



Clingendael

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Dutch focus turns to Europe

Support for greater European military independence, task specialisation and a higher defence budget



German-Dutch military cooperation for airborne operations © Ministry of Defence

For many years Europe has relied on the nuclear and conventional power of the United States for its own security. The Netherlands has traditionally been

one of the most Atlanticist allies. The world is changing fast, however, partly due to China's emergence as a superpower and increased instability in Europe's backyard. President Obama's pivot of US security policy towards Asia was reinforced by President Trump's anti-China policy. The Biden Presidency may well smooth the sharp edges of this policy, but the rivalry between the two superpowers will likely continue.

* The authors are very grateful to Mark Elchardus for his close involvement in the research. They would also like to thank in particular André Krouwel and Tom Etienne of Kieskompas for the data gathering.

America will also continue to pressure European countries to ramp up efforts to maintain their own security. President Trump no longer accepted European NATO partners' unfulfilled promises of 'burden sharing' and kept one of his election promises by withdrawing American troops from Syria, and from Germany. The tone under Biden will be more 'alliance-focused' again, but the message will be unchanged: Europe, fulfil your NATO commitments to spend 2% of GDP on defence.

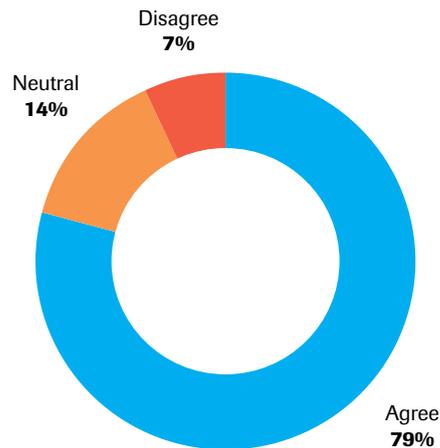
Against this background, European defence cooperation is rising up the priority list in the Netherlands and in the EU as a whole. European security is best guaranteed in cooperation with the US – for which NATO is the glue. But European countries will need to make a greater contribution to their own security – for example by tackling any security crises around Europe without American support.

The Defence Vision 2035 recently presented by the Dutch Ministry of Defence states that Europe must in future be able to act independently when European interests are at stake, and notes that this will require substantially higher investment in the years ahead. The Defence Vision also envisages enhanced cooperation between national armed forces and specialisation within NATO and the EU – which means countries will need to agree who will focus on each specialism.¹ How do people in the Netherlands view these developments? Do they support greater European independence in defence? How do they view task specialisation? And do they think more should be spent on defence? The Clingendael Foreign Affairs Barometer canvassed the views of more than 23,000 people in the Netherlands.

Greater European military independence

The Clingendael Foreign Affairs Barometer shows that people in the Netherlands expect America to be fundamentally less willing to guarantee European security in future. 79% of respondents agree with the statement that “in the next five years the United States will provide less and less protection for Europe because they think Europeans should do more to maintain their own security”. A large majority of people in the Netherlands therefore believe the US will scale back its role in protecting European security in the next five years.

The United States will be less and less willing to protect Europe in the next five years

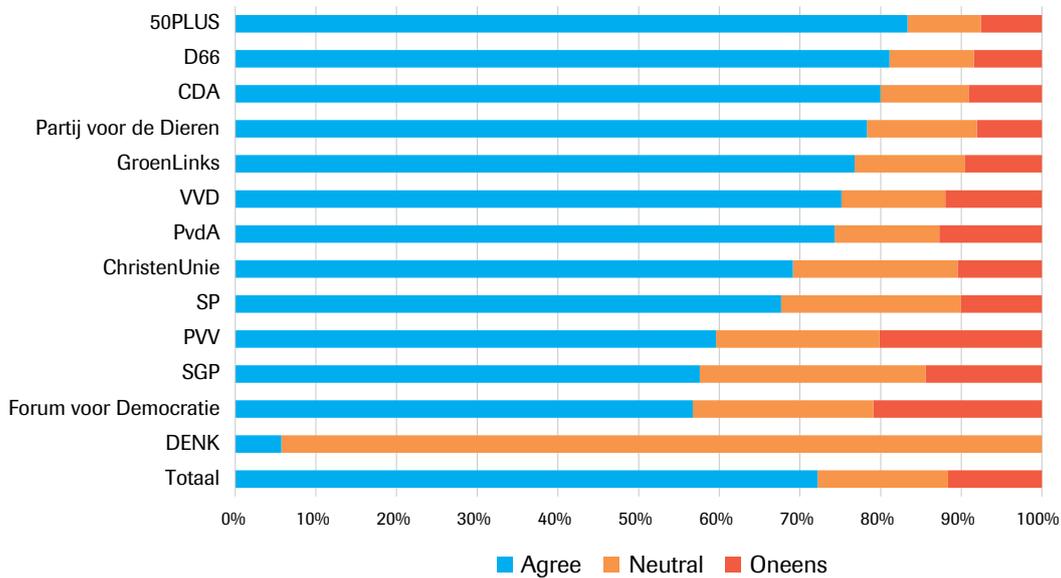


Against this backdrop we see the Dutch turning their strategic focus to Europe in order to guarantee their security. In a previous Barometer Alert on transatlantic relations we noted that 72% of people in the Netherlands supported greater cooperation with France and Germany in the light of Brexit and the policy of President Trump.²

1 *Defence Vision 2035 – Fighting for a secure future*, Ministry of Defence, published on 15 October 2020.

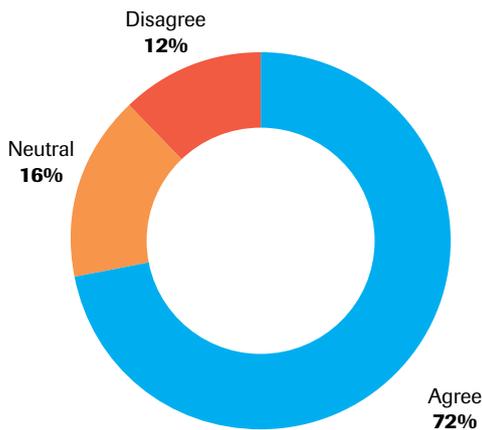
2 Rem Korteweg, Christopher Houtkamp and Monika Sie Dhian Ho, *Dutch views on Transatlantic ties and European security cooperation in times of geopolitical rivalry*, Clingendael Barometer Alert, September 2020.

Europe should be able to take military action independently, without support from the United States



The Defence Vision’s backing for a more self-reliant Europe in the military sphere is broadly supported, as demonstrated by the fact that 72% of people in the Netherlands agree with the following statement: “Europe should be able to take military action independently, without support from the United States.”³

Europe should be able to take military action independently, without support from the United States



It is notable that Dutch support for greater European military independence comes from the entire political spectrum: from socioeconomically left-wing to right-wing, from progressive to conservative. The strongest support is found among those who vote for: D66-81%, CDA-80%, GroenLinks-77% and VVD-75%. Those voting for Forum voor Democratie-57%, SGP-58% and PVV-60% are relatively more sceptical towards European military independence. But a majority even of these voters are starting to support a more self-reliant Europe. The position of DENK is striking, as a large majority of its supporters have a ‘neutral’ view. This is surprising given that the Barometer Alert mentioned earlier on transatlantic relations showed DENK voters to be fairly critical of the United States’ role on the world stage. Nevertheless, they are clearly unconvinced of the need for a militarily more independent Europe.

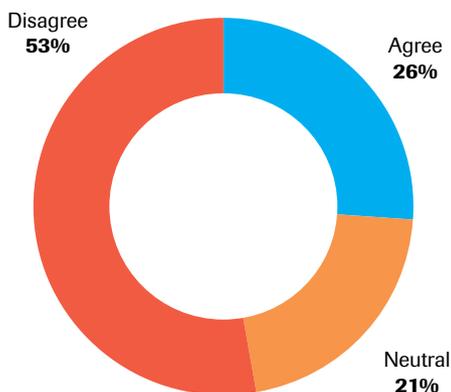
The fact that most supporters even of EU-critical and nationally oriented parties are in favour of greater European military independence is also noteworthy. It should be stressed, however, that there have been no calls for the European Union to have greater military independence.

A second important strategic principle in the Defence Vision 2035 is the continuing

3 In August 2020 a ‘post-Covid-19 outbreak’ survey was conducted among 15,000 respondents. This included the question about greater European military independence.

backing for specialisation within NATO and the EU. Here too the Clingendael Foreign Affairs Barometer shows broad support: a large majority of the Dutch population support specialisation coordinated with neighbouring countries. 53% disagree with the following statement: “So as not to be dependent on other countries, the Netherlands should maintain armed forces with full capabilities and should not share tasks with neighbouring countries.” The majority therefore explicitly reject the notion that Dutch armed forces should be able to take all action independently. 26% agree with this statement, and therefore support military self-sufficiency, while 21% of respondents express a neutral view. For the Netherlands this would include in practice military cooperation with Belgium (navy), Germany (primarily land forces), France (cooperation has intensified in the last few years, partly through the *European Intervention Initiative*) and with the United Kingdom (navy, including the marine corps).

So as not to be dependent on other countries, the Netherlands should maintain armed forces with full capabilities and should not share tasks with neighbouring countries



Defence expenditure

It is clear that a stronger and more self-reliant Europe in the military sphere requires enormous investment. In NATO the Americans provide the most expensive military capabilities (such as missile defence, precision weapons, unmanned systems etc., as well as the nuclear arsenal). Military

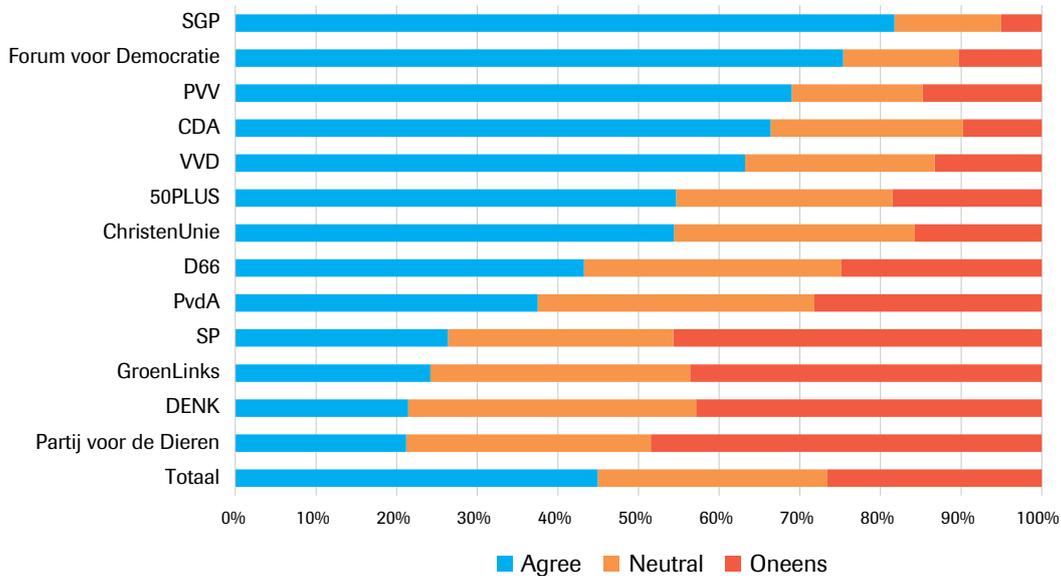
reinforcements sent from US territory to Europe are essential for NATO to be able to deploy sufficient military units in the event of a large-scale enemy attack (but also as a deterrent, for example in exercises). Europe faces enormous quantitative and qualitative challenges if it wants to be able to take more independent military action.⁴

Following the 2008 banking crisis and the subsequent economic crisis, many European countries made deep cuts to defence spending, and the Netherlands was no exception. Security crises such as Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the downing of flight MH17 and the emergence of and war against Islamic State (IS), however, led to a realisation of the harsh reality and a new awareness of Europe’s role in international power relationships following a ‘geopolitical holiday’⁵. At the September 2014 NATO summit in Wales it was agreed that by 2024 member states should spend 2% of their GDP on defence. The Dutch defence budget has risen again, from €7.6 billion in 2014 to €11.6 billion in 2021. This corresponds to an estimated 1.48% of GDP. In order to close the gap between 1.48% and the promised 2%, the annual defence budget needs to rise to almost €19 billion by 2024. That is an increase of 64%. The alternative – achieving the expected European NATO average of 1.8% of GDP – still requires a defence budget of €17 billion in 2024, a rise of 47%.

4 An expert group has calculated that in the next 15 to 20 years the European countries would have to invest the following additional amounts to be able to take independent military action: \$94-110 billion for the protection of shipping routes and \$288-357 billion for territorial (national) defence. See: Douglas Barnie, Ben Barry, Dr Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, Henry Boyd, Nick Childs, Dr Bastian Giegerich, *Defending Europe: scenario-based capability requirements for NATO’s European members*, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) – London, April 2019.

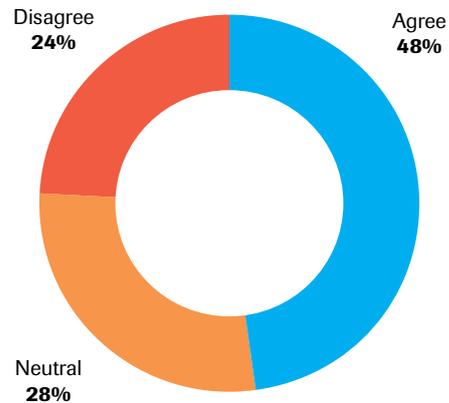
5 Full quotation: “The geopolitical holiday is over. The current generation did not grow up with the Cold War and did not experience the arms race,” says Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. See: Kirsten Commijs, ‘Kabinet doet weinig om kernwapenverdrag te redden’, *Trouw*, 31 January 2019.

The Netherlands should spend more on Defence



The Foreign Affairs Barometer raises the general question of whether the Netherlands should spend more on defence: 48% agree, 24% disagree and a fairly large proportion, 28%, have no opinion. Around half of people in the Netherlands therefore agree that more should be spent on defence and only a quarter disagree. The relatively strong support for higher defence expenditure is striking. The armed forces have not traditionally been high on the Dutch population’s priority list.⁶ The Dutch clearly realise that insecurity has increased, that the Netherlands will have to make a bigger contribution to the defence of its own security and that this will require investment in our defence system.

The Netherlands should spend more on Defence



With regard to the relationship between party preferences and support for a higher defence budget, we find stronger support for a higher budget among right-wing and culturally conservative parties, with SGP-81%, FvD-75%, PVV-69%, CDA-66%, VVD-63% and CU-54% on the one hand and D66-43%, PvdA-38%, SP-26% and Groenlinks-24% on the other hand.

6 In a 1Vandaag opinion poll in 2018 defence was ranked 7th among government spending priorities. See: <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/panels/opiniepanel/alle-uitslagen/item/dit-is-hoe-leden-van-het-opiniepanel-geld-van-de-overheid-zouden-uitgeven/>

What explains the support for a higher defence budget? Respondents who value the transatlantic relationship and treaty obligations also want to invest more in the

defence system.⁷⁸ In addition, supporters of active Dutch participation in peace operations and supporters of military self-sufficiency understand that this requires a higher defence budget.

We also see that respondents who value the protection of the community, who are critical about migration and want to protect Dutch culture are stronger supporters of a higher defence budget than the rest of the population. These results are consistent with the earlier observation that right-wing conservatives in the Netherlands want to spend more on defence.

A final notable finding is that around 34% of respondents call for greater European military independence but at the same time do not explicitly support a higher defence budget (see cross table 1). This may be due to the belief among left-wing and centre-left parties that European defence cooperation saves money through joint procurement, standardisation, task specialisation and the elimination of 'duplication'. That reasoning may be correct, but it ignores Europe's existing serious deficiencies in defence capabilities. After all, there is not much scope for saving on something you already have little or none of.

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- 7 The explanations presented in this section have been analysed by means of a logical regression. The item 'the Netherlands should spend more on defence' serves as a dependent variable. This variable was measured on a five-point scale. In the model the categories 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' have been combined, as have the categories 'strongly agree' and 'agree'. The neutral category has not been included in the analysis. The analysis thus compares groups that support and oppose more financial support for defence. All independent variables consisting of a single item have been recoded as follows: the positive answers (e.g. strongly agree/agree, very likely/likely etc.) have been combined, as have the negative and neutral answers. The interval variables are interpreted on the basis of their standard deviations.
- 8 The value attached to transatlantic relationships and treaty obligations has been measured using the following items in the regression table: 'Threat from US', 'Nuclear weapons on Dutch soil' and 'Dutch fighter jets with US nuclear weapons'.

A stronger, more self-reliant Europe

In conclusion we see that the Netherlands, a loyal Atlantic ally, is turning its strategic focus towards Europe: 79% believe the United States will provide less and less protection in the next five years because the Americans believe Europeans should do more to maintain their own security. 72% support a militarily more independent Europe – a majority of supporters of all political parties in the Netherlands are in favour of this – while 53% reject the statement that the Netherlands should maintain armed forces with full capabilities and should not share tasks with the neighbouring countries.

Defence has traditionally not been high on Dutch people's priority list for government expenditure. Against that background it is notable that the percentage of people supporting an increase in the defence budget is twice as high as the percentage opposing an increase (48% and 24% respectively). This is an important finding. The economic aftershock of the previous crisis was absorbed by deep spending cuts, from which the Defence budget was not immune. Since the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis is expected to be even greater, it is appropriate to continue tracking support for an increased defence budget in the period ahead.

Annex

Cross table 1 Support for more spending on Defence X Support for greater European military independence

		Support for more spending on Defence		
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Greater European military independence	Disagree	34%	20.8%	44.5%
	Percentage of population	3.9%	2.3%	5%
	Neutral	36.2%	40.2%	23.6%
	Percentage of population	5.7%	6.4%	3.7%
Agree	20.3%	26.1%	53.5%	
Percentage of population	14.8%	19.1%	39%	

Regression table: reasons for more financial support for Defence

Variable	β	SE	Odds	Sig.
Constant	-11,059	.854	0	0
Decreasing US protection for Europe	-.035	.093	.97	.71
Threat from Russia	.477	.081	1.16	0
Threat from China	.174	.088	1.19	.047
Threat from US	-.6	.076	.55	0
Europe's military independence	1.01	.075	2.75	0
Franco-German cooperation	.172	.092	1.19	.06
Dutch fighter jets with US nuclear weapons	1.5	.074	4.48	0
Nuclear weapons on Dutch soil	.561	.089	1.75	0
Active Dutch contribution to peace missions	.506	.071	1.66	0
Military self-sufficiency	1,475	.126	4.37	0
Relevant security region: North Africa/Sahel	.292	.072	1.34	0
Relevant security region: Southeast Asia	.08	.082	1.08	.329
Relevant security region: Eastern Europe	.128	.069	1.14	.063
Relevant security region: Middle East	.095	.072	1.10	.188
Relevant security region: Caribbean	.206	.108	1.23	.055
Relevant security region: Horn of Africa	-.015	.09	.99	.867
Pride in the Netherlands' international role	.05	.067	1.05	.457
Community definition	.103	.01	1.11	0
Declinism	.008	.003	1.01	.003
Negative attitude towards migration	.021	.003	1.02	0
VVD/PVV/FvD/CDA/50Plus/SGP	.459	.094	1.58	0
Socioeconomically left-wing	-.048	.012	.95	0
Populism	-.045	.009	.96	0
Telegraaf/AD/FD/RfD	.126	.093	1.13	.176
Age	.008	.002	1.01	.001
Education	-.025	.603	.98	.967
Gender (female)	.114	.072	1.12	.116

Dependent variable: The Netherlands should spend more on Defence (0=disagree, 1= agree)

Explained variance

Model	Nagelkerke R2
1 Threat from superpowers	.086
2 Military cooperation in Europe	.15
3 Support for NATO nuclear weapons role	.403
4 Contribution to peace missions	.403
5 Military self-sufficiency	.447
6 The Netherlands' security regions	.459
7 Pride in the Netherlands' international role	.461
8 Protection of community	.508
9 Political attitude	.519
10 Preferred newspaper	.519
11 Background variables	.522

Descriptive statistics for scales of regression table

Scales	Range	Average	Standard deviation
Negative attitude towards migration	98-190	147.95	18.21
Declinism	33-150	103.11	15.89
Community definition	43-72	61.81	4.42
Socioeconomically left-wing	5-25	17.92	3.5
Populism	6-30	16.14	5.58

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Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, NGOs and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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