

Belgian military plans to quintuple spending on weapons systems

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As NATO countries across Europe come together around the drive to increase military spending to 2 percent of their gross domestic product, Belgium is launching a major rearmament drive. As the Belgian army and state apparatus denounce the condition of the country's weapons systems and troops, the government is proposing a drastic solution.

Its 2018 military budget includes 4.7 times more so-called engagement credits—that is, cash to be paid on delivery and that therefore does not appear in normal operating budgets—than the 2017 budget. Altogether, this involves spending €9.2 billion (\$US11.3 billion) on military equipment between 2020 and 2030.

Officially, the goal is to reestablish the “credibility” of the Belgian army. According to the New Year speech by Chief of Defense General Marc Compernelo at the Royal Army Museum, the Belgian army has suffered from measures that “can be summarized as using budgetary restrictions.” He proposed to “modernize and invest to ensure key missions but also to save our core business while taking into account of demographic changes.”

In fact, spending increases have already been underway for several years. In 2014, the NATO member states agreed on an “end to cuts to defense spending.” This was officially inscribed in the government coalition pact agreed that same year between Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), the Reform Movement (MR, right-wing Francophones), the right-wing separatist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Open Vld (the Flemish free-marketeters) after elections that produced a hung parliament.

The coalition formed under Prime Minister Charles Michel launched a brutal austerity program, including 20 percent cuts in cultural and scientific budgets, cuts to the judicial system, privatizations, tax cuts for

business, pension cuts for the unemployed, the deregulation of overtime and of part-time work. At the same time, the government boasted that it would “give back to the army the means it needs to do its missions.”

In 2015, the Belgian parliament adopted a resolution calling for a “balanced” military force, at which point Defense Minister Steven Vandeput (N-VA) said that “spending more will be inevitable.” In 2016, a new resolution accepted the NATO military spending increase agenda laid out at the Warsaw summit. In 2017, the military planning law prepared a major increase in spending, and in December 2017, Belgium and 25 other EU countries signed the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the embryonic European army proposed by Berlin and Paris.

The technical plans of the Belgian government, as of its counterparts in other imperialist countries, show that it is preparing for aggressive wars, not for a more “credible” defensive posture.

The Motorized Capacity (CAMO) program, the main land army program, is designed to allow the Median Brigade, the Belgian army's principal land unit, to “profoundly modify its doctrine, training and logistics.” This program entails buying 60 armored Jaguar combat and reconnaissance vehicles, and 417 multi-role Griffon armored vehicles. This program is being closely coordinated with the French “Scorpion” rearmament program, launched in 2013 under the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande.

This program, which will benefit Renault Trucks Defense, Thales and Nexter, aims to “establish a partnership based on identical French and Belgian combat vehicles,” declared the Defense Ministry when the CAMO program was adopted and €1.1 billion spent on it by the Belgian government in June 2017. The

government also stated at the time that the Belgian companies CMI, Herstal, and Thales-Belgium could thus obtain contracts in exchange for Belgium's decision to join the program. France for its part is buying 1,668 Griffon and 248 Jaguar vehicles as part of this program.

This is supposed to allow the forces of the two countries to coordinate even more closely on the battlefield.

Other programs involved entail improving "Special Operations Forces" for use in operations abroad, with 200 transport vehicles for light troops. Already in 2016, Belgium had ordered some 108 Fox rapid-reaction vehicles with the British company Jankel.

Brussels is also planning to acquire some 34 fighter jets starting in 2023 in a common program with the Netherlands to develop frigates and warships, mines, drones and a complete redesign of computer systems for the intelligence services. There is also a plan for a joint military satellite program with France.

The plan is not, however, only to mount imperialist wars in former colonial countries. The European Union is engaged in a massive rearmament program in anticipation of growing international conflicts as the world has not seen since World War II. This emerged notably in French President Emmanuel Macron's statement last year that "we have entered into an era in international relations where war is again a possible horizon of politics."

Many countries are launching "civic service" programs that are thinly disguised calls for a return to the draft. Macron wants to establish a universal military service, and Sweden has already introduced obligatory military service that was canceled in 2010. Above all, in 2014, Berlin announced that it would re-militarize its foreign policy.

In remarks flowing directly from those of Macron, the Egmont Institute, an official Belgian think tank funded by among others the country's Foreign Ministry, published a recent report titled "Belgian Defense in 2018: Regeneration Time?"

It declared, "The present and future force structure is based on a logic of peacetime, whereas the possibility of major conflict on the European continent is perhaps still remote, but surely no longer inconceivable. The deepest challenge for Belgian defense planners relates to the question of how to respond to future

contingencies that could be vastly more challenging in operational terms than the experience of recent decades."

It also proposes to plan interventions inside Belgium itself. The report declares, "The 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels have made clear that security problems do not necessarily remain 'far away' problems."

In fact, what the recent terror attacks in Europe have shown is that the attackers were all in one or another way linked to the intelligence services, who protected the Islamist networks they were a part of in order to use them for their brutal war for regime change in Syria. They were in fact fighting for NATO before they turned to organizing horrific terror attacks across the continent.

The central problem facing the Belgian army, and the ruling classes of all the NATO countries, is the lack of enthusiasm in the population, or in fact its deep opposition, toward war. The report is aware that youth do not want to be killed in overseas conflicts. It therefore notes cynically that "paying constant attention to recruiting a far higher number of young men and young women for flexible and attractive careers will therefore be the key for the future, and particularly once the economic situation gets worse."



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