

Belgium: The Reliable Free Rider

Tim Haesebrouck, Ghent University

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Abstract

Belgium traditionally presents itself as a strong supporter of multilateral security cooperation and aims to be a reliable partner in the EU and NATO. Nevertheless, the uninterrupted decline of Belgium's defence budget paints a different picture, that of a country that rides cheap on the defence efforts of its partners. Belgium does make equitable contributions to multinational military operations, but the lack of defence investments threatens to undercut its ability to continue to make substantial contributions to multilateral operations. This article builds on literature on small states and military burden-sharing to explain Belgium's post-Cold War defence policy. More specifically, it argues that Belgium's behaviour is anything but irrational, given that it allows to gain a high degree of security and influence at relatively low political and financial costs.

Introduction

Belgium is a vocal supporter of multilateral security cooperation through NATO and the EU, which are considered the two essential pillars of Belgium's security and defence policy (Vandeput 2016, 29). Official strategic documents and government agreements consistently stress that Belgium wants to be a reliable and/or credible partner in both organizations (Vandeput 2016, 236, Federale regering 2011, 170, Federale regering 2014, 230). However, the uninterrupted decline of Belgium's defence budget throughout the post-Cold War period paints a different picture, that of a country that rides cheap on the defence efforts of its partners. Belgium does make equitable contributions to multinational military operations, but the lack of investments in military capabilities threatens to undercut its ability to continue to contribute to multilateral operations. This article aims to explain why Belgium invests so little in its security and defence policy, although it strongly supports multilateral defence cooperation. Building on literature on small states in international relations and military burden sharing, it argues that it is rational for small states to support the development of multilateral security organizations, but equally rational not to carry a large share of the burden in these organizations. Subsequently, it discusses how Belgium became a strong supporter of multilateral security cooperation, after which the evolution of its defence budgets and contributions to multilateral military operations in the post Cold-War period are discussed. Lastly, the conclusions interpret these developments against the backdrop of the theoretical expectations set out in the first section.

Small states and international security

As a small state, with limited resources, Belgium can be expected to face a dilemma between influence and autonomy (Goetschel 1998, 14-19, Rickli 2008, 310). Influence can be defined as the capacity to modify the behaviour of other states, autonomy as the ability to prevent others from affecting one's own behaviour. In order to protect their security interests, small states must try to influence the "actions of the great powers on which their security and survival ultimately depends" (Wivel 2005, 396). At the same time, they want to preserve their autonomy (Rickli 2008, 310). To maximize its influence, a small state can join an alliance, international organization or coalition, which comes at the cost of reduced autonomy (Wivel 2005, 396). By

opting for autonomy by not joining alliances or coalitions, small states forgo the chance of influencing larger states and risk losing vital support when their interests are threatened. The dilemma between influence and autonomy closely resembles Glenn Snyder's (1977) alliance security dilemma. This postulates that members of military alliances face two countervailing pressures: fear of abandonment and fear of entrapment. The former involves the risk of being deserted by an ally, the latter of being entangled in a conflict central to the ally's interests, but peripheral to one's own. Small states that pursue a defense policy that aims to maximize influence at the cost of autonomy face a higher risk of abandonment, given that they might not get the support of larger states when their interests are threatened. Conversely, the risk of entrapment increases if a state pursues a defense policy that aims to maximize influence at the cost of autonomy, given that this entails the risk of getting involved in actions that are not clearly in line with the interests of the small state.

In a comprehensive discussion of how the autonomy/influence dilemma plays out in the military policies of small European states, Rickli (2008) argues that this dilemma is no longer relevant in the post-Cold War security environment. The high level of security institutionalization, with NATO and the EU both taking on important roles in security management, provide small states the opportunity to increase their influence in return for a relatively low decrease in autonomy. The principle of collective defence, as enshrined in article 5 of NATO's founding treaty, significantly reduce the risks small states face at being abandoned by their allies. Moreover, participation in security institutions, like the EU and NATO, gives small states the "opportunity to influence the security policy of regional great powers or at least voice their concerns and provide an institutionalized means of solving security problems in the European region" (Wivel 2005, 395). This increase in influence comes at relatively low autonomy costs. Although all NATO-allies pledged to spend 2% of their GDP at defence during the Wales-Summit of 2014, this commitment is legally not binding and there are no sanctions in case of non-compliance (Blum and Potrafke 2019, 4, Weiss 2019). Moreover, there is no obligation to participate in NATO's out-of-area operations As argued by Auerswald and Saideman (2014, 31), "countries that participate are volunteers, varying in how willing they are to do what alliance commanders ask". Likewise, EU member states have no obligation to participate in CSDP military operations, nor does the CSDP entail any budgetary obligations (Haesebrouck and Thiem 2018). Multilateral security organizations, thus, allow small states to increase their

security and influence at a relatively low autonomy cost. In consequence, small states can be expected to be strong supporters of international organizations that deal with security issues, such as the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and NATO.

While small states have a strong incentive to support the development of international security organizations, they have few incentives to carry an equitable share of the burden after these organizations are created. Over the years, a comprehensive body of academic literature developed on NATO burden sharing, which has been dominated by collective action theory (Sandler and Shimizu 2014, Jakobsen 2018). The most tested hypothesis in this line of work is the exploitation hypothesis. The latter expects small states to ride cheap on the efforts of large states if collective military action mainly produces public benefits, which are non-excludable and non-rival (Hartley and Sandler 1999, 268, Olson and Zeckhauser 1966). "Non-excludable" implies that non-contributors cannot be excluded from enjoying the benefits of a public good, "non-rival" that consumption by one actor does not diminish the benefits available to anyone else. Because larger allies place a higher absolute value on additional units of a public good, they are expected to satisfy the amount desired by smaller allies. In consequence, small member states have a strong incentive to ride cheap on the efforts of larger allies and only spend a low share of their GDP on defence. Small states can also be expected to be less inclined to participate in military operations, given that the size of their contribution will only have a modest impact on the probability that the operation will be successful (Haesebrouck 2017). In spite of these strong incentives to ride cheap on the efforts of larger states, small countries do have reasons to contribute to collective military efforts. First of all, free riding can weaken the military organizations that provide strong benefits to small states (Jakobsen 2018). The resulting fear of abandonment might incite small states to make equitable contributions to international security institutions (Ringsmose 2010, 331). Moreover, small states that carry an equitable share of the burden of collective security can hope to gain non-material benefits like status enhancement, prestige and gaining a reputation as loyal allies (Oma and Petersson 2019, 107, Pedersen 2019, Jakobsen et al. 2018). Such non-material benefits, in turn, can result in increased influence over larger states, as well as support from these states when a small states' interests are threatened.

To sum up, small states have good reasons to support the development of international security organizations, given that these allow them to increase their security and influence at a relatively low autonomy cost. Once a small state is a member of such a well-developed organization, it

faces two countervailing pressures. On the one hand, small states have a strong incentive not to make costly contributions to collective defence actions and instead take a free ride on the effort of larger states. On the other hand, free-riding entails the risk of undermining security institutions and gaining a reputation of being unreliable and disloyal, which might entail future security costs.

Belgium: the strong supporter of multilateral security organisations

In line with theoretical expectations, Belgium currently presents itself as a strong supporter of multilateral security organizations (Liégeois 2015, 27). For most of its existence however, Belgium pursued a defence policy of neutrality (Jakubowski 2007). This neutrality was not the result of a well-thought-out security policy that aimed to increase Belgium's autonomy at the cost of a decrease in influence. Instead, it was imposed by the great powers immediately after Belgium became independent in 1830 (Biscop 2013). More specifically, the London conventions of 1831 and 1839 between Belgium and Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, France and Russia stipulated that Belgium "shall form an independent and perpetually neutral state" (Lingelbach 1933, 51). Partially because British Prime Minister Gladstone secured treaties in which the two belligerents agreed not to violate Belgian neutrality, but mainly because neither Paris or Berlin could gain much strategic benefits from disturbing Belgium's neutrality, Belgium was able to stay out of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (Coolsaet 2014, 131). The "miracle of 1870" would not be repeated in 1914. Because of the heavy fortifications that had been constructed along the Franco-German border, Germany could gain great military advantage by using Belgian territory and invaded Belgium on August 4th 1914 (Helmreich 1964, 416). After the First World War, Belgium abandoned its policy of neutrality by signing the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 (Coolsaet 2014, 330). However, in 1936 it returned to the policy of neutrality which had failed in 1914. Although France, Britain and Germany agreed to guarantee Belgian neutrality, Belgium became the theatre of war between Europe's great powers between 1940 and 1945. Belgium definitely abandoned its neutrality policy after the end of World War II, and was one of the founding members of NATO, the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community (Biscop 2013).

After the end of the Cold War, Belgium became one of the most vocal supporter of European defense cooperation (Biscop 2013, 33). In the course of 1990, Belgium issued a number of memoranda that made clear it wanted the European Community to develop a security policy with a defense component (Coolsaet 2014, 529). In the 1994 Defense White Book, the development of the West European Union as the military arm of the European union and a European pillar within NATO was mentioned as the first of five guiding principles for Belgium's security and defense policy (Ministerie van Landsverdediging 1994, 28). Written almost immediately after the 1999 Cologne Summit formally launched the European Security and Defense Policy, "The Strategic Plan for Modernizing the Belgian armed forces" stated that Belgian forces at the disposal of NATO would also be at the disposal of the EU (Flahaut 2000, 15, Sauer 2015, 56).

Belgium considers European defense cooperation as a way to reinforce rather than compete with NATO. Nevertheless, its strong support for a common European defense policy sometimes led to tensions with the US, especially during the governments led by the liberal prime minister Guy Verhofstadt (1999-2008) (Biscop 2013, 34). The "Strategic Plan" of 2000 maintained that NATO will remain the cornerstone of Belgium's military security, but also stated that a reinforced European pillar should serve as a counterweight to possible American hegemony (Flahaut 2000, 18). In 2003, prime minister Verhofstadt strongly opposed the US' intervention in Iraq (Coolsaet 2014, 584). Three days after the start of the Iraq War, Verhofstadt invited Germany, France and Luxembourg for a mini-summit on defense (Dumoulin 2004). One of the key proposals of this summit was the creation of a EU headquarters in Tervuren. Such headquarters would provide the EU with its own planning and operational capacities, which, in turn, would result in greater autonomy from NATO. The United States dismissively referred to this summit as a "summit of chocolate makers", considering it yet an attempt to create an alternative to NATO (Menon 2004, 639). Belgium continued to support the idea of a strong common European defense policy, but the discourse of the governments of Christen-Democrat prime ministers Leterme and Van Rompuy was more careful and emphasized the need to strike "a balance between NATO and the EU" (Coolsaet 2014, 589, Biscop 2013, 37). The 2014 Coalition agreement of the Charles Michel government stressed that EU and NATO are complementary, stating that "Belgian security is no more European than Atlantic and vice-versa. We need a strong NATO alliance with the

United States and the latter needs a solid and well-integrated European Union” (Federale regering 2014, 203). Belgium’s most recent defense document, the 2016 “Strategic vision for defense”, reaffirms that NATO and the EU are both essential pillars of Belgium’s security and defense policy (Vandeput 2016, 29).

Next to stressing the vital importance of multilateral organizations for Belgian security, Belgium’s official defense documents consistently acknowledge that Brussels must pay its fair share of the collective efforts of both organizations. One of the guiding principles of the strategic vision is that Belgium should take on its responsibility for defense and contribute in solidarity with the EU and NATO, which meant investing in its military budgets (Vandeput 2016, 69). Likewise, the 2000 strategic plan stated the Belgium must make an equitable contribution to defense and should under no circumstances become a free-rider (Flahaut 2000, 20). As will be argued in the next section however, the evolution of its defense budget tells a different story.

Belgium: the free rider

Assessing whether or not a country carries an equitable share of the burden of collective defence actions requires calculating the ratio between its contributions to collective defence and its estimated ability to contribute. More specifically, the division of military burdens is generally assessed by looking at the percentage of GDP that is spent on defence. This measure has a number of disadvantages. Most importantly, it does not take into account whether or not the money is used effectively, for buying capabilities that are useful for balancing current and future security threats. Nevertheless, % of GDP spent on defence is the most widely used indicator in debates amongst academics, practitioners and politicians. As shown in Figure 1, Belgium does not compare favourably with the other current EU and NATO members on this measure. Belgium already spent less of its GDP on defence at the end of the Cold War period, its defence budget decreased stronger in the following decades and, in contrast to the other EU and NATO members, has not increased after 2014. As a result, Belgium currently spends the third lowest % of GDP at defence of all NATO members (after Luxembourg and Iceland) and the fifth lowest share of all EU member states (after Austria, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta).

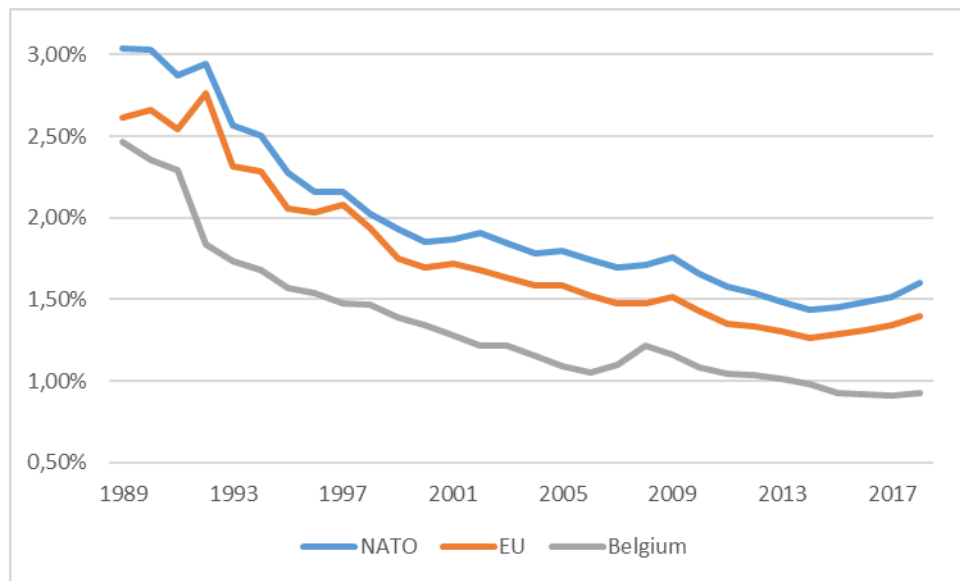


Figure 1: Military Expenditures as share of GDP

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Belgium was one of the first countries to start reforming its armed forces (Dumoulin 2009, 363, Biscop 2013). In fact, it was the first European country that decided to abolish conscription after the end of the Cold War (Sauer 2015, 50). In 1992, defense minister Delcroix launched the largest restructuring of Belgian armed forces since World War II. Instead of deterring Soviet aggression, managing the more diffuse risks that emerged from the numerous conflicts in Europe, the Middle East and Africa became the main goal of Belgium's defense policy (Ministerie van Landsverdediging 1994, 13-14, Dumoulin 1992, 30). However, rather than adopting the Belgian army to the new international environment, the main reason for restructuring the armed forces was a desire to cash in the peace dividend (Biscop 2013, 34). As a consequence of continuous budget cuts, Belgium's defense budget became very unbalance during the 1990s. Whereas Belgium allocated 50% of its defense budget to personnel, 25% to operating costs and yet another 25% to investments at the end of the Cold War, Belgium only invested 14% of its defense budget in new equipment, while 59% went to personnel and 26% to operating costs in the year 2000 (Sauer 2015). "The Strategic Plan for Modernizing the Belgian armed forces", presented by defense minister Flahaut in May 2000, unfroze the defense budget and aimed to increase investment in equipment (Flahaut 2000, Dumoulin and Resteigne 2007). However, the strategic plan was watered down at several occasions and the Belgian defense budget continued to decline (Sauer 2015, 31). The bulk of the budget (78% in 2016) went to personnel costs, leaving little budget for investments in equipment (Vandeput 2016, 81). In 2016, Defence minister Vandeput

presented a new strategic plan, which aimed to increase Belgian military spending to 1,3% of its GDP by 2030 (Vandeput 2016, 72). However, the first increase in the defence budget is scheduled for 2020, effectively passing the buck to the next Belgian government.

There are a number of interrelated explanations for Belgium's very low level of defence spending. First of all, Belgium's government budget was constrained during the 1990s because it had to significantly reduce its debt-to-GDP-ratio to meet the euro-convergence criteria of the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. Moreover, security concerns have historically never been the most important determinants of Belgium's foreign policy (Coolsaet 2014, 649). The last decades can only be expected to have reinforced this neglect, given that Belgium enjoys "a very high level of security from a geostrategic perspective" (Houben 2004, 49). Located at the centre of Europe, surrounded by large and friendly neighbours, Belgium enjoys a higher level of security than most of the other NATO or EU member states. Compared to the Eastern and Central European States, Belgium has less reasons to be concerned with the threats of a more assertive Russia (Jakobsen 2018, 503). Compared to the EU's Southern member states, the turmoil in Europe's Southern immediate and wider Southern neighbourhood is less likely to engender a feeling of urgency to boost its military spending (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2014, 90). The terrorist attacks in Brussels on March 22nd 2016 did make clear that conflicts in Europe's wider Neighbourhood pose a tangible threat to Belgium's security. However, it remains to be seen whether or not this will lead Belgium to put its rhetorical commitment towards boosting its defence budget into action.

Belgium: the reliable ally

Although spending very little of its GDP on defence, Belgium does aim to be a reliable partner of its allies by contributing to multilateral military operations. The 2016 "Strategic Vision", and the coalition agreements of the governments led by socialist prime minister Di Rupo (2011-2014) and the liberal prime minister Michel (2014-2019), for example, stress that Belgium wants to be a "credible international partner" in NATO and in the CSDP (Federale regering 2014, 203, Vandeput 2016, 236, Federale regering 2011, 170). When one looks at Belgium's contributions to multilateral military operations throughout the Post-Cold War period, Belgium definitely seems less of an underachiever than when one looks at its military

expenditures. Figure 2 estimates the number of externally deployed Belgian troops between 1995 and 2018. It is based on data of IISS military balance, which publishes annual snapshots of troop deployments (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2008, 14-15). Although short-term deployments might be missed by the data, the figure does give an indication of the pattern of Belgium's contributions to multinational operations, as well as the average contributions of the current EU member states.

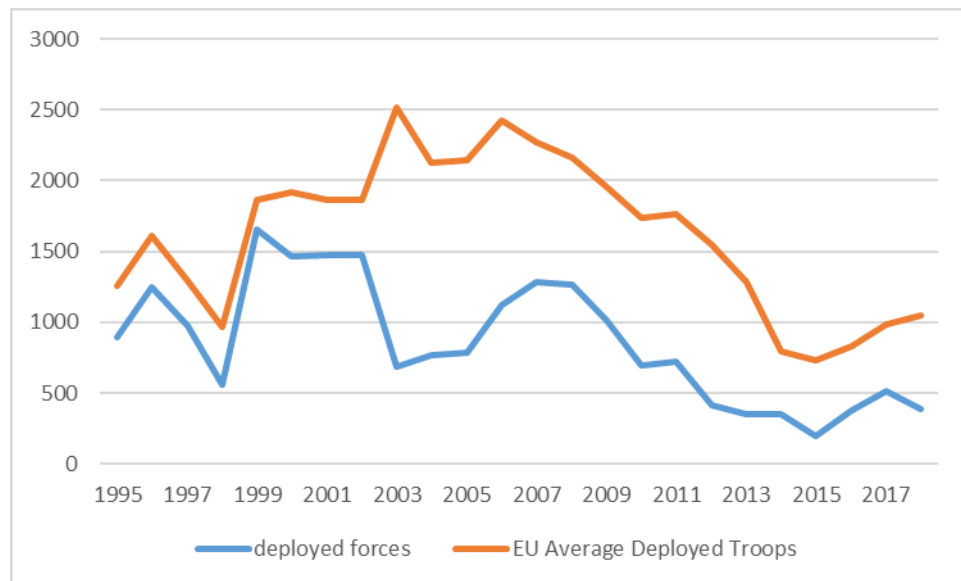


Figure 2: Average Deployed Forces

After the end of the Cold War, Belgium began making substantial contributions to UN peacekeeping operations (UNPOs) (Coolsaet 2014, 526, Liégeois 1993). While only 5 Belgian officers were deployed in UNPOs in 1990, Belgium contributed almost 1,500 troops to various peacekeeping operations by the end of 1993 (Liégeois and Glume 2008). The bulk of the Belgian troops were deployed in (ex-)Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda. After ten Belgian Blue Helmets were brutally assassinated in 1994 during the UNAMIR operation in Rwanda, Belgium's contribution to military operations in general and UNPOs in particular decreased significantly (Liégeois 2012, 324). In 1999 however, Belgium's substantial contribution to the NATO operations in Kosovo caused a steep rise in its externally deployed forces.

When taking into account its relatively small size (Belgium has a GDP below the EU average), Belgium did carry its weight in military operations throughout the 1990s. This changed in the beginning of the 2000s. Not only were the operations in the Balkans gradually reduced, other

European countries began making substantial contributions to the US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. While Belgium vehemently opposed the Iraq war, it did support the US' efforts in Afghanistan (Coolsaet 2014, 584). In 2003, Belgium decided to make a substantial contribution to NATO's ISAF operation in 2003, *inter alia* by providing force protection for Kabul airport (Dumoulin and Resteigne 2007, 37). On top of this engagement, Belgium also started participating with 350 troops in the 2006 reinforced UNIFIL operation in Lebanon. In consequence, its externally deployed were more in proportion to its ability to contribute from the second half of the 2000s. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of Belgian troops active in operations has been significantly lower than in previous decades. This evolution is mainly accounted for by the ending of three of the main Belgium's military engagements of the 2000s: the KFOR-operation in Kosovo (2010), the UNFIL-operation in Lebanon (2014), and the ISAF-operation in Afghanistan (2014). Nevertheless, Belgium did take on several noticeable new military engagements by contributing to the MINUSMA-operation in Mali, the operations against Daesh and NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltics.

Assessing a country's military efforts by looking at the number of externally deployed troops has two important limitations. First of all, burden sharing debates are not only, or mostly, about the number of troops country contribute to an operation, but also on the division of the risks at military casualties (Ringsmose 2010, 328). Both Belgium's general population and its political elite are very risk-averse (Biscop 2013, 39). For the last two decades, Belgium forces were mainly active in operations in which the overall risks were rather limited, such as the peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and the Balkan. To avoid military casualties in Afghanistan, Belgium's ground forces faced significant caveats (Auerswald and Saideman 2014, 170). A second limitation of Figure 2 is that it only includes ground forces and does not take into account naval or air units. In the former category, Belgium's navy frigates have, *inter alia*, been active in the anti-piracy operation Atalanta and the EU's operation to combat human smuggling in the Mediterranean. However, Belgium's most visible contribution to international military operations are its F16 Fighter Falcons, which were active in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya and the operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. By deploying its fighter jets, Belgium can make relatively risk-free kinetic contributions to multinational operations. In 2005, the Belgian government decided to send four F-16 fighter jets to Afghanistan rather than make a larger and robust ground contribution to the operation. In several recent air campaigns, Belgium

has carried more than its fair share of the burden. By participating with 14 fighter aircraft, Belgium was one of the major European contributors to operation Allied Force in Kosovo (Larson et al. 2003, 80). Among European NATO-allies, only the UK, France Germany and the Netherlands contributed more aircraft. In 2011, Belgian F16s flew 620 air sorties in Libya, for which Belgium was praised by then US secretary of defence Gates for being one of the countries that punched above its weight (Anrig 2015, 292, Coolsaet 2016, 11). More recently, Belgian F16s also made substantial contributions to the air strikes against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission (Fonck et al. 2019, Haesebrouck 2016).

When taking into account its substantial contribution to NATO and US-led air campaigns, and in spite of its risk-averseness, it is difficult to argue that Belgium is a free-rider when it comes to contributing to out-of-area operations. However, budget constraints also had a negative impact on Belgium's military deployments. Financial considerations played an important role in Belgium's decision to (temporarily) withdraw its fighter jets from the anti-ISIS coalition in 2015 and not to contribute to EUFOR RCA, which was the first EU-led military operation in which it did not participate (Sauer 2015, 279, Haesebrouck and Meirvenne 2015). Moreover, the lack of investment in military capabilities jeopardises Belgium's capacity to continue to make significant contributions to multilateral crisis management operations. The 2016 Strategic Vision states that Belgium must maintain at least one combat capacity in its army, air and naval force to continue to be a reliable international partner. However, maintaining relevant capabilities will require increased investments (Vandeput 2016, 72). In 2018, the Belgium government made two important decisions in this regard. First of all, it decided to invest in thirty-four F35 fighter jets. Second, it signed a partnership with France that included the purchase of 382 Griffons and 60 Jaguar combat vehicles. Whether Belgium should have invested in the American-built F35 fighter jets (or in fighter jets in the first place) was a contentious issue in the run-up to the 2019 general election (Reykers and Fonck 2019). However, Belgium's political parties generally agreed on the need for future investment in military capabilities. Although increased investment in defence is anything but guaranteed, this does provide reasons to be mildly optimistic about Belgium staying a reliable ally.

Conclusion

Belgium is a vocal supporter of multilateral security cooperation and aims to be a reliable partner in both the EU and NATO. At the same time however, Belgium spends very little at defence. Literature on small states and military burden sharing suggests that this behaviour is anything but irrational. The EU and NATO allow Belgium to maintain a high level of security, at relatively low autonomy costs. Because of the EU and NATO, it is unthinkable that the most substantial threat to Belgium's security will ever again materialize: a war between Belgium's neighbours. Moreover, membership in NATO and the EU allow Belgium to influence and cooperate with larger states when its interests are threatened. This increase in security and influence come at relatively low autonomy costs, given that neither membership in NATO or the EU entails an (enforceable) obligation to participate in operations or spend more on defence. In consequence, Belgium has few reasons to invest in its defence, especially given that it shares most of its security interests with the other EU member states and most threats to European security are less pressing for Belgium than for its European partners. As explained by collective action based models of burden sharing, small states that share their security interests with larger allies have an incentive to ride cheap on the efforts of larger partners. In consequence, it is anything but surprising from the perspective of collective action theory that defence has traditionally been a popular department for budget cuts. However, because of its low level of defence spending, Belgium risks gaining a negative reputation as a free rider, which might result in a loss of influence and threatens to undermine the international organizations that provides it with strong benefits. Therefore, Belgium aims to be a reliable partner of its allies by making visible contributions to multilateral military operations. However, maintaining the necessary capabilities to continue to be able to participate in military operations will require Belgium to make substantial investments. In consequence, Belgium can no longer hope to be considered a reliable partner in the future without increasing its military expenditures.

Conflict of interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest

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