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Prepare to deter. Dutch neutrality as a strategic problem, 1904-1914

In 1903, a group of prominent Dutch military experts drew up an extensive report on the coastal defences of the country. They unanimously concluded that tens of millions of guilders had to be invested to bring both the coastal defence works and the fleet operating close to the coast up to modern standards. The naval base at Den Helder and the IJmuiden fortifications as well as those at Hook of Holland – the seaside protection of Amsterdam and Rotterdam respectively - needed to be modernised. But also the defence works at the Scheldt Estuary, at the southwester tip of the country, were mentioned. All in all, it would be the third substantial Dutch investment in fortresses and war material after the modernisation Dutch New Waterline and the building of the Fortress Amsterdam. Both of these projects had cost the Dutch Government many tens of millions of guilders in the 1880s up to the turn of the century. These two extensive lines of fortifications, both based on an ingenious system of inundations, had attracted some praise from abroad, but as they were lying inland and were obviously meant for the defence of the country, they had not made Dutch defence policy a subject of European interest. This was about the change when plans for improvement of the coastal defences became public knowledge.¹

This brings us to the leading questions of this article: Why were the defence initiatives of a neutral power, lacking any territorial ambitions, of interest to the major European powers, and why did this interest increase significantly from 1910 onwards? How did the Dutch war preparations, based

¹ See on Dutch defence policy: W. Klinkert, *Het vaderland verdedigd. Plannen en opvattingen over de verdediging van Nederland, 1874-1914* (Den Haag 1992) and Wim Klinkert, *Defending neutrality. The Netherlands prepares for war, 1900-1925* (Leiden and Boston 2013).

only on the effective protection of the neutral territory, change because apparently the Dutch preparations had international complications? And finally how did this work out during the First World War?

First, it is important to realise that the choice for armed neutrality created several difficult strategic questions in itself. Remaining neutral in case of a European conflict meant the Dutch would spread their army along the borders. This was meant as deterrence and as show of will to protect the neutral territory with force if necessary. Should an attack take place, the army would retreat within the safety of the fortress lines that protected the western part of the country, which included the main cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. So, if neutrality was violated, the army would resist, but not fight to death because it subsequently had to repel an attack on the fortified lines for at least a few months. Only this scenario would make the country a credible ally if a major power came to its rescue and it would increase the Dutch chance for a seat at a future peace conference.

Second, armed neutrality was also based on the assumption that the interests of the surrounding major powers would be served best when a neutral power controlled the estuary of three main European rivers (Meuse, Rhine and Scheldt). None of the great powers would ever agree with the dominance of one of them over this strategically located coastal area. It meant, in theory, that the Dutch were always sure to find an ally, but that it was an unspoken assumption, not a policy advocated by the Government. On the contrary, the Dutch Government repeatedly declared that it would not side automatically with the opponent of the country that invaded its territory. It wanted to have complete freedom of action to decide any course it wanted at any time.

Third, the defence of the Netherlands posed a difficult and interesting strategic problem. As the army was considered absolutely necessary to defend the core of the country on its own for weeks, maybe even months, how much was to be invested in the protection of outlying parts of the country, especially Limburg

in the southeast and Zeeland in the southwest? On the one hand, both areas were obviously not part of the Fortress Holland; on the other it was areas like this, which could drag Holland into a war against its will. Limburg in the southeast was important if the German Army wanted a quick and easy route towards France, and the Dutch military authorities were well aware of that. They had observed the large railway yards built in the 1880s in small German towns very near the Dutch border.² Zeeland controlled the waterway to Antwerp: that city, with a large and modern fortress ring around it, was the *reduite nationale* of neutral Belgium and presumably the location for British military assistance for Belgium in case that country's neutrality was violated. Such an event could lead to dangerous international complications for the Dutch. As a relatively small military power the Dutch strategic dilemma was how to handle both the defence of their Fortress Holland for a longer period of time as well as use military might to protect outlying areas, which could become of major interest to the Germans, French or English.

From the turn of the century, step by step, the Dutch preparations to protect the country's neutrality could no longer take place in a military vacuum. Especially German-British maritime rivalry on the North Sea was considered a potential danger, and a new Franco-German war was considered very likely in the not too distant future. The first rivalry affected the Dutch coast, the second affected Limburg. What were possible answers?

One answer was the strengthening of international law, a solution very much favoured by Dutch politicians and legal experts. The 1907 Hague Convention respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War was quite important in that regard, as it led to discussions on the credibility of the power armed neutral states could bring to bear. Thus coastal defence works could not remain so obviously out of date but had to be

strengthened also for this reason. Furthermore, the Dutch had been shocked by the Japanese attack on Port Arthur, the Russian city in China, in 1904, which had taken place without a formal declaration of war. The Dutch military especially saw this as a bad omen for future conflicts, in which the attacker would overwhelm his opponent by way of a surprise attack. Lacking strategic depth, this was considered a dangerous development for Holland. A Dutch attempt to include, in the Hague conventions, an obligatory period of 24 hours after a declaration of war, before hostilities could begin, failed.³

The other answer was modernising and expanding defences, but that expensive option brought some difficult questions with it. Was money to be invested in the Fortress Holland, lying inland and obviously purely defensive? Or should it be invested in the outlying provinces, as they were more likely to be in danger of being violated by foreign powers? Yet strengthening defences there could be interpreted as choosing sides while doing both simultaneously was very much beyond the means of the Dutch Treasury. So it is no surprise foreign eyes were looking with interest at the solutions the Dutch would come up with.

Let us go back to the plans of 1903 to modernise coastal defences. They had hardly had time to gather dust as the situation was evolving very quickly. In 1904, the surprise attack of Japan on Russia, mentioned before, and the passage of the Russian Baltic fleet through the North Sea stirred military opinion. Especially while the Russian fleet fired at fishing boats not far from the Dutch coast. As a response, the Dutch Navy came into a state of alert; while the government contacted London and Berlin to be sure Dutch neutrality was not in danger in any way.⁴ Differently but more or less simultaneously formal visits by large German and British naval squadrons, a new phenomenon for the Dutch, attracted attention. In July 1904 part of the German North Sea Fleet visited

³ W. Klinkert, "J.C.C. den Beer Poortugael" in: G. Teitler and W. Klinkert (eds.), *Kopstukken uit de krijgsmacht* (Amsterdam 1997) 250-267, there 263.

⁴ C. Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland, 1903-1907* (Den Haag 1958).

Zeeland and in August the following year a large British naval squadron called on IJmuiden, the North Sea port close to Amsterdam. Both visits triggered all kind of speculations in the Dutch press, but they caused no incidents.

Partly as a result of the Russian-Japanese War the Hague Peace Conference of 1907 codified the rights and duties of neutrals. This not only brought the question on the credibility of armed defence of neutrality to the fore – especially regarding the Scheldt estuary as the Dutch guns would be unable to block this waterway to Antwerp in any way - but also the discussion of a possible British blockade. In a British-German war the Dutch expected the British to block the German coast, and opinions differed on the expected British actions regarding the Dutch coast. Most Dutch experts agreed that a British blockade outside Dutch territorial waters but blocking shipping towards Holland, was in fact a violation of Dutch neutrality and thus a possible *casus belli*.⁵ Further, the scenario of a landing of the British army on the northern coast of the Netherlands was considered a possibility as the British could attack the main German naval ports over land from the northern Netherlands. The question of the blockade was dealt with in the 1908 London Declaration concerning the Laws of the Sea that did indeed protect neutral rights, but as it was never ratified, the Dutch were rather sceptic about its importance in wartime. Great Britain would choose might over right, they thought; because that is what major powers tend to do. The Second Boer War in South Africa, in which the small Boer republics fell victim to British imperial might – at least that had been the majority opinion in Holland - moreover, had not been forgotten.

These international developments are reflected in Dutch war planning. In September 1907, for the first time in several decades, large military exercises were held at the coast, in which not only army and navy participated, but also a new organisation, the military coastguard, founded in 1906 to increase readiness

in case of an undeclared invasion by hostile naval forces. The eastern land border had always been the area where a 'strategic surprise' was feared. Now the press extensively covered the coastal exercises, also because the Queen was present and the navy just had presented its first submarine. Some newspapers guessed that 'Southland', the attacker, was in fact France. Others impassionedly compared the manoeuvres to the glorious days of 17th century Dutch coastal defence by the navy.

New also was the appointment of foreign military and naval attaches in The Hague. Until 1907 only the British army and navy were represented here, but in just three years, from 1907 to 1910 the French and Germans joined them. Moreover, the French were the most frequent visitors to Dutch military exercises, a fact perhaps less surprising as it were probably the Dutch that were the first to confront a German advance towards France.

The newly appointed military attachés were also interested in the Belgian-Dutch efforts to cooperate more closely militarily, something that had been under discussion since 1904. In both countries it was not the government but individual officers and publicists who emphasized that a closer cooperation between the two neutral states would add significantly to the military weight the countries could bring to bear. Both armies combined might constitute a serious enough force to deter both the Germans and the British from violating the neutral borders. It is especially between 1904 and 1907 that this topic was discussed frequently in public, yet both governments remained silent.⁶ For the Dutch Government it was unacceptable to connect their freely declared neutrality to the internationally guaranteed neutrality of Belgium. It would reduce their absolute freedom of action in a future crisis. Moreover, as most analysts expected Belgium to be invaded in the next war, that country would drag Holland into the conflict too: The Netherlands stood a greater chance to remain outside a future

⁶ Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, 52-54.

European conflict if it remained on its own. Some liberal Dutch Members of Parliament did raise the issue of internationally guaranteed neutrality for the Netherlands as well. They argued it would strengthen the Dutch position and, as an attractive ‘by-product’ would reduce the need for increased defence spending. The government did not agree. They were not inclined to ‘beg’ for guarantees and the proposal did not get a majority.⁷

From 1904 onwards therefore one sees a growing interest in the question of neutrality and Dutch coastal defences: it had become a topic of some international importance and the Dutch were well aware of that. In 1906, the Government discussed the modernisation for the first time in Parliament. The need to act was clear, but the problem was finding the means, since the expensive Amsterdam Fortress had not yet been completed and the field army was also being expanded and modernised at great cost. It was urgent, but not only money was a problem, also building new strong defences in the south-western province of Zeeland, positioned outside the Fortress Holland, was problematic. Major investments there could be justified by pointing at international law that demanded effective and credible defence of neutral territory. As mentioned the obsolete guns along the Scheldt that were still in use could only protect neutrality symbolically by firing some harmless projectiles. But effectively closing the Scheldt with modern fortifications at its mouth would hinder British support to Belgium and would consequently favour the Germans. Opponents constantly stressed that the only beneficiaries of the strong Dutch coastal defences were the Germans: who else but the German Army could persuade the Dutch to spend so much money on building defence works outside the Fortress Holland, something that had not been done for almost forty years!

Two scandals in 1910 made things even worse. The first one was the publication of a presumed threat by the German *Kaiser* made directly to Queen Wilhelmina back in 1904 to strengthen Dutch coastal defences or risk a German occupation. It was the interpretation of a

⁷ Klinkert, *Vederland verdedigd*, 430-431.

meeting that had taken place between Abraham Kuyper, at that time the Dutch Prime Minister, who was considered 'pro German' and the German secretary of state for foreign affairs Oswald von Richthofen (1847-1906).⁸ When it became public, it became the subject of a Parliamentary debate in February 1910. Nothing could be proven with any certainty, but speculation remained. The second scandal involved rumours that the mighty Krupp arms factory was behind the Dutch construction plans. It would manufacture the guns that would close off the Scheldt to the British.⁹ The Dutch army, both in Europe and in the colonies, had indeed been a major client of Krupp's for decades. And when it became known other firms competing for this major order were quickly put off, this was a gift for those who feared the Netherlands was moving further into the German sphere of influence. It led to a Parliamentary inquiry and debate in November 1910 and kept creeping up during the following year. In the end Krupp did get the order to produce the guns, but then it was already 1913 and a lot of troubled water had passed through the Scheldt.

All in all, tensions around the defence of the Netherlands peaked in 1910, precisely the year the Dutch parliament had to decide how to spend many millions on coastal defence. The law regarding this issue had been announced formally at the opening of Parliament in September 1909. The Belgians had been informed unofficially even earlier. The government stressed that the huge sums only served to deter any violation of the neutral Dutch territory. Dutch North Sea ports were potentially of such importance for the major powers as naval bases, that only a credible deterrence would suffice. As it was the most expensive Dutch military proposal ever made, it led to fierce polemics: why not fortify the Meuse bridges in Limburg, obstructing a possible German advance over land? Why not invest more in repelling amphibious operations by the army deeper inland instead directly at the coastline? Why invest in Zeeland, outside the Fortress Holland? Why not abandon the plan altogether, as international law was the future for the protection of neutral states, and because all surrounding major powers would only gain by respecting Dutch neutrality? It became by far the most heated debate on fortifications and naval affairs the Dutch had ever known.

⁸ C. Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland, 1907-1914* (Den Haag 1961) 598

⁹ C. Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland, 1899-1914* (Den Haag 1968) 119-122.

The discussion lasted all through 1910 and 1911, as the government and the military reviewed the plans more in detail. It was the French press that made the plans into a European issue. Roland de Marès (1874-1955), a francophone Flemish journalist, working for *Le Temps* in Paris and *L'indépendance belge* in Brussels, published from October 1910 onwards articles to stir up French and Belgian public opinion against the Dutch plans, calling them pro-German and accusing the Dutch of hindering the British to help Belgium in case Germany attacked that country. On 16 January 1911 the Dutch plans were discussed in the French parliament, introduced by the right wing *député* Jules Delafosse (1841-1916). Foreign Minister Stéphane Pichon (1857-1933) welcomed this criticism on Holland. He even toyed with the idea to make the issue the subject of an international conference, but outside France support for this suggestion was extremely low.

In Great Britain it was *The Times* that in December 1910 and January 1911 devoted a series of articles on this question. The newspaper stated several times that German strategic interests inspired the Dutch plan. In this regard, the newspaper followed the general trend at the time of mistrust towards German intentions. The Dutch newspapers followed with great interest how all major European press agencies reported on this case. It was unusual to have Dutch defence issues debated by commentators and prominent military experts from all over Europe, among others Charles a Court Repington (1858-1925) of *The Times* and Richard Gädke (1852-1926) of the *Berliner Tageblatt*.¹⁰

Except from some French and Francophone Belgian circles most comments stressed the Dutch freedom of choice as to how they should defend their neutrality but also pointed out that the question of the Scheldt was potentially dangerous in case of a European crisis. Speculations involving different war scenarios were put forward, as was the widely felt idea that criticising the Dutch would only make them more stubborn.

The question kept commentators, journalists, lawyers and diplomats busy for several months to come, but in the end, the Dutch themselves reduced the tension by postponing the final decision and scaling the expensive plans down. In 1912 the Government gave priority to strengthening the mobile field army, which could be seen as a less controversial tool for the protection of the neutral territory

¹⁰ Herman Langeveld, "Abraham Kuyper, Hendrikus Colijn and Dutch Foreign and Military Policy 1901-1914", *Dutch Crossing: A Journal of Low Countries Studies* (Autumn 1992) 5-19, there 11. All press articles are collected in Louis van Outhoorn, *Internationale Phonogrammen betreffende onze kustverdediging* (Haarlem 1911).

as its mobility made it effective against potential threats at any part of the border. When the issue of coastal defence was brought forward again, the minister of War told Parliament the defence works at the mouth of the Scheldt were to protect the harbour of Flushing against a *coup de main*, not to close off the Scheldt effectively. Flushing was important for the Dutch Navy as an additional base for submarines and torpedo boats. This meant, according to the Government, it was a purely national affair, not related to the ambition of any foreign country. Parliament agreed and work began. In the end, only the foundations were laid. When on 4 August 1914 Great Britain joined the war, the Dutch declared the Scheldt closed to all belligerent ships, a declaration Britain accepted. The fortress was never built.

This episode tells us that in a climate of rising tensions, the defence effort of a neutral state is taken into account by major powers. A number of questions came to the fore, which would resurface during the First World War and even into the next.

Behind closed doors Dutch military authorities became aware of the difference between deterrence to safeguard neutrality and preparations for an actual defensive war, possibly with an ally. During the years 1914-1918 those two proved to be incompatible and led to serious tensions between the Government and the military leadership. The military point of view was, that preparations, including informal talks with foreign powers, were essential in times of danger and were the only way a defend the country successfully. Already in 1910 the Dutch General Staff pointed out that the defence of the country would benefit substantially when the government would indicate timely which major power would be the potential ally. Only then could war preparations be fruitful. The Government on the other hand followed a strictly legal argumentation, which insisted that neutrality excluded any military preparation that could be considered beneficial to a belligerent. During the mobilisation years, this difference of opinion led to several clashes between the Dutch

commander-in-chief and the government, but a solution had not been reached.

This meant the military leadership planned more and more in isolation, going as far as making detailed plans in 1917 and 1918 with the British Army and Navy how to fight together in case of a German attack, without any formal consultation with the Government.¹¹ Apart from this, during the years of the First World War,

the Dutch military leadership was constantly in informal contact with representatives of belligerent powers, through their representatives in The Hague.

As Dutch military planners became more than before aware of the international relevance of their planning, they were unaware of the fact that around 1908 decisions had been taken in London and Berlin not to include Dutch territory in British and German initial war plans respectively. From that year onward, British planning for a continental war was more and more directed towards Belgium and France.¹² Helmut von Moltke (1848-1916), of course,

changed the Schlieffen Plan, around that same period.¹³ But as before 1908 both these major powers had considered using Dutch territory, in theory, it was not inconceivable this could change again. We now know that, should the delay at Liege exceed 12 days, the German General Staff would have insisted on crossing into Holland in order to speed up the advance towards France.¹⁴ And the importance of the Dutch coast for the Germans was obvious, Friedrich von Bernhardi (1849-1930) had stressed such a scenario in his controversial book *Deutschland und der Nächste Krieg*, published in 1911 and also widely read in Holland, moreover in the German war planning, a British attack via Antwerp and the Netherlands was at least until 1911, considered possible. When in 1916 the Germans made their contingency planning regarding the neutrals, they called the

¹¹ Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, 222-225.

¹² D.H. Thomas, "The use of the Scheldt in british plans for the defence of Belgian neutrality, 1831-1914" *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* (1963) 449-470.

¹³ H. Ehlert (ed.), *Der Schlieffenplan* (Paderborn 2007).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 469 and 471.

plan regarding Holland *Fall Küste*.¹⁵ To go even one step further, after the German fortification of the Flemish coast was completed, the German military in 1917 gave their blueprints to the Dutch army that planned new fortifications in Zeeland, according to the German specifications. Only the end of the war prevented the building of these extensive coastal batteries.¹⁶

Also, Dutch public opinion became more than ever aware of the vulnerability of the country and the potential dangers surrounding it. It reacted by emphasizing its own independence and aloofness from power blocks. Some sought refuge in international law, others in stronger defence, but both with the same goal. I fully agree with Maartje Abbenhuis' analysis that from 1910 on the neutrality of the small neutrals militarized. In the case of Holland, the proposed building of the Flushing fortress was the pivotal moment.¹⁷

Concluding. Around 1910 the Dutch neutral position was used for the first time as one of the elements that forged the relationships between the major powers. For France Holland

was important because the Dutch might be the first to confront the Germans on their march towards Paris and large sections of the French military and many politicians feared that Holland was becoming a German satellite state. Germany could, on the other hand, stress in 1910 how much it valued and respected Dutch independence – as long as the Dutch coast was well protected

¹⁵ W. Klinkert, "Fall K: German offensive plans against the Netherlands 1916-1918" in: W. Klinkert and H. Amersfoort (eds.) *Small powers in the Age of Total War, 1900-1940* (Leiden and Boston 2011) 85-118.

¹⁶ J.R. Verbeek, *Kustversterkingen, 1900-1940* (Haarlem 1989).

¹⁷ M. Abbenhuis *An Age of Neutrals. Great Power Politics, 1815-1914* (Cambridge 2014) 224-232. On the Dutch strategic position see also: J. Steinberg, "A German Plot for the Invasion of Holland and Belgium, 1897" *The Historical Journal* (1963) 6, 107-119; J.C.G. Rohl, "Admiral von Muller and the Approach of War, 1911-1914", *The Historical Journal* (December 1969) 651-673; D. Stevenson, "Belgium, Luxemburg and the Defence of Western Europe, 1914-1920" *The International History Review* (November 1982) 504-523 and Jeffery A. Gunsburg, "La Grande Illusion: Belgian and Dutch Strategy Facing Germany, 1919-May 1940" *The Journal of Military History*, 78:1 (January 2014) 101-58.

against the Entente, but that was not said aloud. Britain refrained from criticism towards Holland; in fact, the Scheldt had lost its importance as all planning for sending the British army to the continent had already shifted to the French ports. When Holland closed the Scheldt to British ships it was no longer a strategic problem for Britain. Only Churchill was the exception: he still focused on Antwerp – and led marines to that city – and six months later Churchill would propose an attack on the German North Sea ports via the northern Dutch provinces. That plan was stored away when the choice fell on Gallipoli. In the end the Dutch were not altogether wrong when they claimed their neutrality benefitted all, the only problem was, nobody could give any guarantees.

