

Dutch narratives about Russian-Western relations

Summary

Over the centuries, relations between the Netherlands and Russia had been good (partly because Germany lay in between). After the Second World War, the Netherlands usually followed the lead of the United States in its relations with the USSR. Since the end of the Cold War it has, with some success, concentrated on developing mutually beneficial relations, mainly in the economic field, hoping that Russia would gradually develop into a stable democracy built on the rule of law.

The Netherlands does not have a tradition of independent strategic thinking. When problems, such as the Russian occupation of the Crimea, arose it usually followed the lead of its larger allies in NATO and EU. However, the downing of flight MH17 by a Russian Buk missile, which killed a large number of Dutch citizens, and the Dutch referendum that rejected the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine are issues that the Dutch government will have to address itself. Dutch political parties and public opinion are unused to that.

Introduction

For a proper understanding of Dutch narratives about relations between Russia and the West, it is useful to start with a short description of the characteristics of Dutch foreign policy, in particular the three main strands of thinking about Dutch foreign policy and the consequences of coalition governments for the development of a coherent foreign policy strategy.¹

Three Dutch Views on Foreign Policy

The three main strands of thinking that define Dutch foreign policy can be characterized in short by the words *trade*, *engagement* and *withdrawal*.

The champions of international *engagement* believe that the Netherlands should contribute to a peaceful, just and prosperous world, both out of self-interest and as a moral duty. They want the Netherlands to be an active sup-

¹ The author thanks Minke Meinders, Tony van der Togt and Dick Zandee for their critical comments. I made good use of *Russia, our Distant Neighbour: The Burden of Conventional Beliefs*, written by Hugo Klijn. Of course, all mistakes and simplifications remain mine.

porter of the European Union, the United Nations and other international organisations as well as of international co-operation in general.

The proponents of *trade* argue that, as international trade has made the Dutch among the most affluent people in the world, the main objective of Dutch foreign policy should be the promotion of Dutch foreign trade and investment. They usually, but not always, recognize the importance for international trade and investment of promoting international stability and rule of law

The advocates of *withdrawal* fear that international engagement comes at the expense of Dutch people themselves. They are afraid that international co-operation and immigration only serve the interests of a highly educated elite and endanger the position of the Dutch middle class.

Championing international engagement and championing withdrawal are mutually exclusive, but neither of these groups is against trade *per se*. The three strands do not neatly coincide with political parties, but it seems fair to say that most politicians of the mainstream parties feel affinity with the engagement strand, adherents of the trade strand will mainly be found within the conservative-liberal party VVD, while the proponents of a withdrawal from international engagement can be found at both ends of the political spectrum, with the populist Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, PVV) and with the former Maoist Socialistische Partij (SP).

Until the recent rise of the PVV and the SP, a broad consensus existed about foreign policy, at least among the foreign policy elite. Some wanted to contribute more to international co-operation than others, but they all agreed that the interests of the Netherlands were best served by a combination of trade and promotion of an international legal order, *inter alia* by active membership in the European Union and the United Nations.

However, consultative referenda that were held in 2005 and 2016 made clear that this policy was not based on a similar consensus among the Dutch people at large.

The referendum on the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine, which was held in the Netherlands on 6 April 2016, seemed to be about Dutch policy with respect to Ukraine and Russia. However, appearances were deceptive: the people who took the initiative for the referendum openly admitted that they were not interested at all in Ukraine. They said that their main purpose was to destroy the EU or to withdraw the Netherlands from it, a so-called ‘Nexit’.²

In the referendum, a substantive majority of 61% voted against the Association Agreement (although the turnout was only about 32 %). It is doubtful whether these people would also vote for a Nexit, but the outcome illus-

2 <http://www.nrc.nl/next/2016/03/31/oekraine-kan-ons-niets-schelen-1606419>: “We don’t care at all about Ukraine” said Arjan van Dixhoorn, chairman of the citizens committee that took the initiative for the referendum. Its founders have only one goal: “...destroying the European Union or driving the Netherlands out of the EU, a Nexit.”

trates the gap between a large segment of the Dutch people and their parliament, which had accepted the Association Agreement with about 80% of the votes.

In several respects, the referendum on the Association Agreement was a repetition of the consultative referendum that was held in 2005 about the proposed Constitution of the European Union, although in 2005 the turnout was twice as high (63,3%). About 80% of the members of parliament were in favour of the proposed Constitutional Treaty, but in the referendum 61.6% of the voters rejected it.

The Absence of a Government-wide Strategy

In 1974, in his seminal study *A faithful ally: The Netherlands and the Atlantic Alliance (1960-1971)*, Van Staden characterized Dutch foreign policy as “reactive rather than active. In general [Dutch] governments were sitting on the fence and reacted only to external impulses.”³ More than forty years later, this remains a fairly accurate description of Dutch foreign policy.⁴ The United States provides security to the Netherlands through NATO and, in return, the Netherlands supports American foreign policy as much as possible, e.g. by providing military forces for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving it to the US to worry about long-term strategies.

The most important difference between 1974 and 2016 is the development of a common European foreign policy from an informal consultation process between nine member states in 1974 to the current Common Foreign and Security Policy of 28 member states supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS) led by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Nowadays, bilateral relations with countries such as Russia and positions in international organizations are usually coordinated at European level. However, when important national interests, such as energy relations with Russia, are in play, countries such as the Netherlands often give priority to their national interests. As the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) stated in a recent advisory statement: „The Netherlands has a longstanding trade and investment relationship with Russia. It would not be realistic to subordinate it entirely to the imposition of sanctions in response to the Ukraine crisis.”⁵

The (unofficial) explanation of the absence of government-wide strategic thinking in the Netherlands is that the space for manoeuvre of a small

3 Alfred van Staden: *Een trouwe bondgenoot*. Baarn 1974, p. 300.

4 See Barend ter Haar and Eva Maas: *Threats and challenges for the Netherlands*, Clingendael 2014, at <https://www.clingendael.nl/publication/threats-and-challenges-netherlands>.

5 The EU’s dependence on Russian gas; How an integrated EU policy can reduce it, Advisory Letter No. 26, June 2014.

country is too small for strategic thinking to be of any use. In practice, so goes the argument, important decisions are taken *ad hoc* in the light of the circumstances, not on the basis of a long-term strategy. However, this argument is flawed, because decisions with a long-term impact, e.g. on membership in international organisations and investments in military capacities, do require, at the very minimum, an implicit idea about threats and challenges and how to deal with them: i.e. an implicit strategy.

A more convincing explanation for the absence of government-wide strategic thinking is that the Netherlands is always governed by coalitions of at least two, but more often three, four or even five political parties. To prevent constant wrangling among ministers from different political parties, the mandates of the ministries are clearly demarcated. This helps to prevent government crises, but impedes the development of common strategies that transcend the mandates of individual ministries. The negative consequences of a lack of a government-wide strategy are felt in the field of international cooperation in particular. In this field, for example, it is not an exception for the Dutch Ministries of Education and of Public Health, on the one hand, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the other, to work at cross purposes.⁶

Another consequence of coalition governments is the relatively weak co-ordinating role of the Dutch Prime Minister. Light co-ordination mechanisms exist but, in practice, ministries are free to follow their independent paths without giving much attention to wider geo-political and strategic considerations.⁷ The unavoidable consequence is that the policies of different Dutch ministries are sometimes contradictory, e. g. on energy relations with Russia.

Dutch Concerns about Russia

The history of political, economic, cultural and strategic relations between the Netherlands and Russia is long and eventful. Since its independence, the Netherlands has been occupied twice: by France following the French revolution and by Germany in the Second World War. In both cases, Russia was invaded too: in 1812 by France and in 1941 by Germany. By repelling both invasions Russia/the Soviet Union indirectly played a major part in restoring Dutch independence. The Netherlands did not extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union until 1942, after the USSR became part of the coalition against Germany. After the Second World War, political relations had their

6 See Barend ter Haar: *Blinde vlekken van het buitenlands beleid*; Clingendael Policy Brief No. 11, August 2012.

7 This explains why the Policy brief on relations with Russia pays little attention to scholarships, public health and the environment and why the Policy brief on international security, although it stresses the need for a comprehensive approach that includes infectious diseases, drugs and climate change, was not countersigned by the ministries that are competent in these areas.

ups and downs. Currently, the Netherlands is one of the largest economic partners of Russia. In 2011 the Netherlands was the largest export destination for Russia (\$ 46 billion).⁸ In 2014 the Netherlands had to share first place with China because exports had gone down to \$39 billion⁹, possibly as a result of sanctions.

During the Cold War, most Dutch citizens were concerned about the possibility of a Third World War between NATO and the Soviet Union, but nowadays, few Dutch people worry about Russia. Although a sizable minority (45%) is moderately to severely worried about the general international political situation, this is mostly because of the refugee problem, terrorism, the situation in the Middle East and internal EU problems and not because of Russia.¹⁰

The position of the Dutch government is different. It is seriously concerned about the way Russia seems to be turning away from the international legal order. As mentioned above, the Netherlands does not have an independent and government-wide geopolitical strategy. It usually follows the lead of its larger allies or leaves it to decision making within the EU and NATO. However, the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 in July 2014, killing 298 people, among which were 196 Dutch citizens, has made it difficult for the government to wait and see how its larger allies will react.

Speaking more generally about relations with Russia, the parliamentary leader of the conservative-liberal party VVD, Halbe Zijlstra, said at a meeting of his party on 21 May 2016: "It's very possible that this country is going to get into a war with Russia."¹¹ But others in his party are less alarmist and other parties seem not to be very concerned.

The Dutch public has, so far, shown little interest in a fundamental discussion about relations with Russia. Currently, a major point of contention within Dutch society is the broader question of whether the Netherlands should actively participate in international co-operation or withdraw behind its borders.

8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_largest_trading_partners_of_Russia. Nrs. two and three were China (\$35 billion) and Germany (\$31 billion). It should, however, be noted that an important part of Dutch imports from Russia was transit trade.

9 <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/rus/#Destinations>.

10 According to polls in the first half of 2016, SCP: Kwartaalbericht van het Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven; Nr.1 March 2016 and Nr. 2 June 2016, at: <https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties>.

11 Trouw 23/05/2016: Slijp de messen, vul de kelders, graaf de greppels. "Het is heel goed mogelijk", zei Halbe Zijlstra, fractieleider van de VVD dit weekend, "dat dit land te maken gaat krijgen met een oorlog met Rusland."

Who is Responsible for the Current Situation?

A large majority of the Dutch people believes that Russia is directly or indirectly responsible for the downing of flight MH17.¹² However, Van Dijk, one of the promoters of the referendum on the Association Agreement stated: „You know the history of Crimea? There has been a coup and Russia has supported the local Russian population. That is how you can see it also. We are the cause of that annexation, because of the association agreement that has divided Ukraine”.¹³

The Dutch government explained its position in two letters to parliament: a policy brief on international security on 14 November 2014¹⁴ and a policy brief on relations with Russia on 13 May 2015.¹⁵ In these papers, the government avoided discussing the responsibility for the downing of MH17, but stated clearly that Russia bears a heavy responsibility for the current security crisis in Europe. By showing disregard for international law, European security arrangements and human rights, Russia has caused a breach of trust that cannot be easily healed.

Key Elements of the Developments in Russian-Western Relations

The end of the Cold War was perceived in the Netherlands as a victory of Western values of freedom and democracy.¹⁶ For a long time, it was widely expected that Russia would develop into a more or less Western type of democracy. Relations between the two countries diversified and intensified. Trade and investment grew, but also cultural, legal and scientific co-operation. As part of its Matra programme for social transformation, the Netherlands financed projects in support of a plural democracy. Typical examples were a project to support the improvement of civic education in Kaluga Region and projects to support public participation and NGO influence on environmental management.

However, with the election of President Putin, the window of opportunity for Western countries to promote the transformation of Russia started to close. In 2007, he made clear that foreign support for NGOs in fields such as

12 See for example: <http://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/2015/08/peiling-nederland-wijst-omwonden-rusland-aan-als-schuldige-voor-het-neerhalen-van-de-mh17/>.

13 See footnote 2.

14 Beleidsbrief internationale veiligheid DVB/VD-119/14 of 14 November 2014.

15 Beleidsbrief betrekkingen met Rusland DEU-175/2015 of 13 May 2015.

16 See: How should Europe respond to Russia? The Dutch view by Tony van der Togt, at: http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_should_europe_respond_to_russia_the_dutch_view311233. For a short history of diplomatic relations between the Netherlands and Russia (in Dutch) see: Tony van der Togt: *Wantrouwen en betrokkenheid: het verhaal van een complexe relatie, Diplomatieke betrekkingen tussen Nederland en Rusland 1942-2013*, in: N. Kraft van Ermel/H. van Koningsbrugge, *Nederland en Rusland, een paar apart?*, Groningen, 2013.

human rights and environmental protection was no longer required. A few years later, the Netherlands government itself decided to cut back drastically on the funds available for social transformation. The initial hope that Russia would develop into a modern European country sometime soon was no longer considered a realistic perspective.

For a long time, many felt that geo-politics was something of the past, that large cuts in the defence budget were possible and that Dutch foreign policy could now concentrate on trade and investment. It is only after the interference of Russia in Ukraine that Dutch mainstream parties came to realize that the Dutch (and Western) approach to Russia had been naïve.

Factors Influencing Russian-Western Relations

Russia and the Netherlands (and other Western countries) share many interests, for example, in the economic field. Although the volume of bilateral trade between the Netherlands and Russia declined by more than ten per cent in comparison with the previous year, in 2014 it still amounted to € 24.6 billion, about 3.4 per cent of total Dutch trade.

Other fields where the interests of Russia and the Netherlands (and other Western countries) seem to coincide are the fight against terrorism, piracy, non-proliferation and transboundary crime, cyber security, climate change and arms control. It would also seem that they have a common interest in a well-functioning UN-system and in solving regional crises, such as in and around Syria. Even co-operation between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union could be in the common interest.¹⁷

In its policy brief about relations with Russia, the Dutch government points out the long-standing non-governmental contacts, *inter alia* in the field of culture and emphasizes that it is important to continue people-to-people contacts, cultural and scientific exchange, particularly when the initiatives come from civil society.

The prevailing view in Dutch government circles is that because Russia and the Netherlands (and, more generally, the West) share numerous interests, the challenge is to co-operate in these areas without giving the impression that it can be “business as usual” as long Russia continues to interfere in Ukraine.¹⁸

17 See: Tony van der Togt, Francesco S. Montesano, Iaroslav Kozak: From Competition to Compatibility, Striking a Eurasian balance in EU-Russia relations, Clingendael 2015.

18 See p. 12 of the explanation of the budget of the Ministry of Foreign affairs for 2017: „Rusland ondersteunt de separatisten met onder meer militaire, financiële en politieke middelen en is zelf nog steeds direct betrokken met militaire aanwezigheid op Oekraïens grondgebied. Zolang hierin geen verandering komt, zal het noodzakelijk blijven om de druk op Rusland door middel van sancties te handhaven en tegelijkertijd in te zetten op de-escalatie door middel van dialoog.“

That view might not be supported by those Dutch people who believe that the Netherlands would be better off if the government would concentrate on the problems within its own borders and let other countries look after themselves. These same people often show more understanding for the assertive behaviour of Russia than the Dutch government does.

How to Return to a Co-operative Russia – West Relationship?

Dutch views on the future of relations with Russia reflect the three strands of thinking mentioned above.

The current Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, the social-democrat Bert Koenders, clearly belongs to the school of engagement. His first priority is to bring Russia to the point of agreeing to a sustainable solution to the conflict in Donbass.¹⁹ This will require a combination of pressure and dialogue. For this policy to be effective, NATO and the EU will have to continue to work in concert. Furthermore, it is essential to avoid the trap of *zero sum* thinking about exclusive zones of influence. The question is not, as some people believe, whether Ukraine will become part of a European or a Eurasian empire, but whether it will get a chance to develop fruitful relations with both the countries to its East and the countries to its West.

The basis for the Dutch Russia policy should remain that Russia and the West have many common interests and that long-term stability in Europe requires a *modus vivendi* with Russia.²⁰ In principle, this all fits in nicely with the five principles for EU-Russia relations, on which the EU Foreign Affairs Council decided in March 2016.²¹

A prominent representative of the interests of trade is Hans de Boer, president of the Confederation of Netherlands Business and Employers VNO-NCW. He expressed doubts about the effectiveness of sanctions and said he fears that continued sanctions will help Brazilian and Chinese firms to take over the Russian market, at the expense of Dutch interests.²² In practice, some Dutch agricultural products boycotted by Russia have found other markets and other firms have profited from Russian import substitution for which Dutch technology is very welcome.

The supporters of withdrawal come from many different angles. It is, therefore, difficult to tell their views on future relations with Russia. On the basis of anecdotal evidence and the outcome of the referendum on the Association Agreement with Ukraine, it seems that many of them believe that by supporting Ukraine, the West has unnecessarily provoked Russia. However, the populist PVV pays little attention to relations with Russia. It is also

19 Beleidsbrief betrekkingen met Rusland of 13 mei 2015; DEU-175/2015.

20 Beleidsbrief betrekkingen met Rusland of 13 mei 2015; DEU-175/2015, p. 9.

21 Statement EU HR Mogherini, at: eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160314_02_en.htm

22 Hans de Boer in WNL Op Zondag on 7 September 2014.

unlikely that Dutch relations with Russia will receive much attention in the upcoming election campaign. After all, even the Ukraine referendum, in which some pro-Russian arguments were used by extreme left and right parties, was more about withdrawing from the EU than about anything else.

Conclusion

After the loss of its colonial empire, the Netherlands also lost the ambition to conduct an independent foreign policy. Instead it has proved itself a faithful and active member of NATO and the European Union and a staunch supporter of development co-operation. However, in 2005, a referendum made clear that a majority of the population felt uneasy about the process of ever deeper co-operation and integration. Since that time, not only the populist parties on the right and on the left, but also the main parties in the political centre have lost their interest in an active foreign policy, leading to lower budgets for diplomacy, international co-operation and defence. However, the downing of flight MH17 painfully proved that foreign policy is about more than trade promotion. It is unclear what conclusions Dutch political parties and government will draw from this for relations with Russia.