

The Future of the Benelux Defence Cooperation

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About the report

This report is based on input for a seminar on Benelux Defence Cooperation which took place on 9 April 2013 in Brussels. The seminar was jointly organised by the Egmont Institute and the Netherlands Institute for International Relations 'Clingendael'. Civilian and military representatives from the three Benelux countries and armed forces plus representatives from the Belgian Federal Parliament, the European Defence Agency, the EU Military Staff and several think tanks participated in the seminar.

Introduction

The close cooperation between the Belgian and Netherlands Navies with an integrated command, common training and maintenance facilities for frigates and mine hunters (Benesam) has existed for quite some time. It has been promoted as a model for other countries. In the Benelux Declaration of the three Ministers of Defence signed in Brussels in April 2012 Benesam was also mentioned as the example for broadening and deepening defence cooperation.

The growing gap between capability needs and available budgets was considered as the driving factor behind the Benelux Declaration. Ministers stated their common aim as “increasing military efficiency by bringing our forces together, sharing costs where possible and increasing the output of our operational capacities.” However, they also stated that autonomy for realising the national level of ambition had to be maintained.

The Declaration mentioned four overall areas for cooperation: logistic and maintenance; education and training; executing military tasks, procurement of equipment. Specific cases were identified like the NH-90 helicopter, air policing, common training for paras at one location and possibilities for sharing or specialising other education and training facilities. What is the progress so far in these areas? What are the lessons learned, the obstacles identified and what impact will they have on the way ahead? Furthermore, it is important to look at the transparency and openness to other partners as well as to the connection with capability improvement activities at the EU and NATO level. Finally, political steering remains of paramount importance, but what about the involvement of national parliaments of the three countries – a more or less neglected issue until now.

Progress and lessons learned

Governance

As always when creating new cooperation structures time and energy will have to be devoted to set-up the governance structures. The Benelux defence cooperation is governed by a Steering Group consisting of high defence officials. They monitor and direct the activities of twelve expert working groups dedicated to specific cooperation programmes. A joint Coordination Cell assists the working groups and the Steering Group on a daily basis. The Ministers of Defence have the overall political control. They meet when required. It took some time to create this structure with different levels, but it seems to be effective. Its success remains dependent on involvement and dedication of all relevant actors, from the political to the expert levels.

Sovereignty

The issue of sovereignty has repeatedly been a central theme in the discussions on deepening multinational defence cooperation, including in the Benelux. The question is often asked how to match increasing dependency on capacities of other countries with national autonomy on defence matters. The Belgian-Netherlands naval cooperation (Benesam) is already showing for more than a decade that capabilities can be kept by sharing sovereignty. Common facilities for education and training, for logistics and maintenance do not encroach upon national sovereignty in decision-making on deployments. Thus, the Benesam model is regarded by the Benelux countries as a proven case for deeper cooperation in other areas. It could equally serve as an example for other clusters. However, this does not imply that it is easy to realise deeper defence cooperation in new capability areas. Decisions on loosing nationally owned facilities and capacities are hard to take for all kinds of reasons, not in the last place for local socio-economic interests. It might be one of the reasons why more far-reaching ideas and proposals – such as collocation of transport and fighter aircraft – have moved into the background. The lack of progress in the NH-90 case – aiming at common maintenance and training as stated in the 2012 Declaration – is also showing that economic and industrial interests can delay deeper cooperation.

Projects

Most progress has been made in the area of education and training. The decision to have one para training school in the Benelux (Schaffen, Belgium) by the end of 2013 is the most tangible result so far. Training schedules have been synchronised (including for the 2014 EU Battlegroup rotation). An agreement has been reached to further increase the use of each other's military academies in a modular way, but specialisation (e.g. land-air officers education in Belgium and navy officers education in The Netherlands) has proven not to be possible in the near future. On air policing progress has been made. Quick Reaction Alert (national air space protection) will become a shared activity, with Belgium and The Netherlands on rotation taking care of the whole Benelux air space. To work together on the interception of renegades, the Steering Group is investigating the necessary legal provisions. Common military air traffic control is another area of early deliverables.

Challenges

Creating win-win situations – where all three countries gain from deeper defence cooperation – remains a challenge. In particular to close down a facility in country A and to use from then onwards the facility in country B or C needs some sort of 'compensation' in return. However,

this requires an overarching approach while so far Benelux defence cooperation is very much structured on a project-by-project basis. Regional distribution of facilities – within one of the Benelux countries – can also be an obstacle, in particular in Belgium. Language is not a problem at higher staff levels but it becomes an obstacle at lower levels of deeper cooperation. Social issues can also create problems, for example when people have to move to a completely different location for a longer time-frame.

In general, practice so far has shown that Benelux cooperation is easier when savings can be made. Quick wins in training, education and exercises have been realised, but even in this category more far-reaching proposals – combining schools and facilities – take more time than perhaps originally expected. Deeper cooperation becomes even more difficult when policies have to change and when financial investment is required for results in the longer term. More interests are at stake which will cause the decision-making process to slow down.

Future potential

Realising projects

The current package of projects already has a lot of potential to increase the cooperation between the three partners. Many of them are still in the feasibility or planning phase. First, they should be brought to maturity levels, based on the principle ‘the less problematic, the sooner to be realised’. This applies foremost to areas like specialisation in education and training facilities, to combining commands and to air policing. At the same time, work should continue on more difficult areas such as common training and maintenance for the NH-90 helicopter. On fighter aircraft the Netherlands is ahead of Belgium as The Hague will take a decision on the replacement of the F-16 before the end of 2013. But a Dutch decision may already open the door for deeper cooperation with regard to fighter aircraft, including the issue of possible collocation. The same is the case for transport aircraft in reverse order. Here Belgium and Luxembourg are ahead of the Netherlands. They have already decided to buy the A400M transport plane (first of ten aircraft to be delivered in 2019). Perhaps the Netherlands can join its two partners later on. Collocation of all Benelux transport aircraft at Melsbroek (Belgium) would then make a lot of sense.

Defence planning

In general, defence planning and programming has to move from the national to the international level. However, it is unlikely to succeed in the near future at the EU or NATO level for several reasons – one of them being that too many Member States are involved. Clusters like the Benelux offer better potential for early success. Thus, the three partners should explore potential, which in terms of aligning procurement plans has a better chance of success in the medium to long term because decisions on what to buy still have to be made. As we have seen in the F-16 replacement and transport aircraft examples acquisition in parallel time-frames is not always needed. The crucial issue is to procure the same platform. This is an important precondition for integration of training, maintenance and logistics. Therefore, the future replacement of the M-frigates and the mine hunters – exactly the same platforms operated by the Belgian and Dutch Navies – has to be fully planned together.

Deployments

There might also be potential for more combined deployments in the future. This is not a new area. For example, in the past Belgium and The Netherlands deployed a combined transport battalion to Bosnia and they have operated in combined Deployable Air Task Forces on several occasions. The anti-piracy Operation Atalanta of the Somalia coast offers an

opportunity for combining deployments of ships. The European Maritime Patrol Aircraft (EMPA) pool (with a German lead) could be another area for a Benelux contribution based on the MPA capacity for Operation Atalanta financed by Luxembourg.

Benelux Battlegroup

EU Battlegroups might be another area for closer Benelux cooperation. The three countries could harmonise their contribution to the ongoing discussions in the EU to increase the effectiveness of the EU Battlegroups and to review the issue of common funding. This could coincide with the Benelux Battlegroup planned for the first semester of 2014. For example the three partners could set an example how deployment requirements can be widened and that Battlegroups can be made more modular in their structure, allowing for different configurations tailor-made to particular deployment requirements. They could also make practical proposals on how to increase common funding available for readiness and deployment of EU Battlegroups.

Wider participation and relations

The Benelux cluster is one amongst many. This raises two questions: (i) is the Benelux cluster open to participation by other countries and (ii) how does the Benelux defence cooperation relate to other clusters? The Benelux partners do not consider their cooperation as a closed shop. They are open to participation of other countries, but (a) it should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and (b) such additional partners should only join when the Benelux countries have reached a level of maturity themselves in the project at hand. The German interest to participate in the common para training school is an example of this approach. There is nothing wrong with this practice, but it does raise the question of transparency and openness. Additional partners can only become interested when they have early information on Benelux projects. They too will have all kinds of considerations and interests that need to be taken into account before joining deeper defence cooperation. Therefore, the Benelux partners should be ready to start discussions with other partners who show serious interest to join a project as early as possible after they have taken a principle decision to bring the project to maturity. After all, more participants in a project will increase the potential for cost-sharing. It also helps to improve further interoperability and standardisation which remains essential for multinational deployments.

Equally, the Benelux countries do not consider their own cluster as exclusive. Belgium and Luxembourg continue their cooperation with France and with other partners. The Netherlands is also intensifying its cooperation with Germany. Also, the three Benelux countries recognise that maintaining and improving certain capabilities – e.g. for maritime surveillance, air-to-air refuelling, space - requires solutions on a larger scale such as in the European Defence Agency or in NATO programmes. However, it has already become tangible that three Benelux countries together are considered a more important partner in larger multinational projects than each of them individually. This can be regarded as an important side-effect of the Benelux defence cooperation.

Parliamentary cooperation

So far, Benelux defence cooperation mainly has been dealt with at the level of the ministries of defence and the armed forces. A wider political context is lacking. The formal Benelux cooperation – based on the 2008 renewed agreement signed by the three Prime-Ministers – excludes defence. There is no need to strive for its inclusion. Firstly, the political dimension is guaranteed by the involvement of the Ministers of Defence. Secondly, there are other possibilities to broaden the political scope through parliamentary cooperation. As the

Benelux cooperation on defence intensifies, all three parliaments need not only to stay informed on developments and progress made, but their involvement has to go further than that. Central to effective defence cooperation is the element of mutual trust. In order to deepen defence cooperation increasing dependencies have to be accepted. A closer working relationship between the countries' militaries is a given, but at the end of the day parliamentarians of all three countries have to give their support as well. The element of trust is even more important when cooperation becomes operational, when Belgian, Dutch and Luxembourg military have to work closely together in potentially non-benign environments. Sharing capacities then turns into sharing risk of life.

In order to foster this trust and to fully understand the consequences of deeper levels of cooperation, the Defence and possibly the Foreign Affairs Committees of the three parliaments should meet on a regular basis (for example once per year, rotating over the three countries). For practical reasons, there Benelux meetings could also be organised in the margins of other international parliamentary sessions such as the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for CFDP/CSDP which is composed of both EU national parliamentarians and Members of the European Parliament. A dedicated forum where Benelux parliamentarians would meet on security and defence is needed to widen political support and to create a broader basis of mutual understanding and trust.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The Benelux defence cooperation based on the April 2012 Ministerial Declaration is on track. It evolves evolutionary on a project basis but a clearer overall central direction is needed in order to connect all projects and to create win-win situations for all three partners.
2. Even deepening defence cooperation in a cluster of three countries which have cooperated successfully over a longer timeframe remains a challenge, in particular when financial investment and jobs are at stake. The days of quick wins are over. Now, the Benelux countries have to implement more far-reaching projects, from combining training and other facilities to common acquisition of equipment.
3. On fighter aircraft the Netherlands is ahead of Belgium as The Hague will take a decision on the replacement of the F-16 before the end of 2013. The same is the case for transport aircraft in reverse order. Belgium and Luxembourg are ahead of the Netherlands with the acquisition of the A400M transport plane. But in both cases there is scope for deeper cooperation Benesam-like, including collocation of aircraft.
4. The Benelux countries should start to harmonise their defence plans, in particular in view of future replacement programmes, including fighter aircraft, transport aircraft, frigates and mine hunters – as operating the same platform is essential for deepening defence cooperation (Benesam example).
5. The Benelux countries should also explore potential for more combined deployments, for example for the anti-piracy Operation Atalanta off the Somalia coast. The European Maritime Patrol Aircraft pool (with a German lead) could be another area for a Benelux contribution based on the MPA capacity for Operation Atalanta financed by Luxembourg.
6. The Benelux EU Battlegroup, planned for the first semester of 2014, should inspire the three countries to formulate a Benelux proposal for widening the EU concept of Battle groups through a more modular approach and to increase potential for common funding.
7. The Benelux partners should be ready to start discussions with other partners who show serious interest to join a project as soon as they have taken a principle decision to bring the project to maturity. More participants in a Benelux project will increase potential for

cost-sharing and will be beneficial to improving further interoperability and standardisation between more European countries.

8. Broadening political support for the Benelux defence cooperation is essential as dependencies will increase and mutual trust will become even more important. The three parliaments should become more involved. The Defence and possibly the Foreign Affairs Committees of the three parliaments should meet on a regular basis.