

Pocket-sized foreign policy

Described as a ‘pocket-sized medium power’, the Netherlands has always struggled with its size. It has never felt satisfied, like a teenager in front of a mirror. Within NATO, the Netherlands has for years wanted to be the biggest of the small. When the large member states had finished talking, often there would be time for just one last presentation by the largest of the little ones. With the expansion of NATO, the eastern European members refused to see why the Netherlands should have that honour. Within the European Union the same picture emerged. Under the weighted voting system of the Treaty of Nice, the Netherlands fought hard to get the 13 votes needed to participate in European decision making – just one more than Belgium. There had to be a difference!

It is a bit like betting on two horses, because a country that can call itself the biggest of the small ones can also regard itself as the smallest of the great ones. Sometimes it is preferable to be small, because it allows you to be a free rider without too many repercussions, and the game will go on. At other times it is better to be large, because you can join in discussions on the rules of the game. But to be a pocket-sized medium power is to be accepted in the world of the small *and* large countries.

But priorities can shift. As the world order is changing, accelerated by the economic recession, the Netherlands does not want to miss the boat. The G8 is no longer relevant; now it is important to be in the G20. The days when small countries could piggyback on (or, according to some, even profit excessively from) globalization are over. ‘The kind of regulatory and tax arbitrage that small countries once profited from is now subject to international crackdown. Regulation is fashionable again and taxes are going up’.

Suddenly, becoming a member of the G20 appears to be the Netherlands’ highest foreign policy goal. We are announcing to anyone willing to listen that we are the world’s sixteenth largest economy, and among the top ten in terms of financial institutions, development aid and agricultural exports. The government even laments the departure from Afghanistan, since our efforts there yielded much ‘influence and prestige’ at the table of the great ones. And, as a medium-sized, thus ‘benign’, member state, why not enter the race for president of the European Council?

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There is another list in which the Netherlands has long been among the top ten, but oddly enough this has never been used as an argument to be part of the G-something. This is the list of the world’s arms exporters. In the latest review by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the Netherlands ranks sixth. Although that position should not be overestimated – the market share of the top five amounts to 78% – the Netherlands is yet again the largest of the small, among them Italy, Spain, India, China, Brazil and Canada.

In a recent report on the Netherlands’ arms export policy, several things stand out. In 2008 Indonesia was the largest customer (€316 million). The Netherlands exported military vehicles to Rwanda and Lebanon, and spare parts to Turkey. But the largest arms exporter is the government itself, which still has stocks of excess equipment (frigates, tanks, planes) for sale. Dutch arms exports are now worth around €1.3 billion, compared with €650 million just 10 years ago. The idea that the 1990s would result in a temporary ‘boom’ in exports of Cold War vintage military equipment has not materialized. By SIPRI’s criteria, the Dutch share of the global arms market in the period 2004–2008 averaged 3%, a relatively high proportion of total world trade.

If the Netherlands is ‘doing well’ as an arms exporter, the government itself as an exporter of cold war vintage military systems is even doing *particularly* well. It seems that even in this field we are living up to our reputation as a pocket-sized medium country. ■