In 1949 the majority of the Dutch public (52 percent) thought that the founding of the Atlantic Pact, as it was called in those days, was a good idea. Less than 10 percent said that it was a bad idea. Most of the others, around one-third, did not know. Even more “don’t knows” showed up in a poll in 1951, when the question was put forward whether Yugoslavia, Spain and West Germany should be invited to participate in the Atlantic Pact. Of those who did have an opinion, clear majorities were in favor of such an invitation for all three countries, but most of all for West Germany.1

Going through the NIPO polls of those early years is fascinating. It struck me, for instance, as how seriously the possibility of one West European military was brought forward. And how relatively positively the public reacted. How in 1952 the option of really integrated European armed forces under one supreme commander even had the upper hand.2 Was it, I wonder, one of the reasons for founding in that very year the Netherlands Atlantic Association?

Tempting as it is, I will not linger on these fascinating 1950s, and in fact will take just a few big steps to arrive in the twenty-first century. Our present day concerns always seem so much more important, and there is so much to be said about the public views of NATO in its post-Cold War roles, in principle as well as in practice. I will not confine myself to surveys of Dutch public opinion, but will also include quite a bit of international polling. Data from these particular polls relate to NATO as well as to non-NATO countries. The latter include aspiring members, but also some devoted non-members.

A Faithful Ally

Obviously, international public opinion gives us a much broader view, but it also very helpfully adds some controversy, because if you look at the history of public views on NATO in the Netherlands, there is an awful lot of consensus. At first glance the polls do little to spoil the image of a faithful Ally.

This is illustrated clearly in the first (as far as I know) substantial survey, in 1967, especially intended to tap opinions on NATO.3 At least two-thirds of the Dutch public subscribed to all the raisons d’être of NATO: the fact that NATO had stopped the marching-on of the Russians in Central Europe (61 percent); that it had helped prevent the outbreak of a European war (73 percent); that it had established a balance of power between East and West (72 percent); that it had contributed to détente (66 percent); and that it had committed the US to European security (84 percent). On top of that, more than 70 percent were of the opinion that NATO did not contradict the Christian principle of “love thy neighbor.” The only hint of controversy in this poll had to do with the question of whether certain countries should get out of NATO. Countries, as it was delicately phrased, “with a system of government, which we consider undemocratic.” Some 30 percent thought it unacceptable indeed that Greece and Portugal were members of NATO. In the years to come other polls showed a comparable figure.4 So most people believed these countries should stay in – while quite a few were in doubt or did not care.

The 1967 survey showed convincingly that the Netherlands itself should continue being a member of NATO. There was one question explicitly referring to the formal possibility of
quit membership in 1968: very few people thought that this was a good idea and that is more or less the way it has been ever since. The question has continued to be asked, sometimes with irregular intervals, until recently.⁵

The graph shows that support for membership was at a relative low around 1970, although never under 60 percent, and the “quitters” did not exceed 20 percent. However, the number of people in doubt was growing.

The most remarkable period was probably the first half of the 1980s when the Dutch were far from consensual and there was deeply felt controversy about nuclear weapons. Even though the whole debate very much went to the heart of NATO strategy, it evidently did not shake belief in membership as such. But perhaps even more remarkable is the way that support for membership survived the end of the Cold War – if anything, support went up in the 1990s. For the Dutch, NATO, whatever its initial rationale, has become the institutional cornerstone of any security policy over the years.

**After the Cold War**

But what was NATO for, in the eyes of the public, now that the Cold War was over? If terms such as deterrence and détente are no longer relevant, what is the new rationale and the fitting jargon? On the occasion of NATO’s fiftieth anniversary, the Society and Armed Forces Institute together with the Dutch daily Trouw, made a survey.⁶ It so happened that at the same time NATO’s first real war was at hand.

There was a clear consensus on the question as to whether, after the Cold War, NATO was still necessary for the security of Europe. Yes, answered 85 percent of Dutch public opinion. At the same time, most people did not think that NATO should confine itself to Europe. A majority (54 percent) preferred a worldwide role. The leadership role of the US was endorsed by most people (54 percent), while 30 percent were of the opinion that this role should become less dominant. (Interestingly, when the same question was asked in 2002, figures were 47 percent and 46 percent respectively.⁷ Some criticism of the US’s leading role seems to have slipped in – during the last half year one would suspect.)

“The Alliance lives,” was the headline that Trouw picked in 1999 for an in-depth article on the poll results.⁸ The analysis did not miss the point that the reasons for living had changed profoundly, as far as the public was concerned. The defense of Allied territory was no longer seen as NATO’s priority. Crisis management and peacekeeping came first now.

The same question has been asked regularly with regard to the tasks of the Dutch armed forces. In fact, the formulation of the first three tasks reflects the official priorities as formulated in successive Defense White Papers. The fourth task, fighting terrorism, was added in 1999, suggested by Trouw.
Good journalistic intuition, in hindsight, because now we have a possibility to compare the weight of this particular task after 9-11. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, there are still few people who consider “fighting terrorism” to be NATO’s most important task. Neither has defense of Allied territory become any more prominent. Crisis management and peacekeeping still stick out as NATO’s most pressing business. No doubt these are somewhat vague and rather suggestive concepts, but juxtaposed with other tasks they do give a clear indication of the public’s view of the rationale of today’s military missions. They underscore as well that international law and human rights have become part of a new legitimacy of military operations. This does not necessarily imply that the public wants to stick to a low-risk kind of mission. On the contrary, I would suggest that the public is by far not as casualty-shy as conventional wisdom has it. There is a lot of evidence that force protection and casualty aversion are not being considered ends in themselves.

Kosovo to Afghanistan

For a large majority of the Dutch, military operations relating to Kosovo in spring 1999 were motivated by “human rights” (71 percent) and not by “European security” (12 percent) or by “NATO prestige” (8 percent). There was firm backing of NATO’s bombing campaign. Compared with the results of international polling, the level of support was high. Roughly speaking, there was consensus among NATO members, but it looked fragile. In some countries the number of people opposing the attacks were substantial (Germany and France), in Italy the public was divided and in the Czech Republic most people opposed NATO’s operations. And then, of course, opposition among some non-NATO members (Russia, the Slovak Republic and Ukraine) was sky-high.

This is a pattern that comes back in an even more articulate way when we look at public opinion on military action in Afghanistan. This was not exactly NATO’s war (or was it, in some formal sense?), but as we can see, public opinion shows a clear split between NATO and non-NATO countries. The figures are derived from a Gallup poll among 60 countries around the world, from which I have taken a selection.

The table given below contains answers to two questions: “Do you agree or disagree with the United States’ military action in Afghanistan?” and “Do you agree or disagree that your country should take part with the United States in military action against Afghanistan?” The percentages refer to the levels of agreement with US military action and with one’s own country joining the fight respectively.

Among European NATO countries there is much agreement with the US, so it seems, although not everywhere at Dutch levels. There are three real exceptions: Spain, Turkey and Greece. Especially in the latter two countries there were very few people agreeing with the fight in Afghanistan. These were not “don’t knows”; there was straightforward and massive disagreement in Turkey and Greece. The will to join the fight seems to go hand in hand with agreement, notwithstanding the fact that in all countries there is a slight discrepancy between agreeing with the US and joining the fight. This is most conspicuously so in the Czech Republic.

With the exception of Albania, the average level of agreement with US operations in the non-NATO European countries is quite a bit lower than in NATO countries. In some countries just over 50 percent of the public agrees (Lithuania, Romania, Slovak Republic and Estonia); in other countries most people disagree (Latvia, Russia, Bulgaria and Macedonia). A quick look at a small selection of countries from the rest of the world shows deep disagreement (Pakistan, Malaysia and Argentina) versus overwhelming agreement (India and Israel) with US actions.
When we add the second variable (join the fight?) there is much more discrepancy with the level of agreement with the US, compared to the pattern among NATO members. Again with the exception of Albania, in none of the European non-NATO countries is there majority support for joining the fight. In most it is low to very low. On a global scale, India offers the most intriguing case. It is the only country where the willingness to join the battle exceeds the level of agreement with the US. (In fact, Pakistan shows the same pattern but at very low levels of agreement – I wonder whose side those few people wanted to join in battle?)

Enlarging NATO

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Atlantic Association, the question has been posed to the Dutch public of which countries, if they wish to, should or should not be allowed to join NATO. We picked eleven countries, likely and unlikely candidates in the short run (the Baltic states were treated as one bloc). As with the first round of enlargement in 1999, public support looks rather substantive, although not without making different judgments for different countries.
The results look a bit sad for Albania, where public opinion, as we just saw, is similar to the outlook of NATO members, at least on the issue at hand. Anyway, for all countries “in principle yes” as an answer sets the tone, and in all cases there are more positive than negative reactions. “Don’t knows,” however, cannot be overlooked.

Let us be honest, NATO enlargement is not a big political issue as far as the public is concerned. The fact that the collective reflex is positive tells us something about what I believe is a real development in Western public opinion on security issues and military missions. It has become truly internationalist, post-national if you like. It then seems a relevant question as to how much public consensus an enlarged NATO will show, in principle and in practice. How much controversy can be swallowed before public internationalism as a trend will reach its limits? Or will the NATO-ization of Europe derive its coherence on the public level from a deepening gap with the non-NATO world? This hardly looks like a development that one would welcome.

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Notes

1. NIPO-weekbericht, 299 (1949); NIPO-weekbericht, 518 (1951).
2. NIPO-weekbericht, 556 (1952).
8. Trouw, April 17 1999.
12. Angus Reid Group, April 1999.