

ADVISORY LETTER

OPEN LETTER TO A NEW DUTCH GOVERNMENT

THE ARMED FORCES AT RISK

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Members of the Advisory Council on International Affairs

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Foreword

The Advisory Council for International Affairs (AIV) has the task of advising the government and the States General on foreign policy, including security and defence policy. The AIV is greatly concerned about possible new cutbacks to defence. As a new Dutch government is now being formed, we are addressing this advisory letter to Parliament. A copy of the letter will be sent to the people who in due course will be mandated to prepare and form a new government.

The AIV adopted this advisory letter at a meeting on 7 September 2012.

To the members of the States General

Date 13 September 2012
Our ref. AIV-147/12

Re Advisory letter: Open letter to a new Dutch Government:
The Armed Forces at Risk'

The Advisory Council for International Affairs (AIV) has the task of advising the government and the States General on foreign policy, including security and defence policy. Since the end of the Cold War, the main focus of Dutch security and defence policy has been the promotion of the international legal order and the deployment of the armed forces in peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations around the world. This policy has entailed transforming the armed forces into a smaller, fully expeditionary force. Major reference points for this transformation include the Defence Priority Review (1993), the Defence White Paper (2000), the Budget Day Letter (2003), the policy letter 'Service Worldwide' (2007) and the policy letter 'The Ministry of Defence after the Credit Crisis' (2011). Each of these policy documents has led to further reductions in the armed forces' size and resources. The decisions made in 2011 raise questions regarding the deployability and the level of ambition of the armed forces.

At the same time there is great uncertainty about the future development of the international and national security situation and the growing potential for new conflicts. The AIV is therefore greatly concerned about possible new cutbacks to defence, which would seriously harm the effectiveness of Dutch foreign and security policy. In the party leaders' debates in the run-up to the recent elections on 12 September security and defence policy was not discussed; these debates were entirely devoted to the economic and social impact of the parties' other policy plans. As a new government is now being formed, we are addressing this advisory letter to Parliament and to the future government, particularly because new cutbacks to defence would be in conflict with the constitutionally mandated tasks of the armed forces and the Netherlands' obligations under international agreements.

The gravity of this situation has led the AIV to confine itself in this letter on the formation of a new government to the issue of defence spending.

Foreign policy

The key components of the Netherlands' foreign policy are the defence of Dutch interests and the shouldering of international responsibilities. The promotion of the international legal order is enshrined in the constitution. The objectives of defending Dutch interests and of promoting the international legal order complement each other.

The Netherlands earns a high proportion of its national income through international trade and foreign investments, and is among the world's top ten exporting countries. As a trading nation we have a vital interest in a stable international environment. This is one reason why we take part in peace missions, are active in development cooperation and use diplomacy to promote respect for human rights worldwide. These different foreign policy instruments are closely interlinked, as parts of an integrated security policy. Our country pursues these policies not only from altruistic motives – out of a sense of solidarity with others – but also out of enlightened self-interest, because they benefit our own security and prosperity.

State of the armed forces

A comparison of Dutch defence efforts with those of a representative group of benchmark countries, carried out as part of the Future Policy Review 'A New Foundation for the Netherlands Armed Forces', shows that the Netherlands has since 1990 reduced the size of its armed forces more than most of the benchmark countries. Of the European benchmark countries, the Netherlands has the second-smallest armed forces per capita (second only to Poland), even though we are one of the world's richest countries in terms of per capita income. The AIV notes that Dutch defence spending has fallen substantially as a percentage of national income since the end of the Cold War. Today the Netherlands spends only €7.87 billion a year on defence, or 1.3% of its GNP, compared with 2.7% in 1990. If current policy remains unchanged, defence spending will decline further by 2015, to about 1% of GNP. The NATO standard for national defence spending is 2% of GNP. However, even these figures give too rosy a picture. First, the defence budget includes €1.3 billion for pensions, benefits and redundancy pay. Second, €372 million of the budget goes to the Royal Military and Border Police (*Koninklijke Marechaussee*), most of whose tasks are unrelated to the armed forces. Looking at the defence budget without these extraneous expenditures casts Dutch defence efforts in a troubling light.

Partly in response to the final report of the Future Policy Review (2010), the AIV concluded in June 2010 that 'great care must be taken in deciding whether cutting defence spending would be responsible in this uncertain world, with its intractable challenges and many crises in the making'.¹ The AIV notes that the cutbacks to defence decided in the 2010 coalition agreement – amounting to approximately a billion euros in permanent cuts – have far-reaching consequences for the composition and deployability of the armed forces. For example, the decision was made to completely phase out an entire weapons system, the battle tank. As the Minister of Defence acknowledged in the policy letter 'The Ministry of Defence after the Credit Crisis: Reduced Armed Forces in a Turbulent World', these cuts make it impossible to fully achieve the objective of versatile and expeditionary armed forces. Treating defence tasks in the same way as other tasks of government ignores the principle that the state must have a monopoly of force. While the budget for other public tasks like health care can be supplemented by calling on the private sector or civil society, this is impossible with defence.

1 AIV, Advisory Letter no. 17, 'Open Letter to a New Dutch Government', The Hague, June 2010, p. 6.

Support for the preservation of versatile and expeditionary armed forces is declining, not only among our elected representatives but also in society at large, despite the positive public image of the military and of military personnel. Public support is particularly important for participation in high-risk missions. However, it would be wrong to justify military cutbacks primarily or even exclusively on the grounds of lack of public support. After all, our security, a core task of government, is at stake. The AIV believes that political leaders have a grave responsibility to fulfil this task.

In recent years the operations in Afghanistan and Libya exposed serious shortcomings in the European armed forces, which could only be compensated by the Americans' willingness to fill the breach. European states could not provide enough ground troops to be deployed abroad, helicopters, air-to-air refuelling, transport aircraft or target acquisition capability. The AIV also observes that US strategic priorities are shifting: American foreign and security policy is increasingly set to focus on Asia and the Pacific. Europe will clearly have to chart an independent course more often and stand on its own feet in military crises on or near the European continent that do not fall under article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

A recent AIV advisory report on European defence cooperation pointed out that savings through more far-reaching military cooperation² can only be realised in the longer run.² The AIV emphasises in this connection that investments must be made before benefits can be reaped, as illustrated by Belgian-Dutch navy cooperation and the German/Netherlands Corps. Any future savings from European defence cooperation will be badly needed to repair the military shortcomings mentioned above. Furthermore, new cutbacks would undermine the Netherlands' reliability as a partner in defence cooperation. Maintaining a modern military force requires an adequate level of investment.

Uncertain future

Studies such as the Future Policy Review (2010) have pointed to the great uncertainty about the future development of the international and national security situation and the growing potential for new conflicts. Since the end of the Cold War this uncertainty has become greater than ever. The Clingendael Strategic Monitor for 2012, subtitled 'Continuity and Uncertainty in a Changing World', concludes that the risk of insecurity has increased in recent years.

The rapidly shifting balance of power in the world is putting the post-war, Western-dominated international order under pressure. Emerging powers like Brazil, China, India and Turkey are demanding a greater role on the world stage. Historical experience shows that a shifting balance of power significantly increases the likelihood of international tensions. The financial and economic crisis in the US and Europe has made this altered balance of power painfully apparent. Other major challenges of our time – such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, failing states, mass migration, raw materials scarcity, food and water shortages, climate change, international

² AIV, Advisory Report no. 78, 'European Defence Cooperation: Sovereignty and the Capacity to Act', The Hague, January 2012, p. 34.

terrorism, humanitarian disasters, post-conflict instability, genocide, regime change and cyber insecurity – also increase security risks. No one country can meet these challenges alone; they demand collective action, a greater global role for Europe and a proportionate contribution by the Netherlands. This means investing in both soft power, including development cooperation and diplomacy, and hard power, which only the military can provide. After all, the exercise of political power is neither credible nor effective if it is not backed up with military power.

In view of the growing potential for conflict, it is remarkable that public support for the preservation of versatile and expeditionary armed forces is declining. The armed forces' three main tasks are still as important as ever: defending our own and our allies' territory, contributing to international peace, security and stability, and supporting civil authorities. Over the past 20 years the armed forces have been transformed into a lean, professional, expeditionary force that has capably defended Dutch interests, often in high-risk conditions. The Netherlands was for years a pioneer internationally in transforming its military into an expeditionary force. In the future, too, we will have to make a proportionate military contribution to fulfilling UN, NATO and EU obligations if we do not want our country to become a 'free rider'. A readiness to deploy ground troops in high-risk conditions is particularly important in sharing risks among countries.

The Dutch armed forces have achieved good results with an approach to crisis management that integrates defence, development and diplomacy. A key lesson of recent decades is that a secure environment is a precondition for sustainable development and respect for human rights. Crisis management operations that jointly deploy soft and hard power in a coherent way are labour-intensive; this means that efforts to create high-tech armed forces must not entail a steady decrease in boots on the ground. New operational capabilities like cyber weapons belong in the modern military toolbox but cannot replace either troops or conventional weapons.

In the framework of civil-military cooperation, the armed forces support civil authorities on a daily basis and function as an indispensable safety net in emergencies. After all, civilian agencies like the police have very limited longer-term capacity. Disasters and terrorist threats can lead to societal disruption, requiring large-scale deployment of the military at national level.

The armed forces are currently engaged in a complex and extensive process of restructuring. New cutbacks to defence would not only damage the Netherlands' reputation and reliability as an international partner but would also have irreversible consequences for the restructuring under way and for our capacity for military deployment. In any resort to military means, now or in the future, the human factor is always decisive. The AIV is therefore gravely concerned about the effects of additional cuts on the morale of Dutch military personnel, the Ministry of Defence's reputation as an employer, and the armed forces' ability to recruit promising young people and to retain the best of their current personnel. Further cuts would also place a great strain on the loyalty of defence personnel. This is too high a price to pay.

In conclusion

In view of the national and international security risks to which our country may be exposed, the AIV regards further defence cutbacks as irresponsible. The armed forces should be viewed as a form of insurance in uncertain times. No sensible person would respond to financial difficulties by cancelling his fire insurance. It is also important to realise that once military capability has been hived off, rebuilding it can take years or even decades. Today the armed forces' capacity for deployment is already limited. Additional cutbacks would have a disastrous impact on the defence organisation, as well as being in conflict with the constitutionally mandated tasks of the armed forces and the Netherlands' obligations under international agreements.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'F' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

F. Korthals Altes

Chairman, Advisory Council on International Affairs

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