Dutch Security, Now and Then

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The Netherlands Atlantic Association (then Netherlands Atlantic Commission) was founded in February 1952, in the early phase of the Cold War. This article compares the security situation and defense policy of the Netherlands in the early 1950s with the present-day situation. Under what circumstances did the Atlantic Commission come into being in 1952? And is the present-day situation fundamentally different from in 1952?

There seems to be an easy answer to these questions. During the past decade several commentators have suggested that the Netherlands, as far as security was concerned, had entered a phase of ambiguity and uncertainty. Some of these comments even sounded somewhat nostalgic. The Cold War had been a period of clear and visible dangers and of unquestionable necessities against a dangerous but recognizable enemy: the Soviet Union. It had been a relatively stable confrontation between two power blocs – at least in Europe, and the position of the Netherlands in this confrontation had been clear.

By comparison, the situation since the end of the Cold War is supposed to be less clear and stable. Although the security of the Netherlands at first sight seems to have increased since the end of the Cold War, international relations in general have become anarchic and chaotic, which could in many ways also affect the position of the Netherlands. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union seems to have undermined the “natural” necessity of close US-European military cooperation.

This contribution aims to compare the early 1950s – and the year 1952 in particular – with the present-day Dutch situation from a different perspective. As we will see, the early 1950s were by no means a phase of certainties and necessities. The Netherlands was confronted with a range of problems, doubts and ambiguities. There even seem to be elements of continuity between the early 1950s and the situation fifty years later. Some of the uncertainties and problems of those days are in fact still unsolved.

1952: Decolonization

During the early 1950s the Netherlands was in a process of transformation and modernization, from a conservative, neutral colonial power to a modern, Northwest European member of NATO, actively participating in the European integration process. Until 1949 the military status of the Netherlands was strongly influenced by the violent decolonization of the Dutch Indies. In 1948 – the year of the communist coup in Czechoslovakia, growing West European anxiety over Soviet expansionism and the start of NATO negotiations – the Dutch army was almost completely deployed in the Dutch Indies. In December 1949 the Dutch government finally accepted the independence of Indonesia. In April 1949 the Netherlands had signed the NATO Treaty. A new phase of military reconstruction and modernization could begin.

However, it would be too simple to assume that by 1949 the old colonial opinions and standpoints were replaced by a modern, Atlanticist foreign and defense policy. During the early 1950s the Netherlands was still recovering from the dramatic experiences in the Dutch Indies. Colonial resentment was far from over. The conflict over West New Guinea (West Irian) would trouble relations with Indonesia for more than a decade. In 1951 Dutch Foreign Minister Stikker, who could be considered a key figure in the transformation of the Netherlands from a colonial power to a NATO Ally, was forced to resign because of his
business-like approach to the New Guinea conflict and his willingness to negotiate a transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia.

One could conclude that in the early 1950s the Dutch government was still in doubt over the international status of the Netherlands. Was it trying to continue to play a worldwide role (especially in Southeast Asia) or a more modest and limited one as a small and loyal Northwest European NATO member? The Dutch willingness to recognize the People’s Republic of China (against the wishes of the US government) made clear that the Dutch government still hoped to be able to be politically active in East and Southeast Asia, based among other things upon Dutch sovereignty over New Guinea.

Ideas concerning the reconstruction of Dutch armed forces were also influenced by images and illusions concerning a worldwide Dutch political and military role. It was one of the reasons why the Dutch government wanted a substantial navy. When the newly appointed NATO Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower visited the Netherlands in January 1951, he complained that his Dutch counterparts only seemed interested in the Dutch Navy, while they should be worrying in the first place about the defense of Dutch territory itself.

In September 1952 both Joseph Luns and Beyen were appointed Foreign Ministers. Beyen was responsible for European affairs, Luns for non-European matters and bilateral relations. This remarkable situation seemed to symbolize the contradictory impulses determining Dutch foreign policy, caught as it was between the new Atlanticist and European orientation on the one hand and colonialist resentments on the other. The new orientation would prevail, but it would be misleading to underestimate the colonialist resentments involved in Dutch foreign and even defense policy in the second half of the 1950s.

Luns had been pushed forward by the leadership of the Catholic People’s Party (KVP) in order to defend Dutch sovereignty over New Guinea, and he would certainly keep his promises in this respect. During the 1950s Dutch Atlanticism would regularly be hindered and limited by colonial resentment, especially as a result of the conflict with Indonesia over New Guinea. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the conflict radicalized, the Dutch government would send military reinforcements to New Guinea, which in fact temporarily limited Dutch NATO contributions. Within the Dutch cabinet, some members even suggested that the Netherlands should threaten to leave NATO if Western weapon deliveries to Indonesia continued.

1952: East and West

The Cold War seemed to force the Netherlands to pursue an Atlanticist foreign and defense policy. The Cold War, and the fear of communism, created clear and compelling goals and interests for the Netherlands. The political situation in Eastern Europe gave little room for doubts about the character of the Soviet political system. Repression of non-communist political formations, forced mergers of communist and social-democratic parties, show trials, and increasing political terror stimulated the willingness to increase Dutch military strength and to integrate Dutch armed forces into the framework of NATO. The successful outcome of the Chinese communist revolution in 1949 seemed to make the communist threat even more dangerous. It was, above all, the outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950 that created a feeling of panic in the Netherlands and in Western Europe as a whole.

During the early 1950s military specialists in the Netherlands assumed that Western Europe and the Netherlands were militarily vulnerable. The Soviet Union had the capabilities for an effective attack on Western Europe. It was, however, not easy to decide which military measures would be sufficient to counter the Soviet threat. It was even difficult to find out what the Soviet Union was in fact after. Differences of opinion and conflicts thus arose over
military and security policy, and over the necessary financial investments for the defense of the Netherlands.

In the eyes of Prime Minister Drees, the communist threat was not in the first place a military, but a political and indirect one. The reconstruction and modernization of the Dutch economy was, therefore, more important than military strength if one wanted to prevent the spread of communism. This meant that Drees could not accept drastic increases in the defense budget, which led to conflicts between the cabinet and Chief of the General Staff H.J. Kruls. In January 1951 these conflicts even resulted in the discharge of General Kruls. Nonetheless, the cabinet decided to raise the defense budget substantially in 1951.

In 1952 the build-up and modernization of the Dutch armed forces began to produce material results. At the end of the year the Dutch army was for the first time in a position to slow down a possible Soviet invasion. The strength and organization of the Dutch armed forces had for a long time seemed inadequate to really counterbalance the perceived military Soviet threat. In 1952, however, the panic resulting from the Korean War was already decreasing. A year after the foundation of the Netherlands Atlantic Association, things became even more complicated, when the death of Stalin marked the beginning of a phase of liberalization in the Soviet bloc and relaxation of East-West tensions. Between 1952 and 1956 there was a first period of “peaceful coexistence.” East-West relations became dominated by the Spirit of Geneva, named after the city where in summer 1954 the peace negotiations that ended the Korean War took place and where Eisenhower and Khrushchev met in July 1955 to discuss possibilities to reduce the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In the Netherlands, several politicians would doubt the sincerity of the Soviet détente policy. It was even considered to be a greater danger than direct Soviet expansionism. The Americans seemed to take Soviet intentions more seriously. The Spirit of Geneva was to influence American-Soviet relations until 1956. In those years, like in later phases, US-Soviet rapprochement would create mistrust and insecurity in The Hague. In 1956 several Dutch politicians concluded that the Americans’ reluctant and lenient policy toward the communist bloc was one of the causes of Western impotence vis-à-vis the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolution.

1952: US-European Relationship

The early years of the Cold War were a phase of unquestioned American leadership. This seemed to present the Dutch with clear and compelling criteria to pursue an effective security policy. And indeed, some authors have underlined the pro-American and Atlanticist attitude of the Netherlands during the Cold War. The Dutch had good arguments for this pro-American standpoint: Marshall Aid, the American policy toward Germany, American orientation toward trade liberalization, American military support and the American presence in Western Europe as a counterweight to possible hegemonic aspirations of West Germany and France.

However, there were complications here as well. The first was the American policy regarding Indonesia and more generally regarding the newly independent Afro-Asian states. During the 1950s the Dutch government, and especially Foreign Minister Luns, would on several occasions feel betrayed by the American policy toward Indonesia and the New Guinea conflict. American weapon sales to Indonesia in particular caused resentment in The Hague. The Dutch could not appreciate the American attempts to keep the Sukarno regime out of the Soviet sphere of influence.

Apart from that, the role of the United States seemed to be changing during the first half of the 1950s. Some Dutch politicians, like Foreign Minister Stikker, were afraid that the United States wanted to disengage and limit its responsibilities regarding West European security.
After a conversation with Eisenhower in 1951 Stikker concluded that the Americans apparently wanted to limit their commitments in Europe. It was one of the reasons why the Netherlands reacted reluctantly to the European Defense Community (EDC) plan. Stikker saw the support for the EDC by Eisenhower and the US government as a first step toward disengagement. In November 1952 Eisenhower won the American presidential elections. During his two terms in office, American military strategy would be reformed under the name of *New Look*. Nuclear weapons were going to play a much more important role in the defense of the United States and NATO. This new strategy would continue both to produce unrest in Western Europe and the Netherlands, and speculation about American intentions to reduce their physical military presence in Europe.

So there were doubts around 1952 over the solidity of American commitments in Europe. The changing balances in the US-European relationship, however, also opened up new chances. Stikker’s successor Beyen had a positive opinion of the EDC. Beyen was more Europe-oriented than his predecessor Stikker. As he later wrote in his memoirs, Beyen concluded that the days of the Marshall Plan and related Organization for European Economic Cooperation were over. Beyen wanted to put his cards on the European integration process of the Six, i.e. the states that had founded the European Community for Coal and Steel and that had signed the EDC treaty.

**1952: The European Defense Community**

West European political relations in 1952 were dominated by the EDC project. The French government had initiated the EDC in reaction to the American proposal (directly after the outbreak of the Korean War) to rearm West Germany and to accept it as a member of NATO. The rearmament of West Germany was considered by the Americans of prime importance in order to realize a more effective and offensive NATO defense strategy. The Dutch government, and Stikker, supported the American proposal, although the perspective of a rearmed Federal Republic also produced mixed feelings (five years after the end of the Second World War).

The EDC plan was complicated and ambivalent. It wanted, above all, to limit a possible West German military contribution and to integrate it within the supranational framework of a European Defense Community that was dominated by France. During winter and spring 1951, long and difficult negotiations followed. The Dutch government, and especially Foreign Minister Stikker, reacted reluctantly toward the EDC plan. At first, the Dutch only participated as “observers.” But American support for the EDC made the Dutch government change its mind. In May 1952 Stikker signed the treaty and all its protocols. In The Hague opinions continued to be mixed, but the new Foreign Minister Beyen hoped that the EDC and the related plan to found a European Political Community could open the road to a European common market. It was one of the reasons – the most important being the wish to please the United States – that the Netherlands was the first of the six signatories to ratify the treaty.

In the end, the EDC did not come into being. In August 1954 the French Assembly refused to ratify the treaty. This seemed to be a severe blow to the cause of European integration. However, several cabinet members in The Hague, including Prime Minister Drees, felt relieved. The Dutch supported the solution of 1954: the Federal Republic of Germany became a NATO member and its military build-up was to be put under restrictions, which had to be supervised by the West European Union.

The EDC tragedy showed how difficult it was to realize military integration in Western Europe. It became a symbol for West Europe’s inability to cooperate in the field of defense and security. Most Dutch cabinet members did not mind this inability and the military dependence on the United States that much. On the contrary, in the years to come the Dutch
would oppose any development that seemed to imply a military task for the European Economic Community (which would be founded in January 1958).

The End of the Cold War

As we can see, the early 1950s were certainly not a phase of political and military certainties and necessities. On the contrary, the abovementioned problems and developments produced unrest, ambiguity and differences of opinion in the Netherlands. One could argue that during the early 1950s the Cold War had just started and the bloc formation, typical of the Cold War decades, was not yet completed. The argument is correct. Later on, Dutch defense policy would be made under more stable circumstances. The position of the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970s would become more favorable. The Dutch welfare state was protected from several risks and problems typical of recent years. In spite of the apocalyptic threat of a nuclear confrontation, one could conclude that the Iron Curtain and the Soviet bloc also prevented several of these problems and risks from reaching the Netherlands.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War implied substantial changes in the international system. They seemed to have a double and contradictory effect upon Dutch (and West European) defense policies. At first, reactions in the Netherlands were optimistic. The Soviet threat had disappeared and this made a reduction of defense efforts possible. The Netherlands – like other West European countries – began to reduce its military expenditures. The end of the Soviet Union even seemed to open up the possibility of creating a better world. The United Nations was finally capable of acting. The second Gulf War, and the wide coalition against Iraq, enhanced this optimism about a new world order.

Within a few years, however, it became clear that the world had not become safer and that new types of intrastate violence and chaos began to set whole regions on fire. Some of these violent conflicts burst out in the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia, relatively close to Dutch borders. The Dutch governments of the 1990s showed a remarkable and maybe even naïve eagerness to contribute to UN sponsored humanitarian military missions, in spite of the risks involved. The Netherlands participated in several of those missions, such as the one in Cambodia and in former Yugoslavia.

The tendency to reduce military expenditures and the willingness to participate in humanitarian missions were contradictory. The tragedy in Srebrenica showed that the Dutch armed forces were probably not always well prepared for their humanitarian missions. Srebrenica made the Netherlands temporarily more reluctant to offer military support to UN missions, but in 1998 the government decided to send troops to Cyprus and in 2000 to the border region between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Both missions were considered to be safe. In the meantime, the Netherlands had actively participated in the war against Milosevic’s Yugoslavia.

It was not always clear what interests were involved when the Netherlands participated in humanitarian missions. The terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 could have a sobering effect on this Dutch humanitarian activism. Both the United States and the West European states will have to decide what interests and principles in the foreseeable future will guide and direct their security and defense policies and their preparedness to participate in humanitarian actions. Against this background, it is an interesting question whether the Netherlands and the other member states of the European Union should be and will be prepared to continue to support UN humanitarian missions all over the world.

At first sight the present security situation of the Netherlands seems to be more complicated than during the early 1950s. As we have seen, this difference seems – at least partly – to be a matter of perspective. The present often seems more complicated and unpredictable than
the past. A closer look suggests that the early 1950s were in many ways just as complicated as the present. We can even see elements of continuity when we compare the early 1950s with the present-day situation: some of the problems facing us now remind us of the ambiguities of that time: doubts over the commitments in the non-Western world, the relationship between Western Europe and the United States and the inability of West European states to create an effective military form of cooperation.

There are also important differences. The early 1950s could be described as the start of a policy cycle, while we are now witnessing the end. The early 1950s could also be identified with the development of a more or less stable international structure. Both the beginning and the end of this cycle produced ambiguities and doubts. A range of choices existed during the early 1950s, probably becoming more and more limited for Dutch decision-makers, while nowadays the situation seems more to be the opposite. However, decisions concerning security and defense are always made under difficult and unpredictable circumstances. Security and defense policy are in essence a matter of minimalizing unpredictable risks and dangers.

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