



## Strengthening parliamentary oversight of defence procurement: lessons from Belgium

Yf Reykers

To cite this article: Yf Reykers (2021): Strengthening parliamentary oversight of defence procurement: lessons from Belgium, *European Security*, DOI: [10.1080/09662839.2021.1886087](https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1886087)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1886087>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 19 Feb 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 26



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## Strengthening parliamentary oversight of defence procurement: lessons from Belgium

Yf Reykers 

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

This paper asks: to what extent can a dedicated or special committee with access to classified information empower parliaments to oversee major defence procurement decisions? These decisions often involve a mixture of political, military, economic and societal interests. Particularly after episodes of contestation or controversy, questions tend to arise about how to empower parliaments. The central argument in this paper is that being institutionally empowered and incentivised does not guarantee rigorous oversight. The availability of expertise is an oft-ignored factor in studies of parliamentary oversight. An analysis of oversight behaviour by the Belgian Federal Parliament during the acquisition of new fighter jets (2015–2018) shows that members of parliament also need to be capable of mobilising the necessary expertise in order to translate technical information in such a way that it allows them to influence decision-making, which is often executive-dominated. In this way, this paper contributes to managing expectations about the capacity of parliaments to cope with complex military problems.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 November 2020  
Accepted 2 February 2021

### KEYWORDS

Defence procurement;  
parliaments; oversight;  
committees; expertise;  
Belgium

## Introduction

Buying tanks, vessels or fighter jets is far from everyday business for policymakers. They need to choose reliable weaponry, guarantee economic returns on investment and assess existing alliances and partnerships. These decisions, therefore, not only attract considerable attention within political and military spheres; industrial stakeholders and media also tend to be particularly vigilant. Major defence procurement decisions come with a risk of politicisation, contestation and even controversy.

In Belgium, several high-level office holders resigned in the early 1990s after allegations that manufacturers Agusta and Dassault bribed them to secure procurement contracts. This scandal led to the creation of a special parliamentary committee for defence acquisitions, in order to foster future parliamentary oversight. In Canada, a Conservative minority government was confronted with a vote of no-confidence in 2011 after contestation of its cost estimations of the Joint Strike Fighter. This delayed the acquisition of new fighter jets for years and sparked debate about the structure of the Canadian defence

**CONTACT** Yf Reykers  [y.reykers@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:y.reykers@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

procurement system, including about how to strengthen transparency (Lagassé 2020). More generally, defence procurement decisions are often made with incomplete information, which can make governments underestimate price escalations in the long run (Hartley 2007, van Eekelen 2013). SIGMA, a joint initiative of the OECD and the EU to foster good governance, has noted that the “environment of secrecy and lessened transparency (...) lends itself to becoming a fertile ground for protectionism, corruption and inefficient use of public resources” (SIGMA 2011, p. 3).

This does not mean that major defence procurement dossiers are inherently fraudulent or necessarily go wrong. Rather, it shows that decision-making takes place in a complex playing field wherein rigorous parliamentary oversight would be justified. Yet, we do not know if this is a realistic expectation. Not all parliaments are equally equipped to oversee complex military problems.

One potential approach is the creation of a dedicated or special committee with access to classified information. In this paper, I analyse to what extent this approach empowers parliaments to oversee major defence procurement decisions. Oversight is understood as parliamentary activities that aim “to detect and remedy executive-branch violations of legislative goals” (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984, p. 165). Defence procurement is defined as “the process by which states acquire goods and services required by their armed forces” (Uttley 2018, p. 73). I focus on procurement of goods and services for purely military purposes, as these have the most significant national security and budgetary implications.

We know from previous research that institutionally stronger parliaments should in principle be better able to perform oversight of defence affairs. Dedicated defence committees and access to classified information are expected to offer better oversight powers than multi-issue committees (Born and Hänggi 2005, Auerswald *et al.* 2020). We also know that informal factors, such as party discipline, majority-opposition dynamics and electoral calculations could lead to members of parliament (MPs) opting to oversee decision-making only superficially (Lagassé and Saideman 2017, Fonck and Reykers 2018, Mello and Peters 2018). Interestingly, most research on parliamentary oversight of defence affairs seems to suggest that as long as MPs have these necessary institutional powers and sufficient incentives, they will be able to play their oversight role to the fullest. This line of thinking assumes that they have the required expertise to deal with complex military problems. So far, we know little about the sources and role of MPs’ expertise in defence affairs or how expertise interacts with institutional capacities.

I suggest that a dedicated or special committee empowers parliaments only if MPs are willing and able to mobilise the necessary expertise to interpret and use technical information in a politically meaningful way. In other words, being institutionally empowered and historically or personally incentivised might not suffice to guarantee rigorous oversight of defence procurement, given the technical nature of this policy field. I test this idea by analysing the oversight behaviour of Belgium’s federal parliament during the acquisition of new fighter jets from 2015 until October 2018, when the government decided to buy 34 American-built F-35 fighter jets. The empirics show largely reactive oversight behaviour and a heavy reliance on third-party information which was not always reliable. This ultimately undermined the opposition’s oversight efforts.

The value of this paper is threefold. First, it draws attention to the importance of both dedicated and special committees for understanding parliamentary oversight of defence

affairs and argues that their study requires evaluating their staffing, procedures and confidentiality regulations. Second, it highlights the role of mobilising and nurturing expertise to empower parliaments. In the absence of in-house parliamentary expertise, this responsibility rests on the shoulders of individual MPs and their political parties. While majority-opposition dynamics might prevail and fire-alarm oversight is often preferred, more expertise would allow for better evaluating the trustworthiness of information and performing more rigorous oversight. In other words, access to information without the knowledge or help to interpret that information adds little to MPs' capacities influence decision-making and detect or remedy undesired executive behaviour. Finally, this research shows that more in-depth case studies are needed to adjust expectations about the capacity of parliaments to cope with complex military problems. That includes covering the full range of defence affairs, including the highly technical field of defence procurement.

### Parliaments and defence affairs

The study of parliaments in security and defence policy has blossomed in recent years (Mello and Peters 2018). Most studies echo the core premise of the civil–military relations literature, which is that “[r]egardless of how strong the military is, civilians are supposed to remain the political masters” (Feaver 1999, p. 125). The dominant idea is that even in domains characterised by military technicality, civilian control should be guaranteed.

Interestingly, questions about democratic oversight of defence procurement decision-making are not yet commonplace. While the literature on defence expenditure and procurement is rich, it remains fragmented. There have been studies on the effect of alliance politics (Vucetic and Tago 2015, von Hlatky and Rice 2018), corruption in defence spending (Gupta *et al.* 2001, Rendon and Rendon 2016, Ali and Solarin 2019), the impact of business monopolies (De Fraja and Hartley 1996, Hartley 2007) and state–defence industry relations (Vucetic and Tago 2015, Calcara 2017). Actual oversight of defence procurement has so far been touched upon only in analyses of concrete controversies (Reykers and Fonck 2020) or in studies covering oversight in the wider field of defence affairs (Lagassé and Saideman 2019).

Deepening defence integration in the European Union (EU) adds to the need for research on oversight of defence procurement. Since the adoption of the 2009 EU defence procurement Directive (2009/81/EC), the European Commission has become a supranational force regulating competitive tenders in the area of defence acquisitions (Blauberger and Weiss 2013). New questions about parliamentary oversight of defence procurement, therefore, arise, such as how this growing legislative complexity affects national parliaments. Yet, we still lack basic knowledge about whether and how parliaments use the means at their disposal to oversee the government and the military administration in major weapon acquisitions.

Studies of parliamentary oversight of defence affairs more generally almost always refer to insights about the US Congress. Applying a principal–agent logic, McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) introduced the idea that parliaments can oversee the executive and the administration in two ways. One way is to act as *police patrols*, whereby parliament takes a rather intrusive role and permanently monitors the agent. This is costly

and time-consuming. Alternatively, they can rely upon more reactive control mechanisms, or *fire alarms*. This implies that legislators respond to signals from third actors, such as media, citizens, NGOs or whistle-blowers.

While this logic has been widely applied, there is increasing recognition that using the US Congress as the yardstick for evaluating oversight of defence affairs sets an “artificially high standard” (Auerswald *et al.* 2020, p. 8). The US Congress is exceptionally empowered, with dedicated committees, considerable formal powers and in-house research services. In most countries, parliaments have far fewer capabilities to oversee defence affairs. This variation has been mapped in detail in studies of parliamentary war powers (Born and Hänggi 2005, Peters and Wagner 2011, Dieterich *et al.* 2015).

Dedicated defence committees, such as in the US Congress, rather than multi-issue committees are nonetheless commonly assumed to empower parliaments to perform oversight (Born and Hänggi 2005, Auerswald *et al.* 2020). Particularly if these dedicated committees are given access to confidential information, active oversight becomes a viable option. Yet, there is also ample proof that having the authority and capabilities does not necessarily imply that MPs will use them. Factors that determine MPs’ willingness relate to majority-opposition dynamics, party ideology, vote-earning strategies and party discipline; or external factors, such as audience costs and media attention (Kaarbo and Kenealy 2016, Mello and Peters 2018, Fonck *et al.* 2019, Lagassé and Saide-man 2019, Coticchia and Moro 2020). For instance, Lagassé and Saide-man (2017) showed that parliamentary access to (classified) information does not necessarily equal intrusive oversight. MPs might prefer reactive oversight when they care more about winning the next election. As such, institutional resources alone do not suffice, MPs also need to be incentivised.<sup>1</sup>

Major defence procurement dossiers can be expected to almost inherently come with such incentives. Incomplete information about production and delivery costs, secrecy concerns and arms industry lobbying are just a few of the sensitivities that might incentivise MPs to invest in oversight. The job market implications and long-term budgetary commitments that come with these decisions further add to that. Given that historical experiences may also result in lessons learnt and may change parliamentary practice over time (Wagner 2006), one can expect MPs to be particularly vigilant in countries with past controversies. In those cases, empowering parliaments through dedicated defence committees, or perhaps even special committees for defence procurement, might easily be seen as a step towards more oversight, more transparent decision-making and less controversy about final outcomes. This assumption of legislative-institutional empowerment has guided past institutional change in cases such as Belgium. So far, however, we do not know whether these committees truly empower parliaments.

## Dedicated committees and parliamentary expertise

I seek to answer the question: to what extent can a dedicated or special committee with access to classified information empower parliaments to oversee major defence procurement decisions? This question builds on the dominant principal-agent logic as applied in most civil-military relations studies (Feaver 1999). A core assumption in many of these studies is that when principals have the required institutional powers, combined with reasons to believe that there is a risk of abuse, they will put more effort into overseeing

the agent. In that sense, a parliamentary committee dedicated to defence affairs or a special committee on defence procurement with access to confidential information might be expected to empower MPs.

What has so far been left out of the equation in many studies on parliamentary oversight of defence affairs is the capacity of political parties and MPs to address complex military problems. We do not know how technicality and issue complexity, two key characteristics of major weapon acquisitions, interact with the legal-institutional oversight capabilities and political calculations of MPs. In their study of parliamentary war powers, Born and Hanggi emphasise the importance of parliamentary staff, resources and expertise, by saying that “parliaments need to work through specialised committees which have their own budget, expert and support staff as well as access to research and documentation services and external expertise provided for by civil society organisations” (Born and Hänggi 2005, p. 9). Yet, they only focused on troop deployments and have not moved beyond a cross-country classification on the basis of indicators.

In their report on the role of parliaments in European Defence Cooperation, Bakker *et al.* (2016, p. 5) emphasise the importance of defence knowledge for MPs and the need to “have access to either in-house research expertise on defence or be able to commission research externally”. Van Eekelen suggests that even if information is available, “considerable expertise is required in making sense out of the multitude of claims and counterclaims” (van Eekelen 2013, p. 18). He refers to parliaments with in-house research services, such as the US Congress, the German Bundestag, the French National Assembly, the UK parliament and the Swedish Riksdag. In their comparative study of parliamentary oral questions on defence affairs, Rozenberg *et al.* show that expertise is not a guarantee for rigorous oversight. Expertise can as much be a tool for self-promotion as it is a tool for reducing information asymmetries. Yet, their study focused only on plenary debates, leading them to call for more research on parliamentary control based on committees (Rozenberg *et al.* 2011).

I suggest that a dedicated or a special committee is expected to empower parliaments only if MPs are willing and capable of acquiring or mobilising the necessary expertise. In doing so, I follow an information processing understanding of expertise (Blom 2021). This implies a capacity to gather technical or subject information, interpret it and translate it in a politically relevant message to affect policymaking. Expertise can come from multiple sources. In the absence of parliamentary in-house expertise, MPs might rely on their political parties’ study centres. They can also use their own personal network to mobilise expertise. Limited available staff, budgets and expertise within parliament or within MPs’ own parties create a need for mobilising expertise externally.

To test this argument, more specifically to assess the quality of oversight, it is important to move beyond the proactive (police patrol) versus reactive (fire-alarm) oversight dichotomy. The reason for doing so is that parliaments that rely mainly on reactive oversight or fire alarms might still influence decision-making. In a similar vein, holding hearings or commissioning studies, which are typical examples of proactive or police patrol oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984, p. 166), do not guarantee that parliaments can meaningfully use the information from these activities to influence or remedy decision-making by the government or military. In other words, this dichotomy does not tell us much about the quality of oversight, as it fails to consider the capacity of MPs to use information in a politically meaningful manner. I will, therefore, rather focus on assessing oversight rigour.

This builds on theorisation by Auerswald *et al.* (2020), who measured how much power parliaments have to gather information and use this information to influence decision-making. Rigorous oversight can, in that sense, be proactive or reactive. What differentiates rigorous from non-rigorous oversight here is the ability of MPs to influence the course of action by using their information to either delay, halt, revise or revoke the final decision. Following this more delineated operationalisation, studying oversight requires evaluating the capacity of MPs to gather, translate and use information to influence the course of action. In addition to mapping parliamentary staffing, rules and procedures, this also implies identifying MPs' sources of information.

## Parliamentary oversight in Belgium

To answer the research question and test the expertise argument, I focus on Belgium's Federal Parliament. Three motivations guide this choice. First, the Belgian political system has a clear separation of powers between parliament, government and the military. The executive (and the Minister of Defence in particular) *de facto* controls the military branch, while parliament controls the executive. The relevant parliamentary committees are unable to direct the armed forces independently of the executive, except for setting the budget which requires parliamentary approval. This avoids overlap between the legislative-executive and executive-administration chains of delegation.

Second, from a comparative perspective, the Belgian Federal Parliament seems to be institutionally empowered to perform rigorous oversight. It is one of the few parliaments with a Special Parliamentary Committee for Defence Acquisitions and Sales, with access to classified information (Born and Hänggi 2005, Auerswald *et al.* 2020). This Special Committee operates alongside the national Defence Committee, which is a permanent parliamentary committee strictly dedicated to defence policy. Both committees formally control the Minister of Defence; military officials appearing in both committees do so under the aegis of their minister. The Special Committee has a right to request (classified) information about the full spectrum of defence acquisitions and sales projects. Its advice is formally required for all dossiers with an estimated (yearly) cost of minimum 2.2 million euros (Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Administratief Protocol, 2017).

The role of the Special Committee is, however, solely advisory and non-binding. Its members are, furthermore, bound by strict confidentiality with closed-door meetings only. Crucially, both the Defence Committee and the Special Committee can rely upon only one parliamentary officer tasked with administrative and procedural functions. Since Belgian legislative committees have no separate budget for organising events or ordering studies, the only institutional source of expertise at their disposal is the Court of Audit, a collateral body of parliament, mandated to provide external scrutiny of the budget and spending. But the Court of Audit is limited to providing ex-post evaluations on defence spending, making it a bystander as long as there is no government decision in a procurement dossier (Court of Audit, Law of 29 October 1846, Art. 5). This puzzling set-up with both a dedicated and a special committee but with limited in-house expertise makes the Belgian parliament a crucial case for learning about the role of expertise.

Third, a past procurement controversy tends to cast a shadow over contemporary acquisitions. In the early 1990s, an investigation revealed how multiple members of government had received bribes from aviation companies Agusta and Dassault, meant to

ensure that Belgium would buy the Agusta A109 helicopter (and a deal on refitting the F-16 fighter jets) (Maesschalck and Van de Walle 2006). The case led to the resignation of the Minister of Interior Affairs, the Minister of Defence and then NATO Secretary-General Willy Claes (who was Minister of Economic Affairs during the acquisition process). Upon the advice of a parliamentary investigative commission, it also led to the creation of the aforementioned Special Committee for Defence Acquisitions and Sales in 1995. This controversial precedent can be expected to serve as an incentive for MPs to, at the very least, remain wary of potential misconduct.

Two additional contextual factors are relevant. The first is that the Belgian political system is a proportional parliamentary system, traditionally governed by a majority coalition. High levels of party discipline make that oversight largely depends on the opposition's efforts, unless there is distrust between governing coalition parties (Fonck and Reykers 2018). Lagassé and Saideman (2019) also suggested that Belgium's public Defence Committee is likely to debate in a more confrontational manner than the closed Special Committee, where they foresee more cordial and trust-based legislative behaviour.

The other factor is that there are several confidentiality clauses which might shape parliamentary debate. The Public Procurement Act of 17 June 2016 lays down the core of Belgium's legislation on public procurement, including rules about transparency, equality and fairness of competition. It stipulates that until the procurer has decided on the selection of the candidates, "tenderers and third parties do not have access to the documents relating to the tendering procedure" (Art 13 para 1). It also determines that information that is considered confidential by the candidate enterprise can be exempted from disclosure. The Act of 11 December 1998 on Classification and Security Clearance prescribes that information on matters of "the external security of the state and the international relations of Belgium" can be classified with a secrecy or confidentiality label (Art 3). The Act of 11 April 1994 on Open Government sets the conditions for the right to consult administrative documents. Yet, it foresees that these consultation rights do not outweigh interests such as "the security of the population" or the "international relations of Belgium" (Art 6 para 1).

## Belgium's fighter jet replacement

The analysis focuses on Belgium's procurement of new fighter jets in replacement of its ageing F-16 fighter jet fleet. The process was concluded by the government decision of 25 October 2018 to buy 34 American-built F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets for a total acquisition cost of approximately 3.8 billion euros. Empirically, I build on transcripts of 17 Defence Committee meetings, complemented with interviews with involved MPs and a defence official.<sup>2</sup> The meeting records allow for assessing the level and type of oversight. The interviews offer insights into what happened behind the closed doors of the Special Committee and how MPs gathered their information.

This particular episode has been selected for several reasons. The sizable acquisition costs made this dossier subject to advice from the Special Committee. It involved national security and international alliance considerations that add to its technicality and complexity, both in terms of technologies and interests involved. More generally, fighter jet acquisitions are considered most-likely dossiers for rigorous parliamentary oversight, given the uncertainty under which decision-making takes place and the risk of contestation



(Hoeffler and Mérand 2016). The clearest illustrations of contestation outside Belgium took place in Canada (Byers and Webb 2011, Vucetic 2016, von Hlatky and Rice 2018), Italy (Coticchia 2016), and to a certain extent in Denmark and Norway (Ringsmose 2013, Vucetic and Rydberg 2015). Criticism about a lack of transparency, questions about financial assessments and concerns about the credibility of competitive tenders seem to be shared across these cases.

While defence policy in Belgium is generally not politically nor publicly salient, the prospect of acquiring new fighter jets did spark considerable debate. Already in 2014, a coalition of NGOs and peace movements actively campaigned against the acquisition of new fighter jets. They continued doing so during the procurement process, often referring to survey data that seemed to indicate low public support for new fighter jets (e.g. Vrede.be 2014).<sup>3</sup> The question as to whether these fighter jets would be capable of carrying nuclear weapons added to its salience in public debate and among left-leaning politicians. The combination of a centre-right government with a left-leaning opposition, consisting of both Flemish and Walloon socialist and green parties, created a setting wherein this dossier was contested from the start. The Minister of Defence, furthermore, called the dossier “the purchase of the century”, words which were recycled by both majority and opposition in the years that followed (VRTNews 2014).<sup>4</sup>

## Background

Decision-making took place largely under the Michel I government, a centre-right majority coalition government which took office on 11 October 2014 and consisted of the Flemish Nationalist party (N-VA), the Flemish Christian-Democrat party (CD&V) and the Flemish and Walloon liberal parties (Open VLD and MR). Prior to that, in June 2014, facing an ageing F-16 fighter jet fleet, the Defence staff sent out a Request for Information (hereafter “RFI”) to state agencies of multiple EU and NATO partners. This was initiated by the then centre-left Di Rupo government. The incoming Michel government declared in its government agreement that it aimed “to maintain a fighter jet capacity on a long-term basis given the replacement of the F-16” (Belgian Government 2014, p. 208). The results of the RFI were presented to the Defence Committee during three meetings in January and February 2015. An internal government note from November 2015 concluded that a life extension of the current F-16 fleet, either by a necessary modernisation or by lowering ambition levels, would be inefficient and too costly.

A parliamentary hearing was then organised on 24 February 2016 with the head of the ‘Air Combat Capability Program’ (ACCaP), a unit established within the military administration and responsible for coordinating this dossier (DOC 54 0914/001). Over the next months, several additional parliamentary hearings with representatives of the respective competing state agencies were organised. In June 2016, the Michel government agreed on a “Strategic Vision” written by the Defence cabinet. The document, which included the replacement of the fighter jet fleet, was discussed within the Defence Committee, in the presence of the Chief of Defence. With its publication in January 2017, the government announced the full replacement of the F-16 fleet with 34 new fighter jets starting in 2023 (Belgian Ministry of Defence 2016). The Military Programming Act, discussed and approved by the Defence Committee on 8 and 15 March 2017, listed the defence expenditures for 2016–2030 and further set this process in motion.

Only after this process of parliamentary meetings and strategic documents did the Michel government formally mandate Minister of Defence Steven Vandeput (N-VA) to start the official bidding process. He delegated the identification of selection criteria to the military administration, resulting in a Request for Government Proposal (hereafter “RfGP”) which was distributed on 17 March 2017 to several state agencies (Belgian Ministry of Defence 2017). A year later, on 14 February 2018, the ACCaP unit received two so-called “best and final offers” from the US and UK governments. The French government suggested a strategic partnership, yet outside the official tender.

The analysis of oversight behaviour in both committees is split into two periods: *before* and *after* these “best and final offers” were received. A critical juncture in this episode was the publication of a series of emails between military staff, leaked by the Flemish socialist opposition party sp.a on 20 March 2018, shortly after these offers were received. Sp.a suggested that attempts were made to conceal Lockheed Martin studies which would have made the replacement of the F-16 fleet less urgent.

### *Before the best and final offers*

In the preparatory (and “validation”) phases, from early 2015 to early 2018, debates focused on three main concerns. A first concern, shared by opposition and majority MPs, was the total cost of acquiring fighter jets and the economic return on investment. A second set of concerns related to Belgium’s international partnerships. These included arguments about burden-sharing within NATO and ideas about purchasing European aircraft in order to deepen EU cooperation. Finally, there was a strong call for guaranteeing transparency towards parliament. Opposition parties, in particular, expressed their frustration about the secrecy of the procedure, mainly regarding the RFI.

Each of these three concerns is linked to a more general observation. Parliamentary discussions quickly shifted to accusations by opposition parties of a governmental and military bias in favour of the American-built F-35 fighter jet. This happened despite the military administration using a widely distributed RFI and a detailed RfGP which was made publicly available.<sup>5</sup> Already in February 2015, during a lengthy Defence Committee debate, Flemish socialist MPs criticised the choice for fighter jets in the “highest spectrum of violence” and the absence of a concrete cost estimation (DOC 54 0914/001). The left-wing opposition parties called in vain for suspending the procurement dossier until more information be made available to parliament (pp. 15–16). They also requested to discuss such major defence investments in public parliamentary meetings (p. 9). In response, Defence staff participating in these meetings highlighted non-disclosure agreements with the involved government agencies. Several MPs repeatedly referred to the 1990s Agusta/Dassault scandal to strengthen their calls for transparency.

MPs’ criticism that they were ill-informed is unsurprising when considering their information sources. First, MPs relied heavily on information provided during parliamentary hearings and parliamentary exchanges of views. Military staff members, and officials from the ACCaP unit, in particular, showed up at multiple occasions to inform the parliamentary committees about the state of affairs, which included a presentation of the RFI.

Second, majority and opposition MPs also repeatedly acted upon information from national media outlets or referred to experiences from partner countries. For instance, during a Defence Committee meeting in February 2015, a Walloon liberal MP echoed

national media coverage which suggested that a decision about a replacement aircraft had already been made (DOC 54 0914/001, p. 14). In the same session, a Walloon socialist MP referred to acquisition and maintenance cost estimations disclosed by a national newspaper and television station (p. 8). A Flemish socialist MP referred to information from a Dutch military historian and acquisition costs published on the website of the Dutch Court of Auditors. He asked to make available the same information as is the practice in the Netherlands, Canada, France or Germany (p. 22). However, this disregarded the fact that the Netherlands was at that time already a partner in the international Joint Strike Fighter program, which gave Dutch politicians access to more concrete information and cost estimations. A coalition of five opposition parties, furthermore, (unsuccessfully) issued a proposal to involve the Court of Audit to increase transparency about the acquisition costs, again referring to best practices in partner countries (DOC 54 0885/001). In a parliamentary hearing in April 2016, both majority and opposition MPs referred to newspaper coverage which again seemed to suggest that a decision on a replacement carrier had already been made (DOC 54 1782/001). During the same hearing, a member of the Green party complained about being ill-informed. He said it would be unacceptable if the RfGP – which was publicly available – would be discussed only behind the closed doors of the Special Committee for Defence Acquisitions. He urged for all possible information to be disclosed in public hearings for this “purchase of the century” (p. 27).

Interestingly, the closed-door setting of the Special Committee did not seem to satisfy opposition MPs, which is why the public Defence Committee meetings feature so prominently in this analysis. Before the publication of the RfGP, MPs had the opportunity to discuss the technical details of the tender during multiple Special Committee meetings. Once the RfGP was published, the dossier was hardly discussed in the Special Committee. This can be considered logical, given that perceptions of political interference are to be avoided for ongoing tenders. However, there were issues which could have been discussed to avoid controversy. For instance, the military administration had developed a detailed and innovative evaluation method. A discussion behind the closed doors of the Special Committee before the initial offers were received would have provided MPs with detailed information about how the offers would be evaluated. The military administration reportedly even developed a 60-page document with evaluation guidelines and offered a sealed version to the Court of Audit. Because the Court of Audit can conduct only ex post evaluations, the document was deposited at the Inspectorate of Finance. MPs never requested a Special Committee meeting on the topic of evaluation of offers (Interview #3).

Two more observations are noteworthy about the Defence Committee debates in the weeks before the best and final offers (CRIV 54 COM 815). First, acquisition cost concerns gained prominence again in early February 2018. This followed upon the US Defence Security Cooperation Agency’s publication of cost estimations for a potential Belgian acquisition of 34 F-35 fighter jets as part of its Congressional notifications procedure. When international aviation bloggers framed this in the context of the American government shutdown and highlighted that these costs exceeded initial estimations, national media attention and parliamentary questions quickly followed in Belgium (Defense Aerospace 2018).<sup>6</sup> Second, discussion gradually shifted towards questions about the urgency of replacing the F-16 fighter jet fleet, driven by the Flemish socialist party sp.a. On 7 February 2018, Flemish socialist MP Van der Maelen asked the Minister of Defence whether

his cabinet or the administration had ever asked American manufacturer Lockheed Martin whether a so-called “life extension” of the Belgian F-16 fighter jet fleet beyond the theoretical maximum capacity of 8000 flight hours would be possible. He also asked whether the administration had ever considered proposing an extension based on actual flying hours, taking into account a so-called “severity factor” (CRIV 54 COM 815: p. 3). In hindsight, these remarkably technical questions were an early indication that the opposition party had by then obtained the Lockheed Martin studies that would be revealed later on.

### *After the best and final offers*

Once the best and final offers were received in February 2018, parliamentary tensions quickly heated up around the question of a so-called potential life extension of the ageing F-16 fighter jet fleet beyond 2023. The Defence Committee debate of 20 March 2018 centred around the publication in national newspapers earlier that morning of two studies conducted by F-16 manufacturer Lockheed Martin. The studies included new theoretical models that seemed to suggest that the life expectancy of the structural parts of the Belgian F-16 fleet could hypothetically be extended to the period 2029–2036 by means of a “service life extension” (CRIV 54 COM 848).

In reaction to this publication, a debate unfolded about whether or not the Minister of Defence had known of the existence of these studies prior to the media coverage. The Flemish socialist opposition MPs referred to a set of leaked emails from 2016 in their possession which, they argued, indicated that the military administration might have withheld information from the minister (CRIV 54 COM 848, p. 6). They claimed that the emails indicated that there had been direct contact between the Air Force Commander and Lockheed Martin about such studies. Therefore, they requested to hear these high-ranking military staff. The new information led to fierce criticism by all opposition parties, urging the minister to “take his responsibility”. Majority MPs took a critical but supportive stance towards the minister. Liberals, for instance, wondered why this information had not reached parliament or the minister, but limited themselves to requesting full transparency. The chairwoman of the Commission (and member of the same political party as the Minister of Defence) even praised the minister for his deontology and transparency throughout the procurement process (p. 12).

From this point onwards, a noteworthy majority-opposition dynamic unfolded about the information sources of the opposition. This would shape the debate for the next month. On the one hand, opposition MPs used this leaked information to criticise the lack of transparency and to question the performance of the Minister of Defence. Walloon Christian-Democrat MP Dallemagne claimed that the minister had lost control of his Defence staff and this dossier, while urging for a full disclosure of all relevant information to parliament (CRIV 54 COM 848, p. 25). On the other hand, majority MPs started questioning the origins of the opposition’s information. They repeatedly requested the Flemish socialists to disclose the leaked emails. The Minister of Defence even stated that should any of the members of the Defence Committee have information about unlawful acts, they had the obligation to transfer this information to the public prosecutor’s office. Flemish socialist MP Van der Maelen answered these calls by suggesting that it is rather the minister who should be asked to disclose all email traffic, as “a member of parliament, just like a journalist, never discloses his sources” (p. 29). He was supported

by the other centre-left opposition MPs, saying “it is not up to the parliament to inform parliament” (p. 31).

In response to these leaked studies and emails, the Minister of Defence commissioned an internal investigation by the military administration as well as an “external audit” by the Federal Internal Audit (FIA) service to determine who was aware of the studies and why the information had not reached him. Both investigations concluded that there was no proof of deliberate manipulation of the procurement process itself, but they highlighted that the internal structure of the military administration could benefit group think (FIA 2018, Belgian Ministry of Defence 2018a). In the Defence Committee meetings following upon these audits, the aforementioned majority-opposition oversight dynamic escalated further.

The Defence Committee meeting of 13 April 2018, where the results of these audits were presented, is particularly relevant (CRIV 54 COM 862). It started with a long procedural debate about the fact that the meeting was announced per text message only 24 hours in advance and the audit reports were not made available – only a one-page summary was distributed. It is analytically relevant to repeat that the chairwomen of the Defence Committee, who was responsible for the organisation of the Committee’s activities, belonged to the same party as the Minister of Defence, the Flemish-nationalist N-VA. Opposition MPs saw it as “yet another attempt to make parliamentary control impossible” and told their majority colleagues that they should be “ashamed” to support this practice which “has made their position laughable” (p. 24). Two developments added to the opposition’s frustration. One was that a national newspaper earlier that morning published an article about the audit results which gave the impression that the press had access to these documents before parliament. The other was the announcement that the audit reports would later be made available under strict confidentiality in a data room at the Committee’s secretariat. In other words, the audit results were discussed in a context wherein MPs relied on limited disclosed information and third-party input.

On 18 and 25 April 2018, lengthy Defence Committee meetings took place on the basis of the audit results. The meeting of 18 April consisted of three sessions: one session with the internal and external auditors together with military staff (CRIV 54 COM 866), subsequently a session with military staff from the Directorate-General Material Resources (CRIV 54 COM 871), and finally a session with US Air Force officials and Lockheed Martin delegates followed by military staff from the ACCaP unit (CRIV 54 COM 872). By that time, MPs had consulted the audit reports under the aforementioned confidentiality rules. The debate focused mainly on two issues: the information flow between the military administration and the minister’s office, and the possibility of extending the life expectancy of the current F-16 fighter jet fleet.

Three observations about these hearings are particularly relevant. First, confidentiality regulations were an obstacle for debate. MPs who consulted the audit reports in the data room were not allowed to quote them during their interventions. The Defence Committee’s chairwomen, furthermore, asked the US Air Force officials to “be careful with answering questions about ongoing procedures” and stated “it would not be wise to answer questions about economic compensations” (CRIV 54 COM 872: p. 6). Attempting to bypass these confidentiality rules, MPs frequently referred to information from newspaper coverage, the credibility of which was repeatedly questioned. For instance, discussions

about the estimated costs of extending the service life of Belgium's F-16 fleet were largely informed by input from international newspapers reporting on their country's fighter jet fleets, to which different calculations applied due to a different operational use (CRIV 54 COM 862, p. 40).

Second, the technicality of the dossier hampered debate about a prolonged use of the F-16 fighter jets. This was particularly noticeable during the session with US Air Force officials and Lockheed Martin delegates. The invited Lockheed Martin engineer summarised it eloquently, saying, "We are getting hung up on communication between you and me on what we understand those memos to be" (CRIV 54 COM 872: p. 12). For instance, repeated use by MPs of the term "life extension" raised confusion, leading the Lockheed Martin engineer to indicate that Lockheed's studies did not focus on life extension but rather on a recalculation of a fighter jet's actual flying hours based on the intensity of the usage of the plane and the "durability" of a service life. Likewise, confusion arose about the type of F-16 jets Belgium possessed (so-called Block 15) and the types dealt with in the Lockheed Martin studies.

Third, Flemish socialist MPs again requested to involve the Court of Audit in order to obtain objective cost estimations about a potential acquisition of the American-built F-35 fighter jets (CRIV 54 COM 882). During the session of 25 April, a Court of Audit official once again emphasised that "we only assess and control decided policies, not intended policies (...) we don't even have advisory powers" (p. 27). Although these requests were largely unrealistic, they illustrated once more the opposition's need for value-free information.

The opposition's quest to show that the F-16 replacement dossier was biased from its inception and to question the Minister of Defence's performance escalated in May 2018. At the start of the public Defence Committee meeting of 16 May, Flemish socialists asked the chairwomen if they could start the session with "new information" which was in their view of "high importance" for the debate (CRIV 54 COM 895: p. 2). Remarkably, Flemish socialist Van der Maelen referred to yet another email his party had received from a whistle-blower. This new email was reportedly sent on 18 September 2017 to the Chief of Cabinet of the minister and the minister himself. It was said that the email recommended to halt the replacement decision as the current F-16 fighter jet's service life could be extended. Claiming that the emails were at odds with the minister's and military staff's earlier statements, the socialist opposition advised the majority to "think very carefully about whether they can continue to accept that they have been cheated by this minister, that they have not been given information to which they were entitled" (p. 16). The minister, however, formally declared never having received this email, and openly doubted its authenticity – it would later be shown that this email was indeed fake. Repeated requests to show this email in public and disclose the sender's identity were refused, which further aggravated the aforementioned majority-opposition dynamic. In response to Van der Maelen, a liberal majority MP stated: "Try to be transparent yourself, before asking everyone else to be transparent", while Green opposition MPs again requested to halt the procurement process (p. 28).

The most critical development, however, took place outside of parliament on 30 May 2018. During a special press conference, the party leader of the Flemish socialists publicly demanded the resignation of the Minister of Defence. He did so on the basis of two new emails obtained by his party and claimed: "Not only did the military leadership manipulate the dossier, it also happened with the Minister's knowledge" (VRT 2018). The Flemish

socialist party, therefore, tabled a motion of no confidence against the minister. Yet, almost immediately after the disclosure of these new emails, their authenticity was questioned. It quickly turned out that these emails were fake, just like the one referred to a few weeks earlier. Journalists later found out that the emails had been sent to the socialist party's headquarter by a civilian pretending to be a military whistle-blower (De Morgen 2019). This episode dealt a blow to the Flemish socialists' opposition work and undermined their credibility in this particular dossier.

Debates from June until October 2018 were much less fierce and shifted towards questions about the general state of affairs and acquisition costs. Opposition MPs again mostly referred to national newspaper coverage and so-called "rumours among journalists" (CRIV 54 COM 960: p. 3). The Minister of Defence defended himself against accusations about a lack of transparency by emphasising that it was the parliament's decision to hold public meetings rather than using the Special Committee's closed-door setting – limiting the information he was allowed to provide in those meetings. He claimed that open meetings in the Defence Committee make it "difficult to answer more in-depth questions", especially if they involve commercial or national security interests (CRIV 54 COM 953, p. 17). He, furthermore, highlighted that only after the government decision "parliament would be informed for it to debate" and "the documents can then be inspected, insofar as they do not contain confidentiality clauses" (CRIV 54 COM 960, p. 10). A similar discussion unfolded on 24 October 2018, during a lengthy special meeting of the Defence Committee together with other involved parliamentary committees. There as well, discussion arose around the question of what information could be shared in an open meeting. Interestingly, the minister and majority MPs successfully supported a proposal to continue this meeting behind closed doors (CRIV 54 COM 990, p. 78).

The procurement process was ultimately concluded on 25 October 2018 with the announcement of the F-35 as the winning contender of the bidding process (Belgian Ministry of Defence, 2018). Once the official documents resulting from this decision were signed, the Court of Audit conducted an ex post evaluation of the budgetary aspects and a "marginal review" of the selection motivation (DOC 54 3732/001, p. 4). Although falling outside the scope of this study, it is relevant to note that its report was presented during a Defence Committee meeting on 24 April 2019. Importantly, the report concluded that the procedure and evaluation method defined in the RfGP "were complied with" (p. 5). The auditors, however, also noted that "the Court does not have the technical knowledge" to evaluate all technical details of this "high-tech" material (p. 4), a remark which was criticised by several opposition MPs.

## Discussion

The analysis of meeting records has shown that MPs did not seem to be able to considerably influence the final decision, despite several opposition attempts to delay or halt the procurement process and the availability of both a dedicated Defence Committee and the Special Committee for Defence Acquisitions and Sales. Their oversight depended heavily on information that was made available to them, rather than resulting from proactive outreach. This is interesting, because interviews indicate that the Flemish socialist party's fierce opposition was a deliberate strategy, informed by a prior assessment of Canada's contentious fighter jet procurement. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that majority and

opposition MPs relied mainly on information from three sources: information offered during parliamentary committee hearings and meetings, national and international media coverage and information by (assumed) whistle-blowers.

MPs and their parties had limited capacity to gather information and, in addition to that, limited expertise to interpret the information that was available to them in a politically meaningful way. Interviews with opposition MPs show that this can be problematic. Information, other than what is offered by the executive in the committees, is largely gathered by the individual MPs and their single parliamentary assistant. Belgian federal MPs usually have only one parliamentary assistant responsible for the multiple committees they serve in. Many of the party's internal study centres also seem to have a limited capacity to deal with defence affairs, a domain which does not top parties' priority lists. The Flemish and Walloon Green party had one pooled parliamentary assistant who dealt with defence, migration and foreign affairs simultaneously. Lacking an expert on this particular matter, the Flemish socialists decided to relocate a parliamentary assistant to the party's study centre for the duration of the F-16 replacement process, in order to focus full-time on the dossier. As a result of these limited resources, reactive oversight tends to become the only feasible option for MPs to perform their role as watchdog and third-party information becomes the main source of information. This was particularly the case for opposition MPs (Interview #1 #2, #5), as majority MPs had regular contact with the Defence ministry and with the cabinet of their party's deputy prime minister (Interview #4, #6).

The technicality of the dossier, furthermore, considerably affected parliamentary debate. This was particularly visible in questions about financial cost estimations and a so-called life extension. This technicality can work in favour of the majority-supported executive, as it can be played out against the less-informed opposition. Yet, because the military administration has a near-monopoly on information and expertise on major defence procurement projects, there is also an inherent risk of stovepiping or steering.

When asked about their expertise, most MPs tended to, on the one hand, emphasise that they do not desire to be familiar with all the technical details of these dossiers, while on the other hand, admit that their expertise and that of their party's study centres are not always sufficient to play their role to the fullest. One MP highlighted that "what could be improved is our own technical knowledge. We could follow additional trainings, but that of course depends on the individual MP" (Interview #1). Another MP emphasised that "parliamentary knowledge about defence affairs and the network in this field are too limited", while also suggesting that these networks present themselves for salient issues (Interview #2). Although opposition MPs maintained contact with like-minded officials in the military administration during committee meetings, for instance "via WhatsApp, to inform us about the reliability of information given by the executive", they had the feeling that technical details were instrumentalised by the executive "to avoid debate" (Interview #2). Majority MPs generally found this technicality less problematic as they were being briefed by their deputy prime minister's cabinet. But they too recognised that more internal expertise in their party study centres would be welcome to better prioritise between dossiers (Interview #4).

A final crucial observation relates to the effect of confidentiality rules and procedures. The closed-door policy of the Special Committee, as also the Acts on Public Procurement



and Open Government, have been established by the legislative branch to safeguard sensitive economic and security-related information that characterises major weapon acquisitions. Yet, they can also become a tool for the executive to inform parliament, while ensuring that the information provided cannot be publicly used. This was observable during discussions about financial cost estimations and the audit results.

The opposition's push for public Defence Committee meetings is, therefore, not surprising. Information shared behind the closed doors of the Special Committee can hardly be used during debates in the Defence Committee or plenary, nor can it be explicitly quoted in public communication. This is an obstacle to the opposition and a prominent frustration among opposition members. Some even claimed that the Special Committee "has no added value in the way it is nowadays used" (Interview #2). Of course, this frustration should also be read in the light of majority-opposition dynamics. Opposition parties tend to seek the spotlights when attempting to question or discredit the government. Interestingly, military officials and majority MPs nonetheless considered these closed-door meetings to be productive and well-suited for dealing with technical questions (Interviews #3, #4 and #6). The closed-door policy of the Special Committee, hence, seems to be its main strength and weakness at the same time. Particularly in dossiers where the opposition sees a chance to undermine the decision-making process or discredit the minister, public Defence Committee meetings are preferred and the Special Committee can become redundant. What adds to this observation is that a new protocol for the Special Committee (adopted in 2017), which included a right of inquiry at any time during a procurement process, was never invoked in this dossier "for the simple reason that you cannot use this information" (Interview #2 confirmed by #1 and #5).

It is, furthermore, illustrative of what happened when MPs had the opportunity to consult a report on the evaluation of the final offers. While the evaluation report itself and a summary were made available by the ACCaP unit under strict confidentiality rules, reportedly only one MP came to consult these documents, much to the frustration of involved military staff (Interview #3). Several opposition MPs who did not consult this report preferred to see the full offers, rather than "a summary by the military administration". This required, however, that they applied for security clearance as prescribed by the Acts on Public Procurement and Security Clearance. Interestingly, an interviewed opposition MP indicated that "there is a consensus among MPs not to apply for this security clearance, as we wish to maintain our autonomy and do not want to be controlled by the executive" (Interview #1). Additional reasons that were given for not consulting this information were the length of the documents, time constraints and language barriers – although the summary of the evaluation was provided in French and Dutch (Interview #5). A majority MP suggested that these documents would be too technical to understand and expressed his trust in the administration's expertise (Interview #4).

What connects these different dynamics is that they increase the risk of misinformation and contribute to legislative-executive information asymmetries. Dependence upon third-party or (assumed) whistle-blower information and limited capacity to mobilise expertise to interpret this information might even undermine one's credibility. This mostly affects opposition MPs, as was illustrated by the fake emails saga. Party discipline, which is a key trait of Belgium's political system, further added to this, as majority MPs easily closed the ranks in support of the government.

## Conclusion

Major defence procurement dossiers involve a mixture of political, military and economic interests. Most civil–military relations scholars would claim that in such a complex playing field, parliamentary oversight is desired, not in the least because these dossiers contain a risk of contestation. However, not all parliaments are equally equipped to play their role as a democratic watchdog to the fullest. Questions about how to foster transparency and empower parliaments tend to arise particularly after a controversial procurement decision.

I, therefore, asked: to what extent can a dedicated or special committee with access to classified information empower parliaments to oversee major defence procurement decisions? An analysis of the Belgian federal parliament's oversight behaviour during the acquisition of new fighter jets from 2015 until October 2018 confirms the expectation that being institutionally empowered and historically or personally incentivised is in itself insufficient to guarantee rigorous oversight. MPs also need to be able to mobilise sufficient expertise in order to gather and translate technical information in such a way that it allows them to influence decision-making, which tends to be executive-dominated.

Even with a dedicated Defence Committee and a Special Committee on Defence Acquisitions with access to classified information, Belgian MPs still relied heavily on third-party information, such as from media and whistle-blowers. In the absence of parliamentary research services as exist in the US or Germany, the importance of party-political capacities and political networks increases. While majority MPs can use their linkages with government, opposition MPs have to rely on other means. Weak party study centres or lacking defence expertise within the party can then hinder parliamentary oversight, particularly when unreliable third-party information is used. A noteworthy side-effect thereof is the inherent risk of politicisation of the military administration, given their near-monopoly on expertise. The analysis, furthermore, showed that assessing oversight is impossible without considering the confidentiality procedures that characterise defence affairs. Rules and procedures installed to protect national security or market-sensitive information can easily become part of a political game between government and parliament.

More research is needed to truly understand oversight of defence procurement and to evaluate the role of dedicated and special parliamentary committees. For instance, it is worth studying whether special committees are used differently in less salient procurement dossiers or explore the effect of institutional empowerment in other parliamentary systems. It can, nonetheless, be concluded that, in order to truly empower parliaments in overseeing defence affairs, strengthening the expertise available to MPs should not be overlooked. While reactive oversight might remain the preferred course of action, it would at the very least allow MPs to better evaluate the trustworthiness of third-party information. Ultimately, empirical studies like this one can help in managing expectations about the capacity of parliaments to cope with complex military problems.

## Notes

1. On issue salience, see Jäger *et al.* (2009).
2. A list of interviews, conducted in Dutch and French, and official documents is added in the Appendix.
3. Including movements such as CNAPD, Pax Christi Vlaanderen, Vrede and Vredesactie.

4. The Dutch government already in 2013 opted for American-built Joint Strike Fighters. This added to a general sensitivity for predetermined decision-making.
5. The use of a detailed and open RfGP to guarantee objectivity sparked interest abroad (CRIV 54 COM 990, p. 28).
6. It is not uncommon that the US DSCA anticipates unforeseen costs in Congressional notifications (Interview #3).

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the interviewees for sharing their insights. Special thanks go to Philippe Lagassé, Hylke Dijkstra and the members of the Politics and Culture in Europe research programme at FASoS (Maastricht University) for providing feedback on earlier versions of this research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Yf Reykers  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0080-1815>

## References

- Ali, H.E. and Solarin, S.A., 2019. Military spending, corruption, and the welfare consequences. *Defence and peace economics*, 31 (6), 677–691. doi:10.1080/10242694.2019.1567181.
- Auerswald, D.P., Lagassé, P., and Saideman, S.M., 2020. Some assembly required: how democratic legislatures vary in overseeing the military. *Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association*, 25–28 March 2020, Honolulu (HI), 1–53.
- Bakker, A., Drent, M., and Landman, L., 2016. *The parliamentary dimension of defence cooperation*. Clingendael Report.
- Blauberger, M. and Weiss, M., 2013. “If you can’t beat me, join me!” How the commission pushed and pulled member states into legislating defence procurement. *Journal of European public policy*, 20 (8), 1120–1138. doi:10.1080/13501763.2013.781783.
- Blom, T., 2021. Conceptualising the role of expertise in EU policy-making. In: V. Abazi, J. Adriaensen, and T. Christiansen, eds. *The contestation of expertise in the European Union*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 21–47.
- Born, H. and Hänggi, H., 2005. *The use of force under international auspices: strengthening parliamentary accountability*. Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF).
- Byers, M. and Webb, S., 2011. Canada’s F-35 purchase is a costly mistake. *Canadian foreign policy journal*, 17 (3), 217–227. doi:10.1080/11926422.2011.638193.
- Calcara, A., 2017. State–defence industry relations in the European context: French and UK interactions with the European defence agency. *European security*, 26 (4), 527–551. doi:10.1080/09662839.2017.1384379.
- Coticchia, F., 2016. A controversial warplane: narratives, counternarratives, and the Italian debate on the F-35. *Alternatives: global, local, political*, 41 (4), 194–213. doi:10.1177/0304375417715172.
- Coticchia, F. and Moro, F.N., 2020. Peaceful legislatures? Parliaments and military interventions after the Cold War: insights from Germany and Italy. *International relations*. doi:10.1177/0047117819900250.
- De Fraja, G. and Hartley, K., 1996. Defence procurement: theory and UK policy. *Oxford review of economic policy*, 12 (4), 70–88. doi:10.1093/oxrep/12.4.70.

- Dieterich, S., Hummel, H., and Marschall, S., 2015. Bringing democracy back in: the democratic peace, parliamentary war powers and European participation in the 2003 Iraq War. *Cooperation and conflict*, 50 (1), 87–106. doi:10.1177/0010836714545687.
- Feaver, P.D., 1999. Civil-military relations. *Annual review of political science*, 2, 211–241.
- Fonck, D., Haesebrouck, T., and Reykers, Y., 2019. Parliamentary involvement, party ideology and majority-opposition bargaining: Belgian participation in multinational military operations. *Contemporary security policy*, 40 (1), 85–100. doi:10.1080/13523260.2018.1500819.
- Fonck, D. and Reykers, Y., 2018. Parliamentarisation as a two-way process: explaining prior parliamentary consultation for military interventions. *Parliamentary affairs*, 71 (3), 674–696. doi:10.1093/pa/gsx081.
- Gupta, S., De Mello, L., and Sharan, R., 2001. Corruption and military spending. *European journal of political economy*, 17 (4), 749–777. doi:10.1016/S0176-2680(01)00054-4.
- Hartley, K., 2007. The arms industry, procurement and industrial policies. In: T. Sandler and K. Hartley, eds. *Handbook of defense economics*. 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Hoeffler, C. and Mérand, F., 2016. Buying a fighter jet: European lessons for Canada. *Canadian foreign policy journal*, 22 (3), 262–275. doi:10.1080/11926422.2015.1083872.
- Jäger, T., et al., 2009. The salience of foreign affairs issues in the German bundestag. *Parliamentary affairs*, 62 (3), 418–437. doi:10.1093/pa/gsp006.
- Kaarbo, J. and Kenealy, D., 2016. No, prime minister: explaining the House of Commons' vote on intervention in Syria. *European security*, 25 (1), 28–48. doi:10.1080/09662839.2015.1067615.
- Lagassé, P., 2020. Holding Canadian governments to account for national defence. In: T. Juneau, P. Lagassé, and S. Vucetic, eds. *Canadian defence policy in theory and practice*. Cham: Springer, 45–62.
- Lagassé, P. and Saideman, S.M., 2017. Public critic or secretive monitor: party objectives and legislative oversight of the military in Canada. *West European politics*, 40 (1), 119–138. doi:10.1080/01402382.2016.1240409.
- Lagassé, P. and Saideman, S.M., 2019. When civilian control is civil: parliamentary oversight of the military in Belgium and New Zealand. *European journal of international security*, 4 (1), 20–40. doi:10.1017/eis.2018.17.
- Maesschalck, J. and Van de Walle, S., 2006. Policy failure and corruption in Belgium: is federalism to blame? *West European politics*, 29 (5), 999–1017. doi:10.1080/01402380600968877.
- Mccubbins, M.D. and Schwartz, T., 1984. Congressional oversight overlooked: police patrols versus fire alarms. *American journal of political science*, 28 (1), 165–179. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2110792>.
- Mello, P.A. and Peters, D., 2018. Parliaments in security policy: involvement, politicisation, and influence. *British journal of politics and international relations*, 20 (1), 3–18. doi:10.1177/1369148117745684.
- Peters, D. and Wagner, W., 2011. Between military efficiency and democratic legitimacy: mapping parliamentary war powers in contemporary democracies, 1989–2004. *Parliamentary affairs*, 64 (1), 175–192. doi:10.1093/pa/gsq041.
- Rendon, J.M. and Rendon, R.G., 2016. Procurement fraud in the US Department of Defense. *Managerial auditing journal*, 31 (6/7), 748–767. doi:10.1108/MAJ-11-2015-1267.
- Reykers, Y. and Fonck, D., 2020. No wings attached? Civil-military relations and agent intrusion in the procurement of fighter jets. *Cooperation and conflict*, 55 (1). doi:10.1177/0010836719850203.
- Ringsmose, J., 2013. Investing in fighters and alliances: Norway, Denmark, and the bumpy road to the Joint Strike Fighter. *International journal*, 68, 93–110.
- Rozenberg, O., et al., 2011. Not only a battleground: parliamentary oral questions concerning defence policies in four western democracies. *Journal of legislative studies*, 17 (3), 340–353. doi:10.1080/13572334.2011.595127.
- SIGMA, 2011. *Defence procurement*. Available from: <http://www.oecd.org/site/sigma/publications/documents/49102610.pdf>.
- Uttley, M., 2018. Defence procurement. In: J.R. Deni and D.J. Galbreath, eds. *Routledge handbook of defence studies*. London: Routledge, 73–86.

- van Eekelen, W.F., 2013. *The parliamentary dimension of defence cooperation: policy, requirements, production, cooperation and acquisition (revised edition)*. Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF).
- von Hlatky, S. and Rice, J., 2018. Striking a deal on the F-35: multinational politics and US defence acquisition. *Defence studies*, 18 (1), 19–38. doi:10.1080/14702436.2017.1417736.
- Vucetic, S., 2016. Who framed the F-35? Government-media relations in Canadian defence procurement. *International journal*, 71 (2), 231–248. doi:10.1177/0020702015609360.
- Vucetic, S. and Rydberg, R.S., 2015. Remnants of empire: tracing Norway's F-35 decision. *Contemporary security policy*, 36 (1), 56–78. doi:10.1080/13523260.2015.1012351.
- Vucetic, S. and Tago, A., 2015. Why buy American? The international politics of fighter Jet Transfers. *Canadian journal of political science*, 48 (1), 101–124. doi:10.1017/S0008423914001103.
- Wagner, W., 2006. *Parliamentary control of military missions: accounting for pluralism*. Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) Occasional Paper.

## Appendix

### *Institutional documents*

Belgian Government (2014) Regeerakkoord van de Belgische Federale Regering. Available at: [http://www.premier.be/sites/default/files/articles/Accord\\_de\\_Gouvernement\\_-\\_Regeerakkoord.pdf](http://www.premier.be/sites/default/files/articles/Accord_de_Gouvernement_-_Regeerakkoord.pdf).

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2015) Verslag – Gedachtewisseling over de voorbereidende rondvraag die door de Belgische Defensie werd toegestuurd aan buitenlandse staatsagentschappen in het kader van het dossier van de vervanging van de F-16 vliegtuigen, 26/02/2015, DOC 54 0914/001.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2016) Hoorzitting over de marktverkenning georganiseerd door de Belgische Defensie in het kader van het dossier van de vervanging van de F-16 jachtvliegtuigen, met kolonel Harold Van Pee, hoofd van het bureau Air Combat Capability Program bij de Defensiestaf, 20/04/2016, DOC 54 1782/001.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2016) Integraal Verslag, 29/06/2016, CRIV 54 COM 457.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (voormiddag), 7/02/2018, CRIV 54 COM 815.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (namiddag), 20/03/2018, CRIV 54 COM 848.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (namiddag), 28/03/2018, CRIV 54 COM 857.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (namiddag), 13/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 862.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (namiddag), 17/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 863.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (voormiddag), 18/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 866.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (namiddag), 18/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 871.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (avond), 18/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 872.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (voormiddag), 25/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 876.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag (namiddag), 25/04/2018, CRIV 54 COM 882.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag, 16/05/2018, CRIV 54 COM 895.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag, 27/06/2018, CRIV 54 COM 936.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag, 18/07/2018, CRIV 54 COM 953.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2018) Integraal Verslag, 19/09/2018, CRIV 54 COM 960.

Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging (2019) Hoorzitting met vertegenwoordiger van het Rekenhof – De Audit van het Rekenhof betreffende het vervangingsprogramma van de vliegtuigen F-16. 19/04/2010, DOC 54 3732/001.

Belgian Ministry of Defence (2016) De Strategische Visie voor Defensie. Available at: <https://www.mil.be/sites/mil.be/files/pdf/strategic-vision-belgian-defense-nl.pdf> (accessed 1 June 2018).

Belgian Ministry of Defence (2017) Air Combat Capability Program: Request for Government Proposal. Available at: <https://www.belgianmilitaryinterests.be/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Request-for-Government-Proposal.pdf> (accessed 27 October 2020).

Belgian Ministry of Defence (2018a) Intern Onderzoek Defensie naar bepaalde informatiestromen binnen het beheer F-16 en het vervangingsprogramma: Executive Summary, Algemeen Inspectoraat-Generaal, 18/04/2018.

Belgian Ministry of Defence (2018b) Vervanging van de luchtgevechtscapaciteit: ingediende offertes. Available at: <https://www.vandepub.be/nl/vervanging-van-de-luchtgevechtscapaciteit-evaluatie-ingediende-offertes> (accessed 1 June 2018).

Belgian Ministry of Defence (2018c) Regering investeert fors in Defensie, 26 October. Available at: <https://www.mil.be/nl/artikel/regering-investeert-fors-defensie> (accessed 15 December 2018).

FIA (2018) Onderzoek bij Defensie naar de informatiebehandeling over de levensduur F-16, report submitted to Belgian Federal Parliament, Commissie voor de Landsverdediging, 18/04/2018. Available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/376281218/F-16-document-2> (accessed 10 May 2019)

## Media sources

Defense Aerospace (2018). “Belgium – F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Aircraft”, 18 January, Retrieved from: [http://www.defense-aerospace.com/article-view/release/190048/federal-shutdown-forces-us-to-reveal-cost-of-f\\_35-offer-to-belgium.html](http://www.defense-aerospace.com/article-view/release/190048/federal-shutdown-forces-us-to-reveal-cost-of-f_35-offer-to-belgium.html) (accessed 22 September 2020).

Defense News (2017). “France offers Belgium Rafale jets and close partnership”, 7 September. Retrieved from: <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/european-balance-of-power/2017/09/07/france-offers-belgium-rafale-jets-and-close-partnership/> (accessed 23 June 2020).

De Morgen (2019). “Dit is de man achter de valse F-16 mails van John Crombez”. 8 June. Retrieved from: <https://www.demorgen.be/politiek/dit-is-de-man-achter-de-valse-f-16-mails-van-john-crombez~b979cb72/> (accessed 15 June 2020).

Vrede.be (2014). “Moet België nieuwe gevechtsvliegtuigen aankopen?”, 12 August. Retrieved from: <https://www.vrede.be/nieuws/moet-belgie-nieuwe-gevechtsvliegtuigen-aankopen> (accessed 07 December 2020).

VRTNews (2014). “Ambtenaren hoeven niet bang te zijn, er zullen geen harde saneringen gebeuren”, 12 October. Retrieved from: [https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2014/10/12/\\_ambtenaren\\_hoeven\\_niet\\_bang\\_tezijner\\_zullen\\_geen\\_harde\\_saneringengebeuren-1-2116724/](https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2014/10/12/_ambtenaren_hoeven_niet_bang_tezijner_zullen_geen_harde_saneringengebeuren-1-2116724/) (accessed 07 December 2020).

VRTNews (2018). “Crombez eist ontslag van Minister van Defensie Vandepub”, 30 May. Retrieved from: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/05/30/crombez-eist-ontslag-van-minister-van-defensie-vandepub/> (accessed 15 June 2020).

## Interviews

Interview #1. Member of parliament (opposition). Brussels, 24 October 2019.

Interview #2. Member of parliament (opposition). Brussels, 04 November 2019.

Interview #3. Defence staff official. Leuven, 27 August 2020.

Interview #4. Member of parliament (majority). Video conference, 02 September 2020.

Interview #5. Member of parliament (opposition). Telephone, 25 September 2020.

Interview #6. Member of parliament (majority). Video conference, 06 October 2020.