

Prof. Bert Koenders
Chair of the Advisory Council
on International Affairs
P.O. Box 20061
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Date July 2021
Re Request for advice on hybrid threats

Dear Prof. Koenders,

In recent years more and more threat assessments have highlighted hybrid activities as a threat to national and international security. As a consequence of shifting geopolitical power relations and growing geopolitical rivalries, the Netherlands and its allies are increasingly facing hybrid threats.

Hybrid threats involve the integrated deployment of diplomatic, military, economic, financial, judicial, intelligence and information-related tactics to achieve strategic goals. Because hybrid threats generally do not rise to the level of armed conflict, the Netherlands deliberately avoids using the term 'war' in this context. A key element of a hybrid threat is the veil of misdirection, ambiguity and denial which surrounds the actions in question, thereby hindering attribution and an effective response. While hybrid threats are not new, the rapid development of information technology, social media and economic interdependence has added entirely new dimensions to traditional theatres of conflict. Given the relatively low cost and anonymity of, for example, cyberattacks and information campaigns and the cloak of legitimacy that can cover clandestine activities by companies controlled by state actors, the deployment of hybrid techniques is now generally cost-effective and anonymous, with limited political, economic and military risks, at least initially. Hybrid threats such as cyberattacks and interference in democratic processes have, however, become a highly destabilising factor, with a negative impact on the global security situation.

Given the rapidly changing security situation and the deployment of hybrid techniques, it is fair to say we are now in a continual state of confrontation or low-intensity conflict, which is playing out in a large number of domains. This means that our entire society can be the target of hybrid campaigns. Domestic and international security are closely intertwined in this regard. The aim of such campaigns can vary from undermining a target's military resistance capabilities and undermining the democratic legal order to causing social disruption, and playing the members of international alliances and partnerships off against one another. Combating such threats, and boosting our resilience to them, potentially requires the involvement of a wide range of actors, who would ideally work collaboratively to this end. An integrated, government-wide or even 'whole-of-society' approach therefore seems necessary in order to address hybrid threats. As part of this approach it is important for the government to help boost the resilience of businesses and individual members of the public to these threats.

For several years now the Netherlands has been arming itself against this 'new' type of confrontation and conflict. Various ministries besides the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are involved in these efforts, which are coordinated by the Office of the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security.

Countries themselves bear primary responsibility for combating hybrid threats. But for the Netherlands, international cooperation within both the EU and/or NATO is crucial, and we support efforts to enhance the counter-hybrid capabilities of both those bodies. With a view to further developing our approach to hybrid threats, the government requests the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) to produce an advisory report on how best to confront these threats at both national and international level. The government would like the report to address the following questions:

1. As the AIV notes in its advisory report, 'Smart Industrial Policy: A Task for the Netherlands within the EU', geopolitical relations are evolving at an extremely rapid pace. Major shocks and altered trends are forcing Western countries to make political decisions that would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. The growing threat posed by hybrid activities is an integral part of, and possibly even a driving force of, these developments. As a result of growing hybrid threats, there is also an increasing need to reduce undesirable dependencies on other geopolitical actors.

In the West security-related issues are playing an ever more prominent role in the assessment of the global economy. However, countries that deploy hybrid instruments against European or Western economies and societies are also our partners in certain areas. Global issues like climate change can only be dealt with effectively if all geopolitical players work together. What is more, international cooperation boosts our prosperity, even though open economies like ours are particularly vulnerable to hybrid threats. The combination of threats, dependence and the grey area between war and peace in which hybrid confrontations and conflicts play out creates a complex web of tensions around hybrid threats. Within that web a new balance – with associated norms – needs to be found. How does the AIV view this state of affairs? What form could this new balance take in the AIV's opinion, and what would a national and international normative framework look like?

2. Hybrid threats are characterised by opponents' integrated deployment of various civil and military instruments for the purpose of achieving political, military, economic, social, information-related and infrastructural aims. In the case of a hybrid threat, virtually any instrument could in principle be made into a weapon if it can potentially apply effective pressure to or inflict harm on another party. Such instruments include (dis)information, foreign investments designed to buy influence in critical economic sectors, military intimidation and deliberately engineered migration flows. In countries seeking to combat these activities, political competences in the relevant areas are often insufficient or spread out across various ministries. Even within those ministries various specialist fields are often organised separately. The same applies to the EU and NATO. Yet the fight against hybrid threats requires optimal cooperation in order to identify the various manifestations of such threats in time and to connect the relevant dots so that effective countermeasures can be taken. Ideally, an attack on multiple domains that involves a combination of high- and low-intensity methods should be countered with a wide range of instruments, so as to both effectively mitigate the threat and enable the formulation of a proportional response. Under the aegis of the NCTV the foreign ministry, the defence ministry and other ministries are currently developing a comprehensive, government-wide approach to hybrid threats. In the opinion of the AIV, what is the best way to shape this kind of government-wide collaboration, taking account of the need to involve other partners in the national (companies in critical sectors, municipalities, universities, etc.) and international (NATO and EU) spheres? Which existing or as yet undeveloped instruments does the AIV believe would be most effective in combating hybrid activities? Given that the Netherlands depends greatly on its allies and partners to safeguard its security, this is important from both a national and international perspective. In addition, the difficulty of attributing hybrid activities can inhibit an effective response, considering that complete certainty with regard to attribution is not always possible. The government would like the AIV to address this question as well.
3. In the Netherlands, the EU and NATO efforts to counter hybrid threats mainly take the form of boosting resilience and responding to hybrid activities in order to mitigate their impact and to make the costs for hybrid actors as high as possible. The armed forces have the key task of assisting civil authorities in matters of national security and serving as a deterrent so that the line separating hybrid activities from armed conflict is not crossed. On this side of that line, in the hybrid spectrum, the armed forces can also play a role, though the relevant legal frameworks are different. For example, military instruments have a clear value when it comes to strategic communication aimed at establishing a deterrent posture towards opponents. What role does the AIV think a modern military force should play in countering hybrid threats, bearing in mind that nowadays the armed forces need to have a broader spectrum of instruments at their disposal than simply kinetic options? What military options could effectively help counter hybrid threats? How can the armed forces best operate in a hybrid

conflict landscape, and what does this mean for the legal frameworks in which the defence organisation operates? How can we best shape this policy within international partnerships?

4. In undertaking hybrid activities, autocratic opponents care little to nothing about legal or ethical frameworks and are not subject to domestic checks and balances. For Western countries, by contrast, respecting democratic values and norms is a central part of our identity and of the rule of law. How can the Netherlands, together with its allies, influence the international playing field in such a way that the actions of autocratic countries are bound more closely to these norms? How could the establishment of norms help, and would this be an adequate response in the current geopolitical context? In addressing hybrid threats, how can we maintain an effective approach to security while respecting the rule of law and associated democratic norms and values? What position should the Netherlands adopt at international level with regard to this issue and the dilemmas associated with it?

The government would like to receive the report before the end of 2022. We look forward with interest to receiving the AIV's report.

Yours sincerely,

Kajsa Ollongren
Minister of Defence

Wopke Hoekstra
Minister of Foreign Affairs