



How Security Strategies Can Harm our Interests

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Introduction

This article is not about foreign policies, but about the strategies upon which these policies are built. On the surface, it might look that pragmatic governments deal flexibly with all the challenges they are confronted with. In reality their flexibility is limited by their, often implicit, strategic concept. In other words: their flexibility is restricted by the ideas they have about how the world works and what their interests, values and priorities are. If these ideas are outdated, their policies risk to be incoherent and inefficient.

The recent international security strategy of the Netherlands is an example of a traditional security strategy that ignores the new, much broader international agenda. The British security strategy looks more promising, as it recognises that the international agenda has fundamentally changed, but it is still based on traditional concepts that were developed for the old, much narrower security agenda.

The traditional security concepts remain relevant for dealing with traditional security threats, but they are not fit to deal with new opportunities and risks and can even stand in the way of a recognition that the division between internal and external affairs is losing its relevance and that exclusive national

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security can become a self-defeating concept. The article will end with a few remarks on the need for new instruments and new strategies.

The Classic Concept of Sovereign States Conducting Foreign Policy

The classic concept of sovereign states conducting independent foreign policies is considered to be born in 1648. The idea was that a sovereign prince or republic is free to deal with the internal affairs of its country as it wants and that other sovereign princes and states have no right to interfere in these internal matters.

A sharp distinction between internal and external affairs was a crucial part of the concept of sovereign states. Internally a government could choose its own religion, ideology and rules and enforce these rules, but externally it had to operate in an anarchical environment where all other countries were potential enemies. National security was therefore at the heart of foreign policy. To protect its independence, a country had to maintain an army, to enter into alliances and sometimes to wage war.

A lot has changed since then, but most governments still base their foreign policies on these concepts. They continue to maintain a strict division between internal and external affairs and national security continues to be the essence of their foreign policy. The three main instruments of foreign policy remain diplomacy, defence and development aid (the last one was added after decolonisation).

A New Agenda

The above mentioned traditional instruments have not become obsolete. In many respects the world is still an anarchy where diplomacy, defence and development aid remain the main instruments of foreign policy.

But the world has changed and our growing capacity to change the world, for better or worse, has added new dimensions to foreign policy. We are confronted now with challenges that traditional foreign policy cannot deal with properly, because these challenges do not respect the border between internal and external affairs, they do not fit in the concept of security (unless it is so widened that it loses its meaning) and they require other instruments than the traditional instruments of foreign policy.

The scope of this article does not allow for a full description of the new agenda (assuming that this would be possible). The following examples of items on this agenda are only presented to illustrate the impact of the new agenda on the concept of foreign policy.

The new agenda roots in the revolutionary development of science and technology that started a few centuries ago. This on-going development provides mankind with growing opportunities to use and manipulate nature. This is leading to unprecedented levels of widespread wealth, but it also has unintended consequences that are increasingly worrisome.

It gives humanity the chance to deal more effectively with age old problems such as hunger and disease, but it also opens new possibilities for destruction and exploitation.

Unintended Consequences

The most important unintended consequences of mankind 's own success are well summarized in the *Scientific Consensus on Maintaining Humanity's Life Support Systems in the 21st Century* (Consensus Scientist, 2013) that was published on 21 May 2013:

- ◆ **Climate disruption:** more, faster climate change than since humans first became a species.
- ◆ **Extinctions:** not since the dinosaurs went extinct have so many species and populations died out so fast, both on land and in the oceans.
- ◆ **Wholesale loss of diverse ecosystems:** we have plowed, paved, or otherwise transformed more than 40% of Earth's ice-free land, and no place on land or in the sea is free of our direct or indirect influences.
- ◆ **Pollution:** environmental contaminants in the air, water and land are at record levels and increasing, seriously harming people and wildlife in unforeseen ways.
- ◆ **Human population growth and consumption patterns:** seven billion people alive today will likely grow to 9.5 billion by 2050, and the pressures of heavy material consumption among the middle class and wealthy may well intensify.

But this is not all, because one consequence leads to another. Climate change, for example, leads to rising sea levels, endangering hundreds of millions of people living in lowlands close to the sea.

An example of an unwelcome consequence of the progress in health care and technology is the growing trade in human organs and body parts for transplantation. When the shortage of organs available for transplantation is so large that people are willing to pay \$100.000 to receive a kidney transplant while other people with two healthy kidneys are earning less than \$1000 a year, it will be difficult to prevent “harvesting” of human organs in “what might be considered elsewhere to be unethical ways”, as Wikipedia phrases it with some understatement (Organ transplantation is the moving).

And as inequality between and within countries grows, more people from countries that are hit by conflict, climate change or bad government will have good reason to risk their life to migrate, even if they have to live as illegal, second rank citizens in their new fatherland.

New Opportunities for Better or for Worse

Not all of the challenges on the new agenda are really new. Some, like the danger of epidemics, have always been with us. What has changed is our ability to foresee, prevent or mitigate such disasters, thanks to the fast development of science and technology.

When, for example, in 1918 3% to 6% of the entire global population died of the flu, there was little what governments could do. That has changed. Although the possibility of a disaster of the same magnitude cannot be completely excluded, today a lot can be done to prevent or mitigate such a pandemic.

Or take tsunamis. Thanks to automated warning systems, people living at or near the coastline can now often be warned in time to flee to a safer place.

On the other hand modern technology can also be used for inhuman purpose, such as weapons of mass destruction. Nuclear weapons are the best known example, but the growing knowledge of human health and biotechnology might be used for deliberately developing strains of deadly diseases that are resistant to all known remedies.

The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom

The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom (A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010), which was published in October 2010, is discussed here because of its modern appearance. The Strategy recognizes that “when it

comes to national security, foreign and domestic policy are not separate issues, but two halves of one picture” (A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010: 5). It furthermore recognizes the need of a whole-of-government approach: “All Government departments and agencies will need to work flexibly to ensure they give the agreed priority to national security risks and opportunities within their policies and programmes” (A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010: 34).

New challenges, such as climate change, epidemics and scarcity of natural resources are dutifully mentioned and the Strategy admits that the risk of “A major accident or natural hazard [...], such as severe coastal flooding [...] or an influenza pandemic” (A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010: 27) deserves a higher priority than for example a large scale conventional military attack on the UK.

However, when it comes to discussing the instruments needed to address these new challenges, the Strategy remains silent.

Instead the Strategy states that “Most national security threats arise from actions by others: states or non-state actors, who are hostile to our interests” ((A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010: 25), that “enemies seek means of threat or attack which are cheaper, more easily accessible and less attributable than conventional warfare” (A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010: 18) and that “the means available to our adversaries are increasing in number, variety and reach” (A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty, 2010: 26).

The Strategy gives the impression that the authors feel more comfortable with “real” enemies than with global problems. The Strategy does not contain a full list of all the instruments to tackle risks, but all the examples mentioned – diplomacy, development assistance, military and intelligence capacity-building, influence, trade, deterrent power and border controls – are traditional security instruments. The instruments to address the new challenges are not mentioned.

The Strategy states that British policy must encompass two complementary strategic objectives: ensuring a secure and resilient UK and shaping a stable world, but this second strategic objective receives remarkably little attention in the Strategy. The British National Security Strategy makes visible efforts to encompass new challenges, but in the end it remains stuck in the old security paradigm.

The International Security Strategy of the Netherlands

The international security strategy that was published by the Netherlands government in June 2013 (*A secure Netherlands in a Secure World, 2013*) is younger than the British strategy, but more old-fashioned. It mentions the financial-economic crisis, the Arab spring, climate change, natural disasters, safety of nuclear reactors, water scarcity, pandemics, biodiversity and cyber security, but when it comes to defining strategic interests it puts the new challenges aside and only mentions territorial defence, an effective international legal order and economic security.

For a classic security strategy that is a wide scope, but as a comprehensive approach of all the foreign risks that the Netherlands face it falls far short. The British Strategy has its flaws, but at least it explicitly recognizes that the risk of a major industrial accident, a severe flooding or an influenza pandemic is larger than most conventional threats. The International Security Strategy of the Netherlands just ignores these risks, as if, for example, the risk of a flood disaster in the Netherlands is a completely internal affair, without any link to climate change.

The two strategies differ also in two other important respects. The Netherlands deals with the foreign and domestic aspects of security as separate issues and it does not recognize the need of a whole-of-government approach for the foreign aspects. Only the ministries with a role in classic security were involved in drafting the Dutch International Security Strategy. Other ministries were left out, even when they have a key role to play in addressing one or more of the new challenges. How, for example, to address the danger of a flood disaster without the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, pandemics without the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and almost any global problem without international cooperation in the fields of education and science?

It is interesting to compare the *International Security Strategy* of the Netherlands with its *National Security Strategy*, which was published a few years earlier (*National Security Strategy, 2007*). The international strategy states that while the existing National Security Strategy “examines domestic measures designed to protect Dutch security interests, this strategy focuses on what the Netherlands aims to do in and alongside other countries to safeguard its interests” but that description does not do full justice to the National Security Strategy.

While the International Security Strategy distinguishes only three strategic interests, the National Strategy recognizes five security interests: besides territorial and economic security and social and political stability, it also looks at ecological and physical security. Ecological security can for example be threatened by pollution and climate change. Physical security can be threatened by inter alia epidemics, flood disasters and industrial accidents.

Issues like climate change and epidemics clearly have international aspects, so how can this difference between the national and the international strategy of the Netherlands be explained?

Two factors help to explain this. The first is the fact that the Netherlands is always governed by a coalition of different parties. In order to prevent continuous fights between departments that are led by ministers of different parties, a strict division of competences is upheld at the expense of coordination and coherence. Foreign Affairs does not like to be coordinated by Home Affairs or by the ministry of Security and Justice and these ministries believe they should not be coordinated by Foreign Affairs and nobody wants the Prime Minister 's office to become as powerful a coordinator as it is in the UK. As a result, even when a subject concerns every department, coordination is usually lacking.

A whole-of-government approach is only possible in the Netherlands under exceptional circumstances. It was probably the threat of terrorist attacks that helped the ministry of Home Affairs to involve practically all departments in the drafting of the National Security Strategy, including the ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment and the ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. But these ministries were not involved in the drafting of International Strategy and that – bureaucratic – reason can explain why “their” issues were left out of that Strategy.

The second factor is the selective blindness of the government to the changes in their environment. This can be illustrated by the fact that the ministry of Foreign Affairs makes little effort to involve the other ministries in developing a whole-of-government approach to foreign policy and the fact that those ministries do not seem to mind. The “internal” ministries close their eyes for the growing importance of external developments on their work and the ministry of Foreign Affairs prefers to neglect the fact that the centre of the foreign policy agenda is moving away from the traditional security subjects. We will come back to that in the next chapter.

The chapter in the National Strategy on the international context is relatively short, but it raises an important question that is not addressed in the Dutch international strategy: what is the optimal scale to address challenges to national security? Can it be done nationally or does it require international cooperation? And if international cooperation is needed, at what scale: with neighbouring countries, regional (EU, OSCE), transatlantic, global or at several levels simultaneously?

A strategy that neglects important challenges and that is not coordinated with relevant ministries leads to an unbalanced and contradictory governmental policy. The Netherlands government has, for example, expressed support for the Arab spring and has spent millions on military actions and humanitarian aid, but at the same time it decided to close its regional offices in Amman, Ankara, Beirut, Damascus, Istanbul and Rabat that were set up to promote scientific cooperation and the exchange of students. It, that is the ministry of Education, Culture and Science, also decided to end the Huygens scholarship programme for talented students from these and other countries. What the hand of Foreign Affairs was giving, was taken away by the ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

The Blurring of the Distinction between Internal and External Affairs

Most governments still make a sharp distinction between internal and external affairs. Public health, crime fighting and conservation of nature, for example, are considered internal affairs and ministries of Foreign Affairs are supposed to stay out of these matters. The other side of this deal is that the line ministries that are responsible for these affairs are supposed to leave foreign policy alone.

Although in practice it is impossible to maintain this division strictly and most internal ministries nowadays have departments for international affairs, in general the division is well respected. Line ministries usually do not consider the maintenance of international relations as a core business. Participation in international conferences is often considered to be a luxury, rather than a necessity. The ministries of Foreign Affairs, from their side, show little interest for global health, international crime, etc.

This division of labour helps to keep the peace between ministries, but it ignores the problem that most internal affairs are nowadays also external affairs.

The public health of a country, for example, is to a large extent dependent on the fight of other countries against epidemics, against the pollution of air and water and to prevent bacteria from acquiring resistance against antibiotics. Organized crime does not stop at borders. Natural reserves are not only threatened by the people nearby, but increasingly by people far away, who through their lifestyle contribute to pollution, climate change and loss of bio-diversity, etc. etc.

Dealing with internal affairs therefore increasingly requires international action. Luckily, if the threat is both large and imminent, governments often prove able to set aside their ideas about sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Take for example influenza. A pandemic of a new strain of this virus can be prevented or at least mitigated, but this requires close international cooperation. A country where an epidemic originates has to inform the World Health Organisation (WHO) immediately and to take all necessary measures to prevent the epidemic from spreading further. Scientists that investigate a new variety of an epidemic disease have to share their findings globally and pharmaceutical companies that have crucial technology at their disposal will have to cooperate to make sufficient quantities of medicines available.

Twenty years ago, China would probably have argued that the occurrence of a new strain of flu within China was an internal affair and might have kept it secret as long as possible. But when in the spring of 2013 three Chinese citizens were infected by the influenza A(H7N9) virus, a virus that normally circulates among birds, the government of China reported that to the WHO. The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention posted full genome sequences of the isolated viruses in a public database and, within a few weeks, a China-WHO Joint Mission, composed of experts from inter alia the WHO, Australia, Europe and the US, visited the affected area.

However, such an implicit recognition that the classic distinction between internal and external affairs has become counterproductive still is the exception to the rule.

The Insidious Concept of Security

If governments would be asked to characterize their foreign policies with one word, many would probably choose for security. In a Hobbesian world of global anarchy that might be a rational choice, but in the current, densely

connected world this means that most governments are wrong footed to deal effectively with the new challenges.

Of course, it all depends on the definition given to security. "Security means survival in the face of existential threats" and making an issue into a security issue means "to transfer it to the agenda of panic politics" (Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, 1998, p. 27 and p. 34). One does not have to agree with these definitions to agree that "security" usually is associated with the following ideas:

- ◆ the threat comes from an enemy;
- ◆ the threat should be kept outside our borders;
- ◆ the main instrument is military;
- ◆ security is absolute: either we win or we lose;
- ◆ security means national security.

Efforts are made to widen the concept of security to include almost everything, but, as the examples of the UK and the Netherlands show, most governments nevertheless make these associations. The archetype of security remains a castle with high towers and several rings of walls to keep enemies and potential enemies outside.

However, although the danger of armed attacks has not completely disappeared, for most countries the problems on the new agenda have become more urgent. For these new challenges the classic idea of security is irrelevant and can even stand in the way of an effective approach.

Let us, to illustrate that, comment the abovementioned ideas one by one:

- ◆ *The threat comes from an enemy*: there is no discernible enemy, although one might argue that we ourselves are the worst enemies of our health and our natural and cultural heritage.
- ◆ *The threat should be kept outside our borders*: high walls are of little use against the pollution of air and water. Besides that, these threats come also from the inside.
- ◆ *The main instrument is military*: military instruments are of little use against climate change and infectious disease.
- ◆ *Security is absolute*: the success of the fight against the new threats is always relative.
- ◆ *Security means national security*: problems like extinction of species, loss of ecosystems and pollution are common international problems and can only be addressed effectively by international cooperation.

In short, considering the new challenges as classic security interests misses the point of the new agenda. These problems are not caused by foreign enemies that can be kept outside the door. To address them effectively we have to recognize that they are common problems and can only be addressed effectively by common action. That requires a completely different approach than a policy that focuses on purely national interests by trying to keep global problems out of the door.

Efforts are made to address this problem by widening the concept of security to include *inter alia* economic security, energy security, physical security and ecological security or to change the concept into common security or inclusive security. The tactical advantage is that this might help to draw attention of politicians that are preoccupied by security to new priorities, but the disadvantage is that the association with security obscure the fact that these new challenges require a fundamentally different approach than classic security challenges.

The Need for New Instruments

A key difference between the classic security agenda and the new agenda are the instruments that are needed. It is only slightly exaggerated to say that the purpose of the classic security instruments was to keep other countries out and the purpose of the instruments of the new agenda is to keep other countries in. Typical classic security instruments are armed forces, defensive alliances and border controls. Typical instruments of the new foreign policy agenda are international scientific cooperation, global norms, international education and peer review.

The basic idea behind these new instruments is that the challenges on the new agenda are challenges that countries share. It makes sense therefore to join forces to analyse the problems and to look for common solutions. Examples of this type of cooperation are the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Tsunami Warning Systems. When new global norms or rules are agreed, national reports, international inspections and peer reviews will often be needed to prevent countries from acting as free riders. Here lessons might be drawn from the verification of arms control agreements.

The Need for New Strategies

It is sometimes argued that developing foreign policy strategies is a futile exercise, because foreign policy is in practice driven by a continuous stream of unforeseen events. But that view ignores the fact that the reaction of a country to unforeseen events will be based on a concept of its interests and of the instruments at its disposal. On the basis of this concept a government decides where it will open embassies, which treaties to conclude, whether to invest in territorial defence or in an expeditionary force, etc. etc. Every country has at least an implicit strategic concept. The choice is therefore not between having a strategy or not, but between keeping it implicit or making it explicit.

Policymaking is always about making choices. Even if the interests of a country stay the same, when the world changes it will have to review its priorities. Without an explicit comprehensive and long term look at all challenges and at all available and possible instruments, it is impossible to make sensible decisions about distribution of means and investments.

Making informed decisions about the distribution of political attention and financial means over such diverse goals as defence, social security, education, environment and infrastructure is a crucial task of modern government. An essential precondition for fulfilling this task is a strategy that defines the fundamental goals that have to be kept in mind, the challenges that have to be addressed and the instruments that can be used or have to be acquired.

In the course of the last 70 years, the foreign policy agenda of countries has grown from an agenda that contained little else than security and trade, to an agenda that touches upon almost every subject of governmental policy. But governments, including their ministries of foreign affairs, have been slow in adapting to these changes. They ignore the widening of the agenda as much as possible, or they try to include parts of it in the traditional security concept.

As new agenda items such as climate change, pollution and scarcity of natural resources supersede territorial defence and development cooperation at the top of the international agenda, comprehensive strategies will be needed more than ever to find a proper balance between protecting narrow national interests and investing in global programs and institutions to promote common interests. National security will remain important but should be embedded in such a wider strategy.

As the example of the United Kingdom proves, a whole-of-government approach and a recognition that the traditional distinction between internal and

external affairs is outdated are by themselves not sufficient to remedy the flaws of an old-fashioned security strategy.

What is needed is a fundamental reappraisal of foreign policy, based on a recognition that actively supporting the quest for global solutions for global problems is a matter of national interest.

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