

Opinion: The future of Dutch foreign policy

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One significant finding of the investigation into the reasoning behind the Dutch support for the US-UK invasion of Iraq, published earlier this month, was the decisive role of the 'Atlantic reflex'. The committee chaired by former supreme court judge Willibrord Davids concluded the ministry of foreign affairs had treated the question primarily as an issue of alliance with its strongest international partner, rather than an issue to be decided on merits of international law.

The 'Atlantic reflex' dates from the founding of Nato in 1949, and has since become the cornerstone of Dutch security policy. From then on the global threat posed by communist ideology in general and the military power of the Soviet Union in particular justified acting alongside the principal opponent to this danger, the United States. For many Dutch Cold War Atlanticists, any movement away from this position would undermine the Western alliance and play into the hands of Moscow.

It is important to realise, however, that even during the Cold War the Netherlands never simply followed everything the United States did. Much has been written about the heavy disagreements between the two countries over the continuation of Dutch colonial rule in the Far East after the second world war, and there were other moments of conflicting interests.

The Dutch government was reluctant to send troops to the Korean War in 1950, and in the Suez Crisis of 1956 the Dutch foreign minister, Joseph Luns, supported the British and the French against what he considered to be unreasonable behaviour on the part of US President Eisenhower. Luns also insisted it was ludicrous to expect that the Netherlands would send forces to support the US war in Vietnam (yet he did his best to protect the ally from growing criticism in the Dutch parliament). In the 1970s Dutch development aid went directly against US interests. Protests that erupted in the Netherlands in the early 1980s to stop the placement of cruise missiles on Dutch soil were fuelled by a broad socio-political movement that refused to accept the givens of a seemingly eternal (and increasingly dangerous) confrontational Cold War policy. Five years ago CIA secret prisons and rendition flights through Dutch airports went directly against the principles of Dutch foreign minister Ben Bot.

In short, it is too easy to assume the Netherlands has always displayed knee-jerk support for the wishes of the US. Whenever the interests of the two nations have not coincided, the Netherlands has always sought its own path. This has never been at the cost of the fundamentals of the transatlantic relationship. On the contrary, by making it clear its support cannot be taken for granted, the Netherlands made sure its differing opinions were taken seriously. An alliance such as this, based on a strong adherence to democratic values, can only benefit from respecting alternative viewpoints amongst its members. The 'Atlantic reflex', as the Davids report clearly shows, is ultimately in no-one's interests.

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the former Nato secretary general and the Dutch foreign minister at the time of the Iraq invasion in 2003, said in a radio interview this week that the days of the taken-for-granted US-European relationship are now over. US president Obama has referred to himself as a 'Pacific President' and with the emergence of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) the global power system is becoming more multipolar.

From oil and gas deals with the Russians to trade missions with the Chinese, Dutch foreign policy is moving with these new times. At the same time, threats can no longer be defined by a single enemy as in the Cold War. Obviously the relation with the United States will remain of vital importance – if not *prima inter pares* – based on common values, interests, and goals. But even De Hoop Scheffer, the man at the centre of the Atlantic reflex in 2002-2003, now recognises the changing circumstances. Global politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be marked by flexibility, not dogma. It will take a little while to sort out what it means in practice, but the Davids report may well mark a post-Cold War turning point for Dutch foreign policy.

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