

ADVISORY LETTER

**THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT'S
PRESENCE ABROAD**

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Members of the Advisory Council on International Affairs

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Introduction

On 17 March 2017 the Minister of Foreign Affairs asked the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) to briefly answer three questions as soon as possible:

1. How should the Dutch government be equipped in order to effectively serve Dutch interests abroad and promote Dutch values in a rapidly changing international environment? What does the Netherlands require in order to do this?
2. Is the Dutch government's presence abroad, that is to say the mission network (embassies, permanent representations, consulates-general and Netherlands Business Support Offices), sufficiently equipped to operate effectively in a rapidly changing international environment?
3. With that in mind, has the Netherlands set up Dutch missions in the appropriate locations (countries/cities/organisations)? What gaps are there from a geographic or thematic perspective? (For the complete request for advice, see the annexe.)

The AIV will respond to these questions below. It will focus mainly on the consequences of the cutbacks imposed on both the missions abroad and the ministry in The Hague since 2012. This means that in this advisory letter the AIV will refrain from examining in detail how these two branches of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs perform their tasks. After all, it is only a few years since the Advisory Committee on Modernising the Diplomatic Service carried out such a study.¹ Its findings are still applicable to the present situation and the ministry has diligently begun implementing its recommendations.

This advisory letter was prepared by AIV members J.G. de Hoop Scheffer, A. van Staden and J.J.C. Voorhoeve, with the assistance of T.D.J. Oostenbrink (executive secretary) and Mr Van Laake (trainee). The AIV adopted the advisory letter on 19 May 2017.

The international system is changing significantly

Like the Docters van Leeuwen committee, the AIV notes that the need for representation by Dutch government officials abroad is undergoing major changes. The AIV will summarise the importance of a modern and effective network of Dutch missions covering many policy areas by describing the impact of a number of developments:

1. The internationalisation of nearly all policy areas, including subjects traditionally addressed by ministries responsible for domestic affairs. The coordinating, representational, informational and facilitating tasks of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have increased sharply in recent years as a result of the growing international dimension of the policies of nearly all other ministries. A consistently and coherently integrated external policy requires close coordination in many policy areas to establish an effective negotiation package for each country and theme. This not only involves general policy goals, which the government, parliament and other Dutch authorities (provinces, municipalities and agencies) formulate in The Hague and which are then pursued in Brussels and in a large number of capitals and

1 The Advisory Committee was chaired by Arthur Docters van Leeuwen. Its interim report was published in 2013 and its final report in 2014.

organisations. It first and foremost involves adopting optimum negotiating tactics and timing, wherever and whenever the intended results can be achieved.²

2. An increasing number of actors. More and more players are entering the international political arena. Immediately after the Second World War this involved some 60 states and around 10 treaty organisations, whereas in 2017 it involves nearly 200 states, which – with one or two exceptions – are all members of the United Nations (UN). In addition, there are hundreds of international organisations, ranging from treaty bodies to large and small non-governmental organisations, along with multinational companies, lower-level government authorities from many countries that engage in close cross-border cooperation, and international research organisations that exert an influence. Since 1990, the discipline arising from the postwar East-West divide, which made foreign policy somewhat simpler, especially during the Cold War, has given way to a multipolar and highly pluralistic system with large numbers of actors of various kinds.
3. Growing external insecurity. The trend towards greater insecurity in the global political system has many causes. Some states believe they have no interest in promoting the stability of the status quo. Some of them are clearly out to change their position and the system as a whole. Instability offers them opportunities to expand their influence. Various hybrid warfare instruments are used for this purpose: clandestine military and intelligence operations, disinformation and economic pressure, as well as proxy wars. In this regard, the increased threat posed by Russia merits special attention.³ In addition to the insecurity that prevails in many fragile states and is fuelled by extremist non-state actors, there has for some time been a greater risk of armed conflicts breaking out between major powers. For instance, around the Persian Gulf and in the South China Sea there is fierce geopolitical competition aimed at controlling territory, energy sources and raw materials in international maritime areas, and sea routes. The smaller states around Europe, too, offer major opportunities for exploiting instability with a view to expanding spheres of influence. As a result, the intricate chess game between large and small actors aimed at promoting their international interests and values is more complicated than it used to be.⁴
4. Internal security under pressure. The developments listed here are also causing mounting domestic insecurity. International terrorism, cyberwars and overt or covert interventions by foreign powers in political debates are influencing decision-making, stability and policy options in the Netherlands, as in other countries.
5. Political and ideological trends. The growth of a number of populist and nationalist movements in various countries calls for careful analysis of the consequences for the Netherlands and the international organisations in which it works with the

2 See the final report *Samenhangend internationaal beleid* (Coherent International Policy) by the Joint Committee on Integrated Foreign Policy, 6 June 2005. Changing Government Programme: Government-wide task analysis.

3 AIV, 'Russia and the Defence Efforts of the Netherlands', advisory letter no. 31, The Hague, March 2017.

4 See also: Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), *Veiligheid in een wereld van verbindingen. Een strategische visie op het defensiebeleid* (Security in a World of Connections: A Strategic Vision of Defence Policy), report no. 98, The Hague, April 2016.

countries concerned. Dutch missions abroad are being asked more frequently to explain political and social developments in the Netherlands. It is not uncommon for people in other countries to have an inaccurate picture of what is happening in the Netherlands and the debate on immigration. Partly due to the rise of illiberal democracies, active monitoring of respect for human rights in various countries is also placing a large burden on the diplomatic apparatus.

6. The sustainability of our society is threatened by the (geo)political consequences of climate change. Rapid population growth in Africa, humanitarian crises and wars (including civil wars), often of an ethnic or religious nature, are increasing the vulnerability of states in which the Netherlands is trying to promote its values and interests. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris climate agenda also demands major diplomatic efforts on the part of the Netherlands.⁵
7. Migration is rising sharply as a result of political and war refugees and survival migrants set in motion by major disruptions of the natural environment (drought, floods and rising sea levels). This is not a temporary phenomenon resulting from current wars, but has long-term causes that include climate change and ongoing population growth, especially in Africa.⁶
8. Erosion of the multilateral system. The system of international organisations that has been built up since 1945 is no longer stable and is no longer growing more or less automatically. The leadership that has been given to it by major states, primarily the United States, can no longer be taken for granted. The formal allocation of votes and positions in international organisations no longer accurately reflects the global balance of forces. This also has consequences for the Netherlands. Newly emerging countries are demanding a greater voice, especially in international economic and financial institutions, and this will mean less influence for European countries. All of this calls for active diplomatic efforts to exert influence in other ways.
9. Bilateralisation of European politics. The policy of the European Union is increasingly formulated in national capitals. This creates extra work for embassies and other missions in EU member states as they need to analyse and influence national positions. At the same time, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU means that time-consuming changes will have to be made in the EU. This will affect Dutch policy in many areas, ranging from financial services to agriculture and fisheries.⁷ The Netherlands and the UK used to adopt joint positions on several EU dossiers (including free trade and the expansion of the single market), but the UK's upcoming exit from the EU means that the Netherlands will have to devote more time and energy to building new coalitions.

5 AIV, 'The Future of ODA', advisory letter no. 29, The Hague, November 2016.

6 AIV, 'Security and Stability in Northern Africa', advisory report no. 101, The Hague, May 2016.

7 AIV, 'Brexit Means Brexit: Towards a New Relationship with the UK', advisory report no. 103, The Hague, March 2017.

10. International crime. The size and dynamism of international criminal networks and the threat of corruption are growing. Combating their impact on society and the way they undermine the legal order and orderly market functioning demands greater expertise and intelligence capabilities than in the past.⁸
11. Economic competition. The Dutch economy is highly dependent on imports and exports. It is not only intimately intertwined with the economies of developed OECD member states, but is also influenced by the economic rise of Asia, especially China and India. The shift in the dynamics of the global economy from the West to Asia, the economic consequences of Brexit and the protectionists tendencies connected with economic nationalism are confronting the Netherlands with urgent issues regarding economic diplomacy. These changes also open up opportunities in new markets.
12. Science, technology and innovation. The strongly technologically driven global economic changes and the accelerating pace of progress in science and scholarship require a higher level of expertise and contacts in these areas with foreign research institutions. In this regard, the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) has concluded that the network of knowledge and innovation attachés urgently needs to be expanded.⁹
13. The new tasks that are considered important in external policy, such as conflict prevention and the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals, on which there is a broad consensus, require more diverse forms of representation in areas that have not traditionally been covered by interstate diplomacy, such as democratisation, state-building in other countries and dealing with non-governmental movements of an ethnic or religious nature.

This survey shows that the tasks of Dutch missions abroad have become far broader and more complex in recent years. At the same time, the implementation of specific tasks has to meet higher standards. This also applies to the provision of consular services, one of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' core tasks. In recent years, the ministry has invested considerable resources in improving these services. Dutch and foreign nationals can now reach the ministry's 24/7 Contact Centre 24 hours a day, seven days a week, anywhere in the world. This centre now handles 3,000 customer enquiries a day. Far more attention has also been devoted to assisting Dutch prisoners abroad.

Finally, it should be noted that an increasing number of countries where Dutch diplomats work are affected by violence. This increases the risks to diplomats' personal safety. Providing security for missions and their staff now costs more in certain countries than it used to.

8 AIV, 'Crime, Corruption and Instability: An Exploratory Report', advisory report no. 85, The Hague, May 2013.

9 AWTI, WTI-diplomatie – offensief voor internationalisering van wetenschap, technologie en innovatie (Science, Technology and Innovation Diplomacy: A Drive for the Internationalisation of Science, Technology and Innovation), May 2017.

Consequences for the mission network

In reply to the second question set out in the request for advice, the AIV would first observe that, in recent decades, economic rationalisation and changing views on traditional diplomacy have contributed to a reduction in the size of the Netherlands' mission network, on the assumption that accelerated global communication made a physical presence abroad less important. However, there is no substitute for a local presence when it comes to effectively influencing foreign governments and opening doors for Dutch businesses. This requires maintaining direct contacts with government representatives and networks of local players. This cannot be done at a distance, from The Hague.

As a result of the economic crisis, the former government and the present government, which now has caretaker status, decided to make substantial cuts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' administrative expenditure. The cumulative cuts up to the end of 2017 total €150.5 million.¹⁰ The AIV recognises that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to play its part in restoring Dutch public finances to health. It can now be seen, however, that the cuts have seriously diminished the ability of diplomatic missions to promote fundamental values and effectively advance Dutch interests. As the previous section made clear, recent international developments do not justify giving less funding priority to the government's presence abroad than to other public services.

At present (April 2017), the Netherlands has 108 embassies, 24 consulates-general, seven permanent missions and seven regional support offices. However, the number of missions is far from the only factor that determines the extent and quality of the Dutch government's presence abroad. These depend in part on the number of Dutch representatives at each mission. In general, this number has fallen. Dutch missions have been considerably 'thinned out'. It is notable that the Netherlands now has a relatively high number of small missions, that is, missions with fewer than 15 establishment posts, and that, on average, two thirds of their staff are local employees. There are 40 embassies that fall under this definition of 'small', including seven one-person missions. A total of 834 Ministry of Foreign Affairs civil servants are currently stationed abroad. For comparison, the figure was 948 in 2012 and 1,250 in 1997. If current policy on spending cuts remains unchanged, the number will almost certainly fall below 800.

At the same time, as the number of missions and mission staff has shrunk, the workload has continued to grow significantly as a result of the international changes outlined above. Efficiency measures, including those in the area of digitalisation, have been unable to compensate for this. That is why workarounds have been resorted to, such as engaging large numbers of interns (currently 735)¹¹ in jobs that used to be filled by graduates and internally trained staff. Economising on support staff and secretarial posts also meant that those in senior positions had to spend considerably more time doing administrative work. This has put a serious squeeze on the time available for core diplomatic tasks: promoting Dutch interests and values.

¹⁰ The figure would have been €40 million higher if two motions in the House of Representatives had not called for a reduction in the spending cuts.

¹¹ This figure includes interns at the ministry in The Hague.

Staff at the ministry in The Hague have also come under a great deal of pressure. The annual staff satisfaction surveys show that staff have been experiencing a growing workload for several years and that this is increasingly seen as a problem. The ministry is being called upon from many sides for help. In addition to the many policy preparation tasks that have to be carried out and the external contacts that have to be maintained, the States General must also be kept well informed. It would be unacceptable if parliament's right to be fully informed by the responsible ministers about all aspects of foreign policy were to be put in jeopardy by a further increase in workload or lack of capacity.

The AIV notes that the expectation that EU cooperation and joint action by member states would allow substantial savings at Dutch missions has failed to materialise. In this connection, the AIV is disappointed that the European External Action Service (EEAS) has taken over little or no work from the embassies of the member states. This particularly applies to an important diplomatic task: gathering information and making analyses of complex political processes in countries with a large conflict potential. As far as intra-European relations are concerned, this letter has already referred to situations where the greater need for consultations between EU member states and the differences between national capitals has actually increased the time needed for analyses, reporting and personal diplomatic relations in various capitals. Additional efforts are required to win support from other member states for the EU policy desired by the Netherlands.

In his request for advice, the minister states that the Netherlands is a medium-sized power. That is certainly true in certain sectors, notably trade, investment and a number of other areas, such as water and agricultural technology. This raises the question of whether, in the world of the future, the Netherlands should still be seen as a 'medium-sized power' that must be equipped to act in all policy areas, or whether it would be better to concentrate on a number of critical regions and themes. However, the answer to this question has little bearing on the optimum size of the Dutch mission network. This is because, whether the Netherlands is a medium-sized or smaller power, it is vital for it to be well informed about international developments and the policies of partner countries, and for it to have networks of diplomats in personal contact with political and civil servant representatives from other countries, so that influence can be exercised at the right time.

The Netherlands' interests and values are so closely connected to those of the outside world on so many major issues that its size in relation to other powers does not have much significance for the size and nature of an effective mission network. It is not the extent of its instruments of force that is the determining factor, but Dutch society's close connection with the outside world and the breadth of the goals that the state and civil society organisations pursue in their dealings with other countries. Since the Netherlands must be seen as one of the most internationalised countries in the world, a comparison with other states with a similar population size and income does not provide much insight into the country's needs for an effective mission network. After all, those states also have different geographical locations to the Netherlands, as well as different economic and geopolitical interests.

The AIV concludes from the above that the Netherlands' mission network should be strengthened rather than further curtailed, and that, in particular, the embassies must be assigned more support staff in order to promote our country's values and interests. This conclusion concerns not only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also – in view of

the internationalisation of government policy across the board – many other ministries, such as Economic Affairs; Defence; Education, Culture & Science; Infrastructure & the Environment; and Security & Justice.¹²

Current problems

The AIV would answer the third question by pointing to the problems in the mission network that urgently need to be addressed. One problem concerns the lack of missions in African countries with a large actual or potential exodus of refugees and/or labour migrants to Western Europe, such as Somalia, Niger and Chad. Missions on the spot can keep the Dutch government informed of current developments relating to terrorism (and the fight against it), religious extremism and cross-border crime. Consultations about the return of rejected asylum seekers with the African governments concerned have more chance of success if direct and frequent contacts are possible, both bilaterally and via the EU. The development relationship is a key factor in this regard. In the coming years, many African countries will need to give priority to creating jobs for young people. To achieve this, outside help is essential. The economic assistance modalities – including, in particular, an optimum role for Dutch organisations and businesses – can best be decided on the basis of analyses by Dutch embassies.

As a result of the closure of several embassies in Central and South America, Dutch representation in that part of the world has fallen below the critical level. This jeopardises not only the Netherlands' economic interests but also its connection with the system of Pan-American cooperation, which is important in view of Dutch responsibility for the foreign relations of the overseas parts of the Kingdom. Diplomatic support from countries in the Western Hemisphere can help the Netherlands in the event of unforeseen crises in or around the Antilles. Reopening a number of embassies in this part of the world would be a logical move.

In addition, the establishment of several consulates-general would be opportune for trade promotion purposes. After consultations with the business community, a decision can be made on where the new consular missions would have the most added value.

As regards the understaffing at a large number of embassies, the AIV would recommend giving priority to: (1) missions in countries situated in the arc of instability on Europe's eastern and southern flanks, and (2) Dutch missions in EU member states. Strengthening the missions on the periphery of Europe is justified in the light of Dutch policy on preventing conflicts and stabilising turbulent regions. Diplomatic representatives in the countries concerned can not only play an early-warning role and help ensure the safety of Dutch nationals. They can also mediate where possible between warring parties and, in certain circumstances, help provide humanitarian aid. Dutch representatives are also indispensable in gathering information on terrorist organisations or cells that may try to attack targets in Western Europe. This advisory letter has already addressed the need to strengthen bilateral missions in EU member states. The AIV is convinced that the Netherlands' clout in European decision-making is partly determined by the preparatory work carried out in the various European capitals.

¹² According to the latest figures, there are 319 attachés stationed at foreign missions, from the following ministries: Defence (including the Royal Military and Border Police (KMAR)); Economic Affairs (including agricultural counsellors); Security & Justice (including the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and police); Interior & Kingdom Relations (including Services); and Finance.

As already indicated, expanding and above all strengthening the mission network will inevitably have budgetary consequences. The AIV estimates that at least €70-80 million will be needed on a structural basis to tackle the most urgent problems concerning the government's presence abroad. In the AIV's opinion, this investment, which is modest compared with the overall central government budget, would be of great benefit to society in terms of international cooperation, security, consular assistance for Dutch nationals, other important Dutch interests and values, and the promotion of the Netherlands' economic and financial interests.

Urgent request for advice: ‘Providing the tools for foreign policy: the Dutch government’s presence abroad’

Introduction

As a medium-sized power, with an open society and an open economy, and a historically rooted global mindset, the Netherlands is highly dependent on the world beyond its borders. The wide array of external challenges has a considerable, direct impact on the Netherlands and its citizens.

The influence of developments abroad on security, prosperity and sustainability in the Netherlands is changing in nature and increasing in scope.

The security of the Netherlands and Dutch citizens is directly influenced by an increasingly assertive Russia, fragile and failed states on the fringes of Europe, terrorism, cyber- and hybrid threats, the rise of ‘illiberal democracies’, a considerable increase in the influence of non-state actors (including hostile ones) on foreign policy, and increasing foreign influence (undesirable or otherwise) on the Dutch sociopolitical system.

Our prosperity is highly dependent on exports, which are being affected by the ‘rise of the rest’ and an economic shift to Asia, on the consequences of Brexit, and on protectionist tendencies, as well as on opportunities to tap into new markets.

The sustainability of our society is being influenced by the geopolitical consequences of climate change, the population explosion in Africa, humanitarian crises and inequality, and the migration flows that result from these developments.

In keeping with its traditions, the Netherlands has sought to respond to these issues, which directly impact Dutch society, by way of a strong transatlantic relationship, strengthening the multilateral system, and European cooperation. However, many people are now uncertain about the transatlantic relationship, while the multilateral (liberal democratic) system which arose following the Second World War and the universality of certain organising principles – such as human rights and international law – are the subjects of intense debate. These organising principles, which underpin a level playing field and international free trade agreements, are essential to the Netherlands’ economic interests. Cooperation within the EU is intensifying, with the interests at stake for the Netherlands becoming ever greater. Issues on the agenda are also increasingly becoming the subjects of political controversy, both at home and abroad, in Brussels and in other European capitals. In a Union of 28 member states, negotiation no longer just takes place around the table in Brussels, but also between capital cities. The quality of the information at a country’s disposal helps determine the effectiveness of its position going into negotiations.

All of this requires the Netherlands to operate actively and flexibly abroad, both in multilateral forums and bilaterally, in order to protect Dutch interests and promote and defend our value system.

Questions

In light of the above, the government would ask the Advisory Council on International Affairs to provide an advisory report that addresses the following three questions:

1. How should the Dutch government be equipped in order to effectively serve Dutch interests abroad and promote Dutch values in a rapidly changing international environment? What does the Netherlands require in order to do this?
2. Is the Dutch government's presence abroad, that is to say the mission network (embassies, permanent representations, consulates-general and Netherlands Business Support Offices), sufficiently equipped to operate effectively in a rapidly changing international environment?
3. With that in mind, has the Netherlands set up Dutch missions in the appropriate locations (countries/cities/organisations)? What gaps are there from a geographic or thematic perspective?

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