

“Belgium in the UN Security Council 2019-2020”

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***Belgium in the UN Security Council 2019-2020:
a changing geopolitics, a growing European dimension
and the added value of its UNSC membership***

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The author would like to sincerely thank many Belgian and European diplomats who were interviewed during 2019-20 in the framework of his research project on the sixth Belgian membership on the UN Security Council. Most notably, these interviews were conducted with the ‘UNSC Team’ of the Belgian Public Service Foreign Affairs between 2019-2020 on a regular basis. In addition, several interviews were conducted during our ‘embedded’ research stay in June 2019 at the Belgian Permanent Representation with the United Nations in New York. During this same research stay, the author also had the opportunity to discuss these matters with several diplomats from Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the UN. The views retained from these talks are solely those of the author, and do not in any way represent an official position of these respective governments.

Introduction

Soon the Kingdom of Belgium will finalize its sixth two year mandate in the UN Security Council, 2019-2020. Previously, the country was a non-permanent member of the UNSC in 1947-48, 1955-56, 1971-72, 1991-92 and 2007-08. This puts Belgium in a very select club of UN member states that regularly have been entrusted upon this assignment to peace & security. This non-permanent membership has become a day to day commitment during a two year tenure period. On 8 June 2018, Belgium received a wide mandate in the UN General Assembly with 181 votes, which showed the country was trusted by a large majority to play this role anew. Now that this period is almost over, it is a good moment to try to make a first evaluation. The following elements will be tackled;

- *First*, the **geopolitical**. How has the role of the Council changed since Belgium's last stint in the UN Security Council in 2007-2008? Most in particular, we observe an increasing great power rivalry. How has this impacted the (working methods of the) Council, and what can be expected for the future? In what way can small states such as Belgium play a role in such a complex geopolitical environment?
- *Second*, the **European dimension**. Strengthening the coordination amongst the EU members has been one of the contributions of Belgium, together with like-minded countries such as Germany. It would seem this may be one of the elements that will act as an inheritance to this period.
- *In conclusion*, we briefly reflect upon the **added value of Belgium's UNSC membership**. Were the financial, political and diplomatic investments which Belgium made worthwhile, in terms of its external positioning and internal organization?

1. Geopolitical dimension

Seen from a geopolitical point of view, one cannot deny that the period 2019-2020 was quite different compared to 2007-08. Some observations:

- The **Russian federation started to be resurgent around 2007**, contesting what Moscow viewed as “a Western strategy from the end of the 1990s onwards to make use of Russia’s geopolitical weakness”. This led to a Russian counter strategy in the wake of the Kosovo declaration of independence of 17 February 2008. Think for instance of the brief war in Georgia, most notably in August 2008, when Belgium was presiding over the Council. Since then, **the relationship between the West and Russia has experienced new lows, with the crisis in the Ukraine from 2014 onwards** as an important moment. Although some European countries now do realize that some mistakes were made in this dossier, their relationship with Moscow remains a difficult one – with some isolated exceptions. **The war in Libya in 2011 seems to have been a turning point for the worse**, also for the UN Security Council. Moscow believed, again, that countries such as France and the United Kingdom misused this crisis and adoption of the principle of “Responsibility to Protect” to gain a geopolitical advantage (see also resolution text UNSC/RES/1973 (2011)). Whether this is true or not, **from that moment onwards the parallel dossier of Syria, in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’, has been one of symbolism and geopolitical strife**, up to a point that each bloc developed its own reality of the evolving situation on the ground. During the past years, **Belgium together with co-penholders Germany and Kuwait have played a major role in the Syrian dossier, focusing on the humanitarian dimension**. This has proven exceptionally difficult, although in July 2020

the cross-border regime has been renewed for one year. The Russian federation and also the People's Republic of China openly used their veto in this dossier in the past. Hence a lot of time and diplomatic effort needed to be invested to achieve a resolution text that could be acceptable to all parties, and still implementable. The three co-penholders have been able to play an important role on this humanitarian front. However, Syria remains until this day clouded by a broader geopolitical strife between East and West unfortunately. In that sense, it has proven to be extremely difficult to de-politicize this important dossier, and this also seems to have been the case with other dossiers that are considered to be of 'high geopolitical contention'. **More recently, in the Belarus crisis, Belgium and Estonia tried to play a moderating role which seems to implicitly have taken into account "Western lessons from the Ukraine crisis of 2014", by trying to allow the OSCE to play its regional role.** Whether this really has proved a realistic policy solution, remains another matter. At least it signaled to Moscow that there was no intention to make "Belarus" into a case of geopolitical strife. On the other hand, some in the Belarus opposition movements have voiced their disillusionment with the EU.

- This automatically brings us to a second geopolitical observation and difference between 2007-08 and 2019-2020; **the People's Republic of China is trying to translate vocally its rise in geo-economic power into more geopolitical cloud.** In our interviews, diplomats often implicitly or even explicitly referred to this as a new phenomenon. This seems to have impacted for instance dossiers related to Africa, where Beijing has developed major geo-economic interests over the last decade. There exists worry amongst some Western diplomats which we interviewed on how this will further evolve, especially in matters related to human rights.

In 2021-2022, India will become a non-permanent member of the Council. It remains to be seen how the strategic rivalry between China and India will translate into the Council, and whether for instance the new US Administration under Biden might make use of this in some way.

- A quite unique geopolitical difference with all the previous periods when Belgium was a non-permanent member in the Council, is that **the American administration of Donald J. Trump proved to be disruptive from a geopolitical point of view, which created tensions within the traditional Western bloc.** For instance, on security matters in the Middle East, Washington sometimes either developed its own line (think for instance of Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA-agreement between the international community and Iran *or* his administration's de facto support for the policies of Turkey in Syria). Sometimes, Washington was not very interested in other dossiers (think for instance on Libya) or did not stress human rights in the way previous administrations had done. **As a result, Western countries were not united. All in all, the United States of America seems to have left several power vacuums, which proved an opportunity for other P5-members such as the Russian federation and the People's Republic of China to test their geopolitical reach in matters of regional concern. Also regional powers such as Turkey have tested their power in this new geopolitical environment in volatile cases such as Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabach.** This would have not been possible without Trump's lack of policy engagement in each of these dossiers, in our opinion.

- As a conclusion on the geopolitical dimension, one could state that **it remains very difficult for smaller non-permanent members to navigate such a geopolitical environment.** The added value that countries such as Belgium and Germany have brought is that they have invested in diplomacy and a continued political debate with all members, like-minded and others, while still retaining and defending their core beliefs. **This does not always produce direct results, and may lead to temporary set-backs.** The broader geopolitical transitions in the world create a situation in which non-permanent members can not always materially change the reality on the ground. Nevertheless, they can help fostering a diplomatic negotiation climate in which ideas are tested, again and again. **Next to niche diplomacy into topics such as transitional justice, Belgium also tried to de-politicize some of the conflicts in the world via its presidency of the working group ‘Children in Armed Conflict’,** a role for which it actively lobbied. Only via continued debate and fostering trust can material changes be realized, although sometimes very slowly. It is to be expected that under the new US administration under Joseph R. Biden, the dynamic of a ‘Western bloc’ in the Council might come back in some fashion. There are **hints that a new government in Washington might use a renewed period of multilateralism as a way to keep the People’s Republic of China in check without having to revert to naked power politics.** It will be interesting to see how both the geo-economic and geostrategical relationship between Western countries and the People’s Republic of China will further evolve. The geo-economic cloud of Beijing has grown considerably of the years through projects such as *‘One Belt, One Road’*. Recently, the People’s Republic of China signed a *‘Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership’* (RCEP) initiated by Indonesia,

including Asia-Pacific nations of Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. The falling American foreign direct investments in several countries of this region might also in the longer term have serious geostrategic consequences. In that sense, we believe that in the longer run the geo-economic attractiveness of either the Western or Chinese model will start affecting the geostrategic realm. This is something to watch and follow up for the years to come.

- During the past period, the Brexit-negotiations have been developing further. Based upon our own observations through our interviews conducted during our 'embedded' research stay in June 2019 in New York, it is clear that **the United Kingdom feels it plays in another league as permanent UNSC-member**. Overall, there seemed to be a good working relationship between London and the capitals of the EU countries in the Council, but the British position sometimes tried to bridge policy gaps with the Trump administration – not always in a successful way we might add.
- France now remains the only permanent EU-member in the Council, and as such remains to use this as a lever to act geopolitically above its own weight. Although **Paris** will coordinate with the other EU members, it feels **completely in its own rights to stress its own policies and policy accents**. Interesting however is how issues of climate change are gradually introduced and mainstreamed into existing debates on peace and security. At the same time, France has of course also been confronted with other problems of terrorism and migration, and as a result has often also voiced these issues in several of its interventions. So also from a material

point of view, the **topics of peace and security which are discussed today and will be discussed in the coming years will stress even more the interconnectedness of 'state security' with problems of 'human security' (climate change and biodiversity, migration, human rights, etc.). In that sense one might argue that in the coming years the UN Security Council will need to go beyond thematic debates on these issues and explore in a more structural way aspects of human security in each of the regional dossiers so as to coordinate a more integrated policy response.**

2. European dimension

Second, the European dimension. This has been a domain of innovation during the past period. Quite unique during the past period was that several European countries were non-permanent UNSC member, next to Belgium and Germany in 2019-2020, also countries such as Sweden (2017-2018), Italy (2017), the Netherlands (2018) and Poland (2018-2019) and, but now also Estonia (2020-21) and an incoming Ireland (2021-22). **Belgium continued the policy interest of countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands in the Council, for instance on thematic topics such as climate change. In that same atmosphere of cooperation, a bilateral coordination between the two Benelux countries was set up. This "estafette" also materialized into and was furthered by two secondments in which each country hosted a diplomat of the other nation into its diplomatic team, responsible for specific policy domains.** That fostered continuity and continued the learning curve. Dutch diplomats also voiced their own 'lessons learnt' to their Belgian colleagues at the end of 2018, for instance on matters such as how to deal with P5-dynamics and producing resolutions.

Although the European External Action Service (EEAS) does not have an active role to play in UNSC matters, **it facilitated a process in which a European country became the ‘briefer of the month’**, to inform European colleagues of the issues pending in the UN Security Council. In addition, EU countries have briefed their colleagues if and when there were transitioning into membership of the Council, so that incoming EU members had a good idea of the evolving formal and informal working methods in the UNSC. **At the same time, Belgium and also Germany played a role in joint ‘stake outs’ to the press, for instance in issues on Syria.** It seems France participated in this process, but at the same time slightly frustrated this Europeanization to such an degree that Paris’s voice remained unique in the Council. On the other hand, Belgium deliberately chose to contribute to this soft form of ‘Europeanization’ on security matters in New York – a process which already had started with Italy and the Netherlands. **France and Germany developed a so-called ‘joint presidency’ in the Security Council** which symbolized the political intention of Paris and Berlin to coordinate amongst themselves in matters of security, to which Brussels also contributed. Of course, the past years were somewhat unique in the sense that we will have less EU-states in the Council and that London might play a more unique role. On the other hand, **this soft form of ‘Europeanization’ shows the intent of EU countries to further experiment with “pooling power”, also in matters of security.** In the past years, the EU discovered, through the Ukraine crisis, its geo-economic power through sanction regimes. Whether this produced the desired policy results remains another issue, but it seems that Brussels will have to use its geo-economic power if it is to be more respected in matters of hard security. For the coming years, the French government of Macron also wishes to connect issues of climate change and biodiversity to geo-economic free trade regimes. It

remains to be seen whether this attempt at dealing with the *causes* rather than the *consequences* of hard security problems can also produce material results. Countries such as Belgium and Germany will undoubtedly try to contribute to these debates of human security in the future, via EU foreign policy mechanisms.

A **last comment** can be made about the **current European debate with regard to strategic autonomy**. It seems that the Biden administration will force EU countries to “deliver” in a renewed transatlantic partnership. **On a positive note, the P3 consisting of Paris, London and Washington will function anew. On a more negative note, EU-countries might lose their current momentum to develop their own ‘strategic autonomy’ or be forced to do their own ‘reality check’.** The relationship between NATO and EU defence capacities remains a political topic to be dealt with. French and German ambassadors again stress the complementarity of both these days, but the Trump presidency and/or a new emanation of American transatlantic skepticism might return after 2024 or 2028. Developing their own defence capacities, also in terms of a European “military industrial complex” and technological know-how, will become very essential for Europeans if it is their ambition to still play a role in matters of ‘high politics’.

3. Conclusion, which added value of Belgium’s UNSC membership?

Finally, one can ask the question whether the financial, political and diplomatic investments which Belgium made were worthwhile, both in terms of its external positioning and internal organization. **The highest political level, including the Belgian royal family, was engaged in Belgium’s political and diplomatic efforts at the UN Security Council.** Belgium also presided over the Council in February

2020, a mere month before the global corona crisis hit and the Council was, for the first time in its history, forced to work exclusively through online mechanisms.

The political and diplomatic efforts to make Belgium anew a Security Council member can be traced back to the period immediately after 2008, when Belgian diplomats received a lot of appreciation from P5 members and non-permanent members over their inclusive contribution to peace and security and knowledge of the dossiers at hand. Here we immediately come to the essence; **a two year membership of the UNSC forces a country to develop positions on a wide range of policy dossiers. In addition, the country will develop a lot of useful political and diplomatic contacts.** Belgium had a much smaller central coordination team in Brussels compared to its Dutch predecessors: 5 and later 6 FTE compared to around a dozen. Instead an organizational model was developed in which the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs was energized, and the diplomatic days of 2018 and 2019 proved to be essential to also include all Belgian embassies and permanent representations around the world to provide crucial day-to-day information and liaise with diplomats of other countries on a more permanent basis. **Interviews with diplomats also show that they needed to think much more strategically compared to periods when Belgium was not a member of the Security Council. This has produced a lot of intangible, but difficult to measure benefits in terms of renewing diplomatic contacts around the world. It has also given diplomats of more experienced and younger generations the chance to gain invaluable experience, develop their own personal networks & ‘reality check’ with today’s international politics at the highest levels. In addition, more ‘inside information’ was gathered on current geopolitical transformations and how these impact multilateral, European and bilateral diplomacy.** The insights and personal growth which they acquired will most

undoubtedly reverberate further in the Belgian Public Service Foreign Affairs in the years to come.

Amongst the more general lessons learnt, interviewees often stress aspects such as “the art of the possible”, the possibility to generate positive change through “indirect impact”, high politics matters as a continued “balancing act” and the need for “empathy as the beginning of diplomacy”. The European dimension is also very often mentioned by interviewees. In that sense, **the future of Belgian diplomacy will in the future even more lie in a “multilayered diplomacy” with European and other like-minded nations around the world.** The geopolitical reality check which the sixth stint in the UN Security Council offered will hopefully also help Belgian senior politicians to realize that we have entered a new geopolitical period, in which Belgium will need to be creative and continue, through partnerships, to push above its weight in order to defend its interests and values. A seventh UNSC mandate is likely, but might not materialize until the 2030s, by which time the world will have changed fundamentally.

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