

Belgian government restructures armed forces and "restarts its African policy"

Richard Tyler
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At the end of May, the Belgian cabinet agreed to a significant restructuring of the country's armed forces. According to industry experts from *Jane's Defence* web site, this is intended "to enhance Belgium's ability to project forces capable of operating across the full spectrum of military operations".

Between 2000 and 2015 the government plans to spend \$5.9 billion, involving at least 24 major acquisition and modernisation programmes.

Jane's writes, "A major goal is to prepare joint service forces that are better equipped, trained and supported to operate within the context of NATO, the EU [European Union] and the UN on multinational operations."

A central part of the reorganisation and expenditure will be devoted to improving "Belgium's force projection capability". To this end, the air force is replacing its fleet of 11 Lockheed Martin C-130H Hercules with seven Airbus Military Company A400M, the same European-produced aircraft the British government recently agreed to purchase.

In early May, the Belgian government decided to pull out of the US Joint Strike Fighter programme, which would have provided a replacement for Belgium's F-16 fighters after 2015. The government has delayed a decision on an alternative, but may well decide to join with other EU members in purchasing the rival Euro-fighter.

On the ground, considerable funds will be spent transforming the army from dependency on tracked vehicles to a more rapidly deployable wheeled force. Enhancements will also be made to the Navy's ability to transport men and materiel with the acquisition of a large-capacity roll on/roll off vessel.

Savings achieved in personnel reductions will be channelled into the procurement projects. Defence

Minister Andre Flahaut said he understood the "concerns and reactions" the personnel reductions had created in the military, but stressed the need for modernisation within a "new European context".

Accompanying these developments, Belgian government representatives have made top-level visits to several African states, many of them former colonial possessions. In early April, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt headed a Belgian delegation of over 70 who visited Rwanda and Burundi. Speaking to journalists in Bujumbura, Burundi, he said the aim of this visit was to inaugurate a new approach in Belgium's Africa policy.

Later that month, Defence Minister Andre Flahaut flew in to Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). He held meetings with a number of DRC government representatives including Congolese Air Force Chief of Staff Gen Faustin Munene. Belgium has a long and bloody history in this African country, which was once the private property of the King of Belgium.

Flahaut's visit to Africa also took in stops in Benin, Libreville in Gabon and Windhoek, where he met his Namibian counterpart. One of the main stops on Flahaut's trip was South Africa, where he agreed to closer defence cooperation between the two countries. According to South African Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota, cooperation with Belgium was of particular importance given the possible participation of his country in a peace mission in the Great Lakes region. Lekota also underlined the central role that Belgium could play in the settlement of the conflict in the DRC.

Flahaut said, "If we came quickly to South Africa, it is because the Belgian government has decided to restart its African policy." The Belgian military attaché in Pretoria, Colonel Robert Laloux, has been active

during his three-year posting building up close links with the government agency responsible for purchasing military hardware, as well as with the country's arms manufacturers seeking joint ventures with other countries. "To penetrate the African arms market, it is necessary to come through South Africa," Colonel Laloux told *le Soir* newspaper.

Defence Minister Flahaut is so pleased with the good work of his Colonel that he plans to extend his assignment beyond three years and entrust him with joint Defence-Foreign Affairs missions. The Minister is considering re-deploying Belgium's score or so of military attachés, asking "is it necessary to have one in every European capital?" Instead they could be posted throughout Africa and Latin America where there are none at present.



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