



An EU Survey on Whole-of-Government Approaches to External Conflict and Crisis

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# Belgium Report

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## 1 | Introduction

Today's world has become increasingly complex, and challenges can be political, military, social, environmental, economic or security related. In facing such a situation, governments are more and more obliged to develop means to make their foreign policies more efficient. Belgium is a complex institutional country in which political responsibilities are spread across the federal, regional and community levels. Furthermore, as elsewhere, the Belgian political system is one of coalition governments in which the governing parties very often have their own political agendas.

For decades, the Belgian government has been confronted with external conflicts and crises. Belgium's ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence as well as the Development Cooperation Directorate of the former regularly cooperate as part of a so-called '3D' (defence-development-diplomacy) approach. Since the Ministry of Justice (law) and the Ministry of the Interior (order) are sometimes also involved, a so-called '3DLO' concept has been elaborated.

These federal bodies have traditionally worked together well despite sometimes have conflicting national agendas. However, there was an acknowledgement that there was a need for aligning policy options and instruments spread across the different levels of government. At present, Belgium is formulating a so-called 'Comprehensive Approach' that takes inspiration from a number of instruments embodying a whole-of-government approach (WGA) (as discussed in greater detail below). In 2017, Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a

Strategy Note on a Comprehensive Approach, which determines a framework agreed at the inter-ministerial (or inter-departmental) level with the aim of “jointly identifying, where possible, overarching priorities and increasing the coherence and effectiveness of [Belgian] foreign policy” (Kingdom of Belgium 2017: 2). The note also stresses that the strategy is meant to be “a framework and methodology for foreign policy in the broadest sense” as well as “a working method and not an end in itself” (ibid.) It was approved by the Council of Ministers on 20 July 2017.

## 2 | What policies have been developed to further policy coherence?

The Strategy Note discussed above is binding for the federal government and contains general guidelines for implementation. In contrast, governments at the regional and community levels are not obliged to step in, though they may do so if they wish. A comprehensive approach can be applied in any region, country or sub-national area. However, the most probable regions where Belgium can be involved are the African Great Lakes region (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda), sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Its scope of implementation is system-wide, covering military interventions, situations where defence and diplomacy are the key elements, situations in which humanitarian issues are the key elements, and situations in which the full range of actors is needed to help fragile states to recover: defence, diplomacy, development cooperation, law and order, economic and trade incentives. Although the Comprehensive Approach concept can be implemented in any possible field of action, it mainly favours the 3D (diplomacy-development-defence) dimension.

The European Union Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy has been one of the major sources of inspiration to help Belgium formulate its Comprehensive Approach. Other WGA-oriented instruments that enjoyed Belgium support and helped to inspire Belgium's Comprehensive Approach were the EU's (amended) Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the European Commission's Joint Communication on Security Reform, and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Belgium had urged the European Union to adopt a comprehensive approach when it comes to its external actions. Indeed, as one of the founding members of the European Union, Belgium has always been committed to being a reliable partner and to strengthening the EU's external-action capabilities. It sees the European Union Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy as being hugely important in the context of the internal-external nexus. Belgian diplomats and military officials, acting in the various arenas of the European Union (e.g. the Political and Security Committee, the European Union Military Committee and the Political-Military Group) have been very active in supporting the development of the European Union's Global Strategy. However, it should be noted that, in the last decade, Belgium did not launch any special comprehensive approach initiative within the EU framework.

Belgium is also a solid member of the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Coordination and cooperation with these international institutions take place through the Belgian permanent representations to them. Belgium is also a solid member of the Peacebuilding Commission of the United Nations, and it believes that the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a comprehensive framework within which any national comprehensive approach

should evolve and develop. Furthermore, Belgium sees the United Nations' focus on preventive diplomacy, crisis management and the defence of human rights as extremely important based on the belief that these matters are better addressed in a coordinated and comprehensive manner.

As one of the founding members of NATO, Belgium also plays an important role in supporting crisis-management bodies. Belgium considers it correct for NATO to deploy its military forces at the conflict stage, and that this takes place within a larger strategic and diplomatic framework in which civil comprehensive-approach actors play a major role in a post-military phase. It should also be noted that Belgian efforts have led to a significant evolution of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC). ODA criteria were clarified and extended, such as ones related to passing on the costs of certain military expenditures, deploying military personnel or military equipment in certain international-development contexts, and providing humanitarian aid.

As regards Belgium's Comprehensive Approach, it is crucial for a task force to assess the opportunities offered by the OECD guidelines in this area. With regard to the support that Belgian foreign policy has provided to international WGA policies, remarkable work has been done by Belgian diplomats, who have been constantly involved in developing and influencing the WGA policies of the UN, NATO, the OECD-DAC and the OSCE. At present, as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (2018–2020), Belgium will continue to “make an effort to reinforce the central role of the United Nations to promote peace and security in the world” (Kingdom of Belgium n.d.).

At the federal government level, the Strategy Note stipulates that each department (as the ministries are called) always take foreign policy as an explicit starting point and articulate its own role and contribution to it. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, weekly meetings are held with the prime minister and representatives from all relevant ministries (defence, development cooperation, etc). In foreign locations in which Belgium has specific interests, the ambassador meets regularly with his or her attaches (political, economic and commercial, defence, development) and consular section. The Interdepartmental Commission on Policy Coherence for Development (ICPCD) seeks to focus on security, migration, climate and trade. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intra-departmental coordination meetings involving the relevant directorates are held to achieve maximum coherence of policies related to external conflicts and crises as well as to trade and development cooperation. Within the Ministry of Defence, formal coordination take place on a daily basis under the lead of the chief of defence. Within other departments, informal coordination mechanisms do exist, but only on a case-by-case basis.

At the federal parliamentary level, when needed, the Senate Commission for External Affairs and the Chamber of Representatives Commission for Defence can work together as a joint commission. A special commission dealing with the follow-up of foreign missions meets regularly. As regards coordination between the executive and parliament, it is important to highlight the fact that the minister of foreign affairs is obliged to meet with the Senate Commission for External Affairs on a regular basis, and that the minister of defence is obliged to meet with the Chamber of Representatives Commission for Defence on the same basis.

Belgium's Ministry of Development Cooperation meets its objectives through various partnerships. Civil society actors (e.g. NGOs and universities) are privileged partners in these efforts. In Belgium's view, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) must serve to foster internal cohesion within the European Union and as an influential multiplier on the international stage. In the areas of peace and security, the ministry's objectives are realised through concrete actions related to conflict prevention, crisis management, peacebuilding and peace-enforcing. According to the Strategy Note, Belgian's eventual Comprehensive Approach will need to "connect with" the European Union External Action Service's Prevention of Conflict, Rule of Law/Security-Sector Reform, Integrated Approach, Stabilisation and Mediation (EEAS-PRISM) directorate, a new part of the EU's diplomatic structure (Kingdom of Belgium 2017: 11; see pp. 23–24, which discuss how PRISM was integrated into the new Directorate ISP in March 2019). What's more, the Comprehensive Approach should "be inspired by/absorbed into EU positions and strategies, with a view to policy coherence" (ibid.).

### 3 | Who are the main actors involved in cooperating in a WGA?

Once adopted, Belgium's Comprehensive Approach will be steered and monitored by three entities: a diplomatic mission relevant for the chosen region or issue, a steering group, and a task force. The role of the diplomatic mission will be to establish a consultation platform with the Belgian authorities in the country to serve two functions. First, it will aim to identify and optimise the upstream flow of available information from the field and to thereby participate in the early warning system. Second, it will serve to aid the downstream flow of information to the field for implementation and monitoring.

At the political-strategic level, the steering group – chaired by a representative of the Foreign Affairs Direction Committee and attended by representatives of the federal departments – will manage the Comprehensive Approach. In doing so, it will be responsible for orienting Comprehensive Approach activities and prioritising themes and countries as well as for periodically reviewing and adapting the Comprehensive Approach. Other participating departments will also provide input. For example, the Military Intelligence Service of the Ministry of Defence will supply relevant strategic and operational intelligence to the steering group.

Once the goals of a specific Comprehensive Approach effort have been defined by the steering group, a dedicated Comprehensive Approach task force will be set up on an ad hoc basis. This task force will be chaired by the director of the Geographical Directorate (DGB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or by another director with expertise in the particular issue at hand. However, if the country or theme concerns a partner country in development-cooperation efforts, the task force will be co-chaired by the director of the DGB and the director of the Directorate-general for Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD). Co-chairmanship may also be used when the country or issue involved plays a major role for another department (e.g. defence). The task force is responsible for implementing the Comprehensive Approach. It will be supplied with tactical intelligence and information from the Military Intelligence Service or the relevant officials in the field, and it will report to the steering group.

The system just described will be a flexible and pragmatic way to balance the potentially diverging interests of various participants. Indeed, creating a dedicated task force is the best way to cope with diverse cooperation levels, which may gradually become more integrated. In addition to promoting better information exchange, they can also determine whether synergies with external actors (e.g. the EU, the UN, NATO, the OSCE or regional organisations) are possible. Moreover, they can play a key role in developing common analyses and exploring ways to foster dialogue with partners with a shared agenda. The task force will also be able to work on joint planning, financing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of joint projects and programmes.

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Directorate-general Coordination and European Affairs (DGE) is responsible for preparing, defining, representing, managing and following Belgium's European policy. The DGE and the Directorate-general for Multilateral Affairs and Globalisation (DGM) are both responsible for following the EU's external policy in its entirety. At the European level, the DGE is in contact with foreign partners. At the national level, it liaises with the technical departments; the French-, Dutch- and German-speaking communities; and the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital regions. Furthermore, it helps to shape public opinions about the country's EU policies, including, of course, those involving external actions.

Furthermore, the DGE plays a key role in facilitating policy coherence within the European Union framework. The EU External Relations Directorate of the DGM follows the European Union's external relations, while its Security Policy Directorate is responsible for managing, promoting, developing and coordinating European security and defence policy. It is also in charge of international security in the broader sense and, in this role, participates in all aspects of the decision-making process within international organisations, such as NATO and the OSCE. On the other hand, the United Nations Directorate is responsible for promoting and developing global international cooperation within the framework of the United Nations. This organisation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs already existed before the Strategy Note on a Comprehensive Approach was formulated. As past experiences shaped this structure, its efficiency and quality may be considered fully optimised.

Belgian military advisers are present at the level of the permanent representations to the UN, NATO, the EU and the OSCE. Moreover, a diplomat seconded to the Ministry of Defence may represent the department at the level of the steering group together with the chief of staff. Under the chief of staff, the Belgian Armed Forces General Staff has an assistant chief of staff (ACOS) responsible for strategic issues, an ACOS responsible for operations, and an ACOS responsible for intelligence. The three departments are those that could be involved in a Comprehensive Approach. The Strategy Note also contains a series of rather generic guidelines for the other federal departments.

#### **4 | How does your country operationalise a WGA?**

In terms of administrative structures and policies in place to operationalise Belgium's eventual Comprehensive Approach, no specific human resources policy exists yet to support its implementation except for some positions on the steering group discussed above. It would be highly advisable for human resources officials in each department concerned to designate in

advance competent and available personnel to be ready to join potential task forces. As human resources are very limited and expensive, the departments will probably not provide the needed number or quality of personnel. Information or intelligence produced by assets of the Ministry of Defence (military intelligence) or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (diplomatic missions) are already shared among the departments that are supposed to be most intimately involved in a comprehensive approach. But this is not necessarily the case with information that is generated within other departments.

In terms of early warning, there is no joint integrated cell at the governmental level that could provide any strategic resources to collect, analyse and exploit strategic information. Of course, creating such a cell would pose an issue of subordination, unless it were attached to the Prime Minister's Office. A second issue would be convincing (or even forcing) departments with relevant personnel to second them to the cell, as they could lose scarce personnel resources in the process.

However, the most important item contributing to WGA operationalisation is the budget. The Strategy Note does not foresee any joint integrated budget if a comprehensive approach is about to be operationalised, and the needed budget will apparently be provided by the participating departments themselves. This would clearly oblige federal departments (and possibly even departments at the regional or community levels) to put aside a certain budget line in their annual budget to cope with any potential operationalisation of a comprehensive approach. As in most countries, budgetary resources are scarce in Belgium, and the temptation to use them for core business activities within each department is very high. Indeed, it is precisely here that one can see what one of the most problematic issues will be, and only time will tell whether the federal government decides to provide a common budget to a specific comprehensive approach after the first experience of operationalising the concept. In any case, efforts should be made to use a joint integrated budget to support a comprehensive approach, as this will be key for avoiding any confrontations with departments that refuse to cooperate in WGA undertakings due to a lack of budgetary resources.

In terms of strategic communication, the Strategy Note highlights the importance of internal and external communication for gaining sufficient consensus among departments and for fostering the desired level of motivation. The plan is to let the communication services within each department coordinate with its counterparts in other departments. If task forces involve several departments, the steering group will play the role of clearinghouse for press material with the help of the press and communication department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Regarding the development of a joint lessons learned process, the Strategy Note provides no clear guidance, so it would presumably be the responsibility of the steering group. Of course, a joint lessons learned process can be pre-defined, but it will only be exercised once initial experiences have been made. The effectiveness and quality of the leadership will mainly depend on the political will to designate the right people within the steering group and task force(s).

Another important enabler could be the development of a new working culture that differs from the traditional siloed one. Apart from the usual cooperation between the ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, which has been established and reinforced by jointly participating in many missions and operations, the other departments have developed a few coordinating

processes especially dedicated to fostering a comprehensive approach to conflicts and crises. For example, since 2006, Belgium's Royal High Institute for Defence and the Royal Institute for International Relations (AKA the Egmont Institute) have been organising an annual course on security and defence issues that brings together, inter alia, senior Belgian personnel from the ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, the Interior and Migration, the police and customs forces, the defence industry and NGOs active in development- or security-related matters. In addition to up-to-date and necessary knowledge on security and defence issues, this course also provides a forum for exchanging ideas on these fields and thereby creates an interesting network and common culture.

## 5 | Conclusions

It is, of course, very difficult to assess whether Belgium's future Comprehensive Approach concept will be successful or not. This will only be possible after the Comprehensive Approach has been operationalised and lessons learned have been identified. Nevertheless, we can identify four main factors that might aid in its success. First, the fact that there already is a document approved by the federal government sends a strong and clear message to various government bodies in Belgium as well as to the outside world – namely, that Belgium has decided that a comprehensive approach to conflicts and crises is the best way to proceed. Second, there is an obvious multiplying factor resulting from the cooperation between the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. Indeed, these two traditional participants already have a long history of working together in addition to personnel of a very high quality and with much experience in collaborating with others. What's more, although both departments will surely play major roles in Comprehensive Approach processes, the leading role will always be played – and rightly so – by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Third, the fact that Belgium supported the Integrated Approach developed by the European Union contributes to better global coherence with activities of not only the European Union External Action Service, but also with those of the UN, NATO, the OSCE, the OECD and regional organisations. Fourth, the structures set in place to steer (steering group) and monitor (task force) the WGA process are light, flexible and pragmatic.

However, as discussed in more detail above, some aspects of the concept could unfortunately prevent it from achieving its full potential. First, the lack of a joint integrated budget and a well-defined joint human resources policy will likely cause some difficulties when it comes to operationalising the Comprehensive Approach. Second, if Belgium has to implement two operations at the same time, it could result in added complications. Third, operationalising the Comprehensive Approach could be made harder owing to the 'constitutional lasagne', so to speak, of the country, as its three levels of government – federal, regional and communal – will not have the same coalition governments and will most likely prioritise their own needs, which could make them reluctant to participate in joint efforts. But, as always, we will simply have to wait and see.

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