



Belgium's defence spending pivot

A multiple streams framework approach to understanding Belgium's
defence spending policy trend reversal

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Abstract

Defence spending has become a topic of interest for many countries since the Russian commitment to its attritional land war in Ukraine. This trend is not just limited to Europe; global military expenditure reached an all-time high in 2023¹. Belgium is no different in this, but it has a lot of catching up to do, seeing as it was the second-lowest defence spender among NATO members with 1,21 % of GDP. The promise of reaching 2 % by 2030 is therefore ambitious², considering Belgium's historic trend of cutting its defence spending. If Belgium succeeds in upping its spending to the promised targets, there will be enormous opportunities for the defence sector and the military, however, the question is how the policy has changed, and if these increases address the problems at hand.

The Multiple Streams Framework developed by John W. Kingdon³ provides a model to better understand how Belgium's defence spending policy has changed by dividing policy-making processes into three streams; the problem stream where problem formulations compete for attention, the policy stream where policy proposals get formulated, and the politics stream where policy decisions are made. According to MSF there exists a policy window when the problem, policy and politics stream converge. The intention of this research is to uncover the themes and people populating these streams to better understand how Belgium defence spending policy now projects a decade-long trend reversal. Findings from this study suggest that the multiple streams framework is applicable on the case of Belgium's defence spending pivot, in part due to the change of government and change in public opinion that set up the conditions for the policy window to open, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine likely to be the focusing event that allowed the political entrepreneur, Minister of Defence Ludivine Dedonder, to push through this ambitious increase in defence spending.

¹ *Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity* (2024) SIPRI. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity> (Accessed: 03 September 2025).

² Verstraete, W. and Haas, M. (2024) *No time to waste in rebuilding the Belgian Armed Forces*, Egmont Institute. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/no-time-to-waste-in-rebuilding-the-belgian-armed-forces/> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

³ Kingdon, J.W. (2014) *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

At the core of every state's defence capability are its resources that it can use. These resources come at a cost which like most governmental matters are part of a country's budget, specifically its defence budget. These defence budgets vary greatly depending on how large a country is, its population, how economically productive it is, but also the value of the currency, cost of production, and other individual indicators that make it so difficult to compare countries with each other when measuring efforts in that area of the budget. Simply put, one euro in Belgium might not take you as far as that same euro in Turkey, or one euro invested in a Gripen might not hold the same value as a euro invested in an F35. These are just some examples of the limitations of comparing country's defence spending as a percentage of their GDP, nevertheless, it is the prevalent way of measuring commitments by governments and international organisations including NATO, making it a reality. This reality in Belgium is problematic as its armed forces have undergone an almost systematic decrease in defence spending.

The Belgian Armed Forces were founded upon Belgium's independence in 1830, have been active in both World Wars and the Cold War, as well as in several peacekeeping operations since 1948 such as PKO's in Somalia, Rwanda, Lebanon and Sudan⁴. The BAF consist of five service branches; the land, air, naval, and medical components, completed by cyber command which was inaugurated in 2022. Moreover, Belgium in its rich tradition of diplomacy, serves as a centre for diplomatic relations as founders or original members of NATO, EU, UN as well as housing over 100 international organisations and over 300 diplomatic missions⁵. Of course, each entity has its own reasons to choose Brussels. Geographically it makes sense as the crossroads between the three largest European economies, Germany, the UK, and France, whilst also historically having a strong industrial basis. Politically, Belgium is fitted snugly between these powerhouses serving as a neutral ground for agenda setting and decision making.

⁴ *Peace operations (2024) Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation*. Available at: <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/peace-and-security/peace-operations> (Accessed: 10 December 2024).

⁵ *Brussels as an international capital city – an asset to our country (2022) Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation*. Available at: <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/highlighted/brussels-international-capital-city-asset-our-country> (Accessed: 16 September 2024).

Economically, Belgium was the fifth largest exporter and importer of goods in the EU, accounting for a share of 7,8 % of both EU exports and imports in 2023⁶. All these elements play a role in Belgium’s military reputation at the national and international level and considering the Belgian territory has not been subject to military conflict or occupation since 1945, the international component has long been shaping up to be primordial⁷.

It is also in the international context that defence expenditure commitments to allies are made. Like most matters in life, these commitments are measured and expressed in financial terms, which allows for comparison with each other and throughout time. This research is mainly interested in Belgium’s defence expenditure policy, in comparison with other states to establish how bad the situation was, but also in comparison with itself to make sense of the evolution it has undergone. After Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO allies issued the Wales Summit Declaration in which they each committed to spend 2 % of their GDP on defence, with 20 % of that defence expenditure going to “major equipment, including Research & Development”, within a decade.⁸ Using the % of expenditure to GDP method of calculation, Belgium’s military expenditure has been in a steady decline since 1960, including after then Belgian Prime Minister Di Rupo joined the NATO allies in signing the Wales declaration, as Figure 1 below shows:

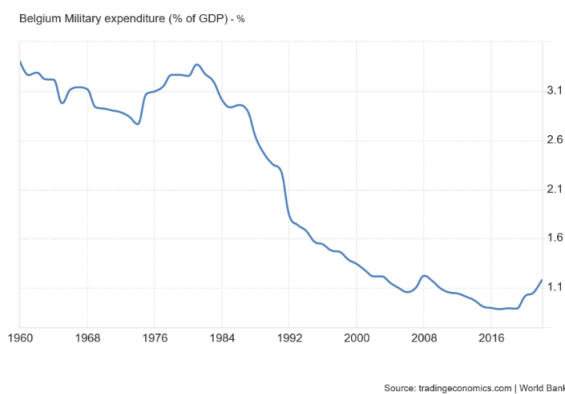


Figure 1: Belgium Military expenditure as % of GDP⁹

⁶ BFTA (2024) *Belgian Foreign Trade 2023*. p. 10 Available at: https://www.abh-ace.be/sites/default/files/Landen_en_statistieken/Belgische_handel/Belgian_foreign_trade_publicaties/2024_editie2023/Belgian_Foreign_Trade_2023.pdf (Accessed: 22 September 2024).

⁷ Biscop, S. (2015) *A Belgian Army for European Defence*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/ambition-for-belgian-armed-forces/> (Accessed: 25 September 2024).

⁸ Nato (2014) *Wales Summit Declaration, NATO*. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/cn/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm (Accessed: 26 September 2024).

⁹ *Belgium - military expenditure (% of GDP) (2024) Belgium - Military Expenditure (% Of GDP)*. Available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/belgium/military-expenditure-percent-of-gdp-wb-data.html> (Accessed: 28 September 2024).

NATO's 2024 press release on NATO countries defence expenditure between 2014 and 2024, with 2023 and 2024 being estimates, paint an even clearer picture of Belgium's lag in augmenting its defence budget. Graph two shows that according to estimates, the number of NATO allies meeting the 2 % commitment rose from 3 in 2014 to 23 out of the current 32 in 2024, however, seeing as Belgium's defence budget rose from 0,97 % of GDP to an estimated 1,30 % in 2024¹⁰, Belgium will not even be close to being part of those 23 projected allies who will meet their commitment. Graph four shows the resolve of the Baltic, Nordic and other states to quickly meet the threshold, with Belgium continuing to trail¹¹. The fifth graph shows that with regards to the commitment to earmarking 20 % of allies' defence budgets to major equipment, including related R&D, Belgium is estimated to spend the lowest percentage on this; 15,2 %. Together with Canada at 18,6 % they are projected to be the only NATO allies not achieving the 20 % threshold¹². Graph eight outlines the main categories of expenditure per ally as estimated in 2024, where Belgium stands out in two categories¹³. First, Belgium is the proportionally the sixth biggest spender on personnel at 50,2 %, and despite not being a very large economy or a Baltic or Nordic state, it proportionally spends 30,8 % of its defence budget on Operations & maintenance and other expenditures.

This already establishes a clear high-level problem; the near-consistent downward trend of defence spending since the 1960's. There are three caveats to consider. Firstly, considering the relatively high personnel cost of the Belgian Armed Forces it is worth noting that Belgium has a rather unique salary indexation mechanism where public service salaries are tied to the consumer price index (CPI), rather than negotiated with the employer or by a union¹⁴. This means that during periods of low inflation Armed Forces salary costs tend to increase less than, for example, neighbouring countries, whereas periods of high inflation, such as the period that started in 2021 and culminated in an inflation rate exceeding 12 % y-o-y in October 2022, tend to have an oversized effect on personnel cost. Second, Belgium has a rather large debt to service at a current 107 % of GDP, and is therefore more vulnerable to interest rate increases, making it ill-equipped to handle increases in personnel cost. Third, Belgian federal coalitions can take

¹⁰ *Defence expenditure of NATO countries (2014-2024) (2024) NATO*. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf (Accessed: 28 September 2025).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6

¹⁴ *100 Jaar Index, Een Terugblik (2020) Statbel*. Available at: <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/nieuws/100-jaar-index-een-terugblik> (Accessed: 30 September 2024).

a long time to form. The 2011 formation took 541 days, the 2020 formation took 652 days¹⁵, and the current government coalition sworn was sworn in 239 days after the 2024 May election. Interim or caretaker governments only have limited power and ability to manoeuvre in budgetary terms. These headwinds make Belgium's defence budget policy pivot stand out even more.

1.2. Research problem

This research aims to contribute to the body of literature on Belgium defence policy, specifically its budgetary policy seeing as the country is comparatively one of EU's and NATO's prolific budgetary underperformers, even though Belgium houses EU and NATO headquarters, along with the many international entities making up the European capital. Conventional logic would dictate that this administrative heart would adhere closely to its commitments because the benefits reaped would be larger than the contributions made, but as far as Belgian defence spending is concerned, this was evidently not the case for more than just a few decades, leading to a hollowing out of the whole defence apparatus. Reversals of historically engrained trends rarely occur without good reason, but when they do, it can give the impression that this was done overnight, perhaps quickly or even rushed. This impression does not coincide with empirical evidence, as this research will try to show, rather, it is the result of the convergence or coupling of three independently developing streams, via a policy window: The problem stream where the Belgian defence spending problematic was formulated and competed with other problem formulations. The policy stream where defence spending policy proposals are put forth for scrutiny, and the politics stream where policy solutions are linked to policy proposals during a policy window.

The research question can therefore be summarised as: "How did Belgium pivot on its defence spending, despite its historic defence budget austerity?"

The objective is to uncover the elements of importance that were designated in the problem, policy and politics stream to get a better understanding of how Belgium managed to reverse its defence budgeting to be more in line with what is expected. Secondly, a discussion on the cause of this reversal, the catalyst in this decision that contributed to the existence of the policy

¹⁵ Chini, M. (2024) *Belgium's Government Formation for dummies*, *The Brussels Times*. Available at: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/1317593/belgiums-government-formation-for-dummies> (Accessed: 30 November 2024).

window that made the reversal possible, will hopefully also contribute to the literature. Hypothetically, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is deemed to have played a large role in this decision as a focusing event. It will also be interesting to examine if the full formulation of the problem in the problem stream was addressed in the policy and politics stream, or if more formulations of policy proposals or solutions are present. The objective therefore of this research is therefore to highlight the important elements found in the Belgian case study as put forward by the multiple streams framework to better understand exactly how the change came to be, when the important timeframes for this shift where, and to whom this shift in defence policy spending can be attributed.

1.3. Delimitations

Due to the highly interpretivist framework, the non-random sampling of data, and that this is a case study of a single country, there are some caveats to this research, however, the aim is not to for the findings of this research to be representative for other countries than Belgium. The intention is to understand a specific part of Belgium's defence policy, namely its budgetary policy. The reason for this is because of Belgium's peculiar position as one of NATO's worst performers in that area, making the budgetary aspect the most important one to address. Belgium's overall defence policy, which can be summarised as a collective security and defence posture, has not shifted at all like its spending policy has. Another delimitation is that this study is looking rather specifically at a handful of actors that, through familiarisation with the data, were deemed to have played a role in the defence spending policy shift, rather than a collective, entity, full government or cabinet. The benefit is that it removes abstraction and allows for identification of the key people involved. The downside is that the results can hardly be considered representative to any other country than Belgium.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on defence expenditure

The reviewed previous research for this thesis consists largely of research on defence spending and applications of multiple streams framework analysis. Regarding defence spending there is an excellent dissertation by Wieluns on the question of how, paradoxically, it is possible for an empirically observable decline in defence spending to correlate to an increase in military capacity. This is done by analysing 27 European states' defence spending cut periods between 2000 and 2012 with a multi-method approach, concluding that decline in defence spending in Europe is likely to be an intentional decision to reform, "sometimes in tandem with defence collaboration or buck-passing"¹⁶. A second source of inspiration is also focused on Europe; 'Defence spending and economic growth in the EU15'¹⁷. The authors underline the gap in literature on the relationship between defence and growth in the European Union, despite the already articulated desire from policy makers to contribute to a common defence. In conclusion there is evidence to suggest that military burden does not promote economic growth, although this research is done on a time-series ending in 2007. In the same line of thought, Biscop's 2019 article 'Defence: Collaborating for an autonomous Europe' looks at the reasons as to why a common European defence industrial base is so difficult to envisage, arguing that apart from the smallest EU member states, each state would rightfully aim to maintain its own land, air and sea capacities¹⁸. These sources provide valuable insight on the obstacles that a fragmented defence industrial base present, but they do not look at policy makers as agents of change in the way that this dissertation does.

This dissertation also considers the possible effect of government formation in the framework of the political stream within the multiple streams framework. Previous research by Klomp and Haan explores the relationship between elections and the subsequent increase or decrease in military expenditure, filling the gap in literature that theorises on whether elections have positive or negative effects on military expenditure, rather than have no effect or only a

¹⁶ Wieluns, L. (2016). *Understanding the relationship between military spending cuts and military capacity: European states 2000-2012* [Thesis]. <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/19744>

¹⁷ Dunne, J. P., & Nikolaidou, E. (2012). Defence spending and economic growth in the EU15. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 23(6), 537–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2012.663575>

¹⁸ Biscop, S. (2019). Defensie : samenwerken voor een autonoom Europa. *HELLING (AMSTERDAM)*, 32(1), 38–42.

detrimental effect. After analysis using the Finite Mixture Model the most important conclusion is that countries that are either facing security risks, or have a large industrial defence base, are more prone to increase defence spending during the election cycle, whereas countries that do not fit these conditions are more likely to decrease defence spending¹⁹. The model they use is certainly useful but fails to offer explanatory power to states that do increase defence spending despite not meeting the risk and industrial base conditions, whether before or after elections.

Belgium's underinvestment in defence is also subject to scrutiny of NATO, which is where defence spending targets are set. In 'An economic theory of alliances' a model is outlined that looks at understanding unequal military spending by assuming that nations usually act in their own interests. The conclusion here is that larger nations contribute disproportionately more, and smaller nations disproportionately less, to international organisations such as NATO and the UN, as a result of pursuing their own interest²⁰. This line of thinking is relevant to Belgium as a small state and therefore strong contributor, however, the timeframe of this dissertation is far closer to the present than it is to Cold War era, when Belgium's defence spending was much higher than it is now proportionally to its GDP. Kim and Sandler make a similar observation while adding to the model foreign assistance and UN peacekeeping contributions, on top of the existing variable of military expenditure, during the timeframe of 1991 until 2020. They conclude that smaller nations remain more prominent to be NATO free riders²¹. Although this research on defence spending is pertinent, it is more focused on the effects of defence spending in the context of alliances rather than the incentives and decisions behind individual states changing course on their defence spending.

In 'Belgium: the reliable free rider' Haesebrouck goes into the greater detail as to why individual nations choose to be NATO free riders by using collective action-based models of burden sharing. As previous research concludes, the incentive to free ride off collective security agreements is appealing to smaller states due to the low political and financial cost, but Belgium seeks to counter this reputation headwind by being a reliable partner in contributions in military operations. Even with this attempt at balancing an unambitious defence spending policy with being a reliable partner in military operations, the author concludes that this latter consideration

¹⁹ Klomp, J., & Haan, J. de. (2024). Do Elections Cause Military Spending to Go Up or Down? New International Evidence. *Armed Forces and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X241247063>

²⁰ Olson, M., & Zeckhauser, R. (1966). An Economic Theory of Alliances. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 48(3), 266–279. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1927082>

²¹ Kim, W. and Sandler, T. (2023) 'NATO Security Burden Sharing, 1991–2020', *Defence and Peace Economics*, 35(3), pp. 265–280. doi:10.1080/10242694.2023.2230408

could evaporate without increasing defence spending, because the austerity is now also affecting military operation capabilities.²² This case study on Belgium explains rather well how it has been able to evade its defence expenditure commitments, and why, in comparison to other small alliance members, it spends a relatively large proportion towards operations, maintenance, and other military expenditures, previously underlined to be standing out. It even gives the reader the warning that Belgium's freeriding could turn out costly if not revised, echoing the sentiments of most authors that are up for analysis in this dissertation. At the time of publication, however, the STAR-plan which makes up the policy stream in this dissertation did not exist yet, nor was there a policy window available for the coupling of streams constituting a change in defence spending policy. Despite the excellent contribution to the literature specifically on Belgium, seeing as it was published in 2020 goes to show how much the situation has changed considering it does not assume any change in its defence spending trajectory, hence the fair warning.

Although there is substantially more research on defence spending austerity than there is on expansion, there is an excellent article by Tian et al.²³ summarising the developments of military expenditure and the effects of the war in Ukraine including the military assistance towards it. This research scope is interesting for this research due to its timeframe and scope, noticing that Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 resulted in an increase in defence spending in former Eastern Bloc states, with the trend spreading to central and western European states after the full-scale invasion in 2022²⁴. This research is quite important as some of these defence spending increases might also constitute a pivot from historical austerity to expansion, however, Belgium is not mentioned in this context as the focus was on those that underwent the highest increases, those that as are correctly pointed out to be in closest geographic proximity to Russia; Lithuania, Finland, Poland, etc... Although this research underlines the impact of Russia's aggression as a catalyst for higher defence spending in, among many, European states, it does not do so specifically for Belgium, which is not in close geographic proximity of Russia, therefore offering little explanatory power for its defence spending pivot.

²² Haesebrouck, T. (2021) Belgium: the reliable free rider. *International politics (Hague, Netherlands)*. [Online] 58 (1), 37–48.

²³ Tian, N. et al. (2023) 'Developments in military expenditure and the effects of the war in Ukraine', *Defence and Peace Economics*, 34(5), pp. 547–562. doi:10.1080/10242694.2023.2221877.

²⁴ Tian, N. et al. (2023). *Ibid.*, p. 557

2.2. Research using the multiple streams framework

Literature that uses a multiple stream framework approach in the analysis of defence policy shifts has also been reviewed. One example is Deschaux-Dutard comparative analysis of the birth and relaunch of European defence using the Multiple Stream Framework²⁵, where she does a comparative analysis of European defence policy during the timeframes of 1998-1999 and 2016-2019. She demonstrates that during those two periods of time, German and French policy entrepreneurs were able to couple the problem, policy, and political stream by setting up policy windows.²⁶ The second timeframe from this article provides a relevant European context for this thesis' problem stream considering Belgium's geographic and diplomatic positioning. Although the article's focus is on defence policy as a whole, rather than purely the economic aspect, it is not inconceivable that Belgium's problem stream was influenced, in particular, by France. More relevant literature is Larsson's qualitative case study of the policy process in Swedish security and defence policy²⁷. Using interview and qualitative content analysis she analyses the policy process leading up to the implementation of the 2015 Swedish Defence bill. She argues that a window of opportunity led to a change in Swedish defence policy, due to previous policy issues, the timing between a focusing event and the ongoing work done by the Swedish defence commissions, as well as the desire from policy actors for change. This dissertation, although focused on a different timeframe and country, makes for a great example of the MSF in the context of a single case. Lastly, in 'Exploring the dynamics of policy change in EU security and defence: policy entrepreneurs behind the Strategic Compass'²⁸ Sus uses the MSF to analyse the politics behind the approval of the EU's Strategic Compass, which she argues constituted a formal change in EU defence policy. Similarly to Deschaux-Dutard, she is focusing on the efforts made by the German and French policy makers, although the focus is put on the entrepreneurship of these policy makers. She argues that the Strategic Compass was influenced heavily by French diplomacy as well as the EU's High Representative, duly noting the role of multiple entrepreneurs at work in the policy and politics streams. The previous

²⁵ Deschaux-Dutard, D. (2020). How do Crises Fuel European Defence Policy?: A Comparative Analysis of the Birth and Relaunch of European Defence using the Multiple Stream Framework. *European Review of International Studies*, 7(1), 52-80. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21967415-bja10019>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Larsson, E. (2021). The Landscape between Bureaucracy and Political Strategy : A Qualitative Case Study of the Policy Process in Swedish Security and Defence Policy (Dissertation). Retrieved from <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:fhs:diva-9682>

²⁸ Sus, M. (2023) 'Exploring the dynamics of policy change in EU Security and defence: Policy entrepreneurs behind the strategic compass', *West European Politics*, 47(4), pp. 942–966. doi:10.1080/01402382.2023.2232704.

literature that utilises multiple streams framework in policy-making decisions is important to this dissertation as it confirms the MSF to be a useful tool for deeper insights into these policy-making decisions at a state level.

2.3. Gap in literature

Research on defence spending policy is focused on the effects it can have on alliances, institutional aspects of it, the effects of austerity, disproportionality among members, and much more. The scope of the literature is, for good reasons, more-so oriented on using a quantitative approach by including multiple countries to identify trends in defence spending. Although this literature inspired this dissertation substantially, particularly because Belgium's defence spending policy, when part of the analysis, did not attain glowing reviews, it does not go into detail about Belgium itself, nor its defence spending policy pivot. NATO members and non-members alike that are in close geographic proximity to Russia have also proportionally drastically increased their defence spending, however, this does not offer an explanation as to why Belgium did, nor how it did it, despite having little incentive to do so. A qualitative approach that analyses the themes of defence spending can contribute to the understanding of how they managed to make these ambitious increases.

The timeframe and location also contribute to the gap in literature. There is ample research on long peace, peace dividend, deterrence, etc... but the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine can only be understood as the end of long peace in Europe, and as a failure of European deterrence. Certainly, the invasion of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and other preludes to the full-scale invasion of 2022, were studied as enormous red flags by experts and academia, but they were not met with the scrambling in augmenting defence spending as was suddenly the case in 2022. Considering the scientific process and rigorous review, it is not a mystery why the topic at hand has not been written about as extensively. As far as Belgium's defence spending trend is concerned, the previous literature rightfully concludes that the nation is an underperformer, and a free rider of its multilateral agreements, but it is not recent enough to encompass the change in defence spending policy that this dissertation will study. This change for Belgium is historical, and it did not occur out of thin air after a plethora of warnings. The proportional increase in absolute terms, if the roadmap is to be followed, will truly be transformative for Belgian defence, to the benefit of its reputation and its allies.

The question of why Belgium pivoted in its defence spending policy is therefore already puzzling, seeing as it was doing fine as a NATO free rider, is geographically snugly tucked

between some of NATO's most powerful allies, and because bluntly put; changing an ongoing defence spending policy which has traditionally been subject to austerity, is no easy feat. As the previous literature on multiple streams framework shows, it is an excellent tool to gain insight into the processes behind decision-making, including within the scope of defence policy decisions, but it has not been applied to Belgium, nor specifically on the themes that surround defence spending.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Multiple Streams Framework

The Multiple Streams Framework is tool developed by John W. Kingdom in his 1984 work *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*²⁹, to analyse policy-making process. This framework is an adaptation of the 1972 garbage can model³⁰ from Cohen, March, and Olsen which symbolises the anarchical nature of organisations, in contrast to decision theory, or its subfield rational choice theory, where perfect rationality is presumed. Kingdom took this garbage can model and adapted it to study the US-political system, to better understand how ideas become solutions to policy problems, however, the underlining assumptions remain the same.

Firstly, policy processes are ambiguous seeing as public events, situations and processes can be perceived and interpreted entirely differently by people or groups. There can be multiple or conflicting interpretations of events, even irreconcilable ones, which increases the ways in which policy problems and solutions can be framed. Second, policy makers operate with the same time and cognitive capacity as most which implies there is only a limited number of solutions that policy makers can explore. Thus, and thirdly, policy makers might have preferences, but these are not fixed and depend largely on the framing of the problem meaning that policy makers might simply not have specific policy solutions ready at the start of policy processes. Another assumption is that of “unclear technology that concerns institutional ambiguity”³¹. The word technology here is understood in the traditional sense which is the application of knowledge for a practical purpose, meaning that we can assume that interference between different institutions may arise during the conceptualisation or implementation of new policies. This can also be exacerbated by the final assumption of fluid participation of policy makers as they can be voted out, change departments, move to the private sector, etc...

These assumptions underline Kingdom’s perspective that problems, policies and politics develop independently from each other, and that policy makers do not rationalise solutions

²⁹ Kingdom, J.W. (2014). Ibid.

³⁰ Cohen, M.D., March, J.G. and Olsen, J.P. (1972) ‘A garbage can model of Organizational choice’, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(1), pp. 1–25. doi:10.2307/2392088.

³¹ Zahariadis, N., Herweg, N., Zohlhöfer, R., Petridou, E., & Novotný, V. (2023). "Chapter 1: Advancing the Multiple Streams Framework". In *A Modern Guide to the Multiple Streams Framework*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. Retrieved 5 November 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802209822.00008>

specifically based on problems alone. These ‘streams’ can therefore be analysed independently. Some problems might have an array of solutions, but no political will for implementation. Some solutions might exist for non-existing problems. When these multiple elements, or streams, converge, however, a policy window opens. These three streams constitute the core analytical elements of the MSF and consist of the problem, policy, and political stream.

3.2. Problem stream and the problem broker

In MSF thinking situations can be seen as situations that require political intervention. In this sense not every situation or condition is necessarily problematic, until they are framed as such by what some call problem entrepreneurs³² or knowledge brokers³³. As the assumptions prescribe, interpretations of conditions or situations can vary wildly and even be conflicting according to how they are framed. One group may consider a low military enlistment as a financial problem due to low compensation whereas another group might frame the problem as a lack of national identity. One group might consider the 2 % GDP-contribution as an achievable target when another group frames this as high, and therefore, problematic spending. All these problem formulations compete for the attention of policy makers and can end up on their agendas, thereby creating the condition for coupling of streams, in three ways³⁴. Firstly, there is usually cause for concern when certain indicators such as economic growth, inflation rate, death- and birthrates come under pressure or experience high volatility. Second, existing policy can be changed according to feedback from problem brokers over time, but third, it can also be prompted by focusing events like a terrorist attack.

These three sources of problems do not just appear overnight and exclude agency over the problems according to Knaggård³⁵, who rightfully argues for the inclusion of framing and the profile of knowledge brokers within the problem stream. As she puts it: “Indicators, focusing events, and feedback reveal conditions that without framing are meaningless. They can, however, all be used in framing a condition as a political problem.”³⁶ The agency is therefore

³² Hoefler, R. (2022) ‘The multiple streams framework: Understanding and applying the problems, policies, and politics approach’, *Journal of Policy Practice and Research*, 3(1), pp. 1–5.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42972-022-00049-2>

³³ Knaggård, Å. (2015) ‘The multiple streams framework and the problem broker’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 54(3), pp. 450–465.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12097>

³⁴ Zahariadis, N., et al. (2023). *Ibid.*, p. 4

³⁵ Knaggård, Å. (2015). *Ibid.*, p. 4

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4

achieved in the problem stream during the framing process, and this will allow it to be elevated to a political problem where the policy entrepreneur will then couple a policy alternative to a framed problem. This allows for a distinction between the policy entrepreneur and the knowledge broker, who operate in different streams and are therefore not necessarily the same person. The role of the knowledge broker is to be the bridge between those that produce knowledge such as scientists, economists, or defence experts, and policy makers, such as national political parties or parliamentary commissions.

Good knowledge brokers are those that are capable of making complex information digestible to the policy makers which leads back to the importance of framing. Successful problem framing, according to Baumgartner & Jones³⁷, can be determined by knowledge, values and emotions. Firstly, a frame should encompass knowledge of what the problem is. This type of knowledge can be scientific, academic, bureaucratic, professional or even local³⁸, with the most authoritative or credible form being scientific knowledge considering its inherent neutrality. Secondly, frames include values that determine why a problem is relevant. Where a problem indicates a less-than-ideal condition, values are typically there to guide to an ideal situation where the problematic condition no longer exists. Certain values are more prevalent across societies, and some problem brokers, such as policy makers, tend to highlight them more when others, such as scientists³⁹, do not. The reason for this being the assumed objectivity that scientific methods entail, although imperfectly, but it does raise into question the objectivity of policy makers when they insert their values and ideology in problem framing. Lastly, frames include emotions. The term is rather vague and requires more research⁴⁰, but Knaggård refers to Loseke who notes that some emotions such as fear, sympathy, and anger are strong emotions to use⁴¹, and to Chong and Druckman who underline that the emotional element of frames can be more powerful than the element of knowledge, or in many of such cases, the pretence or projection of knowledge, when tapping into the public's fears and prejudices⁴².

³⁷ Baumgartner, F.R. and Mahoney, C. (2008) 'Forum section: The Two Faces of framing', *European Union Politics*, 9(3), pp. 435–449. doi:10.1177/1465116508093492.

³⁸ Knaggård, Å. (2015). *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁴¹ Loseke, D. (2003). *Thinking About Social Problems: An Introduction to Constructionist Perspectives* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315135601>

⁴² Chong, D. and Druckman, J.N. (2007) 'Framing theory', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10(1), pp. 103–126. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054.

Knaggård uses Dahl's understanding of political influence in defining the three components that would render a problem broker successful. Firstly, there are the political resources of the problem broker which are categorised as persistence, access, and credibility⁴³, although one could argue that if they would be ranked according to importance that credibility and access are a prerequisite for persistence. Second, Dahl underlines the importance of the problem broker's skillset in using their political resources, more specifically; whom to talk to, when to talk, and lastly, how to talk. The third and last component is the broker's willingness to use their political resources.

Knaggård's contribution to the problem stream by addition of frames and what constitutes a problem broker is a welcome one due to the MSF's inherent vagueness on that front. Without it, it is difficult to distinguish from which point a policy entrepreneur, of which the profile will be discussed further on, takes over from the problem broker, who is not always the same person, allowing for a clearer analytical separation of streams. Her case studies on the framing of climate change in Sweden reference distinguishes the role of scientists in the problem stream, and how they can act as successful power broker. She does rightly conclude that the profile of problem broker is easier to uncover in fields that are heavily dominated by science. Whether social scientists are as successful as climate scientists in these endeavours, is a question that this research can hopefully contribute to.

3.3. Policy stream and the policy entrepreneur

Independently from the problem stream, policy proposals are continuously developed and refined to both existing and future problems by experts⁴⁴. These people can be experts from any walk of life such government, political parties, media, academia, think tanks, etc... Policy solutions when first suggested are usually rough around the edges and need finetuning, which is done in the sphere of policy communities⁴⁵. When policy proposals go through the process of rigorous review by fellow experts and get subsequently changed according to feedback or consensus, thereby gathering more support within the policy community, then they have been

⁴³ Knaggård, Å. (2015). *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴⁴ Zahariadis, N., et al. (2023). *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

‘softened-up’⁴⁶ enough to possibly be adopted. The policy community can then gauge proposals according to three criteria for survival⁴⁷; feasibility, proximity to societal values, and cost.

Policy proposals, the discussions within the policy communities, the process of softening-up, and the possibility of passing the criteria for survival is a time and resource consuming process. This is where the profile of the policy entrepreneur comes in; an actor that is willing to spend their time, resources, and reputation⁴⁸ to advocate for a certain policy solution at opportune times which Kingdon coined policy windows⁴⁹. In contrast to the problem broker operating in the problem stream, the objective of the policy entrepreneur is to couple the problem, policy, and politics stream during a policy window, meaning that the entrepreneur is the one holding agency over the policy solution. Competition within the policy stream is as harsh as it is complex. The concept of policy entrepreneur should therefore also be understood as people within organisations that enjoy the support or backing of these organisations. Although it makes for great case studies the idea of a lone policy entrepreneur, as this research hypothesis, is more applicable to smaller causes at a lower level of governance, rather than a longtime committed team of likeminded experts with, admittedly, a strong leadership figure at the helm.

3.4. The politics stream and the political entrepreneur

The third and last stream from the multiple streams framework is the politics stream where policy proposals get a chance to be negotiated by policy makers. In this stream there are three important elements to consider⁵⁰: The national mood, interest groups, and government. National mood, or public opinion, as a social construct is rather difficult to operationalise, but opinion polls are a good barometer, as well as media reporting and personal contacts. Interest groups are also relevant in the passing or blocking of new policy, particularly when it comes to powerful interest groups. Lastly, government, parliament, and its composition play a large role⁵¹. At the end of the day, policy can be codified as guidelines or laws, so cohesiveness of

⁴⁶ Cairney, P. (2013) ‘Standing on the shoulders of Giants: How do we combine the insights of multiple theories in public policy studies?’, *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(1), pp. 1–21. p. 6 doi:10.1111/psj.12000.

⁴⁷ Zahariadis, N., et al. (2023). *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁴⁸ Kingdon, J.W. (2014). *Ibid.*, p. 179

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Zahariadis, N. et al. (2023) *A modern guide to the multiple streams framework*. Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing. p. 5

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

power plays an important role in this. As Zohlnhöfer⁵² correctly argues: “... decision coupling is not much of a challenge for policy-entrepreneurs if they control the relevant institutions.”⁵³ Government systems come in all shapes and forms, from rather centralised two-party systems where government and parliament are closely aligned, to multi-party coalitions that can legislate according to consensus even outside of their governmental coalition. Moreover, different legislative procedures can require different voting majorities and could thereafter be subject to scrutiny and amendments from their second house or chambre, in some parliamentary systems.

Similarly to the problem and policy stream, there is a lot of work and organisation to be done before coupling in the political stream, which is done by the political entrepreneur⁵⁴ who will first-and-foremost have to compete for political attention using strategies: Concessions, package deals, and manipulation. In the political sphere there is an understanding that less veto power against policy proposals have a higher chance in resulting in a departure from the status-quo, and it also determines how far this departure from the status-quo is⁵⁵. Large policy reforms are therefore more plausible in political systems where political power is more centralised. The U.S. political system is a good example of this in the sense that it would not be too hard to e.g. raise the federal debt ceiling, approve defence support packages, or increase military service members’ salaries. If either democrats or republicans would hold the White House, and both congressional chambers, why would they seek out bipartisanship, unless a supermajority is required?

The political entrepreneur’s strategies of concessions, package deal of manipulation are therefore more relevant in parliamentary systems⁵⁶. Concessions are compromises that will dilute policy proposals that are ready for coupling. They can occur when the political entrepreneur encounters vetoes based on ideological concerns or due to the fear of a negative effect on the electorate. The second instrument is package deals. Whether policy proposals are related to the same problem or not, political entrepreneurs can opt to add in other policy

⁵² Zohlnhöfer, R., Herweg, N. and Huß, C. (2015) ‘Bringing formal political institutions into the multiple streams framework: An Analytical Proposal for Comparative Policy Analysis’, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 18(3), pp. 243–256. p. 255. doi:10.1080/13876988.2015.1095428.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 256

⁵⁵ Zohlnhöfer, R. (2009) ‘How politics matter when policies change: Understanding policy change as a political problem’, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 11(1), pp. 97–115. p. 110. doi:10.1080/13876980802648300.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 113

proposals to broaden support among legislators. Lastly, the strategy of manipulation is simply put, framing the policy solution as the best solution available. Political entrepreneurs do this to two audiences, other policy makers and the electorate, by framing their discourse in a way that, e.g. policymakers might turn fearful of electoral backlash, or that the electorate becomes convinced of the problem, thereby influencing the national mood, which in turn can increase the salience of said problem⁵⁷.

3.5. Coupling of streams during a policy window

The problem, policy and politics stream, as noted earlier, develop independently from each other, but at certain points in time, these streams can cross and open a policy window⁵⁸. These certain points in time can come from focusing events such as natural disasters or economic crises, or from institutional events such as elections, or budget deadlines⁵⁹. The proverbial size of the window – the timing – can therefore vary. Policy windows can be instigated from either the problem stream, e.g. after a shift in national mood, or the politics stream, e.g. after entry of new legislators⁶⁰. As Zahariadis notes: “..., policy windows do not objectively open for specific projects. Rather, policy entrepreneurs will look out for developments in the problem and politics stream and try to couple their preferred policy to the developments they deem favourable for their purpose.”⁶¹ Moreover, policy windows can also simply close without any change from the status-quo, if the political entrepreneur fails to make the desired concessions, the package deal is considered inadequate, or they were unable to manipulate either the veto holders or the national mood.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 114

⁵⁸ Béland, D. and Howlett, M. (2016) ‘The role and impact of the multiple-streams approach in comparative policy analysis’, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 18(3), pp. 221–227. p. 222. doi:10.1080/13876988.2016.1174410.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Zahariadis, N. *et al.* (2023) Ibid., p. 6

⁶¹ Ibid.

4. Material

4.1. Problem stream

To better understand Belgium's pivot in defence spending through the multiple streams framework, we can start by having a closer look at how the problem was framed. As noted, problem frames entail knowledge of what the problem is, values that determine why a problem is relevant, and an emotional appeal. This analysis also sets out to uncover if there was a problem broker at work.

The material that will fit this purpose are therefore commentaries, opinions, analysis, and policy reviews, specifically on Belgium's lack of defence funding, from Belgians that could have had access to politicians, without being politicians themselves. This excludes a plethora of material from political manifestos, parliamentary meetings and commissions, however, as the multiple streams framework entails, it's problems that chase politics, and the problem and political streams operate independently from each other. The idea is also that the material should have had a certain visibility to make it worth it for the problem broker who's making use of their resources. Lastly, and most importantly, the material should include understandable consequences for the – then - continuation of Belgium's current defence spending policy, including what it will affect and how it will do so. This implies that the material is largely critiques towards the Belgian government at the time. The most fitting timeframe to find which problem frame was ready for coupling is during the proverbial Belgian defence dark ages, when Belgium's defence spending was under 1 % of GDP, from 2014 to 2019, despite Belgium's commitment of ending defence austerity at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales.

Following these parameters roughly 45 unique articles were screened, but most of these were on the political drama concerning the financing of the new F35's and Frigates, or on Belgium's role in counterterrorism, or were in French. Most of the authors are native Flemish Dutch speakers so most articles were kept in Dutch. The resulting five non-probability sampled articles are:

Author	Translated Title	Original Title	Date	Language
Charles-Henri Delcour	The open letter by general Charles-Henri Delcour	De open brief van generaal Charles-Henri Delcour ⁶²	12/11/2014	Dutch
Sven Biscop	Just a little while and the Belgian army is a gendarmerie	Nog even het Belgisch leger is een gendarmerie ⁶³	22/01/2015	Dutch
Jo Coelmont	No Belgian armed forces is unaffordable	Geen leger, is onbetaalbaar ⁶⁴	02/2015	Dutch
Sven Biscop	Defence: Belgium is no small country	Defensie: België is geen klein land ⁶⁵	04/10/2015	Dutch
Alexander Mattelaer	See original title	Belgian Defence in 2018: Regeneration Time? ⁶⁶	02/2018	English

Figure 2: Problem stream material

The first author is General Charles-Henri Delcour. He was Chief of Staff of the Belgian Armed Forces, and reported directly Pieter De Crem, who was Minister of Defence from 2007 until 2014. Delcour was appointed Chief of Defence in 2009 and held the position until his early resignation in March 2012, which was also the first accepted resignation at that level since WWII⁶⁷. The second author is Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop's. He is the director of the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont Institute, where he has contributed over 180 publications in more than 20 years in the form of policy briefs, papers, commentaries and books. He currently lectures on Belgian and European foreign and defence policy at Ghent University.⁶⁸

⁶² Delcour, C.-H. (2014) 'De open brief van generaal Charles-Henri Delcour', *VRT*, 12 November. Available at: https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2014/11/12/de_open_brief_vangeneraalcharles-henridelcour-1-2146921/ (Accessed: 02 December 2024).

⁶³ Biscop, S. (2015) 'Nog even en het Belgisch leger is een gendarmerie', *De Morgen*, 22 January. Available at: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/nog-even-en-het-belgisch-leger-is-een-gendarmerie~ba673030/> (Accessed: 04 November 2024).

⁶⁴ Coelmont, J. (2015) *No Belgian Armed Forces is unaffordable*, *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/no-belgian-armed-forces-is-unaffordable/> (Accessed: 11 November 2024).

⁶⁵ Biscop, S. (2015a) *Defence: Belgium is not a small country*, *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/defence-belgium-is-not-small-country/> (Accessed: 11 November 2024).

⁶⁶ Mattelaer, A. (2018) *Belgian defence in 2018: Regeneration time?*, *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/belgian-defence-in-2018-regeneration-time/> (Accessed: 16 November 2024).

⁶⁷ Van den Bossche, M. (2012) 'Nooit eerder nam een Chef Defensie ontslag', *De Morgen*, 29 March. (Accessed: 14 October 2024).

⁶⁸ *Sven Biscop* (2024) *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/staff/sven-biscop/> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

Thirdly, Brigadier General Jo Coelmont is a Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont, in addition to his Senior Fellowship at the Royal High Institute for Defence. His military career spans nearly 40 years, during which he held, amongst other high-level roles, the Belgian Permanent Representative to the Military Committee of the European Union and the Western European Union⁶⁹. Lastly, Dr Alexander Mattelaer is a Senior Research Fellow at Egmont, Belgium's Royal Institute for International Relations, and an associate professor at the VUB, School of Governance.⁷⁰

4.2. Policy stream

The objective in the policy stream is to find which policy proposals finally won the highly competitive battle for attention. Ideally, these policy proposals, suggestions, or recommendations have been reviewed and finetuned by fellow researchers and experts to increase their chances of survival, which as noted earlier depends on the criteria of feasibility, proximity to societal values, and cost. Such document exists. The 23-pages “Update of the Strategic Vision 2030: Recommendations”⁷¹ is a document that looked to update the then still government approved “Vision 2030”. The newly appointed Belgian Defence Minister Ludivine Dedonder assumed office in October 2020, but did not wait long to mandate Colonel Kalajzic from the Royal Higher Institute for Defence, and Professor Struye from UCLouvain to assemble the working group that compiled this report; “a synthesis of all the discussions, written contributions and exchanges of the last few months”⁷². The report was published 30 June 2021. The working group consisted of ten academics, including Sven Biscop and Alexander Mattelaer who both also feature in the problem stream's material, who met on nine occasions between themselves. The working group also organised ten online meetings with participation of experts on themes ranging from strategic visions of neighbouring countries to the future of treaties and evolution of nuclear deterrence.

This report is therefore the ideal source to analyse exactly how policy makers set about defining solutions to Belgian's expenditure policy problem at the higher economic level, at the lower

⁶⁹ Jo Coelmont (2024) *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/staff/jo-coelmont/> (Accessed: 05 January 2025).

⁷⁰ Alexander Mattelaer (2024) *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/staff/alexander-mattelaer/> (Accessed: 05 January 2025).

⁷¹ Kalajzic, E. *et al.* (2021) *Update of the strategic vision 2030: Recommendations*, *Egmont Institute*. Available at: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/update-of-the-strategic-vision-2030-recommendations/> (Accessed: 10 December 2024).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 1

thematic level, and if there are any proposed solutions that fall outside of these thematic levels, which were not specifically mentioned in the problem stream. The first until third chapters are an assessment of the quickly evolving security landscape, a recapitulation of Belgium's vital and strategic interests, and a call to define which sort of missions the Belgian army should participate in. These chapters form a good basis and context for the policy proposals that follow in the fourth to seventh chapters titled: Capability mix, personnel, budgetary capacity, and defence R&D industry strategy. It is in these chapters that the policy community's recommendations are formulated.

4.3. Politics stream

The material for the politics stream must suit three purposes. The first is to identify which reoccurring themes from the problem stream and policy stream are present in the politics stream, and if other themes emerged. Second, to assess whether or not there was a political entrepreneur present. Lastly, the objective is also to establish whether a change in national mood, interest groups, or government has contributed to the coupling of streams, possibly opening a policy window. The material for the first two tasks is the revision of the Strategic Vision for Defence 2030, called the STAR-plan (Security & Service, Technology, Ambition, Resilience) by Minister of Defence Ludivine Dedonder, released 2 May 2022, voted on by the chambre on 14 July 2022 and passed as legislation 20 July 2022. Condensed sub-100-page versions of the STAR-plan are available in French and English in form of an online brochure, but the full 166-page version in Dutch includes the annexes which can be useful, does not include the photography, and has a more legible typeface making it better fitting for the purpose. The specific chapter that details the budgetary cost of the proposed policy solutions is chapter 4: "A budgetarily balanced Defence via a solidary recapitalization"⁷³. This chapter includes the specific solutions to the overarching budgetary issues and are meant to ensure "a coherent fulfilment of the capacity requirement (chapter 5) resulting from the evolution of the security environment (chapter 1), the fulfilment of Defence's tasks and the impact of the changed security environment on the capacity portfolio (chapter 2), the pursuit of European anchoring of capacities and the development of a European industrial and technological defence base (chapter 3). It is also coherent with the policy measures that were proposed with

⁷³ Dedonder, L. (2024) *STAR plan*. Ministry of Defence. Available at: https://dedonder.belgium.be/sites/default/files/articles/STAR%20Plan_NL.pdf (Accessed: 20 December 2024)

regard to the resilience of the organisation (chapter 6) and of the personnel (chapter 7)”⁷⁴. ‘Chapter 5: The capacitary portfolio on route to 2030’ in particular provides for a detailed list of investment projects and their timeframes per capacitary dimension such as the land, air, or information, components. Although this chapter was helpful to better understand which expenditure belonged to which category, this level of analysis is too deep and extensive for the purpose of this analysis, which focuses on the overarching themes.

The material for the latter purpose; understanding a potential change in national mood, interest groups, or government, is less centralised. It consists of the yearly NATO defence expenditure reports as it includes national opinion poll on defence spending as well as a reconstruction of Belgian government formations throughout the timeframe of interest, starting in 2014 and ending with the Belgian defence spending pivot in 2022. Ideally, some data could be analysed to find evidence for, or even measure, a shift in interest groups, however, data for Belgian interest groups is as scarce as it is difficult to get access to, so will not be included in the analysis. Further research on the behaviour of Belgian defence interest groups in this area, and how it possibly contributed to the shift in defence spending is needed, although at first glance it appears these efforts seem to be centralised at a European level.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 40

5. Methodology

With the material for the problem and policy stream consisting of opinion pieces, policy briefs, and commentaries in written format, a qualitative content analysis method is best suited. More specifically, thematic analysis as a method can be used “to identify and interpret patterns or themes in a data set”⁷⁵, which can often increase knowledge on that theme. The high-level problem or theme has already been identified as a persistent downtrend in defence expenditure, the question is therefore which themes of Belgian defence will they affect. Concretely, which themes constitute the problem. Braun and Clarke⁷⁶ developed a six-step systematic thematic analysis, to identify and report patterns in the qualitative data and interpret for their inherent meaning⁷⁷. The six steps are the following:

Step one is the transcription, familiarisation with the data and selection of quotations. In this step, as noted prior, much of the material was inadequate due to language, competing problem stream formulations, or articles that were not focused on the high-level problem being budgetary. There was no need of transcription because all articles were in written form. Quotes were selected that indicated a formulation of a consequence of the problem frame.

In the second step keywords should be selected based on patterns found during the familiarisation with the material, but for this analysis this is largely irrelevant because the purpose is not to understand who the author is referring to, the actor, and whether the author makes a claim on the actor’s support or rejection of a claim. The actor in this research is already known considering the government has a monopoly on budget allocation. The existence of support by the actor is also known, in this case it is absent considering that the consequences outlined by the authors are based on the premise that the actor – the Belgian government – continues doing what it is doing which warrant the authors’ problem formulation in the first place.

In the third and fourth steps words are assigned to segments of data that capture the data’s core message, significance or theme. This is where the authors’ mentions of consequences were coded into four unique themes, of which the first category also includes four subcategories,

⁷⁵ Naeem, M. *et al.* (2023) ‘A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. doi:10.1177/16094069231205789.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

and previously selected quotations were highlighted according to the theme. The code given in the problem stream will start with c for consequence, followed by a number. Most quotations included a single code, some included multiple codes across various themes. In the policy stream four additional reoccurring themes were found and coded. The code given in the policy stream will start with a p for proposal. The choice was made to retain the reputation theme for clarity and uniformity, despite it not being present in the policy stream document according to the criteria. There were no new themes found in the politics stream, where code s stands for solution.

Problem stream	Consequences	Policy stream	Proposals	Politics stream	Solutions
Theme	Code	Theme	Code	Theme	Code
Personnel	c1	Personnel	p1	Personnel	s1
Recruitment	c1.1	Recruitment	p1.1	Recruitment	s1.1
Training	c1.2	Training	p1.2	Training	s1.2
Ability	c1.3	Ability	p1.3	Ability	s1.3
Retention	c1.4	Retention	p1.4	Retention	s1.4
Operations	c2	Operations	p2	Operations	s2
Major equipment	c3	Major equipment	p3	Major equipment	s3
Reputation	c4	Reputation	p4	Reputation	s4
		Intelligence	p5	Intelligence	s5
		R&D	p6	R&D	s6
		Infrastructure	p7	Infrastructure	s7
		Industry	p8	Industry	s8

Table 2: Streams coding

In the fifth step these codes and themes are conceptualised according to patterns that have been interpreted. In this step diagrams or models can be used to understand the relationship between the concepts or themes in the data.⁷⁸ For the purpose of this case study this step is a simple

⁷⁸ Ibid.

aggregation of what the quote implies. In the problem stream this aggregation is ‘A continue in defence budget cuts will have negative consequences on e.g. personnel recruitment. In the policy stream this aggregation is ‘A proposal to increase investment in e.g. personnel recruitment’. In the politics stream this aggregation is ‘A commitment to increase investment in e.g. personnel recruitment’.

The final step is the conceptual model which represents the data “guided by existing theories”⁷⁹, synthesising the analysis and hopefully underscoring the case study’s contribution to knowledge. This model will also include the findings related to the policy window which cannot be found using the same methodology. A simple content analysis is best suited for this purpose where elements of public opinion, government, and interest groups can be analysed. Due to the time and access restrictions, further analysis of the policy window as its own phenomenon is required, particularly on the topic of interest groups, as reliable data on these entities is scarce. To operationalise and measure public opinion, references will be made to the yearly NATO Annual Tracking Research which includes a question on citizens’ views on defence expenditure by member state. To better understand government composition, a timeline of important events will be established to deduce when the policy window for Belgium’s defence spending trend reversal emerged.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

6. Analysis

6.1. Problem stream

6.1.1. Personnel

In the five selected articles written by four authors there were ten quotes that directly referred to the negative consequences that a continuing declining defence budget would constitute. Considering the importance given by the authors to the theme of personnel, this theme was subdivided into recruitment, training, ability, and retention of personnel, with each subdivision constituting a different negative consequence to the overall theme of personnel.

The problem of recruitment is the most visible in this analysis, with a mention by Biscop, and a more thorough problem formulation by Mattelaer, but as noted in the operationalisation, these problem formulations are usually nested in multiple themes, underlining that weaknesses in one theme tend to affect other themes. A good example of this is the warning found in quote 17 by Mattelaer on the effects that the downtrend in personnel recruitment and retention will have on the operational capacity:

“Given this quasi-freefall in human resources, the challenge is not how to downsize the force from its 2018 level of 29,225 men and women in uniform to the 25,000 level the Strategic Vision puts forward (including 1,000 defence civilians). Rather, it is to avoid crashing through this objective and sinking to far lower numbers. Such an implosion of the personnel structure would have grave consequences as far as operational output capacity is concerned.”⁸⁰

The theme of personnel recruitment has the most occurrences, particularly by Mattelaer, closely followed by the theme of personnel training as highlighted by three out of four authors. Equally noteworthy is that every instance of a problem formulation on the theme of personnel training also includes a formulation of how this will negatively impact the theme of operations. Quote 10 by Coelmont, for instance, does not describe the consequences of a continuing underinvestment in training lightly:

⁸⁰ Mattelaer, A. (2018) *Ibid.*, p. 4

“Having the appropriate expertise is the fruit of decades of investing in permanent education and training. This is a core condition for success in operations. Tampering with this is fatal, in more than one sense; for the individual, for the operation as such, for the whole of the military and political system including.”⁸¹

It is also Coelmont that includes the theme of personnel ability when discussing operational capabilities, again establishing a thematic connection between problem formulations on both personnel and operations when facing underinvestment. Moreover, apart from Mattelaer’s previously mentioned quote that included the subdivision of personnel retention, it is once more Coelmont that highlights the issue of underinvestment in personnel retention in the context of operational capabilities:

“A country that has only limited instruments also has limited freedom of movement. The decision to launch an operation or not is taken by countries that have combat units. The supplier of "niche capabilities" is requested to follow suit. As an aside, those who opt for niches for reasons of savings risk losing out on both fronts.”⁸²

In short, all authors seem to formulate the problem of underinvestment in personnel similarly in the sense that it does not only negatively affect the theme of personnel, but also its subdivisions, as well as other themes, most notably operations, as was the case in seven quotes. The problem formulation on the theme of personnel is the most prevalent for good reason as it constitutes roughly half of Belgium’s military spending. As the analysis shows, a further decline would have grave negative consequences for personnel, which in turn negatively affect the other themes of operations, major equipment, and reputation.

6.1.2. Operations

The second most common theme is operations, which was already nested in the personnel theme in some quotes, although other quotes, such as quote 6 by Biscop, are much more apt at shining a spotlight on the negative consequences that decreases in defence spending will have on the theme of operations:

“Of course, this is an international problem, which involves the EU and the US, and cannot be seen separately from (at least) the war in Syria and Iraq. If Belgium wants to

⁸¹ Coelmont, J. (2015) Ibid., p. 5

⁸² Coelmont, J. (2015) Ibid., p. 3

be part of the solution, it must be able to contribute to the international action - and therefore be able to deploy the army abroad instead of in our own cities. And that will now become impossible if the planned savings are implemented.”⁸³

The consequences that a continuing decline in defence spending in this theme would entail, are formulated in the sense that Belgium will simply not be able to participate to operations whatsoever. These problem formulations were commonly nested with the theme of international reputation as well, in the sense that underinvestment in this area would also negatively affect Belgium’s reputation.

6.1.3. Major equipment

On the theme of major equipment there are six instances of problem formulations that a continuous underinvestment in this category would bring with. Half of those were, perhaps unsurprisingly, nested with the theme of operations. Quote 12 by Biscop best illustrates these thematic relationships, also including personnel:

“Continuing this cutback means not only no new fighter jets, but also no replacement of the frigates and no new equipment for the land component. Above all, with this budget, defence cannot recruit enough people to absorb the massive wave of retirements that will come in the coming years. Soon we will have neither the personnel nor the equipment to carry out operations.”⁸⁴

This problem formulation leaves little left for imagination and echoes the sentiment of the quotes on the theme of operations, essentially warning that a continuing underinvestment in major equipment will result in the future absence of said equipment, which in turn will have negative consequences for Belgium’s ability to carry out operations.

6.1.4. Reputation

The theme of reputation was also prominent in the problem stream, with eight quotes underlining the negative consequences that a continuing lack of investment in defence would have on Belgium’s reputation. Quote 2 and 3, both by Delcour, encapsulate the consequences of a continuing underinvestment well:

⁸³ Biscop, S. (2015) Ibid., p. 1

⁸⁴ Biscop, S. (2015a) Ibid., p. 1

“What strikes me is that Belgium promised... not to reduce its defence budget any further, while recent policy decisions show the exact opposite. This is incoherent and has disastrous consequences for the credibility of Belgium and our defence policy.”⁸⁵

“By further cutting back on Defence, we also risk coming under strong international pressure, especially since we have been the fare dodgers on the NATO train for long enough.”⁸⁶

Disastrous consequences for Belgium’s credibility and strong pressure from international allies are clearly unfavourable consequences that, according to Biscop, will arise should a decline in defence spending persist. This thematic sentiment is reflected in the other quotes as well, usually in the context of NATO and EU, and sometimes nested in with the theme of operations which can be understood as the scene where strategic responsibilities are developed and where reputations and therefore made. Belgium’s reputation as an alliance free rider makes the problem formulation on the theme of reputation that much more pertinent.

6.1.5. Summary

Problem stream	Consequences	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10	Q 11	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18
Theme	Code	Delcour				Biscop				Coelmont				Biscop				Mattelaer	
Personnel	c1																		
Recruitment	c1.1															1	1	1	1
Training	c1.2	1									1		1						
Ability	c1.3											1							
Retention	c1.4								1									1	
Operations	c2	1					1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1	1
Major equipment	c3				1	1		1	1				1				1		
Reputation	c4		1	1			1		1					1	1		1		1

Table 3: Problem stream themes summary

⁸⁵ Delcour, C.-H. (2014). *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

In the analysis of the 18 selected quotes from four authors that were published in the timeframe of 2014 until 2018, four reoccurring themes were prominent: Personnel, operations, major equipment, and reputation. The first theme of personnel was mentioned in a more divided manner, indicating a strong focus on the theme; Personnel recruitment, training, ability and retention. Subdivisions in other categories were unnecessary because specificities such as those found in the personnel category were inexistant, or rarely mentioned. All these quotes aggregated to the clear warning that continuing to cut in spending will have negative consequences to these four thematic codes. It is this framing of the problem on the subject of defence spending that was ready for coupling, thanks to the feedback on these indicators, and as analysed later in this thesis, due to the focusing event of Russia's invasion. Adding to that, every author referred to these themes at least once, indicating that this problem formulation was persistent for the whole timeframe. Some author's had a bigger focus on a particular theme, such as Coelmont's warnings on Belgian defence's operations abroad. Taking the personnel subdivision into account the overall theme was pervasive as well during the entire timeframe, with the focus depending on the author, with Mattelaer's strong warnings on personnel recruitment standing out.

Both Biscop and Mattelaer stand out among the authors as potential problem brokers. Biscop has voiced his opinion on multiple occasions, focusing mainly on operations, major equipment and reputation, through traditional news media rather than a policy brief through a research institution. Mattelaer, on the other hand, is more complete in his feedback and refers to every theme making up the problem formulation. Although this could mean that either or both authors were operating as problem brokers, individually or as a team, the evidence for this is not substantial enough to support the claim. These authors involvement in the policy stream, however, does point to that direction.

6.2. Policy stream

In this policy document, mandated by Belgian Minister of Defence Dedonder in December of 2020. Colonel Kalajzic and Struye de Swielande selected ten academics to review Belgium's 2016 Strategic Vision in light of the evolving security environment. The quotes selected from this document are excellent iterations of proposals to increase investment in defence, in part matching with the thematic areas as were found in the problem stream; personnel, operations, and major equipment. The theme of reputation did not feature in these proposals. In addition, four new themes were annotated as they pertained to proposals for increasing defence spending: Intelligence, R&D, infrastructure, and industry.

6.2.1. Personnel

Similarly to the problem stream, the theme of personnel makes multiple appearances, sometimes nested across subdivisions such as the following relatively straightforward quote 9 with regards to personnel recruitment and retention:

“This needs to be compensated both by an increase in recruitment, including to levels that exceed the current total workforce, but also by efforts to retain its personnel.”⁸⁷

Another good example of this is where the themes of personnel recruitment and ability were found depicting a proposal to increase investment in both areas:

“Defence should strive to offer a working environment in which respect and the appreciation of differences prevails. It should therefore seek to strengthen the development of a positive and inclusive organisational culture in order to attract and retain a workforce that reflects the diversity of our society, at all hierarchical levels.”⁸⁸

Codes identifying personnel themes were also found in quotes that address multiple themes at once, such as personnel training and R&D, one of the new themes, thereby highlighting the importance of thematically collaborative proposals:

⁸⁷ Kalajzic, E. et al. (2021) Ibid., p. 14

⁸⁸ Ibid.

“Defence should gain and guarantee access to resilient and secure space-based services (satellite communications, space-based ISR, PNT[Position, Navigation and Timing]) supported by trained staff and R&D programmes.”⁸⁹

Including these selected quotes, there were 13 annotations on the theme of personnel that effectively included a proposal aimed at addressing the problems as they were formulated in the problem stream. The proposals are clear, an increase in personnel recruitment, training, ability and retention across the board including, but not limited to, the use of civilians in technical and logistical matters.

6.2.2. Operations

There is one occasion of a specific policy proposal on the formulation of the problem as it pertains to the theme of operations and as it was formulated in the problem stream:

“We recommend developing a cyber-influence command to support our military operations as well as our national resilience... Homeland cyberspace operations should be complemented by deployed and remote cyberspace operations. This will require recruiting enough technicians, analysts, staff members specialised in that field.”⁹⁰

This indicates that the proposition is more so aimed at filling a gap in operational capacity rather than addressing a current deficit in that theme, which coincides with the problem formulations as they were heavily axed on the consequences that the theme of personnel would have on the theme of operations, and not the other way around. The consequences would be that Belgium would not be able to maintain its involvement in multilateral operations, and in this case the policy proposal aims to address this mainly through the theme of personnel.

6.2.3. Major equipment

The warnings of consequences of continuing underinvestment in the theme of major equipment as formulated in the problem stream were met with five instances of proposals to address these problems. Quote 14 duly encapsulates the proposal to increase investment in this theme:

“The real aim should be to ensure sufficient funding to meet Belgium’s apportioned capability targets as well as to use that capability, whenever needed, to remain a credible partner. We recommend a benchmark that designates a minimum of 20% of total

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 12

⁹⁰ Ibid.

defence spending for the purchase of military equipment in order to fill strategic capability gaps (according to the NATO guidelines on deployability and sustainability and to the PESCO commitments).”⁹¹

Other instances of occurrences of this theme are quotes that include proposals to acquire F-35’s, enter drone programs, contribute to NATO’s ballistic missile defence programme, and other investments in the multiple components making up Belgium’s defence. Despite the large cost of some of these investments, the proposals to increase investments in major equipment are clearly formulated and resemble closely the theme of major equipment in the problem stream.

6.2.4. Intelligence

Intelligence is a theme that was not framed as an issue requiring investment to avoid negative consequences in the problem stream, hence why only two instances where concrete proposals were formulated on this theme. The lack of problem formulations on this theme could indicate that this theme was not problematic to begin with, yet the policy entrepreneurs saw fit to include this as an overall theme to invest in significantly, such as TESSOC:

“To that end, we must guarantee our ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) capabilities... To maintain our position as a host state and maintain the secure functioning of these institutions, Belgium needs to strengthen TESSOC (Terrorism, Espionage, Subversion, Sabotage and Organised Crime) capabilities.”⁹²

The theme of intelligence in the other quote is nested with the theme of major equipment, which indicates that the theme is important enough to require additional investment also due to its interconnectivity with the theme of major equipment.

6.2.5. R&D

The same empirical evidence is found the R&D theme of which there were five quotes that included proposals for additional investments in R&D. Like the theme of intelligence, this theme was not one that was considered as problematic in the problem stream, but does make a large enough appearance in the policy stream to merit targeted investment proposals in order to improve. Quote 18 best summarises the driving force behind these proposals:

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 16

⁹² Ibid., p. 9-10

“Defence will need to work together with the Belgian Regions in this domain, so as to work together in order to strengthen the economic security of the federation as a whole. This implies a significant expansion of the defence R&T budget to 2% of defence spending”⁹³

Aside from direct investment in R&D, other mentions of propositions on this theme are targeted at increasing coordination and collaboration in this field with the academic and scientific community, through monetary investments, another elements that did not have its place in the problem stream.

6.2.6. Infrastructure

Policy propositions on the theme of infrastructure, similarly to operations, were only mentioned once. Moreover, it is one of four new emerging themes in the policy stream, meaning that infrastructure was not considered to be a matter that required immediate attention through investment. In the policy stream, however, the proposal of investment in green technologies and energies for the purpose of decarbonising the armed forces logistics is one that can only be done by investing in infrastructure, as would be the sustainable construction of new projects to accommodate the increase in personnel.

6.2.7. Industry

Lastly, the theme of industry merited three quotes that included specific proposals for investments. Similarly to R&D, the theme of industry overlaps with activating civilians with the aim of increasing cooperation in the Belgian defence sector, but also as a potential pipeline for recruitment, as is the case with quote 19:

“Finally, enhanced cooperation should be encouraged in the STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) between Defence, the industrial sector and higher education to provide sufficient personnel in the fields of IT, robotics, cyber security, data, artificial intelligence, quantum physics...”⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid., p. 19

⁹⁴ Ibid.

6.2.8. Summary

Policy stream	Proposals	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10	Q 11	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18	Q 19
Theme	Code																			
Personnel	p1																			
Recruitment	p1.1						1			1	1	1	1	1						1
Training	p1.2							1												
Ability	p1.3												1							
Retention	p1.4									1	1	1		1						
Operations	p2						1													
Major equipment	p3		1	1	1	1									1					
Reputation	p4																			
Intelligence	p5	1				1														
R&D	p6							1	1							1	1		1	
Infrastructure	p7								1											
Industry	p8																1	1		1

Table 4: Policy stream themes summary

In the analysis of the 19 selected quotes from the committee mandated by Minister Dedonder in December 2020, and published as a policy recommendation document in June 2021, there were seven themes found, of which four were not present in the problem stream: Intelligence, R&D, infrastructure, and industry. One theme that constituted a part of the problem framing, reputation, did not reemerge as a theme in the policy stream. The reason for this is because there were no specific policy proposals on that theme, only loose mentions of Belgium's commitments which does not reach the threshold of being actionable information. This theme therefore does not make part of the policy stream.

The four new themes were prominent enough to not be classified into subdivisions. For example, it could be argued that R&D should be a part of major equipment as they are

categorised by NATO when measuring states' defence expenditure. In the context of Belgium, however, the multiple mentions of R&D as a way of attracting investment through federal subsidies does not coincide enough with the theme of investment into major equipment which is more aimed at buying the R&D, together with major expenditure plans such as the F35 and Frigate projects. Policy proposals as pertaining to intelligence, infrastructure and industry were also developed uniquely enough with specific proposals aimed at solving the problems as formulated in the problem stream. This bears more the traces of package deals rather than concessions, also putting into question if there was any softening-up needed to achieve feasibility. The potential costs associated with these policy proposals is therefore also notable, as they look to solve more problems than were present in the problem stream, with at least two and up to seven tailored policy proposals per theme.

As for the existence of a policy entrepreneur this document by itself is not enough to identify a single person, because it is a result of the hard work of ten academics with strong inputs of outside experts. The policy entrepreneur in this case could be considered to be the select committee as a collective, but additional research into briefings, memos, and other internal documents is needed to identify whether or not a specific individual was driving the policy discussions. The inclusion of Biscop and Mattelaer into the committee could point into a certain direction considering their presence in the problem stream, but as noted there is not enough evidence to substantiate this claim.

6.3. Political stream

The STAR plan is the result of Belgium's review in defence policy. The document is exhaustive in its reasoning as it relies on the previously analysed recommendations from the expert committee, and it finely details every proposed augmentation of budget in each category of expenditure. The level of analysis to the interest of this research consists of the overarching themes. Ten quotes were annotated that included a specific solution to themes of the problem and policy streams, no new themes were found.

6.3.1. Personnel

On the theme of personnel, the essence of the policy solutions are summarised in the 10th quote. The STAR-plan goes into detail there on specific investments totalling over 2 million euros by 2030 on personnel recruitment, training, ability and retention. Every subdivision will see its own investments, including a specific solution for recruitment and retention by increasing salaries. These solutions are justified in this document by underlining the need to attract the personnel that meet the elevated criteria for operations.

6.3.2. Operations

In contrast to the policy stream, but similarly to the problem stream, the theme of operations is mentioned on three occasions. There are investments earmarked for, e.g. small arms and other non-major equipment that is required during operations, as well as investments for the increased cost associated with personnel on missions abroad. Lastly, financial means are set aside for logistics and currently inactive stocks of spare parts, ammunition and other equipment that ought to have future use in operations. The policy solution of increasing investment in the theme of operations therefore closely adheres to the problem formulation from the problem stream, as the negative consequences of underinvestment in operations should be mitigated with these additional investments as described in the politics stream despite lacking a clear presence in the policy stream.

6.3.3. Major equipment

On the theme of major equipment, the evidence for a solution to the problem as framed in the problem stream, matching the proposal from the policy stream, to vastly increase investment in this theme, is found on two occasions. In one case it is nested with the theme of intelligence, the other quote includes the infrastructure theme. The relationship between themes is due to the subdivisions within budget lines that make up the theme of major equipments, meaning that

the investments earmarked for major equipments will also affect other themes, similarly to how investments in personnel also affect required funds for operations. Moreover, it is in these quotes that Belgium's military programming law is unveiled; this law will allow for Belgium to make multi-year defence investment commitments rather than having to go through scrutiny after governmental changes. This change is by far the most important, after the decision to pivot defence spending overall.

6.3.4. Reputation

The theme of reputation is found in both problem and politics stream. In the policy stream there were no proposals found that directly addressed the theme of reputation, however, this could be due to the difficulty of formulating concrete proposals to invest in this theme. In the politics stream, one quote included the theme of reputation by directly referring to the positive effect investments in R&D will have on Belgium's reputation with PESCO, and as an EU-member seeking to achieve the 2 % target.

6.3.5. R&D

There are three quotes that address the theme of R&D in the politics stream. These include very ambitious investments in this specific theme to achieve the 2 % target of total defence expenditure, including significant investments in Belgium's Defence, Industry and Research Strategy (DIRS) and large European long-term programmes related to R&D. These solutions formulated in the politics stream echo the proposals formulated in the policy stream, including earmarking investments for closer military-civilian collaboration on the theme of R&D.

6.3.6. Infrastructure

This theme had two quotes including codes adhering to it. In essence, there is a substantial budget allocated to the modernisation of existing infrastructure as well as the construction of new projects such as the military hospital and the new HQ in Belgium. Moreover, the quotes highlight multilateral investments in NATO infrastructure and, e.g. the modernisation of the AWACS fleet. The investments earmarked in the politics stream on the theme of infrastructure exceed the proposals as formulated in the policy stream where the focus was put on decarbonising of logistics and supply chain. This increase in ambition on the theme of infrastructure going from non-existent in the problem stream, limited proposals in the policy stream, to significant investments earmarked to the theme is another indication that this theme was subject to a package deal.

6.3.7. Industry

The theme of industry was found on two occasions in the STAR-plan where investments are set aside specifically for the DIRS with a strong focus on collaboration between civilian and military industry through, e.g. R&D projects, but also to privatise many services that are deemed possible to be done by companies, such as running security of facilities, management of patrimonial camps, the technical-logistical support of weapon systems at industrial level, etc... Investments in this theme will certainly contribute to the growth of the Belgian defence industrial complex by making parts of it more accessible to non-defence actors such as private companies, and scientific and academic programs in the theme of R&D.

6.3.8. Summary

Politics stream	Solutions	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Theme	Code										
Personnel	s1										
Recruitment	s1.1										1
Training	s1.2										1
Ability	s1.3										1
Retention	s1.4										1
Operations	s2							1	1	1	
Major equipment	s3	1		1							
Reputation	s4				1						
Intelligence	s5	1									
R&D	s6				1	1	1				
Infrastructure	s7		1	1							
Industry	s8					1				1	

Table 5: Politics stream themes summary

Dedonder's STAR-plan is an excellent document stipulating Belgium's new defence policy, including specific mentions on its spending policy, which is the main subject of this thesis. As noted, the document was based on, and includes it as its first chapter, the policy

recommendations from the policy stream that were published 30 June 2021. The STAR-plan was published 2 May 2022 and made into law 20 June 2022, within less than three months. This short timeframe will also be addressed later in the policy window analysis.

Whereas the theme reputation was absent due to a lack of specific budgetary policy proposals, the politics stream document does formulate a specific solution that coincides with reputation as formulated in the problem stream. All problem and policy stream themes are therefore present in the politics stream, as the analysis shows, with at least one mention per theme and maximum four if the personnel subdivisions are included.

No other specific themes were found which indicates a strong reliance and trust in the policy recommendations document written by the policy entrepreneurs in the policy stream, including the four new themes that emerged in that stream. Intelligence, R&D, infrastructure and industry were not a part of the problem stream, yet the policy proposals and solutions feature them as key components of the heightened defence expenditure. A reason for this could be the policy focus on public-private partnerships which are more-so part of these four themes than the original four themes where outsourcing is less viable. Overall, every theme will see an increase in investment by 2030 which is an ambitious solution that again underlines the rather sudden trend reversal.

6.4. Policy window

The coupling of problem, policy and politics stream is done during a policy window, as described in the theoretical framework. National mood, government, and interest groups play a large role in this. As far as the interest groups are concerned, their wishes in matters of defence spending are presumably either in line with the idea of increasing defence spending, such as the Belgian Security and Defence Industry, or against it, such as the Belgian ‘Vredesactie’ (Peace Action). It is therefore difficult to assess their stance without a thorough analysis of these interest groups’ positioning towards defence reforms. Moreover, there is a certain degree of access required, and there is the argument that these interest groups due to their nature are less inclined to drastically shift their stances on defence spending. For these reasons interest groups does not make part of the analysis of this thesis.

In terms of national mood, since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine debates on defence spending in Belgium have flourished in the public and political sphere, however, this data is not overly

useful to capture a change in these attitudes considering these questions were not asked, at least not consistently, prior to 2022. Luckily, NATO has had an interest in the public opinions of its members since its inception in 1950 with the goal of promoting and coordinating public information. Its current public opinion research programme has been in place since 2019.⁹⁵ This implies that their methodology has remained similar enough to track the Belgian responses over time. The most significant question to this research is:

“Which of the following best reflects your view on your nation’s defence spending?”

The possible answers to this question were that the country should spend more on defence, the country should maintain current spending levels, the country should spend less on defence, or don’t know. The results for Belgium from 2019 to 2023 are compiled in table 6 with the respected answers codified as Increase, Maintain, Lower, and Don’t know:

Belgium	Increase	Maintain	Lower	Don't know
2019 ⁹⁶	28%	41%	18%	14%
2020 ⁹⁷	25%	40%	16%	19%
2021 ⁹⁸	24%	40%	16%	20%
2022 ⁹⁹	33%	37%	13%	18%
2023 ¹⁰⁰	43%	33%	11%	13%

Table 6: Summary of public support for defence spending in Belgium 2019-2023

⁹⁵ Nato (2024) *NATO Public Opinion Research*, NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_207244.htm (Accessed: 20 December 2024).

⁹⁶ *NATO audience insight: Alliance Polling (2020)* NATO. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/SGReport/2019/audience-insight-en.pdf> (Accessed: 20 December 2024).

⁹⁷ *NATO Annual Tracking Research 2020 (2021)* NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_182838.htm (Accessed: 20 December 2024).

⁹⁸ *NATO annual tracking research 2021 (2022)* NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/220331-annual_tracker_report.pdf (Accessed: 12 January 2025).

⁹⁹ *NATO Annual Tracking Research 2022 (2023)* NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/3/pdf/230320-annual_tracker_report.pdf (Accessed: 21 December 2024).

¹⁰⁰ *NATO annual tracking research 2023 (2024)* NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/240314-annual-tracking-2023-en.pdf (Accessed: 21 December 2024).

The most compelling evidence for a shift in public opinion in Belgium due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine are the year-over-year jumps in by 9 % from 2021 to 2022, and by 10 % from 2022 to 2023, of respondents whose views are to increase Belgium’s defence spending, accumulating an 86 % gain from the 24 % in 2021 to the 43 % in 2023. The category of respondents that did not know whether to increase, maintain, or decrease Belgian defence spending has also seen a large decrease by 7 %. Interestingly, the respondents that have chosen to lower defence spending has been in a downward trend since 2019, somewhat accelerating after 2021 to a current low of 11 %. The previously dominant choice of maintaining defence spending has dropped enough since 2021 to be replaced by the 2023 dominant choice of increasing defence spending. This trend can clearly be observed in figure 2:

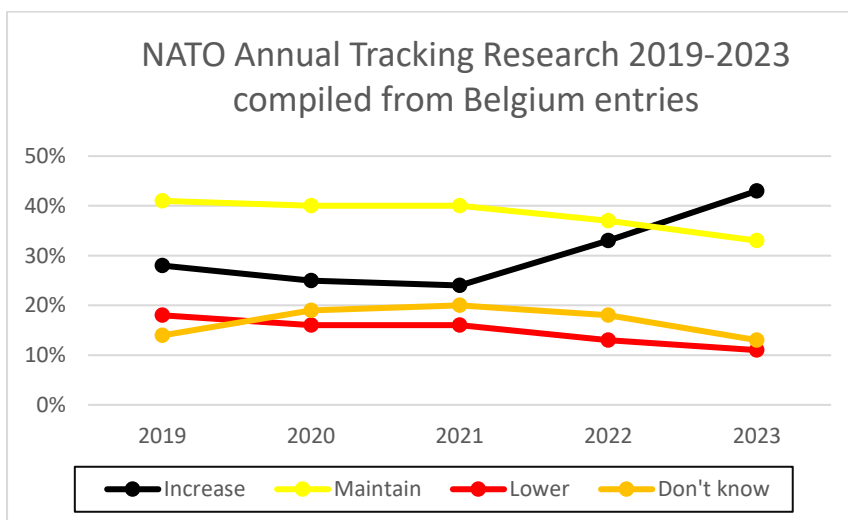


Figure 2: Visual representation of table 6

The final element that to analyse is the government composition and how it lines up with the policy shift. Below is a timeline of significant governmental changes from the proverbial Belgian defence spending dark ages in 2014, until June 2022 when the STAR-plan was made into law.

Policy window timeline	
Oct-14	Michel I is formed with Charles Michel (MR) as prime minister and Steven Vandeput (NVA) as defence minister.
May-15	The guiding principles for the Strategic Vision for Defence are approved by the council of ministers.
Jun-16	Strategic Vision for Defence is approved by the federal government.

Dec-18	Michel II is formed with Charles Michel (MR) as prime minister, and Didier Reynders as deputy prime minister as well as defence minister, after the withdrawal from Michel I by NVA.
Oct-20	De Croo I is formed with Alexander De Croo (Open Vld) as prime minister, and Ludivine Dedonder (PS) as defence minister.
Dec-20	Minister Dedonder requests Colonel Kalajzic and Professor Struye de Swielande to formulate recommendations for an update of the Strategic Vision for Defence.
Jun-21	The Strategic Vision for Defence gets updated with recommendations.
Jul-21	The guiding principles of the update of the Strategic Vision for Defence are approved by the council of ministers.
Jun-22	STAR-plan (successor of Strategic Vision for Defence) is approved by the federal government.

The multiple streams framework details that when the problem, policy, and politics stream converge, it opens a policy window. In the theoretical framework a reference was made to how focusing events or a change in government could trigger the opening of these windows. Considering the analysis of this case study it can be argued that the full-scale invasion by Russia into Ukraine was the focusing event for Belgium to pivot its defence spending policy. This opened the window of opportunity for the already existing problems with Belgian defence expenditure to be coupled with policy recommendations that addressed these problems, and with the political support to codify it into law. Interestingly, the problem stream of underfunding of Belgian defence has been around, at least in a crude form, from 2014, more than seven years before the Russian invasion of 2022. The policy stream that was coupled with the existing problem and political stream was formulated in 2021, also coinciding with the trend reversal in public opinion, slightly more than a year before the political stream was ready for coupling. This implies that the 2020 change in government and reversal in public opinion of 2021 were the building blocks for the window of opportunity, and this window was opened fully after the focusing event of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This policy window was made fully use of to codify a higher defence spending in every theme that made up the problem and policy stream.

6.5. Analytical model

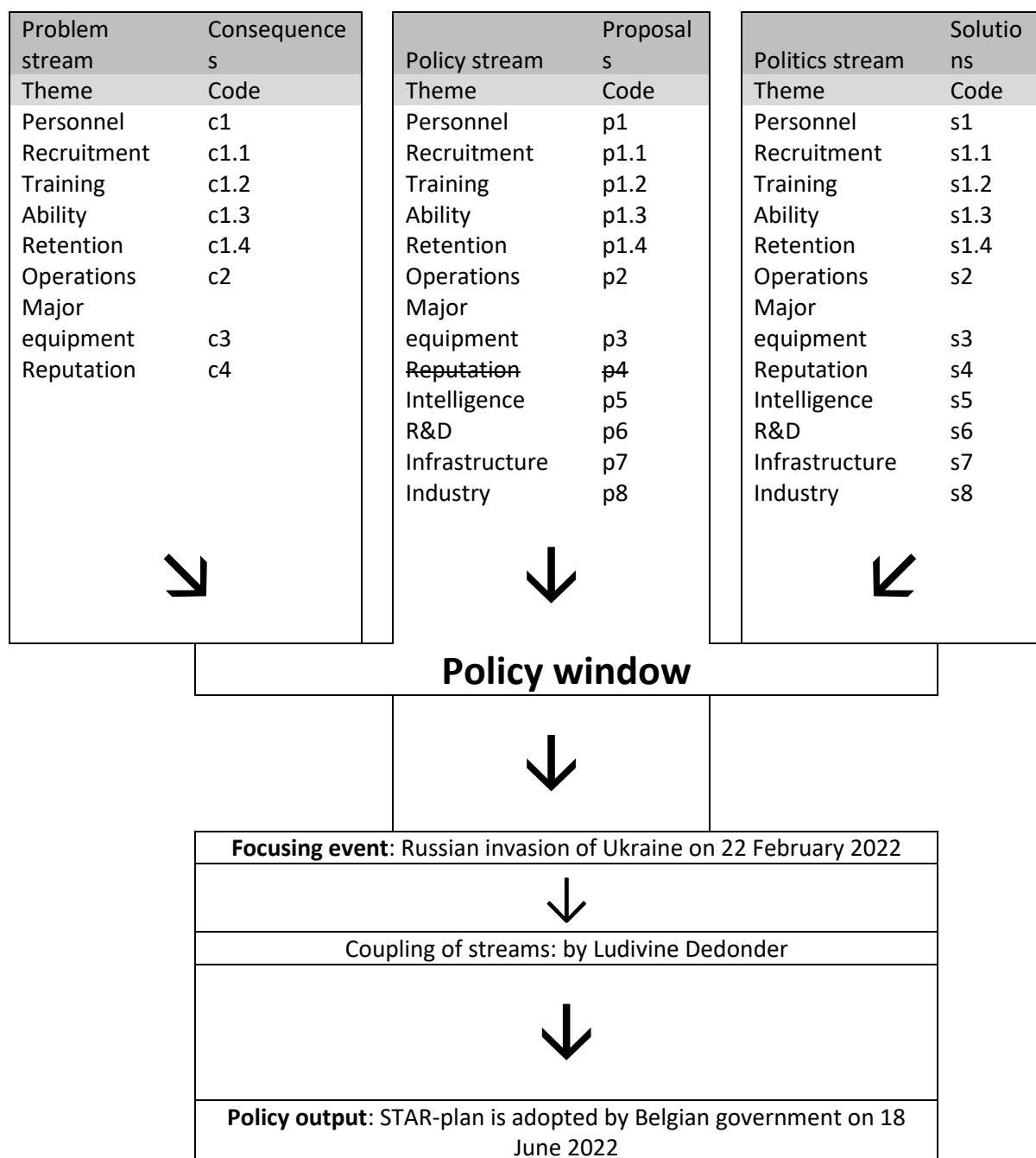


Figure 3: Analytical model of the problem, policy and politics streams

This analytical model outlines the important themes present in the problem, policy, and politics stream that were found and codified in the data as described in chapter 4 and 5. The arrows represent the direction of the stream that flows downward through the policy window, which according to the analysis was most likely due to the focusing event of the Russian invasion of

Ukraine, where the political entrepreneur Ludivine Dedonder managed to couple the existing and independently formed problem, policy and political stream. The result of this process was the policy output of the STAR-plan, effectively pivoting on Belgium's defence spending policy from austerity to expansion.

7. Conclusion

This research used the multiple streams framework to analyse how Belgium pivoted on its defence spending, despite its historic defence budget austerity. This change in policy was substantial and required the coupling of the three distinct streams that have each influenced the process independently. Viewing the policy making process through the framework of these streams allowed for a deeper understanding of how the Belgian defence spending problem was formulated, how policy proposals addressing these, and additional themes, were formulated, and how the political solutions were formulated. According to the problem stream, a continuing decline in defence spending would have negative consequences on Belgium defence's personnel, operations, major equipment, and reputation. As analysed in the policy stream, proposals were formulated to increase investments into the same categories, with exception of reputation, and into four additional themes: intelligence, R&D, infrastructure, and industry. All these themes are addressed individually in the politics stream as well, indicating a convergence of streams when the political stream's document was codified into law, during the policy window which, according to this analysis was likely opened due to a shift in public opinion on defence spending, a change in government, and most importantly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a focusing event.

With regards to the objective of finding evidence of the work of problem, policy, or political entrepreneurs this analysis remains inconclusive on the existence of a singular problem or policy entrepreneur, however, both Biscop and Mattelaer populated both problem and policy stream, so perhaps a policy tracing analysis into their contributions would show evidence of entrepreneurship in those streams. The political entrepreneur was certainly the Minister of Defence Ludivine Dedonder who spearheaded the objective of increasing defence spending by taking the policy feedback in its entirety, putting trust in the policy proposals as put forth by the strategic committee made of academics, and was met with little resistance in the process.

This defence spending increase would simply have been inconceivable without the shift in public opinion and the Russian invasion, so the question also remains to which extent this increase in defence budget will pass the test of time, particularly if public opinion were to change again when the warm phase of the war in Ukraine comes to an end through diplomatic means. Although the trend reversal is large and the increase in defence spending is substantial across all categories, it is also worth noting that in the framework of this current plan Belgium will still be 0,45 % shy of the 2 % target defence spending target agreed on by NATO members

during the Wales Summit. A new target of 3 % that is making the unofficial rounds nearly doubles the 2030 Belgian target of 1,55 %, perhaps necessitating a new and even more ambitious revision of Belgium's defence spending policy.

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