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Back to the Future: Applying Cold War Wisdom to Modern Belgian Defence

Bernard Siman

Dust off the Cold War files that are lying under mounds of dust in the archives of our European Defence chancelleries. Bring back willing retired officers to share their knowledge of how things were done over 45 years of a solid and ultimately successful defence posture. There is bound to be a wealth of instructive and useful structures, tools, experiences and models, tested to their limit and refined to near perfection over the period of the Cold War between 1945 to the early 1990s. They can be adapted to suit the need for a rapid build-up of both defence capabilities as well as resilience.

BELGIUM'S OBLIGATIONS IN NATO: COLD WAR LESSONS IN BRIGADES' FORMATIONS

As the new Belgian government undergoes the trials and tribulation of horse-trading to form a new cabinet, following the recent general election, it behoves all politicians to make the defence of the realm a priority, using the wealth of information contained in the experiences of the Cold War. Do the negotiating politicians need more of a prompt than the NATO summit currently held in Washington (2024), celebrating the 75th anniversary of the most successful defence alliance in history, that coincided with the start of the negotiation.

For starters, NATO itself has re-adopted the doctrine of territorial defence, following the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the Madrid summit in June 2022, Belgium signed up to the NATO New Force Model (NFM). NFM aims to create a pool of 300,000 troops in a high state

of readiness and to pre-assign them to specific defence plans. The NFM has three delivery tiers: Tier 1 requires 100,000 troops to be available in 10 days. Tier 2 requires 200,000 within 10-30 days. Tier 3 provides for at least 500,000 troops in one-six months. Belgium will have to fulfil its obligations under the NFM, which most probably will require new brigade formations. It logically follows that there must be useful Cold War military experiences that can be adapted to current challenges.

"IF IT IS POSSIBLE, THEN IT IS PLAUSIBLE": WE MUST PLAN FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF WAR

From a Strategic Foresight perspective, "if it is possible then it is plausible". The new Swedish National Security Strategy to 2030 explicitly states that the possibility of armed attack by Russia against Sweden or a NATO ally cannot be ruled out. Departing British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, stated that the Alliance is facing the real possibility of a major global conflict within five years unless it rearms and builds resilience. The Alliance is estimated to need 25-30 extra brigades. The policy forecasting tools of apportioning scenario percentages to different possible outcomes, and focusing on the scenario that scores the highest percentage (as our political systems have become accustomed to doing), do not work in the current hostile military and geopolitical environment. They are redundant and are fundamentally at odds with Strategic Foresight. Strategic foresight exercises, in the proper technical sense, are the only viable alternative. They do not provide percentages or gaze into crystal balls. Rather, they explore different futures, enabling policy makers to understand the range of possible outcomes so that they can act now to induce

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the most optimal future desired. In the case of defence, preparing for the possibility of war as a plausible future outcome is necessary and prudent. War in Europe is now a fact. It can expand. The distance between Brussels and Kiev is under 2000KM. Belgium is committed to defending NATO's territory with Belgian soldiers currently stationed on Russia's borders in the Baltics. An expanded war on the European Continent is a plausible scenario. This possibility is not going away any time soon as the European security architecture and tenets were upended and are being re-defined along lines that lack the certainties of the Cold War: Two blocks, institutionally minded, and able to have an understanding of each other's strategic lexicons to avoid unintended disasters and miscalculations. These were essentially the building blocks in enhancing certainty, reducing volatility and the attendant possibility of miscalculation leading to kinetic outcomes. We do not have many of these components of certainty currently. We live in a volatile, uncertain, complex, asymmetric, and turbulent geopolitical and security environment. Belgium will have to be able to defend itself, including its skies, territorial waters, land and cyber domains. It was ready in the Cold War. It should be ready again.

AIR DEFENCE MUST BE A TOP PRIORITY

The (lack of) comprehensive air defence coverage must be top of the agenda. This is particularly important given Belgium's economic reliance on geographically concentrated centres of logistics, distribution, economic activity and innovation, multilateral political activity and wealth creation. Our political system is discussing and negotiating the usual elements of domestic balances of interest: social welfare rights and contributions, taxation and its burden, allocation of revenue, transfers of resources between the regions, constitutional arrangements, allocation of positions across the institutions, and so on. Who is discussing air defence? Where are the allocations for air defence? Can any of those domestic issues be isolated, politically as well as from a budgetary perspective, from a scenario in which Belgium may itself become a target, should it be called upon to play its role in the defence of European and NATO territories.

ELECTRO-MAGNETIC THREATS TO OUR WAY OF LIFE, PRIVATE INDUSTRY, AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The electro-magnetic area of operations needs special attention, particularly as they pertain to satellite-related services and Hybrid Threats. The recent jamming of GPS geolocation services over the Baltics resulted in threats to the safety of civil aviation. In addition to military operations, many key civilian infrastructure backbone services, such as financial transactions, depend on satellite-provided services, including accurate time keeping. If we can't ensure secure satellite connectivity, many of the areas upon which the political parties are negotiating currently (taxation, social insurance etc) will simply not function.

One of the solutions is Quantum technology (e.g. Quantum sensing). However, to deploy this technology economically and widely (thus avoiding GPS jamming for example), requires commissioning the innovative cutting edge private sector. These are mainly small and medium size companies that need the support of the state to test, at scale, the current available and proven technology. There must be in the Cold War files systems to enable such funding and testing without antagonising legacy providers (ergo the usual roaster of large technology and defence vendors). The same applies for areas such as Quantum cryptography. There must also be in the files tools to enable our universities to continue to cooperate and be open to research collaboration, without undermining National security in these critical areas. This means that the political system will have to provide also for new funding mechanisms to replace lost research revenue from adversary sources. We did that in the Cold War; we must be able to do it again.

MOBILISATION, LOGISTICS FACILITIES, COMMANDING INFRASTRUCTURE

Expanding the size of the armed forces, in terms of manpower, is another area that can benefit from a combination of studying those long-forgotten models of mobilisation and recruitment. This can be combined with imaginative solutions to adapt to the society and

the economy as it evolved since the 1990s. The political parties, sitting around the negotiating table, must come up with commitments, plans and resources for mobilisation, should the need arise. This is not just about manpower, but also logistics, real estate and physical facilities for storage, training, housing, medical care, ballistics testing and so on, as well as the attendant necessary social provisions, as well as having the personnel to train recruits. Anticipating possible bottle necks, such as security clearance, must be resolved by beefing up the clearance capacity to match the changes in society that have occurred since the end of the Cold War. Imaginative and flexible solutions for the creation of a wider, and more flexible, territorial Reserve force can also potentially benefit from ideas and structures in those dusty long forgotten Cold War files. And what about plans to command privately-owned infrastructure for military purposes? And how will that fit with existing contracts, such as with private cyber security providers and infrastructure owners? And what about plans to deal with the need to expropriate property for national defence purposes? And will critical infrastructure sites be declared military facilities, and if so, what are the plans to deal with current private security providers? Hand me the Cold War files, please.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS A FORGOTTEN ART: NEITHER PR NOR COMMUNICATIONS

Strategic Communications was, by and large, successful during the Cold War, not only against our adversary, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, but also towards our own population. There must be in the old Cold War files ideas worthy of adopting. The nature of society has changed. Technology, and the way in which media, news and information are consumed, have fundamentally changed over the last 30 years. But the basics of Strategic Communications have not- to proactively engage with stakeholders so as to convince them of one's narrative. The narratives during the Cold War were very clear, and the delivery mechanisms were generally effective. Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since the emergence of the dominant social media (initially Facebook and Instagram from 2010 onwards), the fundamentals of how information is consumed have

changed, as has the cognitive, psychological and social contexts. Disinformation, that always existed, has been turbo charged through cyber and Artificial Intelligence. However, the basics of "StratComm" remain valid today. Examining the corner stones on which our Strategic Communications effort was built during the Cold War is bound to yield lessons that can be adapted to the current security and defence environment, including how to enhance the voluntary recruitment efforts domestically into the armed forces.

CONCLUSION

These areas are only examples, rather than a comprehensive list, to help illustrate the urgent need for the political apparatus to include dusting off old Cold War practices, tools and experiences, in their discussions for the formation of the new government, and to allocate the necessary resources to meet Belgium's NATO obligations. Failing to do so may mean that Belgium will not be match-fit should the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine expand to engulf NATO in its fire. Arguably, by the time we started preparing for war in 1909 and 1936 it was already too late. The first duty of any government is not how far to tinker with social insurance. It is to defend the territorial integrity of the country and to ensure the security of its citizens. The time to act is now because hope is not a strategy and concern is not a policy. Defence must move decisively to the top of the agenda of the new government.

Bernard Siman, O.B.E., is a Senior Associate Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont Institute.

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