

Evening conference

25 June 2026

17:00 - 19:00



Why is a Belgian Maritime Strategy Essential?

Mr Piet OPSTAELE (Blue Cluster)

Navy Captain Kristof VAN BELLEGHEM (Chief of Staff of the Belgian Navy)

Dr Bernard SIMAN (Egmont Institute – VUB)

Dear Madam, Sir,

We are pleased to invite you to an **evening conference** hosted by the **Centre for Security and Defence Studies** of the **Royal Higher Institute for Defence** on **Thursday 25 June 2026** from **17:00 until 19:00**.

The 21st century is referred to as a maritime century. This is particularly true of Belgium, given that it has one of Europe's most trade-dependent economies, is home to the continent's second-largest port and borders one of the busiest shipping routes in the world. However, maritime affairs are rarely addressed in the national political debate. This gap between strategic reality and public awareness has a name: sea blindness.

In an era of renewed competition between great powers, hybrid threats to critical underwater infrastructure and the North Sea that is being transformed by offshore energy and communication networks, this kind of blind spot has real consequences. Small maritime states such as Belgium can no longer afford not to have a maritime strategy.

During this evening conference, we will examine why a coherent and ambitious Belgian maritime strategy is necessary and what form it may take. How can Belgium deploy its domestic resources and international partnerships to build a naval force that better aligns with our interests and merchant fleet?

To tackle this complex subject matter, we are honoured to welcome Mr Piet Opstaele, CEO of Blue Cluster, Navy Captain Kristof Van Belleghem, Chief of Staff of the Belgian Navy, and Dr Bernard Siman, Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations.

This conference will be held **in Dutch** at the **auditorium K.10.24 (room Peeters)** at **campus Renaissance** (entrance: **rue Hobbema 8/Hobbemastraat 8, 1000 Brussels**) on **Thursday 25 June 2026 at 17:00**. Simultaneous interpretation in English will be available on site. Please note that online participation will also not be possible.

Kindly register in advance at www.defence-institute.be. **Registration is required by Thursday 18 June 2026 at the latest.**

(Signed)

Baudouin COPPIETERS DE GIBSON, MSc Eng

Rear Admiral

Aide-de-Camp to the King

Director-general

Royal Higher Institute for Defence

Programme:

16:30: Welcome
17:00: Conference and Q&A
19:00 – 20:00: Reception