

Past, Present, and Beyond: Belgian Perspectives on Irregular Warfare

Description

This IWI Project Europe Fireside Chat takes a closer look at Belgium's experiences and perspectives on Irregular Warfare. We do so by inviting two key figures within the Belgian Special Operations Forces community: the Director of the Belgian Special Forces Command (Colonel Wim Denolf) and the Commander of the Belgian Special Operations Regiment (Colonel Raphael Bechet). The objective of this fireside chat is twofold. First, we want to obtain a deeper understanding of how Belgium closely collaborates with other European Special Operations Forces to oppose irregular threats. This is done by both looking at the origins of BEL SOF and by discussing some of the recent missions Belgium conducted with both European as US partners. Second, this episode provides a critical reflection on how the Belgian Special Forces community conceives its potential roles within the contemporary security landscape.

The conversation starts by exploring how the Belgium Special Forces capability originated during the Second World War, following the establishment of a Belgian Special Air Service Squadron on the one side and the commandos on the other side. These different types of units, and their respective roles, continue to exist today in the different units of the Belgian Special Operations Regiment. The historical operational collaborations with our neighboring (the Netherlands and the French) European countries exist until today, as demonstrated for example by Belgium's participation to the Operation Valiant Phoenix (Iraq) and the fight against Islamic State. As explained by both Colonel Denolf and Colonel Bechet, Belgium contributed by providing training and by conducting operations alongside US, Dutch and French partners.

Belgium's unique characteristics as being a facilitator and being accustomed to work in a multilateral coalition are further demonstrated by the recent Security Force Assistance mission "Operation New Nero" in Niger. In this mission, Belgium took a leading role in streamlining the training activities conducted by a broad range of Western partner nations. This mission furthermore stands out by the efforts to integrate other Belgian interdepartmental partners (e.g. Foreign Affairs and development aid) and the need to thoroughly examine the needs and grievances of the local population by means of the "Deep Development Capacity" (a capability specifically established to study the human domain by engaging with the local population). Both speakers also reflect on the possible lessons identified of this mission, as we unfortunately witnessed over the last years a wave of

coups throughout the Sahel, resulting in a decreasing legitimacy of Western Partner Nations and an associated increased presence and influence of other international players, such as the Russian PMCs. These lessons include, among others, the imperative to better understand the expectations of local populations and the security forces we support, as well as the growing significance of Information Warfare, which has been effectively employed by competing actors.

In terms of the current challenges, we discussed Belgium's contemporary threat perspective, following the return of high intensity conflict on the European continent and the roles reserved for its Special Operations Forces. Following this return of peer-to-peer competition, BEL SOF is switching from a "supported" to a more "supporting" role. This "back to the future" dynamic calls for a renewed emphasis on historical mission sets, now executed with the support of advanced technological capabilities. This shift is already evident in the training activities of the Belgian Special Operations Regiment, which now places greater emphasis on Special Reconnaissance (under degraded communications conditions), Low Visibility training and Military Assistance in a resistance network setting. The real challenge hereby lies in transferring the historical know-how from the Regiment's more experienced members. Additionally, it is crucial to preserve and continue to integrate the knowledge and lessons acquired over the past two decades of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. This is especially important given the current security developments in the Sahel and the Middle East, where terrorist armed groups continue to expand their activities and where all ingredients are present for a long-term degradation of the security situation. Failure to stabilize these regions, which are marked by rising birth rates and growing poverty, could lead to significant challenges for Europe in the long term. Thus, we are confronted not only with a peer-to-peer challenge posed by Russia, but also with a destabilizing situation at Europe's southern borders both unfolding at an unprecedented pace.

To conclude, both Colonels provided an overview of the unique attributes (knowledge, historical experience) Belgium can offer to the alliance in the contemporary security landscape. This includes our unique cultural characteristics, and the fact that Belgium constitutes a small country well-known for its diplomatic skills, and its humbleness to strive to understand other cultures across the world. These competencies are sustained through a rigorous, high-standard education system implemented across all ranks, fostering a culture in which high-potential soldiers are encouraged to assume greater responsibilities. Furthermore, the Belgian military (particularly the Special Operations Regiment) distinguishes itself through its multilingual proficiency in French, English, and Dutch, which significantly enhances its ability to operate effectively within multilateral coalitions. Finally, we carry a distinctive historical legacy shaped by longstanding experiences and enduring relationships with countries in the Middle East and Africa, including Benin, Jordan, and others.

About the Guests:

The two guests interviewed are Colonel (GS) Wim Denolf and Colonel (GS) Raphael Bechet. Colonel Bechet is the current commander of the Belgian Special Operations Regiment, and is responsible for overseeing Belgium's special operations forces (SOF) capabilities. Colonel Denolf is the current Director of the Special Operations Command. In this role, he advises the Belgian Chief of Defence and the staff departments on SOF capabilities, in particular on their operational deployment. He also serves as the point of contact in the field of special operations for international and interdepartmental partners. Both Colonels have previously been commanding officers of the Belgian Special Forces Group, Belgium's Tier 1 unit.

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[Photo credit:](#) Belgian Special Forces patrol the airfield at Chièvres Air Base during the Storm Tide 24 multinational exercise on May 20, 2024. (Photo by Martin Detry, Belgian HQ Special Operations Regiment)

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