

Seeking the Right Balance: NATO and EU in Dutch Foreign and Defense Policy

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Resumo

À Procura do Equilíbrio Certo: A Política Externa e de Defesa da Holanda no Contexto NATO e Europeu

No passado, a política externa holandesa foi caracterizada pela expressão “paz, ganhos e princípios”. Na verdade, a política externa holandesa tem características semelhantes à de outras potências médias com desenvolvimento elevado. Enquanto instrumento de política externa, o uso ofensivo das suas forças armadas não é a primeira escolha; muito pelo contrário, o seu cerne está no reforço do primado do Direito Internacional e nas instituições, com o objectivo de criar relações internacionais estáveis e pacíficas. O que realmente distingue a Holanda é a sua ênfase nas relações transatlânticas como forma de manter a sua independência relativamente aos restantes poderes continentais. Devido às mudanças geoestratégicas dos anos 90, esta ênfase tem vindo a perder relevância. Dado que a Europa deixou de ser a prioridade estratégica dos EUA em matéria de segurança e defesa, a Holanda tenta encontrar um novo equilíbrio entre o tradicional transatlantismo, através da NATO, e a emergente Política Europeia de Segurança e Defesa (PESD) da União Europeia.

Abstract

Dutch foreign policy was once characterized as based on “peace, profits and principles”.

As a matter of fact, Dutch foreign policy has similar characteristics of other highly developed, rich, medium powers. As a foreign policy instrument, the offensive use of its armed forces is not the first choice; instead emphasis is given to strengthening the international rule of law and multinational organizations to create stable and peaceful international relations. What really distinguishes the Netherlands is its focus on transatlantic relations to keep its independence from the major continental powers. Due to the geo strategic changes of the 1990s, this focus has lost its relevance. As Europe is no longer the first strategic priority in security of the Americans and defense matters the Netherlands tries to find a new balance between traditional transatlanticism, which is embodied in NATO and the emerging European Security and Defense policy (EDSP).

The Netherlands is one of the founding fathers of NATO, the European Union and other international organizations. Ever since the end of the Second World War constructive multilateralism has been a dominant feature in foreign and defense policy. The public ‘no’ against the European Constitutional Treaty in 2004, however, was the expression of a deep political crisis that started with the murder of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn by a left wing environmental extremist in 2004 and deepened with the first salafist murder in 2006 of film maker Theo van Gogh. Ever since the murder of Fortuyn the Dutch political elite has been struggling with the Netherlands’ place in Europe and the world. First, due to successive internal crises the country has become increasingly inward looking. Although it probably goes too far to speak of a foreign policy crisis, because, for example, Dutch troops are still important contributors to stabilization missions around the globe. Second, Dutch political leaders are still struggling with the end of the Cold War which undermined a number of the traditional approaches of Dutch foreign policy. Due to the geo strategic changes of the 1990s, its focus on transatlantic relations has lost some of its relevance. As Europe is no longer the first strategic priority in security of the Americans and defense matters the Netherlands tries to find a new balance between traditional transatlanticism, which is embodied in NATO and the emerging European Security and Defense policy (EDSP). This contribution explores the nature of changes in the Netherlands’ foreign and security policy by putting them in a historical context.

The background of Dutch foreign policy

Dutch foreign policy was once characterized as based on “peace, profits and principles”.¹ Some characteristics of Dutch foreign policy are deeply rooted in history. By 1650 the Netherlands had become the most formidable power in the World. It accumulated incredible wealth through foreign trade and possessed the most powerful navy to protect its commercial interests. In those days the fleet numbered over 70 war ships with more than 20,000 sailors. Despite its power projection capabilities and wealth, during the Golden Age the Dutch did not participate in the international power struggle as such. Unlike the rulers of neighboring states the ruling commercial patricians or

1 J.J.C. Voorhoeve, *Peace, Profits and Principles: a Study on Dutch Foreign Policy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1979).

‘regents’ were not interested in territorial expansion or, for that matter, even integrity. Their objective was to accumulate wealth. Moreover, their commercial interests prompted them to stay away from other nation’s political quarrels.

In addition, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the country was a heterogeneous group of cities and provinces, without strong leadership. Consequently, the Dutch were neither willing nor able to get involved in the struggle for power. Moreover, due to its fragmented political system, it had no other choice but to seek consensus among regents, cities and provinces. Hence, Dutch aversion to power politics and its preoccupation with consensus seeking are centuries old.

Scholars disagree about the existence of constant factors in Dutch foreign policy.² Nevertheless, most policy choices find their roots in recurring approaches or traditions. The first is a strong legal approach. This goes back to Hugo Grotius, who in the 17th century was one of the founders of international law. Dutch interest in international law has remained constant over the last centuries. As a trade nation the Netherlands always attached great value to a strong international legal order to ensure stability. Except for the brief period of the Golden Age of the 17th century the Netherlands has never enjoyed the military power to defend its interests. This legal tradition explains why successive governments promote The Hague as the world capital of international law. Numerous international organizations have headquarters in The Hague, including the UN Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the Yugoslavia Tribunal (ICTY), the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

Until the beginning of the Second World War it was thought that the national interest was best served by a policy of strict neutrality. Thus it was hoped that the country could stay out of major power competition and could avoid getting involved in wars. This served the Dutch well, because they managed to stay out of the devastating First World War. Liberated by the Americans and Canadians and faced with an overwhelming threat, it was concluded that after the Second World War there was no other choice but to give up on neutrality and embark on multilateral course instead. Since the end of the war the Netherlands has become a strong proponent of international organizations; the second recurring approach. The Netherlands was among the founding members of the forerunners of the present day European Union, NATO, the UN, the OSCE, the World Bank, etc. This advantage of institutions is, when functioning properly, that they will

2 Y. Kleistra, *Hollen of stilstaan: Beleidsveranderingen bij het Nederlandse Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken* (Delft: Eburon, 2002), pp. 42-61.

bring order in international relations by constraining the major powers. Moreover, the institutional and legal approaches of Dutch foreign policy are seen as complementary.

The third approach in Dutch foreign policy is a certain degree of anti militarism or pacifism. The Dutch are no pacifists by nature. They fought many colonial wars, most notably in Indonesia. Due to its position as a medium power and the size of its armed forces, the Netherlands concluded that international law and multinational organizations are better instruments to create an orderly world. This was reinforced by Humanist and Christian traditions. Part of this tradition is a degree of moralism, which appeared to be a substitute for great power politics. As a result, the defense budget has always been under constant pressure. From time to time the discussion flares up whether the Netherlands should have an army of peacekeepers or a force of genuine war fighters. Usually those parties to the left favor the former option, whilst right wing parties favor the latter.

The fourth recurring approach is the maritime or anti-continental focus. By tradition the Netherlands is a seagoing nation. Already during the Golden Age the security of trade routes and markets depended on *mare liberum*. During the colonial age, this was vital to keep overseas territories under control. There is however, a strong connection between its maritime and anti-continental tradition. The Dutch have always tried to remain independent from those major continental powers, France and Germany. Consequently, a *Pax Britannica*, and subsequently a *Pax Americana* were considered important instruments to remain independent from the big continental powers. NATO itself became, in fact, the embodiment of both.

Finding a way to constrain the major powers through multilateral arrangements and international law has been an important theme for the last half a century. By emphasizing the international rule of law and the role of institutions Dutch politicians appear to reject power politics in international relations. But in reality, the Dutch are quite good at it. By playing the transatlantic card, they not only remained independent from the major continental European powers, but exercised disproportional influence in international affairs, e.g. through international organizations like NATO. This was supported by its economic weight: at present the world's 11th economic power and 6th export nation.

This explains the Netherlands as a status quo power as well. Maintaining status quo means stability. Only in a stable environment Dutch economy could flourish and could the Netherlands avoid becoming the puppet of the great powers. In sum, the status quo could be maintained though orientation on great powers outside the continent, and through depolarization of relations among other European states. Both the *Pax Britannica* and the *Pax Americana* fit in this approach. Until today transatlantic relations and

consequently NATO are seen as the cornerstone of Dutch foreign policy. The same holds too for the attempts to depolarize relations among the major European players.

The end of the Cold War

The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union undermined the status quo in Europe. In the early 1990s it became obvious that for the U.S. Europe no longer was its first strategic priority. Without the threat of major war in Europe, the U.S. could now focus on other areas. At present, as a security priority Europe ranks behind the Far East, Central Asia, the Gulf Region, the Middle East and Central Asia. This was reinforced by the events of 9/11 and the ever growing prosperity of the European Union, which made clear to the Americans that Europe should be able to take care of its own problems.

Needless to say that these geostrategic changes had a profound impact on Dutch foreign policy. Transatlantic relations as an instrument to balance against the major continental powers weakened. Moreover, after 11 September 2001 it was obvious that neo conservatives of the Bush Administrations were not only willing to set aside international law to protect their interests, but had an instrumental view of international organizations as well. In their view, UN and NATO are useful if they serve American interests. This 'pick and choose' attitude undermined the Netherlands' preoccupation with international law and multinational institutions. Thus, politicians had no other choice but to rethink their attitude towards Europe. As a result of ongoing European integration, economic and political ties had grown stronger over time. There was, however, reluctance to support extensive European security and defense integration as it undermined transatlantic relations.

Although maintaining independence from the great continental powers remained an overriding objective, during the 1990s the Dutch began to give preference to ad hoc coalitions depending on the issues at stake. While the transatlantic relationship was still considered to be relevant, policy makers also intensified their political relations with continental powers. This led in practice to confusion, which resulted in a major foreign policy review in 1994 and 1995 by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the leader of the left-wing liberals (D66), Hans van Mierlo. Introduced in September 1995 with Ministers Voorhoeve, Pronk, Wijers and Zalm the Memorandum related to the reevaluation of the

3 H. van Mierlo (Minister of Foreign Affairs) with ministers Voorhoeve (Defence), Pronk (Development Aid) and Wijers (Economic Affairs): policy paper *Herijking Buitenlands Beleid* (The Hague: September 1995).

(Dutch) Foreign Policy.³ The policy review concluded that because of the dramatic changes after the end of the Cold War the world had become more complex and less predictable. International relations would be 'demilitarized'. The Netherlands position would be more exposed. International competition would focus on economics and technology. This would have a profound impact on Dutch foreign policy. Whereas the future role of the United States in European military affairs was uncertain, Europe's future role in world affairs would depend on the way the EU member states could use their collective economic power to enhance the effectiveness of their Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

The policy review, however, led nowhere because Dutch politicians were able to avoid tough choices. In 1995 and 1996 the Dutch government came to the conclusion that the fear of an entanglement of US and European security was unjustified. The US started to play an increasingly important role in UNPROFOR, brokered the Dayton peace agreement and took the lead in SFOR. Consequently, the new central-left government, which was elected in 1998, shifted away from the more pro European course, and returned to traditional transatlanticism. This change in policy was also caused by the lack of a clear vision of the new ministers. Both Foreign Minister Jozias van Aartsen and Defense Minister Frank de Grave had no experience in the field of foreign policy and defense, but their party, the center-right liberal VVD was by tradition transatlantic. In other words, this transatlanticism was merely a reflex. Thus a tension became visible between NATO as the cornerstone of foreign and defence policy; and the need to refocus on Europe and consequently actively supporting the development of a European security and defense policy. Fear for a Europe dominated by major powers still dominated thinking of the Dutch foreign policy elite.

Due to the ongoing European integration process, the increasing dominance of Germany in the EU and the reduced importance of Europe in US foreign policy, the Netherlands would have no other choice but to focus more on its European partners. Of great importance were new initiatives taken by France and the United Kingdom. During the 1998 St.Malo meeting President Chirac and Prime Minister Blair called for a European capability for autonomous action.⁴ The importance of this meeting was that institutional arrangements in the field of the CFSP concluded in the early and mid-1990s were now backed up by concrete military initiatives. St.Malo was the start of a process leading to an ongoing effort to create a European Reaction Force. The Dutch were of course ambivalent. On the one hand they accepted that due to the geostrategic changes there

⁴ Franco-British Summit, *Joint Declaration on European Defence*, St. Malo, 4 December 1998.

was no other choice but to create such a capability; on the other hand the transatlantic link was to be preserved and NATO to remain the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Nevertheless, the St.Malo decisions and operation Allied Force contributed to a significant shift in Dutch foreign policy with respect to a common European defense policy. The government accepted the British-French initiatives and acknowledged the importance of European defense co-operation as a part of the economic and political process of integration that has been going on in Europe for decades and represents the European will to create an autonomous military capacity to back the EU increased global economic weight and the wish to have a greater say in the world. Less than a year after its inauguration, the center-left Kok government even concluded that European defense should be emphasized. From the Dutch perspective, this meant a dramatic policy change since the new initiatives regarding the defense component of the EU could also be seen as an attempt to restore the balance of power between Europe and the US after the end of the Cold War.

The initiatives for the ESDP were not only the result of Europe's ongoing process of integration, but were prompted by the worry about America's security commitment to Europe as well. There was a risk that European security would decouple as a result of probable American unilateralism and the consequences of the increased technological gap. EU Commissioner Chris Patten expressed this concern about American unilateralism explicitly in an internal paper for the European Commission. He asserted that the EU has the obligation to contribute to the increase of stability, because the world is one in which the United States increasingly acts without giving any thought to the concerns of others.⁵ In the Netherlands, however, the debate on the consequences of the geopolitical changes and the emerging US strategy of selective engagement was almost absent. For the Netherlands the new geopolitical realities required no less than a paradigm shift in security policy, i.e. a new balance between Europe and America.

The crisis of 2002

Until 2002, the debate on European versus transatlantic relations lingered on. In that year a crisis period started, one that would fundamentally affect its foreign and security policy as well. There was however no paradigm shift. Instead, politicians were preoccupied

⁵ *International Herald Tribune*, 'The EU Counterweight To American Influence', 16 June 2000.

with domestic challenges. In April 2002 the government collapsed as a result of an inquiry into the events that led to the mass murder of citizens in Srebrenica in 1995, the Bosnian city which was supposed to be under the protection of Dutch peacekeepers.⁶ The coalition was called 'purple' because this color would be the result of the colors associated with the three partners were combined. The fall of the government marked the end of a remarkable period in Dutch politics, i.e. two successive 'purple' coalition governments made up of right-wing liberals (VVD), left-wing liberals (D66) and the social democrats (PvdA). Until the emergence of the first 'purple' government (1994-1998), a coalition without the Christian Democrats had been virtually impossible. The purple coalition was quite successful both in economic and social terms. During the early 1990s the country became one of the most prosperous within Europe. However, the second 'purple' coalition (1998-2002), again under the leadership of social democrat Prime Minister Wim Kok, faced considerable difficulties. Although the economic performance of the Netherlands remained good, it appeared that the government was unable to solve major problems regarding health care, education, traffic congestion and crime. The taboo to discuss immigration was lifted as well. It turned out that new groups did not assimilate. Some groups, most notable those from Morocco and the Antilles, were responsible for a large part of crime nationwide.

More importantly, the much praised Dutch 'polder model', no longer functioned satisfactorily. The model was based on consensus-seeking between the government, the parliament, the labour unions, employers, and various special interest groups, most notably environmental groups. During the late 1990s the system worked well as long as not too difficult choices had to be made and enough money was available to buy off the complaints of the unions and pressure groups. The new challenges, however, demanded firm measures and true leadership. Wim Kok, the embodiment of the famed 'polder model', lacked leadership and tried to solve the problems through uneasy compromises. The government's inability to solve these problems, the obvious failure of the 'polder model' and the perception of an ever growing part of the population that the country was run by an incompetent, small, inward-looking elite of politicians led to public unrest.

This situation provided fertile ground for the center-right populist politician Pim Fortuyn. He spoke a different language, offered unorthodox solutions and wanted to get rid of the traditional Dutch political elite, which is a closed inner circle of some of the

6 (Report on Srebrenica) Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, *Srebrenica: een 'veilig' gebied*, (Amsterdam: Boom, 2002). Parts 1, 2 and 3.

most important politicians, representatives from industry, labor unions, universities and some public figures and journalists. His party, the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), made a staggering rise in the polls. The chance that he would become the next Prime Minister was high, but on 6 May 2002 he was murdered by a supporter of a left-wing animal rights movement, Folkert van der Graaf, after leaving a radio studio in Hilversum. Despite the murder of its leader, the LPF took part in the election. It gained a landslide victory. It took 26 out of the 150 parliamentary seats, which however was not enough to provide the Prime Minister. Despite the fact that the Christian Democrats became the biggest party, losses in terms of parliamentary seats were big. Consequently, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had to resign. He was succeeded by the inexperienced Jan Peter Balkenende, who became the new Prime Minister. He formed a government of CDA, VVD and LPF, which confirmed NATO as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.⁷ The Cabinet was short-lived. The LPF was not well organized. A number of people were competing to lead the party and their 'new politics' lacked experience. Moreover, there were conflicting personalities. Two LPF Ministers, the Minister of Economic Affairs and the Minister of Health Care were involved in constant battles, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Cabinet. The Cabinet could not handle a situation which coincided with unusual bad performance of the Dutch economy and a mounting Iraq crisis. New elections brought to power a second Balkenende Cabinet, with the LPF replaced by D66. The LPF fell back from 26 seats to 6 parliamentary seats.

The new CDA - VVD - D66 Cabinet appeared to be quite stable and, in the eyes of a large part of the population, went back to 'normal', i.e. consensus politics, run by the old political elite. Again, the Cabinet confirmed NATO as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.⁸ In an opinion piece in the *Washington Times*, foreign minister Jaap de Hoop Scheffer explained why: "The world is a dangerous place, and we can only deal with these dangers by working together, not against each other. To effectively counter the threats facing us, coalitions of the willing may be sometimes necessary, but longer-lasting structures are preferable. Ad hoc coalitions lack the transparency, stability and continuity that only permanent international organizations can provide. This is where NATO fits in as an essential component of international cooperation."⁹ A few sentences later he

7 (Coalition Agreement 2002) *Werken aan vertrouwen: een kwestie van aanpakken*, Strategisch Akkoord van Kabinet CDA, LPF en VVD, 3 July 2002, p. 28.

8 (Coalition Agreement) *Meedoen, meer werk, minder regels*. Hoofddijnenakkoord voor het kabinet CDA, VVD, D66, p. 14.

9 J. de Hoop Scheffer, 'A New TATO Needed', *The Washington Times*, 2 June 2003.

explains why: “American engagement (...) remains vital”, for example to anchor the Balkans in Euro-Atlantic structures.

The ‘polder model’ was restored when government, parliament and labor unions agreed on dramatic measures to improve the economy, including the October 2003 decision to freeze wages for the next two years in an attempt to improve the export position of the country. Regarding foreign policy, however, a monumental change was visible. Due to two successive elections 80 per cent of the members of parliament lost their seats. Almost all experienced spokesmen in the field of foreign policy and defense lost their seats. Within parliament there was hardly any knowledge left, so that a political and consequently public debate about the Netherlands’s foreign policy orientation and how defense might fit in, virtually came to a standstill. This was reinforced by the preoccupation of politicians to solve internal problems which caused the crisis and explains why the second Balkenende Cabinet decided upon the biggest cuts in the defense budget ever.

The Iraq crisis

The Iraq crisis fell in the midst of this turbulent period in Dutch history. Actually, during the crisis the country was run by the outgoing Cabinet which lacked the power to make firm policy decisions. As a result, the government was unwilling, probably politically incapable to co-sign the letter of the “gang of eight”. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar took the initiative for a pro-America initiative to back its Iraq policy, which resulted in the publication of an open letter on 30 January. Actually, the letter was drafted in close cooperation with his British colleague Tony Blair and co-signed by the governments of Italy, Poland, Denmark, Portugal, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The letter was a direct retaliation for the anti-war positions adopted by France and Germany. Instead of signing the letter, the Cabinet tried to find domestic compromise on Iraq. Coalition negotiations were lingering on and the social democrats of the PvdA were still considered a plausible candidate for a new government. The PvdA was opposed to an intervention, while the CDA, together with the right-wing liberals of the VVD supported the U.S. As a result, the Government issued a statement arguing that it would support a war politically, but not militarily. This uneasy compromise led to a bitter debate. Both proponents and opponents of the war argued that this was a typical Dutch compromise, with little actual meaning. Moreover, the Cabinet had to take public opinion into account, which was vehemently opposed to war. Indeed, public had grown very critical of U.S. global leadership. A majority of 61 percent disapproved the way President Bush handled

international policy; only 9 percent was in favor of the U.S. remaining the only superpower. Instead, 65 percent favored a superpower role of the EU.¹⁰ Thus there was a clear discrepancy between the Cabinet and the people.

The declaration that the Netherlands would support the war politically, but not militarily turned out to be a brilliant move which helped clear the way for Jaap de Hoop Scheffer becoming NATO's new Secretary General. The Iraq crisis led to deep divisions within Europe. Spain, Italy and most East Europeans supported the United States and the United Kingdom, while a German-French alliance opposed the policies of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair. Due to its unofficial status, the government could not take a position, in what appeared to be one of the deepest crisis of transatlantic relations, undermined NATO and stalled the process of European security and defense integration. Belgium, France, Germany and Luxemburg sparked an unprecedented crisis at NATO just before the war in March by blocking help for NATO partner Turkey. The crisis was further deepened on 29 April 2003 when the heads of Cabinet and government of France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg gathered for a summit in Brussels in an attempt to form a defense core group.¹¹ It was argued that American unilateralism demonstrated that the European Union had no other choice but to develop a credible foreign, security and defense policy. The Union had to be able to speak with one voice and should fully play its role in the international scene. This would require a credible security and defense policy. They continued to argue that although the transatlantic relationship remained a strategic priority for Europe a genuine partnership between the EU and NATO was a prerequisite for a more equal partnership between Europe and America. Consequently, a European Security and Defense Union was proposed. States taking part in this union would commit themselves to mutual help and assistance when confronted with risks, systematically harmonize their policies, coordinate their defense efforts and jointly develop or pool military capabilities. The summit also proposed the development of a European rapid reaction force, which builds on the so called Helsinki Headline Goal, and the creation of a capability for operational planning and conducting operations within the EU.

The Cabinet was quite unhappy with these discussions but, due to its outgoing status, it was unable to take sides. It was decided not to join the Franco-German mini-summit;

¹⁰ German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2003*.

¹¹ Declaration of the Heads of State and Government of Germany, France, Luxembourg and Belgium on European Defence, Brussels, 29 April 2003.

instead the government expressed its worry that this would undermine NATO. However, given its traditional preoccupation with NATO as the corner stone of its foreign policy it was quite unlikely that the Cabinet would have supported the idea of a France-German summit if it were not outgoing. Indeed, in September 2003 Belgium's Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt announced that he would go ahead with plans to build a European military command headquarters near Brussels next year despite opposition from the United Kingdom and the United States. The headquarters, according to Verhofstadt, was needed to execute European operations autonomously. Again the new, now functioning Cabinet, was reluctant to support this move.

Dealing with ESDP: a minimalist approach

Traditional Atlanticism explains Dutch ambivalence towards Europe's security and defense integration. Traditionally the Netherlands considers the EU as the prime vehicle for economic integration, but is reluctant to actively support the EU's security and defense integration as this may undermine transatlantic relations. Nevertheless, the Dutch were frequently unhappy with some aspects of NATO, most notably decision-making. For example, during operation *Allied Force*, NATO's much-praised political consultation mechanism turned out to function unsatisfactory. Compared to its role as a military organization, NATO played no role of importance as a political organization. This led to considerable uneasiness among a number of allies, including the Netherlands. In an after action report the Dutch government complained about its limited access to NATO's decision-making machinery during the air campaign.¹² Although multilateral consultation was not entirely absent during the crisis, it took place especially in small and sometimes informal forums. Harmonization of policies took place in the Contact Group for Former Yugoslavia, the Quint (the five NATO members of the Contact Group) and the G-8 (the seven largest industrial nations and Russia). Apparently these were discussion clubs with honeyed decision-making processes, which were not crisis-resistant. The result was that institutions, which had been established for the prevention of conflicts and the management of crises, have actually become organizations that carried out the decisions of informal directorates. In practice the United States was in control. Consequently, many countries, particularly smaller ones like the Netherlands

12 (Kosovo After action Report) Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Kosovo-evaluatie*, (The Hague, 22 March 2000).

were left out. In some European capitals, including The Hague, this led to the conclusion that decision-making should be less dependent on Washington and that Europe's decision-making machinery concerning security matters should be improved.

Defense politics

Aversion to military power explains why a debate on defense policies has generally been lacking in the Netherlands. Over the last 13 years the Netherlands armed forces were faced with never ending budget cuts and very few cared. Dutch politicians tend to use the argument that for a 'small' country a big armed force is a waste of money. The 'smallness' of the Netherlands is an enduring psychological problem for Dutch policy makers. Apparently, for Dutch policy makers territory plays a bigger role than economics, in defining whether the country is big or small. However, due to the absence of a political and hence public debate about defense, the defense establishment could restructure the armed forces according to their own wishes. Due to intelligent spending of the limited defense budget and early decisions to transform its armed forces, the Netherlands managed to rank substantially higher than one would have expected. Despite the lack of orientation, military performance undoubtedly contributed to the effectiveness of foreign policy as a whole. Within NATO, the Netherlands still belongs to the most important troop contributors. As a matter of fact, due to the quality and diversity of its armed forces the Netherlands are in a position to provide the benchmark for most of the smaller NATO members. The Netherlands has sea, land and air forces and a broad range of force elements, sufficient to make a meaningful contribution to a wide variety of operations. As UNMEE, the peacekeeping mission in the border region of Ethiopia and Eritrea, has demonstrated, the Netherlands could also provide the framework for peacekeeping operations.

Restructuring began with the 1993 White Paper.¹³ Until then, its force posture was focused on the defense of the NATO territory. On the one hand it was concluded that a strategic attack on NATO territory was unlikely. On the other it was concluded that the world had not become a safer place. New risks had emerged. The Balkans and the Gulf regions had become permanent sources of unrest. The danger of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery was real, and international

¹³ (Defence White Paper) Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Prioriteitennota: een andere wereld, een andere defensie*, (The Hague, January 1993)

terrorism and international crime were considered a growing threat. The conclusion was that these risks, together with the scarcity of natural resources, threats to trade routes, the very fact that economic prosperity depends on global stability, and the desire to relieve human suffering would require a wide toolbox of military capabilities to deal with a variety of challenges. Thus, together with a decrease of the defense budget, a reorientation of the task, role and mission of the armed forces took place. It was decided to leave the existing structure with naval, land and air forces intact and that restructuring would focus on expeditionary warfare or power projection. Due to the political ambition to make a contribution to combat operations, as well as stability and reconstruction missions a wide toolbox was developed. This toolbox contained a broad range of assets which would provide politicians flexibility through a wide range of options. Consequentially, an all volunteer armed force was deemed necessary; because political practice prevented the use of conscripts for combat missions abroad. Moreover, it was decided to procure strategic lift and to put more emphasis on logistics and combat support. A dramatic downsizing of almost 50 percent in terms of manpower freed the funds necessary for the restructuring of the Dutch armed forces.

During the 1990s, due to new missions, ongoing restructuring and an ever decreasing defense budget, the toolbox became both wider and shallower. After 2000, new budget cuts, increased operating costs due to ongoing peacekeeping operations, the increased complexity of missions, enhanced readiness and sustainability requirements, and the costs of modernization and transformation presented new challenges. In 2003 Minister of Defense Henk Kamp sent a letter to Parliament with new measures.¹⁴ This Restructuring Plan was followed by an update in 2005.¹⁵

Kamp was the first minister who explicitly mentioned the word 'expeditionary'. His ambition was to play a role in the 'premier league'. This was expressed by the desire to procure of cruise missiles for the air defence frigates to contribute to early entry operations. Kamp contributed to the stabilization mission in Iraq. He sent commandos for high risk operations to the south of Afghanistan to prepare for the deployment of ISAF III. But again the minister was confronted with budgetary problems. A 5 per cent budget cut in 2003 required a reduction in the size of some force elements of 20 to 30 percent. This brought some elements under a critical mass, both in terms of commitments and

14 (letter to Parliament) Minister of Defence, *Prinsjesdagbrief 2003*, 16 September 2003.

15 (letter to Parliament) Minister of Defence, *Actualisering van de Prinsjesdagbrief 2003*, 2 June 2005.

economies of scale. Some frigates and mine hunters, all Maritime Patrol Aircraft, all Army reserve units, the Army's Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), and a number of artillery pieces and F-16s were abolished to free money for expeditionary capabilities such as Medium Altitude Long Endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (MALE), extra Chinook transport helicopters and Hercules transport air craft. Thus, the 2004 Defense Budget Statement sought a new balance between the tasks of the armed forces and the budget, in order to create affordable armed forces and the necessary funding for investments. Nevertheless, some capabilities became dangerously close to a critical mass. The number of frigates was reduced from 14 to 10. As a consequence contributions to peacekeeping operations with frigates were only possible when units were withdrawn from standing commitments, i.e. the Standing Naval Forces of NATO or national obligations in the Antilles. Thus, in terms of commitments this force element fell below the critical mass. Furthermore, the reduced number of aircraft would still require the same infrastructure, logistical base and training facilities, and could fall below a critical mass in terms of economies of scale. While force modernization was still possible, it was not certain that the funding for transformation was sufficient. Transformation required the government to spend 30 percent of the budget on procurement and research and development. Unfortunately, only 20 to 25 percent was spent on these activities. Despite Kamp's high ambitions, there was still a clear risk that the Netherlands would be unable to fulfil its ambition.

Despite a higher defence budget, this happened in 2007. The budget increase was insufficient to cover ever increasing costs. Deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan required replacement of assets sooner than envisioned. In addition, special equipment was procured. For example, Australian Bushmasters costing one million euros each, were needed to protect troops against Improvised Explosive Devices. Thus, Kamp's successor, Eimert van Middelkoop, had no other choice but to take drastic measures.¹⁶ Again, the armed forces were confronted with cuts, including reductions in the number of tanks, artillery pieces and F-16s. Some of Kamp's projects were terminated such as MALE and the cruise missiles. The latter made clear that the new government had less far reaching ambitions. Indeed, the coalition of Christian democrats (CDA), social-democrats (PvdA) and a small Christian party (Christen Unie) put more emphasis on peace support operations and were reluctant to get involved in high risk early entry operations. Demanding additional cuts in the number of major weapons systems, a

¹⁶ (letter to Parliament) Minister of Defence, *Het defensiebeleid of hoofdlijnen*, 2 July 2007.

report by the PvdA confirmed this trend in 2007.¹⁷ This was very much in line with the tradition of the Netherlands.

The future

Dutch foreign policy has similar characteristics of other highly developed, rich, medium powers, including Canada and some of the Scandinavian countries. As a foreign policy instrument, the offensive use of its armed forces is not the first choice; instead, emphasis is given to strengthening the international rule of law and multinational organizations to create stable and peaceful international relations. A large contribution to peacekeeping fits into this approach. What really distinguishes the Netherlands is its focus on transatlantic relations to keep its independence from the major continental powers.

On the one hand there remains a need to continue traditional Dutch balance of power politics by focusing on transatlantic relations and NATO. On the other hand, the world has changed dramatically during the 1990s, making the transatlantic partnership less capable of fulfilling Dutch policy goals. The nature and quality of transatlantic relations, which is embodied in NATO will largely depend on the U.S. After the end of the Cold War the U.S., however, no longer sees NATO as the cornerstone of its foreign and security policy. This urges a refocus of Dutch foreign policy. For more than ten years, Dutch politicians are struggling with this problem. Due to the internal political crisis of 2002, the replacement of old politicians by new ones as a result of two successive elections and major changes in the political landscape, a public debate about foreign policy orientations is lacking. This is reinforced by the increased inward-lookingness of Dutch politics. There is an almost exclusive focus on domestic problems. Foreign policy is once again dominated by the ministry of foreign affairs, which has a very traditional orientation, i.e. a transatlantic, pro-NATO orientation and ambivalence towards the development of effective European foreign, security and defense policies.

Nevertheless, most Dutch foreign policy experts agree that the Netherlands has no other option but to strike a better balance between NATO and ESDP. Due to the strategic reorientation of the U.S., the ESDP will become more important. Those experts also agree that only through the ESDP European military capabilities could be strengthened.

¹⁷ (Defence plan) PvdA, *In dienst van Nederland, In Dienst van de Wereld*, 3 November 2007.

Europe's military problem is fragmentation, i.e. countries with independent defense bureaucracies, trying to sustain a broad toolbox of military assets. This, however, turns out to be unaffordable. The solution is innovative new ideas such as the development of more focused toolboxes or a smaller diversity of military capabilities, the development of niche capabilities and more emphasis on multinational units. This, however, can only be achieved, in a supra national context which can only be provided by the EU. This requires the EU to step up its efforts to create genuine European defenses.

Regarding national defense, the case of the Netherlands shows that the broad toolbox approach will become unaffordable if the Government does not spend more on defense. The lesson learned is that due to downscaling, force elements could fall below a critical mass so that they have to be abolished altogether. In order to keep selected force elements above that critical mass and free funding for transformation, the choice is a focused toolbox or niche capabilities. This not only requires a political decision on national ambitions but better international cooperation as well. Indeed, to be able to make a meaningful contribution the focused toolbox or niche capabilities must be brought into balance with the efforts of others.