

Contributor Profile: Belgium

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Active Armed Forces ¹	Helicopters	Defense Budget	Uniformed UN Peacekeepers	UN Contribution Breakdown	Other Significant Deployments
34,336	27 Agusta	2010: \$2.74bn (0.79% GDP)	129 (10 female) (31 August 2012)	UNIFIL 100 troops (9 female)	NATO ISAF: 577 troops
World Ranking (by size): 74	3 Sea King (Search & Rescue)	2011: \$2.77bn (0.74% of GDP)	Ranking: 60 th	MONUSCO 26 (21 troops, 4 experts, 1 police)	EUTM 5
Army: 12,544 Navy: 1,590 Air Force: 5,739 Joint: 12,619	4 Alouette III	2012: \$2.82bn	(10 th largest contributor from EU states; 12 th from NATO)	UNMIK 1 police UNTSO 2 experts	EUSEC 8
Defense Spending / Active troop: ² US\$82,000 (compared to global average of approx. US\$59,000)					

Part 1: Recent Trends

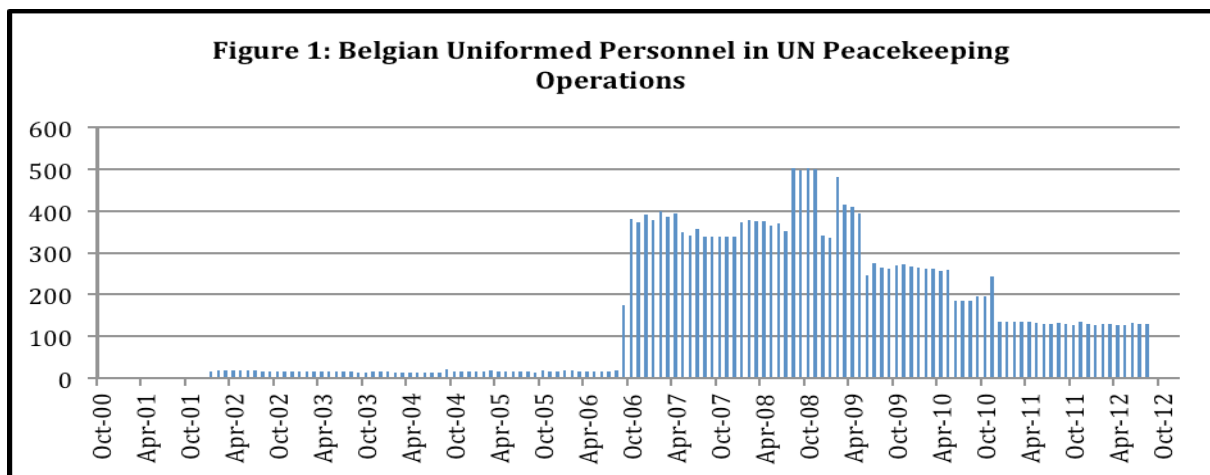
During the last two decades, Belgium's contribution to UN peacekeeping has fluctuated between moderate and high levels of involvement (in the early 1990s and mid 2000s) and entirely symbolic contributions (early 2000s and 2010s). In the early 1990s, Belgium participated actively in UN peacekeeping missions in both the Balkans and Africa. Most importantly, between 1992 and 1997, it contributed to UNPROFOR by sending an infantry battalion to the Baranja region (BELBAT: 1,038 troops) and by providing UNPROFOR's Force Commander between 1993 and 1994 (General Francis Briquemont). In addition, between 1996 and 1998, Belgium contributed 130 troops to UNTAES (Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Sirmium). It also contributed 450 troops to UNAMIR I and II and elite fighting force battalions to UNOSOM I and II (Somalia). On a more symbolic scale, Belgium sent personnel to ONUB (Burundi) and UNMIS (Sudan) between 2004 and 2006 before engaging more strongly in UNIFIL since 2006 (see below).

UNPROFOR and UNOSOM proved challenging, but it was the experience in Rwanda that turned Belgium's ruling elite and society into UN-sceptics. On 7 April 1994, ten Belgian peacekeepers were assassinated and mutilated while performing duties for UNAMIR. The assassinations shocked Belgians and led the government to withdraw its battalion. This decision had important knock-on effects for UNAMIR's other troop-contributing countries as well as affecting the speed and extent of the genocide itself.

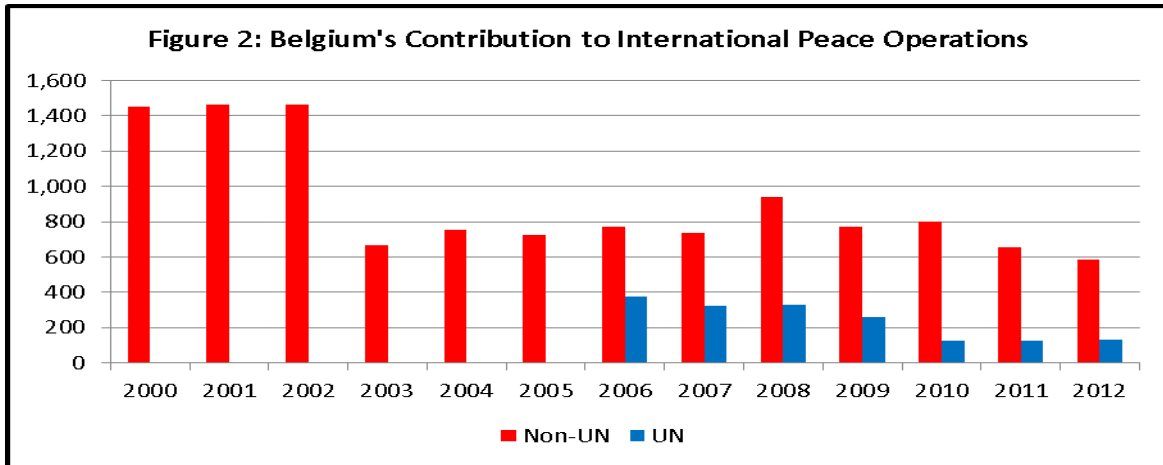
The Rwanda experience had a lasting effect on Belgium's political and strategic attitude towards UN peacekeeping. A [Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry regarding the Events in Rwanda](#) was established to investigate and reflect upon the episode. Its conclusions were presented in December 1997 and inspired the articulation of criteria to guide peacekeeping decision-making, which were included in the [Note of General Policy regarding the Belgian Participation in Peacekeeping Operations](#) in January 1998. The Note of General Policy confirmed the recommendation "to cease furnishing contingents to UN operations carried out in former Belgian colonies" but stressed that this would not exclude the provision of

assistance to peacekeeping missions in those countries. Belgium could provide logistics and communication assistance, as well as financial and material support to troops from third countries, notably African countries. Also, while underlining that the decision to participate in UN peacekeeping operations should be taken on a case-by-case basis, the document specified four preconditions: 1) the existence of a clear international political framework (including a UN Security Council resolution); 2) sufficient means and resources (in terms of room for manoeuvre, troops and equipment, and logistical support); 3) political and operational coherence (i.e., a clearly defined concept of operations and rules of engagement as well as effective command and control structures); and 4) credible security guarantees (including medical evacuation) for the troops involved.

As a result of the “Rwanda recommendations,” as of 1998, successive Belgian governments froze the participation of their armed forces in UN peacekeeping missions. Since then, Belgium has contributed only a very limited number of personnel to UN peacekeeping, with UNIFIL being the exception to the rule (since 2006) (see figure 1). Currently, Belgium contributes 129 peacekeepers to the UN – which amounts to less than 0.1% of the UN’s overall deployment.



Importantly, the limited recent contributions cannot be explained solely by the Rwanda trauma. They represent a political choice to concentrate Belgium’s peacekeeping contributions in NATO and EU missions (see Figure 2). During the last decade Belgium contributed significantly to NATO’s missions in the Balkans as well as to the EU’s missions in Chad and the anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia. The continued preference for EU and NATO operations is also associated with Pieter De Crem (CD&V; Flemish Christian Democrats), who succeeded André Flahaut (PS; Walloon Socialist Party; see below) as Minister of Defence in 2007. The most recent [government agreement](#), which dates from 1 December 2011, confirms this choice. More generally, this focus on NATO and EU missions also follows from wider discussions on the nature of “robust” versus “traditional” and “multidimensional” peacekeeping. For robust military operations, Belgium chooses to limit its contributions to NATO and the EU (but only if sanctioned through a UN Security Council resolution). It is open to contributing to UN peacekeeping on a case-by-case basis, provided there is a clear mandate and adequate force protection (note: in the early stages of UNIFIL in 2006, Belgium sent a 130-strong force protection unit outside the UN-budget in order to reinforce force protection of the Belgian UNIFIL components).



Part 2: Decision-Making Process

The Permanent Mission of Belgium to the UN forwards UN requests to the Belgian Defense Staff and the Ministry of Defense's Operational and Strategic Divisions, which provide a dossier on the operational feasibility and mission plan. The Chief of Defense transmits advice to the Minister of Defense, who, in turn, submits the proposal for approval to the government's "core" cabinet of ministers (i.e., Prime Minister, Deputy Ministers, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defense). Consensus among the various ministers (and de facto political parties) is required. Further advice can be sought from the permanent representations at NATO and the EU.

The Belgian government does not require formal authorization from parliament to deploy its armed forces on international missions. Yet, a norm and practice has developed of keeping the Parliament informed. Two parliamentary commissions are involved, the [Parliamentary Commission for Foreign Affairs and Defence](#), and [the Special Parliamentary Commission for the follow-up on Foreign Missions](#) (which meets behind closed doors). As a result, the time frame from request to authorization can be very short, depending on the political will of the departments involved. In the case of UNIFIL, the entire process (from request to deployment) took roughly 2½ months. In contrast, Belgium's participation in the Libya campaign (2011-) was confirmed in only a matter of days, despite being confirmed by a caretaker government.

Part 3: Rationales for Contributing

The main rationales for Belgium's contribution to UN peacekeeping are political in nature. In brief, Belgian contributions result from a political compromise between the actors mentioned above. The current level is a legacy of Belgium's non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council in 2007-08.

Political rationales

Domestic politics: Belgium's contribution is the result of a political balancing act. Some political parties, notably the Socialist Party in the southern part of the country, the Socialist Party in the northern part of the country (SP.A) and the Green Party in the northern part of the county (GROEN), see participation in UN peacekeeping as a *conditio sine qua non* for lending their support to participation in more robust NATO and EU operations.

Prestige and influence: Belgium's (limited) "return to UN Peacekeeping" in 2006 cannot be understood without taking into account its campaign for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council in 2007 and 2008. It hoped to gain greater influence and authority during its

Council membership by way of a direct participation in UNIFIL. As explained below, depending on the economic situation, a similar development could be expected in the run-up to the next membership campaign (2019-20).

Normative Rationales: [Some have argued](#) that Belgium's contribution to UNIFIL was also in line with the professed foreign policy concepts of "humanitarian activism" and "ethical diplomacy" proposed by André Flahaut, Minister of Defense between 1999 and 2007. However, discussions with policy officials reveal that Flahaut was probably driven by more mundane motivations including the wish to generate good relations with France and the Lebanese community in Belgium, which has its home base in the francophone part of the country (notably in the city of Nivelles) and thus in electoral regions considered important to Flahaut's party. More generally, the Belgian government [often stresses](#) its normative commitment to multilateralism and the UN system at large, seeing it as the [cornerstone of global security](#). Similarly, Belgium has been a vocal supporter of including a "protection of civilians" dimension in peacekeeping mandates. Yet these normative commitments have not been translated into strong(er) support in terms of a uniformed presence on the ground.

Security Rationales: UNIFIL is broadly in line with both Belgium's and the EU's security aim of improving stability in the "Southern Neighborhood." In this sense, Belgium's contribution to UNIFIL has been presented as a taking a more active role in de-escalation efforts in the Middle East.

Institutional Rationales: Belgium's (limited) participation in MONUSCO – operating from Kisangani, Belgium provides air-support by way of tactical and strategic flights (C-130) – offers some military operational experience (flight hours), but participation in NATO and EU operations are seen as equally, if not more, valuable in this area. A new role in UNIFIL may offer opportunities for training and the involvement of middle-ranking officers and thus assist in the reorganization of the Belgian army.

Economic Rationales: Belgium's participation in UN peacekeeping is not driven by a desire to benefit financially from participation. Yet, in certain small scale deployments (such as Belgium's air force contribution to MONUSCO), UN reimbursements are seen as useful for easing the financial burden and allowing pilots to gain vital flight training. Given the current search for budget cuts across all departments, the general budget for 2013 will also contain a downsizing of participation in military missions abroad. Belgium's upcoming withdrawal from ISAF in 2014 (the exact month of the withdrawal is yet to be determined in coordination with its Allies) may create opportunities for a stronger UN involvement. However, it may also increase the domestic political pressure to withdraw from UNIFIL and other UN-led peacekeeping activities – thus turning the "post-2014 return to UN peacekeeping" hypothesis on its head.

Part 4: Barriers to Contributing

The most significant barriers to Belgium's provision of UN peacekeepers are political and institutional in nature. A difficult domestic context and strong resistance within the Belgian military explain the status quo. Both factors remain defined by the Rwanda experience.

Difficult domestic politics: After almost twenty years, the catastrophic experience in Rwanda still marks Belgian political discourse, public perception and strategic thinking related to UN-led peacekeeping. Large-scale involvement in Belgium's former colonies remains taboo, as is

participation in high-risk operations. The “body bag syndrome” means that both the public and large sections of the military are sceptical about UN-led robust peacekeeping.

Resistance in the military: The view that the UN is not the most effective partner for conducting more robust (i.e. ISAF-type) operations is widely held among military officials. Based on the negative experiences in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda, but also on their experience during Belgium’s 2007-08 membership of the UN Security Council and its recent experiences during UNIFIL, many question whether progress has been achieved in terms of reforming the UN’s command and control structures. Belgian military planners were strong supporters of establishing the (European) “strategic military cell” within DPKO for UNIFIL – a model they would like to see improved and repeated, due to the more direct control it gives them over the day-to-day running of the operations. Yet, Belgian planners are aware that this is a rather controversial path. Belgium’s approach towards command and control is more in line with that of NATO and the EU, which are seen as the more natural partners. The same line of thinking applies to intelligence gathering.

Alternative institutional preferences: Belgium’s participation in NATO- and EU-led missions has placed constraints on more active involvement in UN peacekeeping. In recent years, Belgium’s main contribution has been to ISAF. Tellingly, the withdrawal of Belgium’s field hospital from UNIFIL in 2009 was justified on the grounds of a conflicting commitment of the same resources to the EU Battlegroup roster (even though the EU Battlegroups themselves have so far not been deployed). Belgium remains a strong supporter of [a more pro-active EU role in international security](#), including a reinforced role in civilian and military crisis management operations and the eventual possibility of an EU army (as outlined by the recent [Future of Europe Group Final Report](#)).

Financial costs: As noted, Belgium’s public debt reduction measures impose strict saving policies on all departments, including the Ministry of Defence. The next budget, which is currently being negotiated and expected in late October 2012, may include further cuts in Belgium’s participation in international peace operations.

Part 5: Current Challenges and Issues

The Belgian armed forces have been undergoing substantial reform and restructuring since 1999. The defense budget has also seen a [continual decline during the last decade](#). As noted, the cross-departmental search for budget cuts may impact negatively on Belgium’s involvement in UN peacekeeping as well. Another important challenge remains scepticism towards the UN’s command and control and its general capabilities to conduct robust peacekeeping and to ensure the safety of troops. In this sense, a change of Belgium’s stance is closely linked to the issue of command and control reforms in the UN. Yet, it should be noted that there is also a clear lack of awareness in Belgian circles about the advances and reforms that have been made by DPKO in terms of command and control. A sustained dialogue and awareness-raising campaign might be helpful here.

In political terms, the envisaged withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 will coincide with the next Belgian general election and a new government might take a different stance on UN peacekeeping. A more likely scenario is that Belgium will take a more pro-active stance when campaigning for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for 2019-20 i.e. it is likely that any Belgium return to UN peacekeeping will be a pragmatic one, as before.

Part 6: Key Champions and Opponents

Stronger participation in UN peacekeeping is advocated by a number of political parties, notably the PS, SP.A and GROEN. The choice for EU and NATO, and thus for a more robust (some say more visible) involvement, has been associated with Pieter De Crem, the Minister of Defense since 2008. The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is more sympathetic to UN-missions whilst the Ministry of Defense is more supportive of operations led by the EU and NATO. A noteworthy exception used to be Jean-Artur Regibeau, the former Chef de Cabinet, who had a reputation for being a UN-friendly senior official. At the other end of the spectrum, the former Chief of Defense, Charles-Henri Delcour, openly called for Belgium's withdrawal from both UNIFIL and MONUSCO, but he resigned in March 2012.

In terms of think-tanks and research centres, Belgium has a very limited research culture on UN peacekeeping. Most Brussels-based institutes (such as the [Royal Military Academy](#)), universities (such as the Vrije Universiteit Brussels's [Institute for European Studies](#)) and think-tanks (such as the [Centre for European Policy Studies](#) or the [Security Defence Agenda](#)) naturally focus on the EU and NATO. Notable exceptions are the (Brussels-based) [Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité \(GRIP\)](#), the [Global Governance Institute \(GGI\)](#) and to some extent the [Egmont Institute](#). The [Belgium United Nations Association](#) is a vocal supporter of UN involvement more generally.

Part 7: Capabilities and Caveats

Belgium has strong logistic capabilities and has taken the lead in exploring options for a modular approach to providing key logistical support to peace operations. More generally, Belgian peacekeepers have a strong reputation for being highly trained and flexible and in possession of strong language skills. Most members of the military are fluent in French, which makes them potentially attractive for the UN's *Policiers Francophones*. However, Belgium has only limited experience in international police missions. In recent years, Belgium has contributed to various capacity-building and training initiatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Benin and Uganda, but there still is a very strong feeling against involvement in territories that used to be Belgium's former colonies (see above). Once again, reservations about the UN's command and control capabilities and processes remain and should be addressed.

Part 8: Further Reading

Research on Belgium's contribution to UN peacekeeping is limited and externally driven, usually conducted in reaction to Belgium's membership and leadership roles, notably its 2007-08 membership of the UN Security Council:

Liégeois, M. and G. Glume, "[A Small Power under the Blue Helmet. The Evolution of Belgian Peacekeeping Policy](#)," *Studia Diplomatica*, LXI:3 (2008): 111-138.

Mattelaer, Alexander, "[Europe Rediscovered Peacekeeping? Political and Military Logics in the 2006 UNIFIL Enhancement](#)", *Egmont Paper No. 34*

Pauwels, A., "NATO as Peacekeeper: Challenges and Opportunities for the UN" in J. Wouters, E. Drieskens, & S. Biscop (eds.), *Belgium in the UN Security Council: Reflections on the 2007-2008 Membership* (Antwerp: Intersentia, 2008), pp.133-144.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise stated, data is drawn from IISS, *The Military Balance 2012* (London: IISS/Routledge, 2012).

² Armed Forces Spending is a country's annual total defense budget (in US dollars) divided by the total number of active armed forces. Using figures from IISS, *The Military Balance 2012*.