

COUNTRY CHAPTER ON THE NETHERLANDS

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THE NETHERLANDS AND THE FUTURE OF NATO

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As a founding member of the alliance, the Netherlands has been a staunch ally of the United States and a reliable NATO partner. The Netherlands hosts US tactical nuclear weapons and has been contributing troops to operations such as ISAF, NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Lithuania, NATO's Mission in Iraq and the war against ISIL. At the same time, the Netherlands has supported the project of European security and defence. Portraying itself as a bridge-builder, it has traditionally tried to reconcile opposing views within NATO between proponents of American leadership and proponents of European self-reliance in security. In recent years, however, this balancing has been giving way to a more pro-European view among think tankers and decision-makers (Thompson 2021). Removed from NATO's frontlines, the Dutch security community tends to take a less alarmistic view of external threats and a more analytical look at NATO's internal frictions. This transatlantic consensus with a Dutch flavour is reflected in discourses among Dutch think tanks and research institutions such as Clingendael and the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS). Most think tankers share the somehow contradictory diagnosis that NATO will remain a cornerstone of Dutch and European security and that NATO is in crisis (Klijn 2020a; Zandee 2018/2019: 5). It is therefore not surprising that Dutch institutions are debating the state and possible futures of NATO fairly intensely.

According to Clingendael scholar Dick Zandee (2019a; Zandee 2019b), three major internal issues are eroding the cohesion of the alliance: US–European divergences that were exacerbated by Donald Trump, the East–South divide and Turkey. Although President Biden has renewed the American commitment to multilateralism and NATO, Dutch scholars expect that structural shifts – such as the erosion of the multilaterally-oriented centre in the United States (Thompson 2021: 28) and the continued American pivot to Asia in response to an increasingly assertive China – will persist (van Hooft 2020a). A report by the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs summarized the consequences most succinctly:

The era of US hegemony, in which the United States served as the guardian of the post-war global order, is over. (AIV 2020: 4)¹

¹ The independent Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV), consisting of members with an academic background, advises the Dutch government and parliament on foreign policy.

The East versus South divide will continue to draw members apart. Eastern European allies regard Russia as the main threat and have asked NATO to invest in heavy forces. »Southern NATO members are mainly worried about the spill-over effects from instability and conflict in the Middle East and Africa« (Zandee 2019a: 176) and would like NATO to invest in naval, coastguard and border protection capabilities. Turkey is regarded as a major challenge. According to the Dutch analysis, »Turkey is not only drifting away from the value-based transatlantic order but is also pursuing an assertive, risky and strictly independent foreign policy that creates conflicts with its NATO-partner along several fronts« (Zandee 2019a: 177; Kruijver 2019).

RELATIONS WITH CHINA

One issue area in which Dutch scholars see a need for reflection is NATO's positioning towards China and the unfolding American–Chinese conflict. As already mentioned, Dutch scholars assume that the United States' traditional role as NATO's benign hegemon will shift as it braces for competition with China. The HCSS/Clingendael strategic forecast review concludes that »the US pivot to Asia means that Europe is no longer the top priority for US grand strategy, and European policymakers have begun to take steps to reduce their security dependence on Washington. Both of these trends will accelerate between now and 2030« (Thompson et al. 2021: 134f). Clingendael's Hugo Klijn expects that »in this process, it [the United States] will increasingly try to shed distracting obligations and partnerships that serve no direct purpose to this end« (Klijn 2020a). Sooner or later, the European NATO allies will be confronted with a choice to either demonstrate NATO's usefulness in this context or otherwise risk the American leadership in preserving European security. The initiators of a newly established HCSS research programme on Transatlantic Relations in an Age of Sino-American Competition expect »deterrence gaps and shortfalls that will emerge in NATO Europe during periods when the United States is preoccupied with China«.²

² Available at: <https://hcss.nl/news/initiative-on-the-future-of-transatlantic-relations-program-2021-2030-transatlantic-relations-in-an-age-of-sino-american-competition/>

The majority of think tankers agree that for the Netherlands, such a choice would be difficult. A Clingendael report on Dutch public opinion shows that if a »new Cold War« with China were to develop, »the largest group [of respondents] would prefer to stay neutral« (Korteweg et al. 2020: 6). Interest groups and government agencies, too, are split between those expressing concerns about China's increasing assertiveness and military capabilities, and those emphasizing economic interests. The Dutch China strategy, adopted in May 2019, tries to balance concerns and interests, describing the Dutch government's position as »constructively critical of China. The government seeks to work with China on the basis of shared interests. At the same time, it wants to make the Netherlands more resilient to the risks to which China is exposing us« (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019: 92). The Indo-Pacific strategy that the government unveiled in November 2020 – the Netherlands is the third European country to adopt such a strategy – also oscillates between highlighting security threats and calling for diplomatic initiatives. Regarding the critical issue of Huawei's participation in the Dutch 5G network, the government has taken the middle ground. Despite warnings from the United States and from the Dutch intelligence agency AIVD, a regulation passed in summer 2019 forces telecom companies to vet their equipment suppliers more thoroughly, but made no mention of banning Huawei. Since then, however, the major operators have started to replace Huawei equipment in their core networks.

So far, Dutch scholars see a Chinese challenge not primarily in military terms but rather pertaining to functional issues, such as the resilience of critical infrastructure, digital security, economic standards and the security of supply chains.³ On the crucial question of whether or not a grand transatlantic bargain on China is advisable, the debate among Dutch think tankers has just begun and clear camps have not yet emerged (Dekker/Okano-Heijmans 2020). There is general agreement that the Netherlands should remain closely aligned with the United States and its European allies on these issues. Beyond this consensus, members of the Atlantic camp tend to argue that the Netherlands should coordinate closely with the United States on China within NATO. Members of the European camp emphasize the differences in the American and European approaches towards China and favour coordination within the EU as a first step and consultation with the United States at the level of EU-US dialogue as a second step. The 2020 Indo-Pacific strategy is in line with this latter approach as it is presented as a stepping stone in the development of a European approach towards the Indo-Pacific.

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

Opinion polls conducted before Alexei Navalny's latest arrest show that »of all European countries, people in the Nether-

³ While some voices in this debate argue that global interdependence renders analytical concepts such as geopolitics in relations with China less useful (Langendonk 2021), others are concerned about open and covert Chinese interference in public debates.

lands [and Sweden] have the most negative views of Russia« (Deen et al. 2020: 2). The downing of the MH-17 aircraft over the Donbas area and the clumsy Russian denial strategy have most likely contributed to these negative attitudes. Yet, this negative image does not translate into alarmistic military threat perceptions. The scholarly debate on Russia reflects these nuances. One outspoken Dutch voice in this debate is Clingendael's Hugo Klijn. The starting point of his argument is the assessment that the West will »have to deal with Russia as it is« (Klijn/Deen 2020: 1). He argues that the breakdown of the European security order began before the Russian intervention in the war in Georgia in 2008 and was also caused by Western policies. At the core of Russia's animosity is its »deeply felt frustration with the way the European security order evolved after the Cold War« (Klijn 2020b: 3). In his view, only bold diplomacy could create a way out of the downward spiral of reciprocal threats, sanctions and escalating tensions. The success of such a change of course »hinges on the readiness to discuss in earnest Europe's Eastern neighbourhood (...) as the most sensitive bone of contention« (Klijn 2020b: 5). The West should »somehow convey the message to Russia that for the foreseeable future they [Georgia and Ukraine] will not join [NATO] (if at all)« (Klijn 2020b: 5). Klijn does not expect »hamstrung Germany« to lead this strategic overhaul. Instead, he counts on French President Macron and argues that his overtures towards Russia deserve support, not scorn (Klijn/Deen 2020). In the end, however, it will be up to the new US administration to »muster the adulthood required for engaging Russia in a serious dialogue and for partnering with Europe in this endeavour« (Klijn 2020b: 4). As already mentioned, Klijn is only one voice in this debate, and others view Russia more critically. For example HCSS scholar Paul van Hooft (2020a) maintains that Russia's departure from the post-Cold War security order was overdetermined and probably also related to Putin's authoritarian turn and increasing state capacities fuelled by rising energy prices. In his view, NATO's past decisions to enlarge NATO, reap peace dividends and redirect scarce funds towards the creation of expeditionary armies resulted in a dangerous deterrence gap when the underlying assumption of perpetual Russian weakness and friendliness was proven wrong (van Hooft 2020b). Following from this analysis, many Dutch think tankers argue that territorial defence should be NATO's operational priority.

THREAT ASSESSMENT

Dutch think tanks and the HCSS in particular excel in strategic and technical assessments of asymmetric, hybrid and emerging kinetic and non-kinetic threats (Sweijts et al. 2021; HCSS 2020). Concerning a Russian threat of hybrid warfare, Dutch scholars differ in their assessments. While some describe it in stark terms, others argue that the West is barking up the wrong tree (Klijn 2019). Scholars agree in the assessment of the severity of (Russian) disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks and other forms of intervention in the »grey zone«. Against the background of meddling in the Dutch referendum on the association agreement with

Ukraine⁴ and attempts to hack the computers of the OPCW during the Organization's investigation of chemical weapons attacks in Syria⁵ – both incidences have been attributed to Russia – the Dutch academic community expects that in the future »gray zone operations will be a central part of Moscow's strategy« (Thompson et al. 2021: 134).

ARMS CONTROL

Dutch scholars generally support a restart of arms control. Clingendael's Sico van der Meer (2019) has explored ways of rescuing the INF Treaty. Dick Zandee cautions that arms control will have to take the changed geopolitical and technological circumstances into account. This implies that first steps should focus on an extension of New START, a revival of the Open Skies regime and new regional initiatives aimed at confidence-building measures and risk-reduction. Additional arms control endeavours should go beyond the bilateral framework, take the rising arsenals of states such as China into account, and move beyond traditional quantitative approaches (Zandee 2019b). Sico van der Meer (2018) proposes eleven options to reduce the risk of nuclear weapons use but stops short of recommending a separation of launchers and warheads. Peter van Ham (2018) explores ways of resuming conventional arms control with a focus on qualitative constraints of technological developments.

Beyond this general support for negotiated arms control, the public and decision-makers are conflicted with regard to additional steps, such as supporting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) or a renunciation of the Dutch participation in NATO's nuclear sharing agreements. Advocacy groups support the TPNW,⁶ and the Netherlands was the only NATO country to participate in the negotiations on the prohibition treaty, only to come out against it in the final vote. While advocacy groups refer to polls showing strong support for nuclear disarmament, a study by the European Council on Foreign Relations finds that »the Dutch government and the public are in favour of nuclear disarmament, but not at the expense of NATO's security. They do not support the unilateral disarmament of tactical nuclear weapons, and believe that disarmament should also form part of negotiations involving Russia«.⁷

Dutch think tankers share this stance. They support negotiated arms control and are more reluctant with regard to unilateral steps. The Dutch debate on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the role of American nuclear weapons deployed in Europe is a case in point. An

outstanding report by the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) defends Dutch participation in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. As long as nuclear weapons exist, deterrence against nuclear attack should be their sole purpose. Arms control efforts should be intensified to mitigate the dangers of misperceptions and inadvertent use (AIV 2019). The Dutch government concurred with these findings. The government continues to support the goal of complete nuclear disarmament and hopes that »the international security situation and agreements within NATO« will allow the Netherlands and other European countries to abandon NATO's sharing arrangements. However, the government thinks that »a unilateral withdrawal of US sub-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe would be undesirable for both military and political reasons«.⁸ Instead, the government will try to achieve the withdrawal of all Russian and American sub-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe (from the Atlantic to the Urals).

MILITARY MISSIONS

As already mentioned, the Netherlands have contributed to most of NATO's out-of-area missions. Starting in 2006, Dutch forces extended their presence in Afghanistan and deployed to the rather unstable southern province of Uruzgan. After winding down the unsuccessful ISAF mission and the failures in Libya, Dutch think tankers do not expect that large-scale military interventions will be high on NATO's agenda any time soon. Instead, multinational high-end interventions out of area will, if at all, most likely be conducted by »coalitions of the willing« (Zandee 2018/2019: 5).

NATO AND EUROPEAN SECURITY

The Netherlands has traditionally supported European defence initiatives. Dutch scholars have emphasized the effective generation of European military capabilities but have been reluctant to embrace far-reaching political concepts such as strategic autonomy. Being aware that such buzzwords will be met with criticism in Eastern European NATO states and cognizant that even France looks to NATO and the United States for territorial defence, Dutch scholars continue to emphasize the complementarity of European Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and NATO. For example, Clingendael's Dick Zandee argues that »closer defence cooperation among EU nations can certainly help to strengthen the alliance, provided it is carried out not in competition, but in cooperation with NATO« (Zandee 2019a: 179).

However, given Europe's vulnerabilities, the United Kingdom's departure from the EU and shifting American priorities, the Dutch views on European defence cooperation are

4 Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-fake-news-dutch-vote.html>

5 Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-11/news/russia-charged-opcw-hacking-attempt>

6 Available at: <https://www.icanw.org/netherlands>; <https://www.pax-forpeace.nl/stay-informed/news/majority-of-the-dutch-say-that-the-netherlands-must-join-the-ban-treaty>

7 Available at: https://ecfr.eu/special/eyes_tight_shut_european_attitudes_towards_nuclear_deterrence/#

8 Letter of 18 April 2019 from Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok and Minister of Defence Ank Bijleveld-Schouten, available at <https://www.advisorycouncilinternationalaffairs.nl/documents/government-responses/2019/04/18/government-response-to-nuclear-weapons-in-a-new-geopolitical-reality>.

changing. A recent AIV report advises the Netherlands to align itself »as closely as possible with the Franco-German initiatives for European security« (AIV 2020: 6). The report not only proposes hitherto contentious proposals such as the transformation of the existing Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) into a headquarters for strategic and contingency planning and the preparation of military missions. It also embraces French-German ideas of new institutional structures, such as a European Security Council in order to enhance Europe's capacity for decisive action. A Clingendael report argues along the same lines that »more European responsibility can no longer be interpreted solely as realizing better burden-sharing in NATO; it is also about Europe becoming a geopolitical actor in the context of the changing international order with China, Russia, and the United States as the main competing world powers« (Zandee et al. 2020). The report, although supporting the idea of a European Security Council, emphasizes the generation of European defence capabilities that will benefit both NATO and the EU. In this regard, Dick Zandee proposes that European mechanisms such as the Capability Development Plan and Permanent Structured Cooperation should be further developed in coordination with respective Alliance mechanisms such as the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) (Zandee 2019c). Even the traditionally more transatlantic-oriented HCSS embraces European defence and concepts such as strategic autonomy.

NATO's 2 per cent target is a rather sensitive issue as currently the Netherlands falls short. Despite substantial increases in defence spending in absolute terms in recent years, spending as a percentage of GDP will remain at around 1.3 per cent. The most likely explanation is not a lack of funds but a lack of political will to invest more in defence. Dutch think tankers argue that a new transatlantic security bargain should focus less on input measures and more on output. The generation of defence capabilities should be the future standard of burden-sharing, and »the European allies should set themselves the goal of delivering half of NATO's conventional forces« (Zandee 2019d). Turning half of NATO's level-of-ambition into a European one would entail that EU forces be able to conduct one major joint operation (for example, territorial defence of Europe) if the United States is engaged in a major parallel conflict in the Pacific area (Zandee et al. 2020: 27).

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