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van Dijk, R.

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Time to Give Up on the Americans?

Ruud van Dijk

Reflections on a New Recommendation to the Dutch Government

The starting point for this report by the official Advisory Council on International Questions (*Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, AIV*) was not really open-ended, and so the title lacks a question mark.¹ It is simply “time for new steps” in the pursuit of European security—including for the Netherlands. And no matter how precise and nuanced the writing here, these steps do not simply extend existing policies; rather, they represent a change of course. Much more than in the past, the Netherlands, according to this report, ought to put its energy and resources toward the development of European capabilities and institutions. It should no longer seek to balance as evenly as it has long sought to do between European and Atlantic components. NATO is just not what it used to be.

The AIV got to work last January, when the government sent over a request from parliament for a study of the “optimal shape of the European security architecture and the optimal division of labor between NATO and the EU.” The request emerged from a debate launched last year by Salima Belhaj, representing the centrist D66 party, on the need for European armed forces. Belhaj is one of a growing number of politicians who argue in favor of European strategic autonomy. To be sure, NATO still gets mentioned, and few people in official or political circles in The Hague would be willing to give up on the alliance. At the same time, we are reaching the point where among the people who care about these things (there are too few of them—more about this below), a majority believes that the Atlantic component of Europe’s security should finally take a back-seat to the development of various European initiatives. Perhaps this is unsurprising. Still, the question remains—as it does with the report in hand—whether in light of Europe’s disjointed track record and what it suggests about the future, and in a global geo-political perspective, Dutch or European interests are best served by such a shift.

The rationale for this investigation is clear enough: “[t]he increased vulnerability of Europe, the departure of the

United Kingdom from the European Union and the altered position of the US demand that the Netherlands revise its own role and position.” The longer version then speaks of how the US no longer sees itself, or acts, as the promotor and protector of the postwar international order; how Russia has become a military and political threat again; how there is instability on Europe’s southern and south-eastern flanks; how China’s growing assertiveness also challenges Europe; and, finally, how the number and variety of non-military threats are increasing.

The report next essentially seeks to work out the ways in which the Netherlands should put its eggs in the basket of an optimization of “the European security structure”. This is not entirely persuasive.

It is not as if no European initiatives, capabilities, or institutions exist. The report gives ample evidence that they do. But a small question mark would have been warranted next to “the” in the phrase, in order to emphasize that a genuine, functioning European security organization is something that still needs to be put together (let us deal with reality and not worry about European armed forces). And until it exists and has proven its independent mettle in practice, perhaps a little more hedging of one’s bets is



The AIV recommends that the Netherlands drop its reticence toward the practical realization of the EU's political and military-strategic autonomy, and actively participate in the creation of shared European military capabilities. Pictured is a Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopter of the Royal Netherlands Air Force landing near Oirschot, close to Eindhoven (photo: SpaceKris/Shutterstock.com)

called for. Besides, even if it were a good idea to strive for strategic autonomy, security policy in the end remains merely a tool to pursue political goals and thus would depend on there being a common European foreign policy. We are not even close to having that on the old continent.

In any case, the report recommends that the Netherlands support the French-German initiative for the creation of a European Security Council, made up of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the chair of the European Council, and NATO's Secretary General. The Dutch should also give up their resistance to a further development of the EU's Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and allow it to deal with strategic planning and the direction of military operations. Furthermore, the AIV recommends that the Netherlands drop its reticence toward the practical realization of the EU's political and military-strategic autonomy, and actively participate in the creation of shared European military capabilities. Britain's exit from the EU no longer gives The Hague the option to impede French-German initiatives here. Also, the Dutch and their allies, according to the AIV, should be flexible about which

structure to use when action is called for: NATO, the EU, or a "coalition of the willing." The Hague certainly ought to be willing to act as a serious ally, regardless of the mechanism that emerges to deal with a particular crisis. Finally, the AIV report emphasizes the importance of keeping the United Kingdom engaged with the defense of Europe (without allowing London veto power over EU matters, including the Common Security and Defense Policy). To promote such British engagement the AIV recommends, in addition to its support for a British seat on a European Security Council, a revival of the old Eurogroup of defense ministers within NATO.

VITAL FOR BOTH SIDES

What's curious here—although again, not without justification—is that where the United States mostly figures as part of the problem, the other Anglo-Saxon power that recently has been putting its own interests first is explicitly discussed as part of the solution to Europe's security challenges. The authors, of course, are correct when they argue that the United Kingdom belongs in Europe's

neighborhood and just by virtue of that geographical and historical fact ought to be included (to say nothing about British military capabilities). But one of the things we all should have learned from the past century is that in a globalized world, the transatlantic partnership is vital for both sides. It is not just the United States which has learned the hard way (before, during, and after the Cold War) that it has a vital interest in a Europe that is open and at peace. For their part, Europeans have more than once relied on Washington to maintain or restore that way of life. They have more than once showed themselves incapable of achieving the required unity, or dedicating sufficient resources, to be able keep the peace or to ward off challengers wishing them ill.

In the 21st century, this has not really changed, no matter how much Americans are preoccupied with their internal affairs at the moment. During the preparation of its report, the AIV met with the ambassadors of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, but not the American envoy. This, too, is not terribly outrageous (that epithet goes to the current administration in Washington and its enablers), but it illustrates the marginalization of the United States in the context of this study. In this way, this report can also serve as advice to Washington: continuing to act as a disrupter in the international system rather than its anchor will make it less and less relevant to this part of the world—to the ultimate detriment of its own interests and those of its allies.

The report mentions China, but then, as with some of the other threats facing European societies, does not really develop the implications of Beijing's growing assertiveness. Still, one of them, and it could be the defining security challenge of this century, is whether our globalized world will function mostly on terms set by the likes of the Communist Party of China and the Kremlin, or whether the norms and values of the post-World War II order will regain the upper hand. On that question Europe and the United States have a lot more in common than what divides them, and any "defense of the West," in Stanley Sloan's term, can occur only through shared action (together with like-minded countries elsewhere in the world).

AMERICA'S 'PERIODIC STRUGGLE'

Looking at the political and societal dysfunctionality in the United States at the moment, it may be hard to see how the "West" can still be a useful concept, how a Western alliance can truly be effective. But as much as we may be tempted to see the United States as a failing state, it is probably more accurate to say that the Americans are engaged in one of their periodic struggles over what the country ought to stand for, at home and in the world. A

Democratic victory in the November elections would not mean the end of that struggle, but it might well make Washington more of a responsible actor on the global scene and a more engaged NATO ally.

China's is also the kind of challenge not so easily countered with military means. While not explicitly part of this study, the AIV may in the near future want to investigate how challenges posed by China to open societies in Europe might best be met. And while on the subject of non-military threats, with military options looming darkly in the background, there is also more work to be done in figuring out how to deal effectively with the wide range of Russia's anti-Western activities. Both China and Russia are very active in cyberspace. The other articles in this issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief* are devoted to cyberspace. This domain is of growing importance as a theater of international political, economic, and military rivalry, particularly between open societies and the major autocracies of the world.

In the past three years, we have had ample illustration of all the "winning" the *America First* strategy has produced for the United States in dealing with these problems; it is difficult to imagine Europe being more effective following a variation of a "Europe first." We don't need another cold war, and we should not turn adversaries such as Russia or even China into giants they are not—autocracies without grave domestic problems who have no interest in some modus-vivendi with us. But adversaries they are. The success of open societies everywhere, but particularly in the West, threatens everything these regimes stand for and seek to protect. The same goes for the liberal-democratic international order, which, while incomplete and flawed, still offers the best chance to promote peace and justice worldwide.

The alleged success of Western societies takes us to yet another challenge faced by the Dutch and other European governments. It is only briefly discussed in the report, in a passing reference to the importance of legitimacy for any security policy pursued in a democracy. Whether the people in whose name a defense is organized view it as legitimate is essential for its effectiveness, as the authors rightly note. But the report does not really develop the question of the extent to which Europe's security may be under threat from within, by the indifference of large sections of the population to what ultimately is being defended and the threats to it.

Too many seem to take the rights and privileges of our prosperous and open societies for granted, while a not insignificant minority agrees with the current inhabitant of the White House in his amoral, self-centered, transac-



The AIV report emphasizes the importance of keeping the United Kingdom engaged with the defense of Europe (without allowing London veto power over EU matters, including the Common Security and Defense Policy). Pictured is the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elisabeth (photo: Kristofer Keane/Shutterstock.com)

tional approach to governance. Democracy is eroding in several EU member states without Brussels being able to do much about it, while NATO seems to have no way to address growing authoritarianism in some member states, especially Turkey. Such contempt from within for the basic principles of our societies and institutions and our leaders' inability to address it does little to boost the legitimacy of our core values. Thus, ordinary people can perhaps be forgiven for sharing in the cynicism their leaders at times seem to display.

One very concrete way in which the perceived legitimacy of a security policy can be measured is in the popular support for the required allocation of resources. The Dutch government will, by its own admission, not meet the shared NATO goal of spending 2% of GDP by 2024, probably not even come close. That fact only symbolizes how a constituency for a serious contribution to any security policy does not exist in the Netherlands. One cannot argue for a major increase in defense spending at the expense of valued domestic policy goals and run for parliament successfully. Or maybe one could, but virtually nobody in or out of office is willing to tie his or her political fate to it.

Perhaps even more daunting for the development of a credible security policy is the fact that many developments in the world that sooner or later will threaten peace, stability, and justice in Europe are not experienced as such by most people. The predicted consequences of climate change are the best example. It is both very challenging to point to concrete security threats it will produce (let alone their timing) and even more difficult to recommend, and gain support for, expensive policies that will meet threats yet to materialize. And yet, rather than, say, an invasion by the Russians, it is these hard-to-pin-down but nonetheless very real dangers that are likely to make life

difficult in the near to medium term, including in Europe. Developing or maintaining the right tools (institutions, alliances, treaties, money, and yes, militaries) is the first thing to worry about, and in a way, the AIV report deals exactly with this problem. But again, can Europe really hope to deal with these global challenges mostly through self-reliance? Can it stand up for its justly cherished liberal-democratic international order, without like-minded nations elsewhere in the world?

THE NEED FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

So, it would be good if another member of parliament got up and demanded a thorough examination, and a public debate, of this set of problems: viewed in a global context, what are the shorter- and longer-term security challenges we face, and what would be the required tools and partnerships at least to have a chance to meet them? In the meantime, one of the things the politicians in The Hague could do is organize a public debate around this current report. It has received some attention in the press, but even allowing for everyone's preoccupation with the COVID-19 crisis, there has been too little.

It is a measure of the value of a study when, besides reaching certain conclusions, it gives rise to a large number of new or additional questions. No single paper can deal with everything, and with the mission it received from the government, the AIV certainly has done thorough and thoughtful work, making a valuable contribution to the debate (such as it is), especially in the Netherlands. While it could have been a little more skeptical of the premise on which this project was meant to be based, the study's recommendations certainly make sense. In fact, most of them are pertinent even if one believes the transatlantic link deserves to be protected better from this part of the world. Even with a more trustworthy and competent administration in Washington it would be good if Europe organized its part of the defense of the West more efficiently, and if it managed to put its money where its mouth increasingly can be found.

Ruud van Dijk is senior lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. He teaches courses in the history of recent international relations and Cold War history.

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Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

1. Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, *Europese veiligheid: tijd voor nieuwe stappen* AIV Advies nr. 112, 19 juni 2020 (in Dutch). <https://www.adviesraadinternationalevraagstukken.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/06/19/europese-veiligheid-tijd-voor-nieuwe-stappen>