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A Small State? The Size of the Netherlands as a Focal Point in Foreign Policy Debates, 1900–1940

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ABSTRACT

Do small states behave in an appreciably different fashion than their larger counterparts? Social scientists and historians have, for decades, searched for the defining features that set small states apart from larger ones and have come up empty. This analysis suggests that rather than searching for another set of membership criteria, focus should be on the explanatory power of the discourses surrounding the size of states. As this article demonstrates, based on a reading of Dutch international history from the late nineteenth century to the advent of the Second World War, the changing shape of discourses surrounding the “smallness” did historically influence foreign policy practices.

Since the publication of Annette Baker Fox’s 1959 landmark study of small states during the Second World War, “small state studies” has emerged as a distinct sub-field of the study of International Relations [IR]. Its adherents share the notion that a state’s size, or specifically its “smallness,” decidedly influences such states’ policy options, thereby fundamentally setting them apart from “non-small” states.¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, the study into small states focused on the search for empirical criteria of “smallness” and efforts to relate these criteria to specific types of foreign policy behaviours. This search, however, resulted in an impressive list of possible criteria—population size and GNP being the most popular—and an even more impressive list of counter-examples of states that “should be” small but, curiously, did not “behave” like a small state. In fact, most conclusions suggested that most supposedly small states’ foreign policies had very little in common.²

Robert Keohane and Robert Rothstein, writing in 1968 and 1969, respectively, therefore suggested that the examination of small states should focus not on their static empirical characteristics but, rather, on their fundamental inability, recognised by both themselves and others, to provide for their own security.³ This allows, they argued, for a less static concept of “smallness” in international relations. However, further muddling the debate, inter-changing “small” with “fundamentally insecure”

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introduced its own operational difficulties, mainly surrounding what exactly constitutes “security” in the nuclear age.⁴

Iver B. Neumann and Sieglinde Gstöhl have suggested more recently yet another alternate approach. They suggest that the value of small state studies lies in these states forming a useful antidote to a field-wide over-emphasis of empirical evidence from “Great Powers” in general IR theory.⁵ This might be true in some cases, but certainly not in all. More importantly, equating under-representation and smallness invites not only endless confusion over the right balance between evidence from “Great” and “not-Great” Powers, but also on whether every under-represented state is automatically small.⁶

These disheartening attempts at defining the subject of “small state studies” have engendered two responses. First, there are those who share Peter Baehr’s assessment, in a 1975 review article of several books on “small states,” of simply discarding completely the notion of a “sharp dichotomy between large and small states.” A “small state,” he concluded, is simply not a useful analytical category, as “smallness” does not *ipso facto* explain anything.⁷ Others, less willing to give up on the promise of the subject, have opted for an “I know it when I see it” approach, generating many interesting user cases but little methodological clarity or insights into whether the concept of “smallness,” in whatever shape or form, has a decisive influence in shaping a state’s international relations.⁸

Baehr was right. “Smallness” is not a useful analytical tool in analysing foreign policy because evidently it means too many things for too many people. This, however, is also the key to revitalising small state studies. Rather than studying some set of criteria all small states, past and present, share, there should be focus on studying what “being small” meant in specific cases, and whether connexions exist between discourses surrounding “smallness” and specific practices. In other words, when smallness means something in particular, how does this translate into foreign policy? And how does that change over time?⁹

This analysis therefore focuses on analysing a single country that is widely—but not uniformly—considered small, over a considerable time: the Netherlands from 1900 to 1940. In this context, evidence exists of the co-existence of various, changing ideas about whether the Netherlands was a small state and, if so, what being small actually meant. More specifically, there occurred different discourses surrounding the use of the term “small” in discussions related to the Dutch role in the world within the Netherlands itself, highlighting how in Parliament, prominent newspapers, and amongst popular opinion-makers different narratives co-existed about the Dutch relative size and its implications. When a different narrative gained prominence, this had a real and tangible impact on the breadth and width of foreign policy options felt to be “appropriate” for the Netherlands. Finally, these discourses need historicisation to recognise their fluid nature.

Focusing on the Dutch case also allows for arguing that a reliance on ahistorical categories hampers the current understanding of the history of

Dutch international relations. Currently, Dutch foreign relations scholarship mainly focuses on the formal decision-making processes within the ivory towers of the Foreign Ministry in The Hague. Moreover, the core assumption behind much of this literature is that continuities mark foreign policy in the Netherlands. Some stress that the Netherlands was a “small state” in the “realist” sense of the word: limits to its population and natural resources pre-destined it to play only a limited role in the international system. Surrounded by greater Powers that were more often than not hostile to each other, the country had no choice but to remain neutral in the hope of avoiding entanglement in their rivalries. Neutrality saved the Netherlands from being embroiled in the First World War, but it could not spare the country from the horrors of Nazi occupation in the Second. After 1945, with all its neighbours firmly in the camp of the American superpower, the Netherlands slipped just as easily into the role of the Americans’ “junior Power.” Naturally, the limits externally imposed on Dutch foreign policy were hardly subject to meaningful debate, since there was no rational alternative.¹⁰

A second group locate in Dutch foreign policy a continuous idealistic undercurrent. This could take the shape of an insistence on international law or, after 1945, an enthusiastic embrace of European co-operation. Frequent explanations posit that this was a natural recourse for “small states”; lacking “real” power, they use international law or supranational organisations to level the playing field by removing military and economic force from the equation as much as possible.¹¹ For others, the dominant expression of this idealism was a certain paternalistic attitude towards the “third world” after 1945, in itself a post-colonial legacy of Dutch attitudes towards the Netherlands East Indies “natives” as little children needing the steady hand of their European parent to grow up into responsible national adulthood. This paternalism, too, has been explained from a classic realist “small state” perspective. Either as a means of achieving “soft power” in the absence of the resources for “hard power” or as a sort of national distraction from the awful realities of European power politics: if the Netherlands cannot be part of the strongest nations of the world, then let it try to be the *best* nation of the world.¹² In contrast to these static and narrow perspectives, the approach in this exegesis highlights the dynamic and contingent nature of Dutch foreign policy formation.

The argument flows from the origins of the debate on Dutch smallness in the first half of the nineteenth century and its evolution into the early twentieth century, when a consensus emerged that the Netherlands should strive to be “small, but great.” Inconspicuous in its international dealings, it should present the world with a model of what a harmonious, satiated country could achieve. There was a serious challenge to that consensus, popularised by a highly influential Leiden law professor who claimed that the Netherlands might be small, but it also had a special mission in the world that required a highly active foreign policy. Thus, there was a clash between these different, and changing, notions of Dutch smallness and the connotations of smallness with

another conception of the Dutch Empire as a—potential—Great Power. Nonetheless, there are benefits emanating from this approach to Dutch smallness for the study of—self-proclaimed—small states.

Sometime in the early nineteenth century, to the surprise of many Dutch, the Netherlands became a small Power: something never supposed or even designed.¹³ In fact, when the Netherlands regained its independence from Napoleonic France in 1813, the territory of the old federated and republican United Provinces were merged with the Austrian Netherlands, the Prince-Bishopric of Liège—current-day Belgium—and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in a new unitary kingdom. This new country was designed as a bulwark against renewed French revolutionary violence and was therefore expected to be politically stable, on one hand, and reliable and militarily formidable, on the other. Domestic and international hopes regarding the new Dutch state's role in the Concert of Europe quickly proved barren, however, as the country proved to be neither. Poor management of the many religious, economic, linguistic, and political diversities within the new constituent country created widespread support for a secessionist movement in the southern—Belgian—half of the country. Concluding that the new compound state was no longer viable, the 1830 Conference of London, which brought together representatives of the self-appointed guardians of the European order—Britain, France, Russia, Prussia, and Austria—confirmed Belgian independence.¹⁴

The realisation that the once mighty country was now reduced both in size and in stature dawned quickly after the secession of Belgium.¹⁵ In fact, in Parliament, a consensus quickly emerged that what was left of the Netherlands was now a “small country” of “not 2.5 million souls,” and that the government should not entertain any thoughts of continuing to play a meaningful role within the European security framework.¹⁶ In the 1840s and 1850s, when the expense of keeping the country fully mobilised caused a severe economic downturn until the Dutch finally accepted Belgian independence in 1839, several influential policy-makers even began to question whether the country had become too small to survive.¹⁷ In an age where, both in Italy and Germany, smaller states seemed poised to combine into larger units, the question was asked if it would not be better if the Dutch would become a part of a larger whole as well? Indeed, whilst some Dutch argued for joining the German Confederation, many more feared an invasion, most prominently by Prussia, to speed up the process of amalgamation; they wondered whether the now-small country might be able to put up a meaningful resistance.¹⁸

After the 1850s, a slightly more optimistic narrative gained prominence.¹⁹ The Netherlands might be a small nation but, nonetheless, it remained one worthy of a continued independent existence. It could, and should, prove this to the world at large by “perfecting itself,” to borrow a phrase from the noted reformist prime minister, Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, in 1869. Moreover, in 1898, Queen Regent Emma called upon her people to become “great at

everything a small country can be great at.”²⁰ In other words, the Dutch should let go of any power-political aspirations in favour of bettering themselves and thereby providing a shining example of virtue to others. The accompanying dominant narrative was that the Dutch, rather than experiencing a relative “decline” in power and status, had transformed into an experienced, cultured, and satiated “elder state” whose duty was to counsel its younger, more exuberant, and impulsive neighbours in the ways of virtue.

The Dutch self-identification as “small, but great” proved highly popular, and Emma’s speech received frequent citations whenever the Netherlands appeared to have punched above its weight in virtuousness, especially when it came to accomplishments in the arts, sciences, and sport.²¹ A 1928 newspaper article in the *Tilburgsche Courant* reporting on a football match between the Netherlands and Italy perfectly illustrates its enduring popularity and wide-ranging cultural connotation.²² A few minutes before the final whistle, with 2-2 on the scoreboard, the Italians notched what turned out to be the winning goal. However, the newspaper glowingly reported, rather than showing anger or frustration, that the Dutch players “saluted both the away and the home supporters. The [Italian] public appreciated this gesture and answered the salute, as one does when in the company of representatives of a small country, which is nonetheless great.” The sub-text is clear: although the Dutch squad could not hope to win against Italy—surely a “Great Power” not only in the realms of political power but sports as well—it left the field with its collective head held high, teaching the Italians a lesson in losing well.

This self-identification as small but inherently moral had foreign policy repercussions. During the latter half of the nineteenth century and throughout the early years of the twentieth, commentators and lawmakers agreed that the Netherlands’ role in the international scene was limited.²³ The publicist and historian Herman Theodoor Colenbrander, for example, felt that the role of the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs was, in effect, a decidedly minimal one: “not getting the country in any sort of trouble.”²⁴ Foreign Minister Willem Hendrik de Beaufort echoed this sentiment when he wrote in 1899 that as a “small state,” the Netherlands “should keep to itself as much as possible.”²⁵ Obviously, not everyone agreed, at least not in principle. Baron Van Goltstein, a prominent Liberal parliamentarian, spoke regularly of the Dutch “historic duty” to combine with others to fight for the freedom of Europe against nefarious rulers like “dictator Napoleon.” However, Goltstein conceded in 1851, this was a purely hypothetical situation; for now, he too felt that the small state’s foreign policy should be limited to safeguarding its own territory.²⁶

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a different and decidedly less modest view of the Dutch role in international relations emerged. This view found basis on two central tenets. The first was that

the Netherlands was hardly internationally irrelevant, but had, despite the Belgian schism, continued to play a key role in maintaining European security and peace, which required active maintenance. The second was that Dutch morality was superior to that of others and needed translating into a set of specific foreign policy objectives.²⁷

The notion that the Dutch held the keys to European peace and security came primarily from a particular reading of the Netherlands' geographical position in Europe and the wider world. As both the Netherlands and the Netherlands East Indies were territories of prime strategic and economic value, it was in the interest of all the rivalling European states—most importantly Britain, France, and Germany—that the Netherlands remain unaligned. If the Dutch elected or found themselves forced to join in an alliance with any of them, the global security and power balance would alter irrevocably, automatically triggering war. A reinterpretation of Dutch neutrality in potential conflicts hereby emerged: from a means of avoiding the sort of “trouble” about which Colenbrander and De Beaufort warned to a deliberate policy to maintain the European balance of power, and therefore peace.²⁸

Slowly but surely, a majority of commentators and politicians during the last years of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century came around to this view, arguing that simply doing nothing and keeping “out of trouble” was not enough to fulfil this important role in maintaining European peace. It did not fail to have an effect on official policy. It is striking, in this regard, how government reaction to the First (1899) and Second (1907) Hague Peace conferences differed; whereas De Beaufort warned against too active a Dutch role in the 1899 conference, his successor, Reneke de Marees van Swinderen, was, near the end of his term in 1913, extensively praised for taking international initiative. The *Nieuwe Courant* gushed:

The modesty ... some so-called experts feel should characterise a small nation's relation to other states, is not a feature of Mr. Van Swinderen's policy, and we are thankful for it. For five years the minister has frequently shown the world the Dutch point of view at any relevant international venue. He represented the Netherlands as often possible and as best he could, and the inauguration of the Peace Palace [at The Hague in 1913] serves as a fitting and magnificent conclusion of his tenure as minister of Foreign Affairs.²⁹

In other foreign policy areas, increased support for a more energetic Dutch diplomacy—fitting with this new conception of neutrality and smallness—also translated into policy. The Netherlands played an active part in not only hosting the Second Hague Conference; it also entered into talks for regional security arrangements in the North Sea area in 1907–1908 and the strengthening of maritime neutral rights at the London Naval Conference of

1908–1909. These and other activities had the closely inter-related goals of strengthening Dutch security and European stability.³⁰

The linkage that the *Nieuwe Courant* made between a highly visible foreign policy and the Peace Palace—the home of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, intended as a legal-international alternative to violent conflict resolution between states—shows that the closely connected causes of international peace and international law played a significant part in this new conception of an active Dutch foreign policy. In fact, in the years prior to the First World War, an unparalleled enthusiasm for promoting the cause of international law gripped the country. The immense public support for its most enthusiastic epigone, Leiden law professor Cornelis van Vollenhoven, makes this clear.

In a 1910 scene-setting article, tellingly entitled “Holland’s Calling,” van Vollenhoven argued that the Netherlands had become the pinnacle of societal modernity. Potentially rife with conflict between different religious groups and political ideologies, Dutch society had, instead, evolved into a cohesive whole whilst still allowing a maximum of freedom to develop individual and group identities. This remarkable feat, he claimed, matched the success of its civilising mission in the Netherlands East Indies. An expert in *adat*—local indigenous customs and law—he noted how the Dutch did not seek to exploit the natives entrusted to their care, but hoped to school them in the advanced ways of the West: promoting education, improving infrastructure and agriculture, and introducing more rational forms of government. Now having fulfilled these national duties and as the Netherlands had indeed become a shining example to others, it was high time for that Dutch sense of mission to enter the “*international age*.”³¹ The Dutch lack of power-political ambitions as evidenced by the Netherlands’ impartiality in European conflicts, but most of all its experience of creating unity out of diversity and its “ethical” approach to non-Western peoples made them ideal candidates to lead a global movement for a new, just world order based on strict adherence to international law. Van Vollenhoven therefore urged the Dutch government to propose the formation of an international fleet to enforce this law and suggested that the Dutch navy form its nucleus. Dutch ports and coaling stations in Europe, America, and Asia could serve as its bases of operation.

Van Vollenhoven’s “plan” was enthusiastically received—even more so when his seminal article was reprinted on the centenary of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1913.³² The most fanatical adherents of his “legal internationalism” and a prominent Dutch role in the new world order even suggested the building of a new star-shaped “international city” near The Hague, which would function as a new world government and court.³³ Critics of van Vollenhoven’s rather grandiose plans, lamented cautious commentators, were widely lambasted as sceptic naysayers, small-minded conservatives, or even enemies of peace.³⁴ Nevertheless, even they had to admire

the “new spirit” emanating from the van Vollenhoven camp.³⁵ The government, too, had to respond. Although it politely fielded questions as to why it had not pitched van Vollenhoven’s plan to other states immediately, it had no choice but to bow to public pressure and include the now-famous law professor in the committee preparing the groundwork for the third Hague peace conference, scheduled for 1915.

The unique duty of the Netherlands in maintaining international law—*not* despite of but *because* it was a small “disinterested” state—also manifested itself at the start of the First World War, during which the country remained neutral. In August 1914, according to the wartime prime minister, Pieter Cort van der Linden, it did so to remain international law’s ultimate guardian and protector in a world gone mad where all the belligerents seemed animated only by their most basic instincts.³⁶ His argument, “Since whoever appeals to the law is not ruled by partisanship, and one that maintains the law even if it falters from attacks by all sides, finds oneself on firm footing,” received great applause from Parliament and the universal admiration of the mainstream press.³⁷

However, the belligerents quickly and heavily contested any claim to a unique Dutch duty in international affairs based on its defence of higher morality. Their propagandists argued that both the Allies and Central Powers fought and died for such lofty principles as “culture,” “democracy,” or “the rights of small nations,” and they were quite successful in painting the smaller European neutrals as freeloaders that would profit from their victory but were unwilling to make the ultimate sacrifice themselves.³⁸ Moreover, the ease with which the belligerents dismissed international law in pursuit of ultimate victory—especially those rules and regulations governing neutral-belligerent interaction in the area of international trade—caused a great deal of scepticism about the validity of Cort van der Linden’s optimistic statement or the possibility of a world ruled by law in general.³⁹ Additionally, the outbreak of the war seemed to invalidate the notion of the European importance of Dutch neutrality, as it had failed to prevent global war. And, finally, and perhaps more important, the Netherlands seemed to have no success in translating lofty morals and big words into concrete actions to put an end to the war or at least mitigate its effects. The Dutch wartime foreign minister, John Loudon, did announce in 1915 that although the Netherlands would be willing to facilitate talks between the belligerent sides, it would not suggest peace terms as doing so was too dangerous; an ill-received Dutch proposal might invite the ire of one or both sets of belligerents, with potentially egregious consequences.⁴⁰

Dutch timidity in the face of the belligerents became even more pronounced during the last year of the war. When the Allies, including the Americans, seized a sizable portion of the Dutch merchant marine on 18 March 1918, the Cort van der Linden government voiced its extreme disapproval but did not

take any putative measures for fear of endangering neutrality.⁴¹ Netherlands newspapers near-universally derided this Dutch “capitulation,” and the Catholic *De Tijd* even suggested the Dutch declare war.

Although the Dutch are patient and lenient, we are not cowards. The Dutchman’s soul and sense of justice are deeply disturbed and the Dutch people are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend our autonomy and independence.⁴²

Although many in the Netherlands would not have supported entering the war, certainly not on the side of the Central Powers, *De Tijd* did manage to capture the profound sense of disappointment. It touched not only the (in)action of the government, but also the wide gap between the noble ideals of the Dutch international mission and the harsh reality, as it now appeared, of being a very small, and very frightened, fish in an overwhelmingly big sea.⁴³

Worse still, the First World War dealt a serious blow to the notion that the Dutch were an inherently moral people: “small but great.” It seemed hollow when confronted with the not entirely unjustifiable belligerent accusations of “moral bandwagoning” and, perhaps even more poignantly, war profiteering; it was hard to deny that the Netherlands, undamaged by the ravages of war, had managed to profit handsomely from the removal of German, British, and French competition in key markets. The humiliation of March 1918 seemed like the final blow, and calls issued forth for an isolationism that seemed to harken back to the days of the Belgian split in 1830. “[W]e should concern ourselves exclusively with ourselves alone,” argued the legal expert and Member of Parliament, A. C. Visser van Ijzendoorn, to near-universal acclaim.⁴⁴ Angry at both the world and themselves, the Dutch once more turned inward.

Given the country’s First World War experience, the creation of the League of Nations posed a particular challenge for the Dutch, who hailed it with a curious mixture of enthusiasm and scepticism. Many felt that the League was an imperfect institution at best, but that it did show promise to one day become a truly universal world society. Moreover, such a reformed League might serve to prevent the outbreak of another global war.⁴⁵ And without such a League, the influential weekly, *De Amsterdammer*, opined in 1927, “Europe remains a dangerous hornet’s nest for the Netherlands.”⁴⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, van Vollenhoven emerged as one of the leading Dutch advocates of the League and argued that the Dutch should take the lead in turning this imperfect institution into the best hope for preserving global peace. But, in striking contrast to his pre-war arguments for a pro-active Dutch foreign policy to support the cause of international law, his suggestion that the Dutch government lead the charge was based on the necessity of League reform *per se*, not on a supposed higher Dutch morality or special Dutch role in international politics.⁴⁷ Like many of his contemporaries, van Vollenhoven seems to have downplayed

this element in Dutch identity construction in the years following the sobering First World War experience. Instead, during the 1920s, many commentators focused on the vital need for “small nations” in general to help the League reach its full potential as an embryonic world government, as these nations served to “enrich” the international community by forming its “collective consciousness.”⁴⁸

Here, for the first time, was the portrayal of the Netherlands as part of a group of other countries with which it supposedly shared similar qualities and characteristics. Consequently, the emphasis on a Dutch “*Sonderweg*”—a “special path”—almost disappeared, as did the stress on a “geographic” basis for a special Dutch role in maintaining a European balance of power, which seems to have definitely swung in the Allies’ favour following the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles and German disarmament.⁴⁹

If the Netherlands were, indeed, one of the comparable small countries, what of its colonial possessions? Alone amongst the European smaller Powers, the Netherlands possessed a sizable Empire in Asia which, especially from the late nineteenth century, came to be viewed as a source of national pride; a true Dutch imperialism grasped the public imagination.⁵⁰ The key unanswered question, however, is what together the Netherlands East Indies and the Netherlands represented. Were the Indies nothing more than a dependency, a far-flung annex of the European metropole? Or were they, as van Vollenhoven and many others felt, a sort of nursery entrusted to its Dutch parents by Fate, who had placed its childlike natives in their care?

A smaller group, who might be called Dutch “Imperial Federalists,” however, eschewed this parochial—“ethical”—view of Dutch–East Indies relations in favour of the notion of an integrated Empire in which the Netherlands and the Indies were equally important parts of a constituent whole, closely intertwined politically, economically, and culturally. Adherents to this federal idea frequently and proudly claimed that the Netherlands did not consist of several million Dutchmen; it constituted a nation of tens of millions, including not only White Europeans but the many peoples of the Netherlands East Indies as well.⁵¹ Imperial Federalists simply denied that the Netherlands was a small Power. Rejecting both the notion of a limited foreign policy—the Van Vollenhoven-inspired important ethical international mission of a disinterested small Power—and the post-1918 stress on being one in a distinct category of small Powers, they maintained that, at least potentially, the Dutch Empire was a Great Power.

Explicit confrontations between these views of the Netherlands—and the consequences they supposedly held for the scope and direction of Dutch international relations—became most explicit in discussions surrounding the defence of the Dutch East Indies. These discussions started in earnest in the early years of the twentieth century, when a powerful lobby of Imperial Federalists and Dutch businessmen heavily investing in the Indies urged the government to increase its naval spending to ward off would-be invaders. Navy Minister Hendrikus Colijn, a former Indies-orientated businessman and a veteran of the Dutch colonial war

against the Sultanate of Aceh in 1873–1904 on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, was their champion. In 1913, he managed to convince both Queen Wilhelmina and his Cabinet colleagues of the necessity of a vastly expanded Dutch navy to safeguard the Indies. He explained that the continued survival of the Dutch Empire was not only in the Dutch interest, but in that of civilisation itself; the Dutch were to serve as bulwarks against the aggressive “yellow peril” in the guise of the resurgent Japanese Empire or potential Great Power, China. Parliament, however, was not immediately convinced, especially since the projected naval expansion was to cost tens of millions of guilders, even though most of the costs would be borne via a special tax paid for by Dutch–East Indies businesses.

Discussions turned to the question of whether a small Power like the Netherlands should invest so heavily in its military capability. Unilateral naval expansion might raise suspicion amongst the Netherlands’ larger neighbours in Europe and Asia and would thwart Dutch efforts to improve international law. Moreover, it would fit ill with Dutch higher morality. Colijn, however, would have none of it.

Time and again I hear: the Netherlands is a small country and should not entertain such plans. The Netherlands is a small country! . . . Is this true, when we consider that the Dutch State does not solely consist of its territory in Europe, but includes lands in Asia and America? On the contrary, the Dutch State’s . . . size is one of the reasons why the Netherlands is more like a great Power than a small one. . . . And therefore our position is such that we have special obligations, which we ought to honour.⁵²

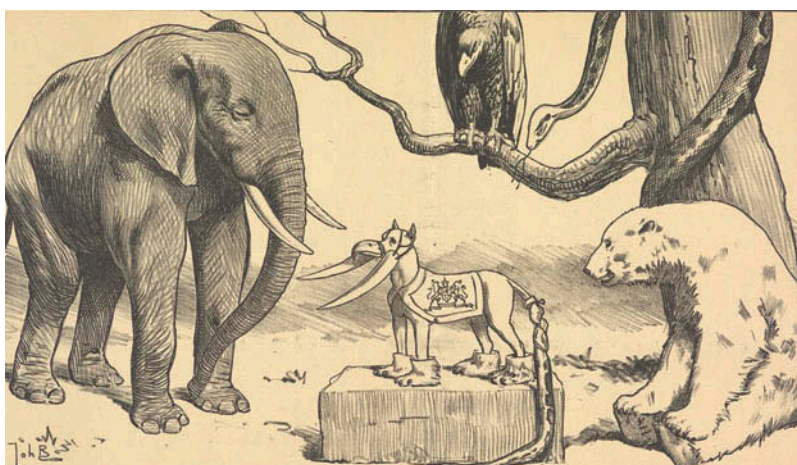


Figure 1. Great in everything a small country cannot be great at. Cartoon by Johan Braakensiek, *De Amsterdammer* (7 April 1912). The caption reads: “The Lord has provided all the animals with their own means for self-defence: one He gave great tusks, the others a mighty beak, and yet another sharp claws, and to the small fox-terrier speed and tenacity. But the small fox-terrier was not satisfied, armed itself like the larger animals and foolishly thought itself protected.” Cleverly turning Queen Regent Emma’s now-famous dictum on its head, Braakensiek argued that the Netherlands was definitely not a Great Power and should not try to act like one, but rather use its innate abilities to secure its position in Europe, and thereby further the cause of peace. [copyright free]

To Colijn's misfortune, new elections occurred before the *Naval Expansion Bill* could pass through Parliament. The outbreak of war delayed further naval plans, but the matter re-emerged in the 1920s. After several aborted attempts, mostly due to ill-timed elections, Parliament received a new plan in 1923.⁵³

Both proponents and critics of the plan structured their arguments relating both to the plan itself and its immense costs around competing visions of the size of the Netherlands and the repercussions of that size. Vocal critics on the Left, who opposed a costly fleet expansion, argued that it might lead to tensions with the Japanese that could possibly escalate into an East Asian war that the Dutch could not hope to win. Moreover, they argued that small states, given the global community's conscience, should be advocates of peace and disarmament. It would be of universal benefit and increase small state security. In short, Dutch naval expansion in the Indonesian archipelago would therefore send exactly the wrong message and distort previous Dutch efforts to provide the world with positive examples.⁵⁴ In contrast, proponents of the new Indies defence budget, most of them belonging to the political Right, argued that the Dutch Empire constituted a Great Power in its own right and therefore "deserved" a navy that was commensurate to its global interests.⁵⁵ Without such a navy, the Netherlands would abrogate its responsibility for maintaining its long-term independence to others and, thereby, truly become a small state.⁵⁶

The narrowest majority defeated the Fleet Plan: 49–50 with one pro-Navy Member of Parliament forced to abstain due to a serious illness. With this rejection went the last serious attempt to bolster colonial defences prior to the Second World War and Indonesian independence in 1949. The debate revealed deep divisions within Dutch politics and society over the status of the colonies *vis-à-vis* the motherland and the viability of their defence against aggression. Less visibly, it also highlighted how, some one hundred years after the first Dutch started self-identifying as citizens of a "small country," there was still little consensus over whether that was universally true and, if so, what that *meant* in both the closely inter-twined areas of national defence and foreign policy.

These debates continued to rage until the German attack and occupation of the Netherlands in spring 1940. As the prospect of a new Great War dawned in summer 1939 and Dutch society confronted the difficult question of what the Netherlands could do to weather the coming storm, the language of national identity and sense of mission once again framed opinions. The future prime minister, Dirk Jan de Geer, chairman of the Protestant Party that had enthusiastically lobbied for naval expansion in the 1924 debates, argued in 1938 that "a small state like ours" should

contend with trying to foster a spirit of European understanding and cooperation by providing moral examples, a “duty . . . more pressing than increasing our defences.”⁵⁷ Defence Minister Jannes Johannes Cornelis van Dijk did not agree, arguing that in the coming war small nations would be at risk if they possessed no believable defences.⁵⁸ Two months after war broke out with the German invasion of Poland, the foreign minister, Eelco van Kleffens, added that the “European function of our independent existence” might prevent the conflict from spreading to the West. He had an enigmatic comment, “Sensitive to this historical calling and aware of its defensive tasks, the Netherlands honestly guards its position of independent neutrality.”⁵⁹

In conclusion, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the German invasion of May 1940, which created a paradigm shift in Dutch foreign policy thinking, Dutch policy-makers and opinion leaders overwhelmingly believed that they were inhabitants of a small country and that being small carried policy implications. Throughout the entire period under study, evolving debates surrounding the contested meanings of Dutch “smallness” remained closely connected with different conceptions of the Dutch sense of self and, therefore, the country’s scope of action in the international arena remained essentially contested.

Some felt that Dutch smallness should necessarily translate into a “minimalist” foreign policy. Representations abroad should limit themselves to remaining in the other nations’ good graces and not cause offence. Meanwhile, innate Dutch superiority provided both a positive example and the *raison d’être* of Dutch independence. This vision of the Dutch nation as “small, but great” was quite popular around the turn of the century, but suffered greatly during the First World War. After 1918, the Netherlands suddenly found itself part of a “family” of small nations sharing an inherently ethical outlook and whose role in the League was therefore crucial. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when German aggression turned towards several smaller states—Austria and Czechoslovakia—in 1938, the focus was once again squarely on Dutch special moral qualities.⁶⁰

Others argued that the Netherlands had a special mission precisely because it was so small. Although diminutive by most metrics, Providence had entrusted it to protect the geo-strategically and economically important Rhine delta and, hence, hold the key to European peace. Moreover, its moral superiority coupled with its avowed lack of power-political designs made it the perfect candidate to lead a global movement for the strengthening of international rights and regulations. After the First World War seemingly destroyed both Dutch geographical exceptionalism and international law as a sole basis for peace co-existence, the League project provided Dutch “internationalists” with a new mission and sense of purpose. In the late 1930s, with the League project

seemingly unable to prevent the coming of a new war, hope once again turned to the notion that the Dutch role in the world was to prevent a new global war by actively maintaining and defending its neutrality.

A smaller minority championed the idea that the Netherlands was, at least potentially, a Great Power. These Dutch Imperial Federalists argued that the Dutch state spanned three continents—the Netherlands also had Caribbean colonies—and counted tens of millions of inhabitants, comparable—but not equal—to the British Empire. They focused mostly on the issue of defence and argued for increased spending even at the risk of Dutch goodwill or even of actively sabotaging Dutch efforts to solidify international rights and support global disarmament. In stark contrast to the other two types of arguments, found across political parties, this line of thinking existed mostly in conservative-liberal circles, especially amongst those members of the political and economic elite that fervently believed in Dutch Imperial unity.

These schools of thought on what it meant for the Netherlands to be small had a real influence on the range of foreign policy options deemed appropriate for the Netherlands. Naturally, they were not sole inspiration of foreign policy—nor could they be—but the connexions made between the changing shape of the discourses surrounding “smallness” and foreign policy practices suggests that “smallness” does have real explanatory power, just not in any static sense. This is how “small state studies” can escape the twin dangers of empirical rigidity—what exactly sets small states apart from others—and the “anything goes” approach that tells nothing about “smallness” as an explanatory factor. Being “small” in international relations is nothing more than an essentially often-contested construct. It opens up an entirely new field of study: the properly historicised analysis of the discourses and practices involved in the different conceptions of smallness.

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