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The Future of NATO

Country Report Netherlands



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Content

Introduction	3
Threat analysis	4
A global NATO?	5
Transatlantic relations and NATO as a community of values	5
The future of nuclear deterrence	6
The role of the Netherlands in a future NATO	6
References	7

Introduction

The Netherlands is one of the founding members of NATO and actively participated in the Alliance's out-of-area missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, deploying around 2,000 troops. Following its withdrawal from Afghanistan and other non-NATO-led missions, such as that in Mali, the Netherlands has primarily contributed to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence mission in Lithuania. Since 1 October 2024, NATO has been led by its fourth Dutch secretary-general. No other country has held this position more frequently or for a longer period than the Netherlands – a fact generally regarded as a sign of recognition of the country's loyalty to NATO and its reliability. In June 2025, the “aspiring middle power” (Verbeek 2024, 768) that is the Netherlands will host the NATO Summit in The Hague.

Former prime minister Mark Rutte's candidacy for the position of secretary-general also gave a boost to Dutch defence spending. When Crimea was annexed, defence expenditure stood at less than 8 billion euros. Under Rutte's centre-right government, it initially rose to 12.9 billion euros in 2022, then surged to over 15 billion euros in 2023 and to in excess of 22 billion euros in 2024. Measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), this corresponds to an increase of 1.5 percent in 2023 and slightly more than 2 percent in 2024. The fact that the Netherlands has met the 2 percent guideline agreed at NATO's Wales Summit is a result of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. But it also highlights the Netherlands' role model status and improved Rutte's chances of becoming secretary-general.

The voluntary commitment to spend a minimum of 2 percent of GDP on defence also played a central role in the Netherlands' 2023 election campaign. While the left-wing social liberal D66, the Greens and the Social Democrats supported meeting the guideline, the Christian Democrats (CDA), centre-right liberal *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), VOLT and the newly established *Nieuw Sociaal Contract* called for the guideline to be legally binding, with the right-wing conservative *Juiste Antwoord21* (JA21) going as far as to argue for the target to be increased to 2.5 percent of GDP. That said, there was still opposition to the guideline from both the far left and the far right of the political spectrum. The left-wing radical *Partei Bij 1* had already called for the Netherlands to withdraw from “imperialist NATO” as early as 2021, while the right-wing populist *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD) has campaigned for a referendum on NATO membership. The FvD was also the only party in parliament to vote against Sweden and Finland joining NATO.¹ The *Partij voor de Dieren* (Party for the Animals) likewise considers an increase in the defence budget to be a waste of taxpayers' money.

The winner of the 2023 elections, Gerd Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV), placed strong emphasis on national autonomy in defence policy. Although the PVV does not expressly question NATO per se, its election programme clearly rejects a European army as well as the integration of the Dutch and German armed forces. In the context of the discussion about NATO as a community of values, the party's call for Turkey to be excluded from the Alliance is particularly noteworthy.

A look at the party programmes of the right-wing liberal VVD and the populist *BoerBurgerBeweging* (BBB, English: Farmer-Citizen Movement) also offers some interesting insights. The VVD's Ruben Brekelmans has served as Minister of Defence since the summer of 2024, while BBB veteran Gijs Thuinman holds the position of State Secretary of Defence. Both parties' programmes stress the importance of defence policy cooperation among free nations and highlight the threat posed by authoritarian regimes, explicitly naming Russia and China in this context. They also both set out plans to align national defence procurement projects with NATO requirements.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO has gained more importance among the Dutch population. In a survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund in 2022 (published in 2023), 81 percent of respondents considered NATO to be “very important” or “somewhat important” – an increase of ten percentage points compared to the previous year. In 2023, this figure dropped slightly to 79 percent, but it still remained higher than the equivalent values for the UK, Germany, Italy, France or Spain.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on public opinion in the Netherlands is also evident in two surveys among the same respondents conducted by Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana and Tom Etienne in September 2020 and June 2022 (Onderco et al. 2023). Following the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the majority of respondents initially believed that the possession of nuclear weapons (within the framework of nuclear sharing) does actually deter a nuclear attack. Approval of the use of nuclear weapons also increased, although it consistently remained below the 50 percent threshold, depending on the specific use scenario. The responses to questions on the conditions under which a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons would be supported show that withdrawal as part of an arms control agreement now enjoys the most support; two years previously, the most commonly held view was that nuclear weapons should not be withdrawn under any circumstances. Overall, the Dutch-Czech research team concluded that public opinion in the Netherlands has become more hawkish – though, as the last question illustrates, this shift is certainly accompanied by interest in arms control negotiations.

¹ For an overview of the complex Dutch political party landscape and the different security policy positions, see Sonneveld (forthcoming).

An annual survey on foreign policy issues by the Clingendael Buitenland Barometer, however, also shows that in February 2024, a lack of military capacity and involvement in a war due to an attack on an ally ranked only eighth or ninth in the hierarchy of perceived threats. Fears of a cyberattack, an Islamist terrorist attack and a refugee crisis all ranked higher (Sie Dhian Ho et al. 2024).

For many years now, the debate among Dutch think tanks and research institutes has been shaped predominantly by the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, established in 1983, and the *Haag Centrum voor Strategische Studies* (Hague Centre for Strategic Studies – HCSS), founded in 2007 by Rob de Wijk. Since 2024, however, this duopoly has been joined by the US think tank RAND Europe (from research and development), which opened an office in Rotterdam. Alongside their in-house publications, contributions from Dutch security experts regularly appear, sometimes in English and sometimes Dutch, in the quarterly *Atlantisch Perspectief*, published by the *Atlantische Commissie* (Netherlands Atlantic Association). Founded back in the 1950s, the association is similar to the German *Atlantikbrücke*. It is a non-governmental organisation that serves as a forum for dialogue between Europe and North America.² The following analysis is based on an evaluation of publications and on interviews with Dick Zandee (Head of the Security and Defence programme at the Clingendael Institute), Dr Tim Sweijs (Research Director at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies) and Dr Paul van Hooft (Research Leader at RAND Europe). Zandee is also a member of the *Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken* (Advisory Council on International Affairs) which advises the Dutch government and parliament on foreign policy matters.

Threat analysis

In the predecessor study to this one, published in 2021, Matthias Dembinski noted that Dutch politics and society tended not to adopt an alarmist stance regarding external threats, instead viewing them in a rational, analytical way. While this analytical view has not disappeared, Russia is now more clearly perceived and explicitly identified as a threat to the West and NATO – and thus also to the Netherlands. Exactly how long the fighting will continue in Ukraine, remains difficult to predict. Notwithstanding this, however, Russia is seen as a revisionist and revanchist power, with a vested interest in the failure of the Western-dominated international order, even after the potential end of the war in Ukraine. Rob de Wijk also points to the fact that it is not Putin, but rather Russia itself, that is the problem and as such this issue will persist under Putin's successor (de Wijk 2024, 321). As long as Russia is engaged in war in Ukraine, Zandee explained during an interview, its armed forces will remain tied up, making an attack on a NATO member, such as one of the Baltic states, more or less

impossible. However, as soon as the fighting in Ukraine comes to a (temporary) end, the threat to NATO will increase because Russia will then have an opportunity to recuperate and replenish its weapons stockpiles. Russia is not expected to change its anti-Western stance in the foreseeable future. However, among the different scenarios Rob de Wijk describes, there is also one he calls “horizontal escalation”, in which Russia conducts a limited or small-scale attack on a NATO member while the war in Ukraine is still ongoing. According to de Wijk, this would force the NATO states to halt their arms deliveries to Ukraine because their entire capacity would suddenly be used to defend a NATO member (de Wijk 2024, 319f.).

In the interviews we conducted with representatives of Dutch think tanks, there is also an awareness of what Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler have dubbed “security dilemma sensibility”, in other words the self-critical view of how one's own actions can fuel the threat perceptions of the other side (Booth and Wheeler 2008). Sweijs (Hague Centre for Strategic Studies), for instance, points out that Russia sees the planned stationing of US medium-range missiles in Germany as a provocation and a threat because these missiles could be used to eliminate Russian command and control sites. The same applies to NATO membership for Ukraine – something Moscow would undoubtedly perceive as an escalation.

From the Dutch point of view, the threat posed by China is much less pronounced than that of Russia. As van Hooft (RAND Europe) points out, unlike Russia, China probably does not want to see the current international order fail completely because, at least for now, it benefits more from the system than Russia does. Of course the assessment of a threat from China largely depends on the likelihood of a military confrontation between the People's Republic and Taiwan – which China's considers a “renegade province” – because, especially in China, it is believed that this would trigger a war with the US. When it comes to this issue, representatives of Dutch think tanks and research institutes strongly believe that a Chinese attack aimed at occupying Taiwan cannot be excluded but, given the risks involved, is unlikely to happen in the near future. After all, capturing a well-defended island is one of the most demanding military missions and the cost to the People's Republic would undoubtedly be extremely high. However, this should not obscure the fact that China is preparing for such an attack and has already secured or is in the process of securing the necessary funds. Moreover, China is already pursuing a strategy of “boiling the frog” (van Hooft 2022), in other words gradually increasing pressure, including through military action, with the intention of weakening Taiwan's resistance to a reunification with the mainland and driving up the costs for third parties to do business in Taiwan as well as the cost of defending Taiwan.

² See the homepage www.atlcom.nl/ (27.03.2025).

Should a military confrontation between China and Taiwan occur, this would of course also have an impact on NATO because it will be almost impossible to separate the different war and crisis zones (Sweijts and Van Hooft 2024). As van Hooft explains, Europeans have certainly benefited from the notion that the crises in Europe and Asia are interlinked, as this idea of interconnectedness is used in the American discourse to justify the ongoing military engagement in Europe; without this, the Americans would likely have withdrawn from Europe earlier and pivoted more strongly towards Asia. The Europeans also acted accordingly: “[W]hen they support the US in the Indo-Pacific, Europeans are ‘showing the flag’ in the hopes of keeping the US engaged in Europe” (Van Hooft 2022, 48).

If there were to be a military escalation and the US were to decide to intervene on behalf of Taiwan, they would undoubtedly expect the Europeans to offer assistance. That said, this contribution would likely take place outside NATO structures. Moreover, such a contribution would have to be strictly limited as the European lack the necessary capacity.

A global NATO?

Among the Dutch think tanks and research institutes there is a consensus that NATO should concentrate on Europe. They hold that the Alliance should not seek to play a role in Asia and should recognise that its capabilities on the southern flank are limited, with the European Union better positioned to address issues in this region.

In an opinion piece in *Atlantisch Perspectief*, van Hooft (2022) outlines several reasons as to why NATO should refrain from involving itself in the Indo-Pacific. First, the Europeans simply have very little to offer that would increase deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Second, lumping the threats posed by Russia and China together would risk blurring the differences between them. As an emerging major power with a high degree of international market penetration, China requires a different strategy to the declining state of Russia, which is far less integrated into the international economic order. Third, if the Europeans are to make a contribution, it would be politically wiser to do this outside NATO. For countries such as India or South Korea, which are key players when it comes to deterring China, supporting Western policy would be easier if it were not tied to NATO, a connection that certainly raises concerns in countries like India, for example. That said, de Wijk posits that all military operations conducted by NATO states, whether led by the United Nations, the European Union or NATO, or even those conducted as part of an ad hoc coalition, are perceived by Russia and China as NATO missions (de Wijk 2021).

Another reason Zandee (Clingendael) believes the chances of NATO playing a role in Asia are slim is the opposition from some members, notably France. From the French perspective, protecting trade routes in Asia is the European

Union’s responsibility, not NATO’s. Of course this is also in line with the traditional French position that the European Security and Defence Policy – and more generally the European Union vis-à-vis NATO – needs to be strengthened. France is, however, by no means the only NATO member to hold this view. Given that the Washington Treaty explicitly references the North Atlantic, not Asia, as the territory it applies to, critics have a strong argument in calling for NATO to be limited to this region or Europe. Concentrating its core tasks in the North Atlantic does not, however, preclude NATO from addressing security issues in Asia through non-declaratory means, as it has indeed done with the Washington Communiqué. Moreover, various NATO members are actively asserting their presence in East Asia by deploying warships.

The Dutch think tank community is similarly sceptical about NATO’s southern flank. It goes without saying that the priorities of the Southern European members of NATO lie in the Mediterranean region and not in Ukraine, let alone the Indo-Pacific. However, the members of Dutch think tanks we spoke to have significant doubts as to whether NATO possesses the appropriate means for this. When it comes to managing migration, for instance, the European Union seems to be much better suited to the task than NATO. On the other hand, when it comes to stabilisation missions in North and West Africa, the member states’ reluctance is palpable. While some members of the military leadership maintain that training in peacekeeping and stabilisation missions also contributes to territorial defence, there is good reason to question this view. Given that NATO’s training and education apparatus is currently primarily focused on high-end warfare, NATO cannot be expected to be well equipped for tasks on its southern flank.

Transatlantic relations and NATO as a community of values

In the Dutch discourse, there is a general consensus that US engagement in Europe is on the decline and that this trend is likely to intensify with Donald Trump’s return to office. This view is reflected, inter alia, in a series of interviews with experts summarised by Anna van Zoest and Maarten Muns in *Atlantisch Perspectief* (van Zoest and Muns 2024). However, as Zandee has emphasised, the pressure for Europeans to reduce their dependence on the US would have existed even with a democratic president in the White House (Zandee 2023, 24). A defining characteristic of Trump, however, is his high degree of unpredictability. For de Wijk it is clear that NATO’s survival depends on Europeans being willing to support the US in exchange for a US defence commitment. This could also mean a European mission in Asia (de Wijk 2021, 355). The Clingendael Institute in particular has long supported efforts by the European Union to play a more significant and more independent role in security and defence policy, while also highlighting the numerous obstacles to achieving this (Zandee et al. 2020).

Trump's presidency was also cited as one of many reasons why doubts regarding the idea of NATO as a community of values are justified. For America expert Kenneth Manusama, Trump's "one-sided admiration for Putin" is reason enough to question the existence of a shared transatlantic value foundation (van Hooft et al. 2024, 21). Van Hooft also points to historical examples such as US support for dictatorships during the Cold War, the discrimination against African Americans in the US southern states and NATO membership granted to Turkey, Greece and Portugal during military rule (van Hooft et al. 2024). Zandee, for his part, focuses on the challenges posed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey and Victor Orban's Hungary, adding however that Erdoğan's anti-Western rhetoric primarily serves domestic political purposes and that Turkey has no plans to leave NATO. Even Orban is reluctant to be genuinely obstructionist. All in all, NATO is seen as more of a political military alliance than a community of values.

The notion of a value community has also surfaced in the context of Ukraine's potential membership of NATO. On the one hand, the Dutch discourse explains its support for Ukrainian membership by framing it as a stand with the world's free democracies, highlighting that Ukraine is defending itself against an authoritarian state that is flagrantly violating international law. On the other hand, as Zandee points out, the consensus among NATO members required for Ukraine's accession to NATO is also lacking. While the Baltic states and Poland are in favour of accession, the majority of Western European states consider this step premature. The US has not yet made its position entirely clear, but under a Trump administration, caution is likely to prevail. Thus, discussions surrounding Ukraine's NATO membership expose the deep divides within the Alliance and for this reason alone are best avoided.

The future of nuclear deterrence

Russia's threats to use nuclear arms have put the issues of deterrence and nuclear doctrine back on the agenda. As Sweijs noted in *Atlantisch Perspectief*, the risk of unintentional escalation is a very real concern that must be taken extremely seriously (Sweijs 2023, 7). The Dutch think tank community shares the concern that Europe can no longer automatically count on the US agreeing to provide its nuclear weapons for deterrence and defence against a Russian attack. At the same time, Dutch think tanks are also sceptical about the idea that French nuclear weapons could serve as a substitute for American ones. As Sweijs points out, the French arsenal consists of a mere 300 nuclear warheads compared to Russia's 5,000. These figures alone make it clear that a defence strategy reliant on French nuclear weapons would not have escalation dominance and adding the around 200 British nuclear weapons does little to change the situation.

Zandee also highlights the challenges that developing a nuclear doctrine based on France's *force de frappe* would

present. After all, French president Emmanuel Macron has made it clear that the decision to deploy nuclear weapons would be France's alone. This stance contrasts sharply with the American doctrine, which differentiates between strategic (intercontinental) and tactical nuclear weapons (stationed in Europe), having offered Europeans nuclear sharing arrangements for the latter. The French nuclear arsenal makes such a distinction impossible as the entire arsenal is to serve as a last resort. France's sole authority over the use of its nuclear weapons is therefore unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The role of the Netherlands in a future NATO

As for many other NATO members, for the Netherlands, too, the escalation of the Ukraine War in February 2022 was a wake-up call which sharpened the focus on the underfunding of its armed forces. In light of this, the substantial increase in the defence budget has been welcomed by the Dutch think tank community. A number of specific military procurement decisions also appear to be well-founded, including the purchase of Tomahawk cruise missiles for the marines and warheads for F-35 fighter jets. Van Hooft also refers to the Dutch decision to participate in the European long-range strike approach (ELSA), which was launched in June 2024 by the defence ministers of the Weimar Triangle and aims to jointly develop and produce precision weapons with a range of more than 1,000 kilometres. That said, it is also clear that it will be some years before these decisions on developing and procuring new capabilities translate into tangible resources for the Dutch forces. Shortages in combat-ready units remain a major issue. Proposals to upgrade the battalion stationed in Lithuania into a brigade have not yet been acted upon by Dutch politicians, largely due to the unavailability of the necessary resources. For years now, the armed forces have struggled to meet their self-imposed goals of recruiting enough young people to serve in the military (Ministerie van Defensie 2023). Although surveys indicate a slight increase in Dutch citizens' willingness to fight for their homeland since the start of the Ukraine War (Onderco et al. 2024), the shortage of personnel in the armed forces will not be easy to remedy without the reactivation of conscription, which was suspended in 1997. However none of the many political parties in the Dutch parliament have called for conscription to be reintroduced. Instead, a practice similar to Sweden's military service model, which targets young adults and assesses their skills and interests, seems to appeal to a few centre-right parties (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie 2023, 17).

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NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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