

Belgian Foreign Minister criticises US role in Africa

Richard Tyler
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Bourgeois diplomacy is usually the art of speaking between the lines. When it comes to articulating decisive economic and geopolitical interests, the diplomat and foreign affairs spokesperson normally choose their words carefully.

A recent interview with Belgian Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Louis Michel, broke with the customarily measured tones of international relations. The article, headlined “Louis Michel wants to bind the destiny of Africa and Europe,” was also used to voice some blunt criticism of the role of the United States in Africa, and in the Balkans.

“I would like to know what, exactly, are the ulterior motives of the USA regarding Africa ... I would like to know what they really want,” he told *Le Soir*.

“They supported Kabila, now they play the Rwandan Kagame against Kabila. They are obviously pawns. I can't see what perspective the United States can give to Kagame. I ask myself, to what extent the cessation of the economic exploitation of the natural resources that exist in the Congo has been arranged by the USA? And if, at a given time, they won't come forward themselves with a financial plan to improve the economy, under which they will, of course, profit the most.”

In the wake of NATO's Balkan war, voices within Europe's ruling elite are increasingly calling for the continent to take a more independent role from the USA. Antagonisms are also growing between America and Europe on a whole range of issues—trade, defence, new geopolitical and geostrategic issues, etc. Under such circumstances, demands for greater European independence must also find their expression in foreign policy considerations. Michel's utterances should be seen in this context.

Serious European criticism of the USA first arose in the aftermath of the Gulf War, which placed the

region's vital oil supplies effectively under American control. In particular Germany—one of the largest Western trade partners of Iraq—was angry at being effectively closed out of this lucrative market. Although German troops did not participate in this first major imperialist assault following the end of the “Cold War”, the country was asked to finance the war to the tune of \$6.6 billion. In the aftermath of the war, the bulk of the reconstruction contracts in Kuwait went to American firms.

As long as the Soviet Union existed, the Western powers generally subordinated their differences and acceded to American hegemony, in the interests of presenting a united front to their perceived common enemy. The collapse of the USSR has fundamentally altered the balance of forces internationally. America's subsequent claim to be the world's sole super-power, based upon its presently undeniable military advantage, increasingly brings it into conflict with its erstwhile allies. It is not possible to play the role of the world's “policeman” without laying down the law. And it is not just alleged criminals who may find they get their heads tapped with the American night-stick.

Le Soir also writes, “In the same way, he [Michel] wonders if the Balkans are not also a strategic stake for the United States in order to delay a larger Europe.”

At this time, it is somewhat easier for the Belgian Foreign Minister to express the real concerns of the European powers. But what Michel is saying openly in Brussels, is being talked about behind closed doors in London, Paris and Berlin. Mark Eyskens, a former Belgian Prime Minister, summed up the central problem confronting the European Union several years ago with the words: “*L'Europe est un géant économique, un nain politique et, pire encore, un ver de terre lorsqu'il s'agit d'élaborer une capacité de*

défense.” (Europe is an economic giant, a political dwarf, and, even worse, a worm until it concerns itself with elaborating a defence capability.)

European attempts to address this military imbalance are fraught with dangers. At home, the increase in defence spending required to provide a force that can rival “Uncle Sam” means the slashing of Europe’s still considerable welfare spending. Abroad, such a militaristic policy can assume a momentum of its own. The development of an independent European military capability implies the identification of specifically European interests.

Africa

This is the thinking behind Michel’s demand for Europe to play a more active role in Africa. He told *Le Soir*: “I am only in an exploratory stage, but my analysis of what is at stake in Africa is as follows... I think, and this does not have any neo-colonial or commercial connotations, that not just central Africa but all Africa must, at a certain point, become privileged partners of Europe on a geopolitical and world level. Europe may find it very beneficial to take more interest in Africa, as part of a vision of partnership based on human rights, democracy and economic development.

“In the end, a privileged partnership with Africa is a path that must be followed to assure the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of Europe.” As his model for closer European involvement in Africa, Michel cites the conditions imposed by the Western powers in the Balkans following the NATO war against Yugoslavia; “A significant element in my eyes is the partnership pact there, inspired by the stability pact in the Balkans”.

Nor should Belgium miss out in Europe’s intervention into Africa. Michel says it is necessary “to send some small signs of a renewed Belgian interest for what happens in central Africa.”

Belgium’s former African colony was the Congo Free State, more recently renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Civil war here has led to tens of thousands being killed and injured, and over half a million internally displaced people. After years of corrupt rule under the Western stooge Mobutu, the country’s wealth had been plundered. However, the concern of the Belgian political elite for the plight of

ordinary Congolese citizens was indeed small, it amounted to a paltry US\$0.94 million aid package.

A Belgian Foreign Ministry document notes that “the increasing globalisation of the economy opens up new prospects for the commercial expansion of our country and influences competition on the international markets, where Belgium wants to consolidate its position and enter new parts of the market.”

It is precisely this process of globalisation that is driving all the major (and minor) powers to seek new markets for their products and new sources of raw materials and cheaper labour. This increasingly takes the form of the former colonial powers renewing an interest in their lost possessions: most recently, Portugal in East Timor. But the open expression of such imperialist intentions is usually hidden behind the diplomatic double-speak of “democratisation” and “human rights”.

Africa contains some of the world’s greatest untapped natural resources. It is potentially a huge market for Western goods, and a source of cheap labour to rival South East Asia and Latin America. Its shores begin just across the narrow straits of the Mediterranean Sea. Without doubt, a new “scramble for Africa” is beginning to unfold. But as Michel’s remarks indicate, this scramble could once more become a crossroads where great power interests collide.



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