

► Belgium's busy Ambassador Patrick Nijs talks diplomatic life in Beijing

# DIPLOMAT AND OPTIMIST

By Gregory Brundage

Centrally located between London and Amsterdam, Paris and Hamburg, and composed of French and Flemish speakers (Wal-loons and Flemings), Belgium is politically, if not geographically at the heart of Europe. The first elected President of the European Union, who took office on December 1, 2009 is Belgium's former Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy.

Though only having submitted his Letter of Appointment as Belgium's Ambassador to China to President Hu Jintao on September 4, 2009, Ambassador Patrick Nijs has long experience having served in diplomatic posts in China before.

## Diplomatic relations

To say that Ambassador Nijs is a "busy" man would be something of an understatement. Interviewed in the Embassy of Belgium residence which he shares with his wife and two children, Ambassador Nijs explains: "Twice before I was Consul General in China: Once in Shanghai from 1997 to 2000 and then in Hong Kong from 2003 to 2007. But China is changing so fast, you have to adjust yourself every day, like a river that is flowing quickly. You can't stand in the same place in the river twice."

There are numerous current

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## Ambassador Nijs

and future events he must attend to, such as visits to China by heads of state including the Belgian Royal Family, issues regarding international trade and tariff, events sponsored by the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the upcoming Shanghai Expo 2010, and the Diamond Road Show, a showcase for the Antwerp diamond industry that traveled through China in 2009.



Ambassador Patrick Nijs at the Embassy of Belgium residence. Photo: Chang Luowen

There are in addition a number of charity events, book launches, television and radio interviews, statements which must be issued in response to domestic and world events, uncountable diplomatic functions, and even supporting the Belgian Embassy football team (anyone can join), to name just a few.

## Incredibly busy

With regards to his embassy's role in the newly re-organized European Union, Ambassador Nijs says, "There are still a lot of questions without answers, like what will the permanent presidency do? We will have to carve out answers

together with our European partners." Ambassador Nijs mentioned that the Belgian Embassy in Beijing has already been scheduled to chair some 55 meetings relating to this process.

With all this going on, one might wonder if Ambassador Nijs has any time for hobbies. "My hobbies are my kids; otherwise I'm incredibly busy all the time. But I do like reading and do a little bit of sport. I go jogging twice a week and like fitness centers. I've always liked running. We [ambassadors] eat and drink too much! Laughing, he continues, "If you don't have this kind of routine, you can really harm

yourself. When I'm running it's like a meditation. You just breathe."

Asked about his favorite Chinese food, and places he's visited, Ambassador Nijs responds: "Oh that would have to be Shanghai noodles with preserved vegetables. Wonderful! Just delicious! Also Sichuan tofu! There is so much wonderful food here. I'm very fond of Chinese cuisine."

"As for favorite places, I remember visiting a town called Hongcun in Anhui. It was like a water village and close to Huangshan [Yellow Mountains] as I recall. Maybe you remember the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*? It was

extremely beautiful with very clear water. I would very much like to go back there."

## Major roles

Given that diplomats are at times in the business of making peace, I was curious to know if Ambassador Nijs believes peace is even possible in this war-torn world. "Of course! I try to believe in the goodness of humanity. Human nature is good. If people become bad it is because they are frustrated or they get into trouble. But if you treat people well, they open their heart and they are nice."

"It is just a matter of time to get the spirit free. It will take time, because we have to settle issues, you know, like poverty. Some places in Africa you see people dying in the streets, this is the problem. I always have the feeling of 'why them and not me?' It's not fair. The day we will be able to give everyone a chance to develop themselves, the conflicts will be settled. That's the way we have to go."

Ambassador Nijs still thinks diplomats have a major role, often unsung, to play in world affairs. "I think diplomats are important because we are the ones who try to settle all these conflicts peacefully. As long as diplomats are working, you can try to find settlements and arrangements and negotiate."

"This is what our job is all about, bridging the gap to bring people closer. This is more than just a naive declaration; it's a real job. And, now we have the European Union ... and beyond that we have the United States of the Universe, maybe 30 years from now! We are working on that with a long-term vision."

"I believe in mankind. I believe we all have this goodness in our hearts and in our minds; we just need a chance to express it. I'm sorry if this seems too naive, but at my age I think like that."

Like Belgium itself, Ambassador Nijs is a blend of contradictions gravitating between reassuring soft-spoken information and lighthearted humor with sparkling insights into human nature and relationships.

Anyone wishing to have more information is invited to visit the website of the Embassy of Belgium in Beijing at: <http://www.diplomatie.be/beijing/>