

In the autumn of 2002 the foreign policy of the Netherlands took a decisive turn, the implications of which still play out in Dutch politics and could continue do so for several years to come. This refers to the conscious decision, in the wake of 9/11 and with the Iraq issue coming to the boil, to place Dutch foreign policy closely in tune with US unilateralism. In short, the Dutch entered the Anglosphere and show every intention of remaining there.ⁱ

Was this really something new? Since WW II the Netherlands has built a solid reputation as a 'loyal ally' of the United States. There have been serious disagreements between the two countries on specific policy issues (such as Indonesia/New Guinea) but there has remained an underlying recognition that these should not disrupt a relationship considered fundamental. Political challenges to the Dutch role in NATO, most notably from the New Left-influenced Labour party from the late 1960s up to the mid 1980s, could be coped with by the pro-Atlanticist elites and alleviated by the intricacies of coalition politics. Even during the early 1990s, when the Netherlands backed up the development of the Maastricht Third Pillar in security affairs, NATO remained the corner-stone. Throughout NATO's history, it has acted as an ideal middle-power operating as a 'bridge' between North Americans and Europeans, arguably far more suited to and more successful in this role than the UK. The Dutch had attached themselves to NATO for more than 50 years, in doing so turning themselves into its watch-dog, maintenance man, and occasional whipping-boy if they did not live up to their own commitments (as with Cruise Missiles in the 1980s). Not for nothing have the Dutch provided three Secretary Generals, a number equalled only by the UK.

The shift towards the Anglosphere has more to do with the dilemma for all NATO nations on how to respond to US unilateralism following 9/11. For some such as Blair there existed not a dilemma but an opportunity to fulfill a global moral mission. For the Dutch it was not so simple. The US thanked its allies for invoking Article 5 and then walked away in the other direction. NATO was clearly no longer the framework for communal decision-making it should be (if indeed it ever could be), and it was no longer the best means to tie together US and European security interests. Afghanistan could be sanctioned in an ad hoc kind of way, and thanks to the UK it was eventually transformed into a NATO task based on a peace-building mission. But Iraq pushed everything to the limit.

In response The Hague chose irrevocably in favour of trailing after US unilateralism, but in a typically Dutch manner. The Netherlands has a long



tradition in defending the normative legal order in international relations (following Hugo de Groot), and from the 1960s onwards it has taken to heart a self-appointed role as 'gidsland', literally a nation pointing the way for others from a morally correct perspective. Thus the argument put forward by the Dutch government under Jan Peter Balkenende was that the Iraq issue was based not on WMD but on Baghdad's failure to comply with earlier UN resolutions. In September 2002 Foreign Minister Jaap de Hoop Scheffer even stated publicly that new UN resolutions were not necessary to justify a war against Iraq, a position which went further than any other US ally at that time.ⁱⁱ Dutch military intelligence were highly sceptical of the notorious British dossiers that pointed to an increasing Iraqi security threat, but their concerns over politicised intelligence did not affect the developing policy direction in The Hague.ⁱⁱⁱ Staying within the bounds of their identity as a normative power, the Dutch backed Operation Iraqi Freedom on principle, not pre-emption. The failure to secure a second UN resolution in early 2003 did not change this standpoint, since the latter was based on previous directives ignored by Saddam Hussein. On 18 March 2003 Minister President Jan Peter Balkenende then side-stepped any further complications by offering 'political, not military support' to the Anglo-American invasion. Once the war was declared 'over' in late May, Balkenende announced the placement of 1350 Dutch military in Muthanna province, southern Iraq, as part of the international stabilisation force. Heavy US and UK pressure caused The Hague to extend this force's stay in Iraq until March 2005. The Iraq war has also rumbled on as a prickly issue in Dutch politics. Revelations of military involvement have since emerged, putting to the test the credibility of Balkenende's 'political not military' morality play. But the most revealing aspect of the Iraq episode was the announcement in September 2003 that de Hoop Scheffer would be the next NATO Secretary General. The former Foreign Minister was an ideal candidate for the US, since having chosen the Anglosphere he could be relied upon to make NATO malleable to the demands of US leadership, whatever that may require. His success in this has led to a second term. This has included some recent outspoken statements that the Netherlands must hold the line in Afghanistan.^{iv}

The decision to join the Anglosphere, a choice forced on the Dutch by US unilateralism and Iraq, involved several major factors, some with a long history. The Dutch have long been faced with powerful neighbours on the European continent, and have a traditional aversion towards French and/or German designs on how to run things. In his analysis of Dutch transatlanticism forty years ago, Robert Russell pointed out that it essentially represented a choice for freedom of action separate from the interests and demands of larger European neighbours.^v This led to a focus first on the UK as a fellow maritime power and free trader, and after WW II on the USA. European integration complicated this



approach slightly but The Hague became adept at sustaining a dual identity, as much European as Atlanticist, keeping all lines open to London and Washington while pursuing the all-night discussions in Brussels. But the last five years have seen this balancing act finally break down. Franco-German resistance to the US-UK offensive against Iraq finally placed the Dutch with a straight choice between two camps, and it was clear which would win. It is significant to include here the rejection by referendum of the EU constitution on 1st June 2005, which ended any lingering impression that the Dutch remained at the forefront of European affairs. The Balkenende government put up a lacklustre performance in promoting a yes-vote, including poor attempts at scare-mongering that a win for the 'no' campaign would entail the break-up of Europe and the collapse of its civilisation. This indifference has continued over the past two years, the blame for the result being conveniently passed to Brussels and no significant Dutch contribution to rescue the situation being made. Instead, in line with joining the Anglosphere in the realm of security, Balkenende teamed up with Blair to push for a more modest EU treaty and the abandonment of any pretensions towards a constitution.

The outlook and development of the Dutch military since the end of the Cold War is also indicative of the implicit shift towards the Anglosphere long before it became explicit in policy as such. In line with the rapidly changing international context, in 1993 it was decided to re-vamp the Dutch armed forces from a conscription-based military to a more professional outfit, with peace-keeping as one of its central tasks for the years ahead. A major factor in this development was the increasing acceptance of operating under US leadership. Thus Dutch forces were part of the Kurdish safe haven operation in northern Iraq following the first Gulf War (although no Dutch forces were part of Desert Storm, the government did support it), they participated in Haiti peacekeeping operations during 1993-96, and they operated as part of the US-led NATO strikes in Bosnia (Deliberate Force, 1995), the follow-up IFOR and SFOR missions, and Kosovo (Allied Force, 1999). With former Yugoslavia in particular, for the Dutch the US can-do approach got things done and was the only viable way to approach security affairs. The debacle at Sreberenica in July 1995 was in this sense a crucial turning point, convincing many in The Hague that this was the only credible way to go. What was the alternative? Efforts to develop a significant European military capability stranded in the late 1990s, and Blair's increasing turn to the US, coupled with French dismay, rapidly undermined the impetus of the 1998 Anglo-French St. Malo agreement. Combined with this was a determined attempt by the Dutch to stay in touch with the US-led revolution in military affairs. This is exemplified by the backing of both military and business circles for the Joint Strike Fighter deal since (once again) 2002, despite the unending tale



of woe on broken deadlines and spiralling costs. If you are not interoperable with the Americans, you are nothing. The Dutch have therefore bought into the whole Coalition of the Willing mentality, attempting to seamlessly adapt their longer-running commitment to peace-keeping, peace-building, and international law to this radically altered international environment. Contradictions abound, but they have not yet exploded.

It remains to be seen where the Dutch commitment to the Anglosphere will lead them. The decision on the extension of ISAF mission in Afghanistan is pending, and will thus be left for the next blog entry. The arrival of Sarkozy has also transformed the international landscape once more, leading to perhaps the most pro-US leadership in the Elysée since Louis XVI and turning the Dutch choice for the Anglosphere into something of a prescient move. Meanwhile, statements of intent concerning Iran by the current Dutch Foreign Minister, Maxime Verhagen, leave little to the imagination. If the crunch comes, the Dutch will almost certainly line up once again on the side of (Anglosphere) international law and justice, this time with the IAEA as back-up legitimation if required. In April 2007 Verhagen insisted in parliament that “something can happen in Iran, or Iran can do something” which would require a response not limited by the restrictions of earlier UN resolutions.^{vi} A remarkable claim, for a nation that defines an important part of its identity by its promotion of and support for international law. Being part of the Anglosphere is a tough job, a heavy responsibility, and its certainly not cheap. But the world has changed, and the Dutch have put their cards on the table.

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ⁱ This piece has benefitted from the work of Ko Colijn and Chris Klep.

ⁱⁱ Karel van Wolferen & Jan Sampiemon, *Een Keerpunt in de Vaderlandse Geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2005), p. 117.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joop Oranje, ‘Hollandse Oorlogslogica,’ *NRC Handelsblad*, 12 June 2004, available at http://www.nrc.nl/binnenland/article380237.ece/Hollandse_oorlogslogica

^{iv} Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 September 2007, available at http://www.nrc.nl/nieuwsthema/uruzgan/article771154.ece/Er_kan_niemand_weg_uit_Afghanistan

^v Robert Russell, ‘The Atlantic Alliance in Dutch Foreign Policy,’ *Internationale Spectator*, 23 (8 July 1969), pp. 1189-1208.

^{vi} ‘PvdA openlijk in botsing met minister Verhagen,’ *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 April 2007, available at http://www.nrc.nl/binnenland/article680057.ece/PvdA_openlijk_in_botsing_met_minister_Verhagen