

# Hanging Together

Partners and Policies for the Netherlands and EU  
in Turbulent Times

**Strategic Monitor**  
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**Jack Thompson**  
**Danny Pronk**

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#### **Reviewers**

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#### **HCSS**

Lange Voorhout 1  
2514EA The Hague  
The Netherlands

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The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

Email: [info@hcss.nl](mailto:info@hcss.nl)  
Website: [hcss.nl](http://hcss.nl)

#### **The Clingendael Institute**

P.O. Box 93080  
2509 AB The Hague  
The Netherlands

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## Note to the Reader

The Strategic Monitor 2021-2022 consists of a synthesis (“Hanging Together”) – the document in your hands or on your screen – as well as five sub-reports and three Strategic Alerts. The synthesis includes summaries of the sub-reports. The full versions of these sub-reports can be found online at [www.hcss.nl](http://www.hcss.nl) or [www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org). The three Strategic Alerts are not included in this synthesis but can be found online:

- “Towards a Space Security Strategy: Action Points for Safeguarding Dutch Security and Prosperity in the Space Age,” by Hugo van Manen, Tim Sweijs, and Patrick Bolder; <https://hcss.nl/report/strategic-alert-towards-a-space-security-strategy/>
- “National Security Implications of Quantum Technology and Biotechnology,” by Carolina van Weerd and Deborah Lassche; <https://hcss.nl/report/strategic-alert-quantum-technology-biotechnolog/>
- “Fifty Shades of Grey: 21st Century Strategic Competition with Russia and China,” by Danny Pronk; <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/21st-century-strategic-competition-russia-and-china>

# Executive Summary

**B**enjamin Franklin famously admonished his fellow signatories to the US Declaration of Independence, “We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.” Franklin meant that the thirteen colonies had to remain unified in the face of significant internal divisions and an unforgiving geopolitical landscape if they were to gain their liberty from Great Britain. If they did not, then their cause – and in the case of Franklin’s co-signers, their very lives – would undoubtedly be lost.

Though dramatic – and possibly apocryphal – Franklin’s epigram is nonetheless an apt description of the situation confronting the Netherlands and other EU member states today. If they do not hang together – if they do not forge a common vision for foreign and security policy – they surely will be left to shift for themselves in a world characterized by accelerating great power competition and eroding multilateral institutions. In a nutshell, the failure to solidify Europe’s global role would mean reduced prosperity and sovereignty for states such as the Netherlands.

The pursuit of strategic autonomy is supposed to provide a framework for building a geopolitical Europe. Though there are significant inter-EU differences as to the definition of strategic autonomy, most would agree that it should entail bolstering resilience to economic and security threats and enhancing the EU’s ability to act independently of other states. The ultimate goal is to enable the Netherlands and EU to hold their own in the face of an international landscape more daunting than

anything since the end of the Cold War. The growing tendency to treat access to sensitive technologies as a zero-sum game, the increasing impact of emerging and disruptive technologies in every facet of international economics and security, the waxing climate crisis, the militarization of international politics amongst great powers and in key regions such as the Middle East – taken as a whole, this set of problems poses nothing less than an existential challenge, one requiring a long-term, coordinated response from EU member states.

This report seeks to identify policies and partners intended to advance the goal of strategic autonomy. It reaches two main conclusions. First, progress has been made in the five areas evaluated in the report. When it comes to the problem of techno-nationalism, the EU has taken initial steps towards putting an infrastructure in place for mitigating the negative impact. In the realm of intelligence cooperation, the EU has created several institutions intended to facilitate intelligence sharing between member states. In the field of arms control, the EU has established expertise in the provision of technical and financial assistance to support the implementation of treaties and the work of international agencies. EU member states also have considerable experience in collaborative armaments programs and have a number of such programs in the pipeline. Last but not least, the Netherlands and EU have become global leaders in understanding and acting upon the security implications of climate change. However, in spite of such progress, more work is needed in each of these areas.

The second principal conclusion of the report is that two big hurdles still face the EU. It is hampered by significant shortcomings in capabilities, especially in the realm of defense. It is also struggling with the problem of insufficient political will, a problem driven in large part by the EU's structure – which entails constant tension between the supranational and national components – and the influence of nationalist and anti-EU political parties.

As a guide to hanging together in the quest for strategic autonomy – both in the specific fields evaluated, and the broader problems of capability shortcomings and insufficient political will – the report develops three broad principles. First, it contends that only by actively working to establish rules and norms in key areas of international concern will the Netherlands and EU be able to shape an environment conducive to European interests and values. In particular, they should focus on minilateral and multilateral international partnerships in areas such as climate security, arms control, emerging tech, and space. In other words, the Netherlands and EU should lean into their already considerable normative power. Second the report argues that better protecting EU member state economies and societies from external interference in areas such as espionage, hybrid operations, unfair market policies, and extra-territorial sanctions will enhance efforts to hang together. The EU will not be able to resist the divide and rule tactics employed by other great powers if it does not get its act together in this area. Third, the report asserts that defending and deterring potential adversaries through boosting

military strength and fostering closer military collaboration will both make the Netherlands and the EU more resilient and capable and make it easier to forge unity on key foreign and security policy questions. EU member states have been talking a good game in these areas for years; now it is time to begin putting their money where their mouths are by investing in capabilities and collaborative programs and by doing a better job of leveraging NATO and security relationships with other like-minded actors.

Europeans could do worse than looking to US history for inspiration whenever they despair about the outlook for strategic autonomy. Americans tend to idealize the origins of their nation but in reality, the process was slow and frustrating and could have collapsed many times. It was not fully secure until victory in the War of 1812, at the very earliest. The thirteen colonies stuck together through thick and thin not out of idealism, but out of sheer necessity; failure to do so would have led to dissolution of the Union. They recognized that, left to fend for themselves, the individual colonies would have been easy prey for the great powers of the era, such as Britain and France.

Similarly, the Netherlands and other EU member states should keep in mind that strategic autonomy is a tool designed out of necessity, to make them more capable and resilient. It will often be difficult, and will always require compromise, but it is necessary if they wish to safeguard their interests and values in a dangerous world. After all, the alternative to hanging together is to hang separately.



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**Jack Thompson** is a Senior Strategic Analyst at HCSS, where he leads a range of projects on US foreign policy and political culture, European security, and transatlantic relations. Before joining the HCSS, he was Head of the Global Security Team at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich and Lecturer at the Clinton Institute, University College Dublin. He holds degrees from the University of Cambridge, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and the University of St. Thomas. He is author of *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2019), which was the recipient of the Theodore Roosevelt Association 2020 book prize.

**Danny Pronk** is Senior Research Fellow Strategic Foresight at The Netherlands Institute of International Relations *Clingendael*. His research focuses on security and defense issues, particularly in relation to China and Russia, and on geopolitical trend analysis, alternative futures development, and horizon scanning. He has over twenty years of experience as a practitioner in intelligence analysis. He is currently also employed as a guest researcher (Dual PhD candidate) at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University.

#### **HCSS**

Lange Voorhout 1  
2514 EA The Hague  
The Netherlands

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