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## **Belgium's Defence Policy After the Invasion of Ukraine: A Free Rider's Business-as-Usual Approach**

*Friday 27 June 2025 10:00 (20 minutes)*

Belgium is widely known as one of NATO's most persistent free riders, deprioritizing military investments for decades. Successive budget cuts have left its armed forces weakened and ill-prepared for major geopolitical shifts. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine significantly disrupted the European security order, raising the question: to what extent did this external shock lead to a substantive shift in Belgium's defence policy? While Belgium swiftly condemned the invasion and aligned with NATO and EU-led initiatives structural constraints - underinvestment, a fragmented political system, and a political elite largely disengaged from defence matters - prevented a substantial policy shift.

This paper argues that, despite the external geopolitical shock, policy responses remained largely confined to a traditional reliance on multilateralism and minimal military spending. Although the war prompted minor adjustments, such as a stronger focus on NATO's Eastern flank over its previous attention to the Sahel, these changes were not transformative. Initial plans to reach the NATO norm of 2% GDP in defence spending by 2035 remained in place, with acceleration to 2029 occurring only after a new federal government took office in 2025. Geographic security and longstanding political inertia continue to limit meaningful adaptation to a shifting security landscape. By examining this case as an example of entrenched free riding, this paper contributes to broader debates on military burden sharing, the ability of smaller states to adapt to shifting geopolitical realities, and the resulting challenges for intra-European defence cooperation.

**What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?**

Political science

**If you are submitting an Open Panel proposal, have you included all four abstracts in attachment?**

No, I am submitting a Closed Panel abstract

**Are you a PhD student or early-career researcher?**

Yes

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