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Blinded by Bias

Chapter 7 | Reluctant to Confront Reality: The Netherlands

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Reluctant to Confront Reality: The Netherlands

At the onset of the crisis, the relationship between the Netherlands and Russia was already strained first through Russia's annexation of Crimea followed by the downing of flight MH17 in 2014 and Russia's subsequent refusal to admit involvement of Russian agents and to handover those responsible, and its active effort to undermine the investigation of the Dutch authorities into the event. In this context, the Dutch government expressed concern about Russia's military buildup in April 2021 but continued to support diplomatic solutions through the Normandy Format with additional sanctions seen only as an instrument of last resort. Public opinion echoed this ambivalence with public figures sowing doubt over the likelihood of Russian aggression.¹ Similar to France and Germany, senior policymakers considered a potential large-scale war in Ukraine to be unlikely. A deeply entrenched peacetime mindset led many of them to dismiss Russian actions as routine provocations rather than as precursors to a full-scale invasion. As such, the Netherlands acted as a non-existentially threatened 'Dove' state that did not provide military support to Ukraine in the months leading up to its invasion. The Dutch government's eventual shift in early 2022, marked by the announcement of sanctions and military aid, reflected a growing alignment with the Five Eyes Community, Poland and the Baltic states, a shift that came only days before Russia invaded.

A Strained Relationship

In the years leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, three issues dominated the bilateral relationship between the Netherlands and Russia. The first significant event following less than half a year after the annexation of Crimea was the downing of passenger flight MH17 over the Donetsk Oblast in July 2014. The fateful attack resulted in the death of 298 passengers including 196 Dutch nationals, representing one of the biggest losses of life for the Netherlands in recent memory.² As a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official put it: "*The downing of MH17 was a real low point... This was like a wake-up call.*"³ Russia's subsequent obstruction and refusal to cooperate with the Dutch investigation team aggravated the Dutch government.⁴ In addition, Russia categorically dismissed the team's findings as "fiction", refused to hand-over those responsible to stand trial, and did not offer any compensation to the families of the deceased.⁵ Amid the strained relationship resulting from MH17, a series of

¹ *Waarom Poetin Oekraïne Niet Aanvalt*, directed by Maarten van Rossem - De Podcast, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf5XHNa3Qcl>.

² Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 'MH17 Incident - Government.NL', onderwerp, Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 23 January 2018, <https://www.government.nl/topics/mh17-incident>.

³ Interview 7

⁴ Dickinson, 'Putin's New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions'.

⁵ Stephanie van den Berg, 'Russia Calls Ukraine's MH17 Accusations at World Court "Fiction"', Europe, *Reuters*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-calls-ukraines-mh17-accusations-world-court-fiction-2023-06-14/>.

“With gas, we knew: when the Groningen field is empty, we can only buy gas from Russia and Norway.”

high-profile incidents further fuelled Dutch concerns, which cemented, as a former senior Dutch official observed, Russia's status as a “spoiler.”⁶ These incidents were not unheard of going back to the Cold War. The following are known examples from recent years. One such incident took place in response to the Russian diplomat Dmitri Borodin being arrested in The Hague for the possible abuse of his children.⁷ Just 10 days later, Dutch diplomat Onno Elderenbosch was attacked in his Moscow flat.⁸ As the former senior Dutch official previously quoted recalled: “*So that was uncomfortable. And the second man from the embassy was beaten up. Many unpleasant things happened.*”⁹ Another incident was the 2018 attempted Russian cyber-operation against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), based in The Hague, by Russian agents present on the ground.¹⁰ This prompted the government to arrest and extradite the Russian agents and publicly attribute the action in a press conference.¹¹ Similarly, the Netherlands expelled two Russian spies in 2020 after uncovering an espionage network.¹² Finally, the Netherlands, like Germany, came to increasingly rely on Russian gas, after the partial closure of the Groningen gas fields in 2018. As one expert stated: “*With gas, we knew: when the Groningen field is empty, we can only buy gas from Russia and Norway.*”¹³ Underlying this need was the hope that mutual dependence on the lucrative gas trade would ensure peace, inhibiting forceful responses.

The Lead-up: Deterrence and Dialogue

Russia's initial military buildup in April 2021 was characterised in Dutch media as the deliberate flexing of Russian military muscle, with the goal to intimidate both NATO and Ukraine.¹⁴ Rob Bauer, incoming Chair of NATO's military committee, publicly described the troop buildup as a “clear message” from Russia, highlighting the need for greater investments in the Dutch armed forces.¹⁵ Dutch policymakers, however, predominantly interpreted the buildup as posturing rather than as a precursor to invasion. Paraphrasing a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, this was all about signalling for the United States, and the Russians wanted to be taken seriously.¹⁶ The official added that since the Covid pandemic, the Russians had become more isolated, which made them harder to engage with in conversation. The Dutch government's immediate response that April was a statement expressing support by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok: “In short, it is in the Dutch, European and NATO

⁶ Interview 41

⁷ ‘Dutch Apologize to Russia over Diplomat's Arrest’, AP News, 9 October 2013, <https://apnews.com/general-news-71ad58fe01c042c284a62cecf0ff5ea>.

⁸ Tom Balmforth, ‘Attack on Diplomat in Moscow Deepens Dutch-Russian Rift’, World News, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/16/moscow-assault-dutch-diplomat>.

⁹ Interview 41

¹⁰ Ministerie van Defensie, ‘Russian Cyber Operation Disrupted - Cyber Security - Defensie.NL’, onderwerp, Ministerie van Defensie, 4 October 2018, <https://english.defensie.nl/topics/cyber-security/russian-cyber-operation>.

¹¹ ‘Dutch Authorities Brief World Chemical Weapons Watchdog on Alleged Russian Cyber Attack | UN News’, 4 October 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1022262>.

¹² ‘AIVD ontmaskert twee Russische diplomaten als spionnen’, 10 December 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2360085-aivd-ontmaskert-twee-russische-diplomaten-als-spionnen>.

¹³ Tom-Jan Meeus, ‘Hoe Nederland de gasmarkt aan Poetin uitleverde’, *NRC*, 21 October 2022, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/10/21/hoenederland-de-gasmarkt-aan-poetin-uitleverde-2-a4145779>.

¹⁴ ‘NAVO-chef waarschuwt Rusland: stop met troepenopbouw aan grens Oekraïne’, 13 April 2021, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2376564-navo-chef-waarschuwt-rusland-stop-met-troepenopbouw-aan-grens-oekraïne>.

¹⁵ Harm van Atteveld, ‘Commandant Der Strijdkrachten over de Erbarmelijke Staat van Ons Leger: “Dit Is Niet Uit Te Leggen”’, 1V Een Vandaag, 2 April 2021, <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/artikelen/commandant-der-strijdkrachten-over-de-erbarmelijke-staat-van-ons-leger-dit-is-niet-uit-te-leggen-127951>.

¹⁶ Interview 6

interest to simultaneously send a very clear message to the Russian Federation that the autonomy of Ukraine must be respected.”¹⁷ A few months later, after the NATO Summit on 28 June, then Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigrid Kaag, when asked what the agreed upon course of action would be, stated:

*“We always seek dialogue where possible, but there are limits. We naturally also look for the opportunity to discuss safety and confidence-building measures, if only to be able to avoid the risk of misunderstanding and thus escalation.”*¹⁸

This course of action sparked little discussion. Then parliament member, and current Minister of Defence, Ruben Brekelmans captured this “support [for] the two-track approach of deterrence and dialogue”.¹⁹

Putin’s summer essay on the unity between Russia and Ukraine did not trigger widespread concern among Dutch policymakers. It was largely dismissed as another rhetorical feat meant for internal consumption, rather than a genuine threat, as one senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official observed.²⁰ A senior Dutch military official at the time regarded the essay as an attempt “more to explain history and also Russian thinking about, well, about Ukraine in more generic terms.”²¹ Another senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official stated: “Actually, I don’t think it changed much because it doesn’t fit into the more rationalist think frame that many have here. It’s an imperialist way of thinking which is not maintained.”²² As a result, Russian expansionist ambitions were not taken seriously. Dutch policymakers regarded the essay not as a precursor to anything, but rather as a means to reiterate Russia’s view on Ukrainian sovereignty without any material implications.

Doubts and Duality

The Dutch parliament was regularly briefed on the government’s responses to the escalating situation. During a session on 15 September, Prime Minister Mark Rutte defended his government’s approach, emphasising that efforts were made to prevent further Russian aggression:

*“If we had a solution to that [Russia-Ukraine], we would do it. I think the whole mix of measures, the sanctions, the people-to-people contacts and the pressure-and-dialogue approach that we have is really the only way.”*²³

Russia’s second significant troop buildup from October onwards followed by its *démarches* presented in mid-December did, however, raise more concern both among Dutch diplomats

¹⁷ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, ‘Raad Algemene Zaken en Raad Buitenlandse Zaken; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 15 april 2021, over Raad Buitenlandse Zaken NB gewijzigd tijdstip’, officiële publicatie, 29 April 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-21501-02-2322.html>, 18.

¹⁸ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, ‘NAVO; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 7 juni 2021, over de NAVO Top’, officiële publicatie, 25 June 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28676-370.html>, 11.

¹⁹ Staten-Generaal, 3.

²⁰ Interview 34

²¹ Interview 10

²² Interview 7

²³ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, ‘Europese top van 24-25 juni 2021’, officiële publicatie, 22 June 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20202021-91-37.html>.

in Brussels and in The Hague. Still, as one senior Dutch military official observed: “*These things were reported, briefly discussed. Unfortunately, these discussions were not very deep.*”²⁴ The increased concern was apparent and reflected in a statement by the newly appointed Foreign Minister Ben Knapen in mid-December:

*“In short, we see this troop buildup in Russia as extremely worrying. I repeat: extremely worrisome. It is something that we have to keep a close eye on and where we will possibly have to send signals that we consider it worrying. Of course, the European Union can always decide at some point to come forward with what is within its means, think of specific sanction packages. It was also Ukraine’s request to do so last week.”*²⁵

Despite the minister’s acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation, he stopped short of announcing any concrete robust measures. This hesitation appeared to stem from the absence of a clear mandate or consensus on such options at the time. While more forceful responses may have been considered, they were ultimately deferred to discussions within the broader EU framework, consistent with the Dutch foreign policy tradition of acting in concert with European and Transatlantic partners. In conjunction with a reluctance to recognise the possibility of large-scale conventional war, a preference for a soft approach aimed at avoiding confrontation persisted for much of the pre-full-scale invasion period, in line with the positions of Germany and France. For example, according to a senior Dutch official, experts on the Dutch Russia Desk at the Dutch Foreign Ministry reported higher up in the decision-making chain that “*The intelligence services’ assessment was that the threat was a threat but, would not materialise into an actual Russian attack.*”²⁶ The likelihood of a full-scale invasion was, in spite of mounting signs, still seen as neither rational nor politically palatable. As one former senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official aptly observed:

*“We thought in terms of soft power. And not in terms of hard power. We were thinking in terms of a larger single market. Of legislation and regulation. Of more trade. Of more cooperation. And Russia actually never abandoned thinking in terms of power. Only we didn’t see that.”*²⁷

Meanwhile as the crisis developed, the Netherlands remained committed to getting Russia to back down through the threat of sanctions.²⁸

Caution Persists

Russia’s December *démarches* did stir some concern among Dutch policymakers, but reluctance to adopt a more forceful stance persisted. The Dutch government’s discomfort and fear of escalation, was visibly at display reflected in Dutch Foreign Minister Knapen’s statement a few weeks later on 5 January 2022:

²⁴ Interview 10

²⁵ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, ‘NAVO; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 24 november 2021, over NAVO/OVSE’, officiële publicatie, 14 December 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28676-381.html>.

²⁶ Interview 42

²⁷ Interview 41

²⁸ ‘Introductiedossier Buitenlandse Zaken’ (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, December 2021), <https://www.gracao.com/docs/Introductiedossier+ministerie+van+BZ.pdf>

“The intelligence services’ assessment was that the threat was a threat but, would not materialise into an actual Russian attack.”

*"At this stage, I would like to stay away publicly from what exactly is sensible and what is not. This is also a subject that calls for a certain amount of subtlety and nuance, because on the one hand, you want to make it clear that there are limits somewhere and, on the other hand, you don't want to do anything that in itself promotes escalation."*²⁹

Questions concerning Russia's intentions now came to be more widely debated among senior policymakers, yet the Netherlands remained on the fence. As a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official related:

*"I personally didn't think we should agree to it [Russia's demands] based on those Russian proposals... It seemed like a tactic to give credibility to their demands while Russia demanded to be viewed as a superpower."*³⁰

Priority was put on ensuring a unified front with NATO allies coordinating their responses in the lead-up to the 26 January convening at NATO to formulate a written response to Russia's demands, rejecting them publicly.³¹ Public opinion mirrored this caution and indecision. The same month, a survey found that 81% of Dutch respondents expressed worry about Russian aggression, second only to Georgian respondents.³² However, when economic concerns were added to the questioning, respondents expressed tempered resolve to respond forcefully, even if only on the economic front. For example, when asked if the Netherlands should import more gas to lower energy prices at the risk of increased dependence on Russia, respondents were nearly split evenly, with 41% opposing and 39% supporting the idea. While these figures underscore concern among significant parts of society, they also highlight a reluctance to endure any economic sacrifice. Rather than being entirely out of sync with public sentiment, government policies, such as preparing sanctions without committing to major defence spending increases, reflected a delicate balancing act within a divided coalition and a public with mixed views. Drawing lessons from this account, one official emphasised the importance of sharing intelligence to build public support:

*"That means we have to be much more open about what we see. I think that's a very important lesson. Because that creates more support. And therefore, more options for action or more opportunities to do something as well."*³³

Coming to Terms with Reality

By late January 2022, the Dutch government's position regarding the threat posed by Russia remained close to the French and German positions. A few days after the NATO-Russia Council meeting on 12 January, yet another new Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra clung on to the commitment to finding a diplomatic solution. As related by a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

²⁹ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'Raad Algemene Zaken en Raad Buitenlandse Zaken; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 7 december 2021, over Raad Buitenlandse Zaken', officiële publicatie, 22 December 2021, <https://zoek.officiëlebezoekingen.nl/kst-21501-02-2439.html>.

³⁰ Interview 42

³¹ NATO, 'NATO Conveys Written Proposals to Russia', NATO, accessed 13 March 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_191252.htm.

³² 'Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century', Fondapol, accessed 20 February 2025, <https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century/>.

³³ Interview 42

*"In addition to strengthening deterrence in case of further Russian aggression against Ukraine, the government considers de-escalation, transparency and dialogue important to stabilise relations between Russia and Ukraine."*³⁴

This statement essentially mirrors the one of his pre-predecessor Sigrid Kaag from June the previous year. At face value it indicates little significant change in the Dutch approach. A pervasive sense of disbelief dominated, as key policymakers within the Dutch government grappled with the escalating Russian aggression and the possibility of large-scale war. This sentiment is encapsulated in one former Dutch official's reflection: *"We couldn't imagine them going any further. They fiddle with the boundaries, yes. And that's annoying, but that's not a war."*³⁵ Similarly, another senior Dutch military official admitted to being sceptical about the possibility of war: *"And I believed until the very last moment that he [Putin] would not take the risk. But he did."*³⁶ Such cognitive dissonance was more widespread, with Russian military posturing and inflammatory rhetoric being dismissed as routine provocation rather than indicators of impending conflict. As related by one high-ranking Dutch military official: *"It's very difficult. I think, in general. If it doesn't fit into your world, then it's very difficult to take certain indications very seriously."*³⁷

This disbelief was the product of many decades of peace in Western Europe which had conditioned policymakers to view war as an inconceivable outcome. One former senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official noted: *"For so long in the West [...] we have lived in such relative peace on our continent. It was just beyond imagination that anyone would be so stupid."*³⁸ Another senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official added: *"Our assessment at that time was not [that Putin would use force], and also that buildup did not lead to that understanding."*³⁹ In policy discussions about robust deterrent responses, potential risks associated with unwanted escalation induced caution. For example, there was a debate on whether or not to send sniper rifles to Ukraine. As related by the same senior Dutch official:

*"I know that until fairly recently before the invasion, we had an internal discussion, which in retrospect seems very surreal, about whether sniper rifles were offensive or defensive weapons... So there was already discussion about whether this leads to escalation or de-escalation/deterrence?"*⁴⁰

These unfavourable realities meant that policymakers held off from making any big commitments until the situation necessitated it. Illustrative of the lack of urgency also present in other capitals, a senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official recalls the last week before the invasion: *"But when I left, let's put it this way, I went on holiday. With the idea that it is possible, but it could also take months or it might not happen at all."*⁴¹

This measured stance was evident in Prime Minister Mark Rutte's public statements. His remarks consistently avoided endorsing more assertive options and instead emphasised

³⁴ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'NAVO; Brief regering; Verslag van de NAVO ministeriële bijeenkomst van 7 januari 2022', officiële publicatie, 14 January 2022, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28676-385.html>.

³⁵ Interview 41

³⁶ Interview 10

³⁷ Interview 11

³⁸ Interview 41

³⁹ Interview 15

⁴⁰ Interview 15

⁴¹ Interview 15

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diplomatic solutions, while explicitly rejecting more forceful responses. At the time, public and parliamentary debate largely focused on whether to send troops or weapons, neither of which the Netherlands committed to. On 21 January 2022, Rutte called the idea of sending troops to Ukraine “out of the question”.⁴² By 2 February, as tensions escalated, he reiterated that “anything to avoid war” was the priority, while describing the issue of sending weapons as a “very sensitive issue and it has to be very precise”.⁴³ The Dutch government’s position started shifting in the days leading up to the invasion, reflecting a broader reassessment of security priorities. However, after February 2022, there was a shift in their approach. On 18 February 2022, the Dutch government finally did adapt its approach as it committed to send:

“3,000 combat helmets and 2,000 fragmentation vests with accompanying armour plates. In addition, the Ministry of Defence will make available 30 metal detectors and two wire-guided detection robots for (sea)mine detection. Finally, the Netherlands could supply two battlefield surveillance radars and five weapon location radars and 100 sniper rifles with 30,000 rounds of associated ammunition.”⁴⁴

These commitments were made after a Cabinet meeting that same day, as Defence Minister Kajsa Ollongren stated: “The Netherlands supports Ukraine on many fronts and, like a number of other partners, will also supply military goods. We do this out of solidarity and as part of a broader package of political, financial and military support measures for Ukraine.”⁴⁵ The military aid package certainly signalled a shift but the type and scale of the military aid paled in comparison to what the Dutch would offer after the invasion on 24 February 2022 that shattered peacetime assumptions held by Dutch policymakers.

Conclusion

In the Dutch case, Putin’s preparations for an invasion were met with disbelief that Putin would actually go ahead with it. Russian military posturing was interpreted as a mere provocation rather than as a genuine threat, and Putin’s rhetoric and buildup were seen as strategic manoeuvres for political leverage rather than as warnings of an impending invasion. Perceptions of Russia in the prelude to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were affected by long-held assumptions that war was not in Russian interests. Policymakers struggled to reconcile Russia’s increasingly aggressive actions with their own deeply held belief in diplomacy and international law as the primary tool of conflict resolution. At the same time, it was assumed that economic interdependence with Russia would work as a deterrent to Russia. The reliance on Russian gas, coupled with a broader European tendency to frame Russia as a difficult but manageable partner rather than an existential threat, reinforced the idea that diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation would suffice to maintain peace. This mindset explains the delay of more assertive policy responses until very late in the crisis and after the start of the invasion. Thus, the Dutch government aligned more with the cautious,

⁴² Hanneke Keultjes, ‘Rutte: Geen Nederlandse troepen naar Oekraïne’, AD.nl, 21 January 2022, <https://www.ad.nl/politiek/rutte-geen-nederlandse-troepen-naar-oekraïne-af719527/>.

⁴³ ‘Rutte wil Oekraïne helpen: “Alles om oorlog te voorkomen”’, NOS Jeugdjournaal, 2 February 2022, <https://jeugdjournaal.nl/artikel/2415434-rutte-wil-oekraïne-helpen-alles-om-oorlog-te-voorkomen>; ‘Rutte zegt Oekraïne hulp tegen cyberaanvallen toe in gesprek met president’, NU, 2 February 2022, <https://www.nu.nl/oekraïne/6181682/rutte-zegt-oekraïne-hulp-tegen-cyberaanvallen-toe-in-gesprek-met-president.html>.

⁴⁴ Ministerie van Defensie, ‘Nederland bereid Oekraïne militaire goederen te leveren - Nieuwsbericht - Defensie.nl’, nieuwsbericht, Ministerie van Defensie, 18 February 2022, <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/02/18/nederland-bereid-oekraïne-militaire-goederen-te-leveren>.

⁴⁵ Defensie, ‘Nederland bereid Oekraïne militaire goederen te leveren - Nieuwsbericht - Defensie.nl’.

diplomacy-focused stances of Germany and France rather than the more proactive, robust approaches taken by the US and the UK. Ultimately, the Dutch government shifted towards a more assertive stance which included not only committing to sanctions but also to supplying military support to Ukraine, but only shortly before the invasion. The reliance on diplomatic optimism, economic pragmatism, and a reluctance to confront hard power realities thus affected the Dutch government's willingness to respond more robustly to Russian aggression. It highlights how entrenched biases in policymaking can obstruct timely and effective responses to geopolitical threats, especially in an era where military conflict in Europe had long seemed unthinkable.

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