000 men in October, as well as the re-launch of the arms industry, which was one of the only sectors where Russia had strong assets. Despite Western hopes that stocks of shells and missiles would be depleted, the course of the fighting over the past two months suggests that not only the stocks but also their replenishment have kept some capacity.

As for men, rumours of a new mobilisation of half a million men show that here again, Russia should be able to mobilise. Demography plays a key role here, as the Wall Street Journal recently reminded us: Russia has 140 million men, while Ukraine had only 39 million before the war, 9 million of whom fled abroad. Assuming that the losses in men are equal (according to the Pentagon's estimates at the end of November), [this is far from the 3.5 Russians killed for every Ukrainian that would be needed to balance the loss ratio](#). Is this one of the reasons for the use of mercenaries ([LV 201](#))?

As for the Ukrainian economy, it is devastated, which motivates its constant

appeal for Western aid, both financial and, above all, material. The announcement in recent days of the sending of AMX 10RCs, Bradleys, Marders, Leopard 2 or Challenger 2 main battle tanks shows the (still indirect) support of the West for the Ukrainian war effort. This economic and material support allows them to support Ukraine without directly entering the conflict.

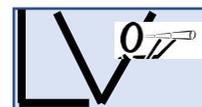
Economy in the War

Finally, the economy is an issue in war: let us remember the Islamic State's seizure of Syrian oil wells. Let us recall the ambiguous role of war entrepreneurs in contemporary conflicts. Above all, **it is important to note that the economy is becoming a military objective in itself**, not only in the initiation of wars (yesterday the conquest of energy resources, in this case Northstream2) but, once the conflict has begun, in the identification of economic objectives as military objectives. This may of course be to benefit from the financial flows associated with a particular production site (oil wells or salt mines in the recent case of Soledar) or to prevent the other from using it (Odessa, Ukrainian port). Finally, "outlaw" businesses and trafficking of all kinds inevitably develop.

The other possibility is also to destroy the enemy's resources. This is the reason for the Russian strategy of strikes in the Ukrainian depths, which mainly target "infrastructures" and not only military sites (flak positions, warehouses): they can be arms industries, railways, bridges and tunnels, the electrical system...

By damaging the enemy's productive apparatus, they considerably hamper both its conduct of operations (its logistics are hampered) and its war economy (its capacity for productive mobilisation).

This is the whole point of military logistics, which is basically a militarised economy: let us recall that the *Train des équipages* was created by Napoleon precisely because civilian service providers were not up to the task. Any peace leads to a withdrawal of production capacities from the military sphere, **every period of war leads to the opposite phenomenon**.



Spyglass : **GERMAN MOD ROLLERCOASTER**

Before February 2022, the chiefs of staff of the German Navy and Army declared, one, that Putin had to be understood, the other that the Bundeswehr was on its last legs.

Since the Russian offensive, the Chancellor announced (in June) that Germany wanted to have the first European army and to provide it with an extra 100 billion euros.

All these fine words have been shattered by the recent resignation of the German Defence Minister, whose term of office had started badly. Having admitted that her appointment was a surprise, which owed more to gender equality and party balance than to her knowledge of the subject, she successively promised helmets to the Ukrainians, went on holiday with a Bundeswehr helicopter, failed to calm the debate on the delivery of tanks to the Ukraine and presented wishes that were considered strange, to say the least. *Auf wiedersehen, meine Dame*.

Two things bring her closer to her compatriot Benedict XVI: they did not want the job and gave it up. One point distinguishes them: no one remembers her name anymore. The post is vacant, good luck to the German armed forces.