

Toespraak conferentie VVN
“Balans Belgisch lidmaatschap VNVR”

Mr Chair,

Your excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

When Belgium acceded the UN Security Council, two years ago, one of our leading newspapers headlined: “Belgium enters the Security Council with confidence”. This confidence originated in part from the fact that we got elected with 180 out of 189 votes. True, this number is the result of a consensus-building exercise, but acceding members have seen worse results.

We were confident as well, because the Belgian diplomacy can rely on a year-long tradition of consensus-building – so crucial a skill in the UN context - as well as on a remarkable expertise in certain area’s that can ensure even a small country like ours added value among the major players of the world.

But now I feel comfortable enough to admit we might not have been as confident as some might have thought. This is because we were fully aware of the difficult task that was ahead of us. Being member of this ‘inner circle of the world’, albeit temporary, and working on this variety of issues, takes a tremendous amount of resources, specifically human. And on the resources front, we fall short of most other member states at the Security Council-

table. Comparing the means of our embassies around the world with those of the P5 members, or even with those of neighboring countries, is sometimes a depressing pastime. Frankly, sometimes I wonder how our diplomats manage. I bet they sometimes wonder themselves.

At the risk of sounding a little Calimero-like, being a small country at the big-boys table is evidently not an easy undertaking. If for nothing else, because it creates great expectations on the home front, expectations that are almost sure to be disappointed. There is a saying that says “politics is the art of the feasible”. This is even more true for diplomacy, and the security council being in some respect the highest form of diplomacy, one must temper the expectations on what can be achieved in this forum.

However, expectations and ambitions are two different things altogether. It is not because we are aware of the limitations of our countries capacity and of the constraints of the Security Council itself, that we did not have the ambition to do as much as we can out with our membership. We could have made it easy on ourselves and become a “niche-member”, so to speak, and focus on the areas and thematics where we have specific expertise, such as Central-Africa. Instead we chose to aspire to be a fully-fledged member and try to have our input on the whole of the functioning of the Security Council.

In all modesty, I think we succeeded in being active in and contributing to the work on the three major ‘chapters’ of the agenda of the Security council: the mandates of the UN-operations, the so-called ‘political’ discussions, like Burma or Zimbabwe and the thematical discussions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The discussions on the mandates of peace-keeping operations constitute an important part, in substance as well as in workload, of the work of the UN-Security Council. To substantiate this with some numbers: the Council currently 'manages' 16 peace-keeping operations, comprising a total of 109.000 members of personnel and with a budget amounting to 7.1 billion dollars.

In this task, the Council is constantly forced to reconcile the sometimes extremely high expectations with the resources that are already at their limits, while at the same time trying to reconcile the need to act quickly in times of crisis with the difficult task of ensuring a minimum degree of security for the peace-keeping forces.

In this complex juggling of often contradictory interests, Belgium has always striven to adopt a realistic approach: it would be counter-productive and even disadvantageous for the credibility of the Security Council to take decisions that are impossible to apply; be it because of a lack of resources or because the conditions in the field for a successful peace-keeping operation are not met. Therefore, as a rule, we favor operations there, and only there, where they can really have an impact, preferably in close cooperation with regional organizations.

More and more often, the Security Council deals with conflict situations in the broad sense, where an intervention is not in place and not envisaged. These are the so-called ‘political’ discussions. Often they deal with countries which experience a difficult democratization-process –to say the least- such as Zimbabwe, Kenya and Myanmar. Throughout its membership, Belgium has always striven to put these questions on the agenda of the Security Council, often in close cooperation with the European Union. It was Belgium that, through a letter to the presidency of the council in June 2008, put the issue of Zimbabwe on the Council’s agenda. In this case, the Council was able to exert enough pressure to achieve some progress, although the situation today shows that a lot of work is still ahead of us.

Belgium has consistently attempted bring thematical issues in to the discussions. The word “consistently” is of utmost important here, because it is only through continuous references to certain points of attention, that these points are heard and taken up by other delegations.

One of those themes we pride ourselves in bringing up consistently- sometimes even to the point of harassment of other delegations- is our concern with international law, and specifically the battle against impunity. I do not have to go to lengths to bring to remembrance the often unspeakable atrocities that are going on in the world today, even as we speak: the murdering, the maiming, the plundering, and last but not least: the acts that have more to do with sexual torture and mutilation than with genuine rape. We, as a country, believe that these topics should be at the center of

attention on the international scene, and surely in the Security Council. One of the examples where I am specifically proud of the achievements is Darfur. This issue was originally treated through a triple approach (peace-keeping, political negotiations and the humanitarian situation). Here we –together with our partners- succeeded in adding a fourth point of attention: the battle against impunity and the cooperation with the international criminal court. I am of course very aware of the problems with implementation and that the situation in the field is still gruesome, but at least we were able to get this issue in the center of the debates of the world's number one policy-making venue.

Your excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

An exhaustive enumeration of all the thematic issues we tried to cover- from the broad attention to humanitarian issues over the transversal attention to gender-issues to the specific and horrific problem of child-soldiers- would lead us too far. But I can not go without mentioning the issue of natural resources and their link with conflict.

I personally pushed, not long after being granted the honor of becoming Minister of foreign affairs, to take up the issue of the link between resources and conflict, and how to break it, at the center of our policy. Building on our experience and expertise in this issue, Belgium dedicated its first thematic debate as president of the council to the question of what the UN –from a security perspective- can do. To the outside observer, it might seem that the results of this exercise are not too impressive. Of course, achieving

diplomatic progress is often a work of such small steps, that sometimes the results are difficult to be seen with the naked eye. But the mere fact to have this delicate issue for the first time discussed at the Security Council, is in my mind hugely important, because it is an acknowledgement by the highest council that this is indeed also a “peace and security” issue.

Your excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Defining one’s positions, ambitions and goals is one thing, achieving them is a whole other matter. And within the concept of the Security Council, achievement is defined by the degree of success in convincing other delegations and the council as a whole. For this, we developed a few ‘tricks’ I’d like to share with you today.

In our experience, we get the most willing audience in the Council when our interventions are “no-nonsense”, reasonable and pragmatic, while at the same time original and solution-oriented. This might seem evident, but often member states are urged by internal pressures to take principled stances that will not achieve much in the New York environment. Resisting these pressures is not always easy, and not always popular, but crucial to get results. One has to choose his battles.

Expertise is obviously an asset, and we have some of that in our diplomatic network. In this context I would like to underline the importance of close contacts with civil society. These contacts can give a country the necessary

insights to have an added value in discussions in the Security Council. Belgium tried to have intensive contacts on a regular basis.

The Belgian voice resonates more loudly with the support of the EU, if we can benefit from what I call the “European loudspeaker”. To this end, we had informal but regular and intensive coordination with EU-partners, both in New York and in European capitals.

Nevertheless, we do not want to polarize. On the contrary: we strive to be a reliable partner to permanent as well as non-permanent members, to European and to non-European member states. In this we build upon our own internal consensus-building tradition. This made us a suitable candidate for sometimes delicate assignments, like assuming the presidency of the Al-Qaeda and Iran sanctions committees.

Your excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Belgium’s time at the “big boy’s table” is for now over. Surely not all expectations have been met, but I do consider our membership of the Security Council a success. It has surely been a great investment of investments, human and material. But it has first and foremost been an investment in human and diplomatic capital: we’ve expanded our expertise, the experience of our diplomats, the credibility and visibility of our country on the international scene.

For me, this is surely not an end point in our UN aspirations. Of course, the cases and the themes that we fought to bring to the attention of the Security council, will remain at the center of our foreign policy. Equally important is that we do not let this experience go to waste. Our membership was a challenge, an opportunity as well as a learning exercise for our diplomatic core. They have proven to be up to the task. This experience will serve them well in future challenges ahead: very shortly the presidency of the EU, and undoubtedly someday a new membership of the UN Security Council.

Therefore, if for nothing else: yes it was worth it!

I thank You.