

The Netherlands Atlantic Association: The First Forty Years

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In 2002 the Netherlands Atlantic Association, one of the oldest private Atlantic associations in Western Europe, celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. The Netherlands Atlantic Association is currently a very active organization, which is highly respected by most of those who are interested in Dutch foreign policy and international relations. However, things have not always looked as rosy as they appear today: the Association's history has been colorful and, at times, turbulent. This article looks at the first forty of the Association's fifty years.

The Origins of the Netherlands Atlantic Association

The late 1940s constitute a period of crucial importance in the history of Dutch foreign policy. In 1948 the Dutch joined the Brussels Pact, an event that marked the end of their prewar policy of neutrality and aloofness in international affairs. The following year the Netherlands became one of the founding fathers of NATO. In 1949 the Netherlands also formally recognized the independence of Indonesia, which had been a Dutch colony for well over 300 years. From now on the Netherlands, which before the war had looked upon itself as a kind of pocket-size world empire, was reduced to the status of a minor European power. Having realized this, the Dutch decided to give their full support to the nascent process of European integration. In 1951 the Netherlands, along with France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Luxembourg, signed the treaty that brought the European Coal and Steel Community into being.

In some parts of Dutch society the idea of European integration was greeted with enthusiasm; some even dreamed of creating a genuine United States of Europe. In 1948 various private associations of European federalists combined forces and formed the Netherlands Section of the European Movement (NREB). However, some members of the NREB believed that European integration was but a first step toward the creation of a far wider federation of democratic states, which should include both the United States and Canada. The writings of the American journalist Clarence K. Streit, who in 1939 had argued for the creation of such an Atlantic federation, served as their main source of inspiration. Apart from European and Atlantic federalists one should distinguish a third group of international idealists, consisting of those who were in favor of a world order based on the rule of law. Some advocates of this idea had instituted the Dutch United Nations Union (VIRO).

In 1951 O.C.A. van Lidth de Jeude, a former Dutch Cabinet Minister who was a member of both NREB and VIRO, suggested that these organizations set up an investigatory committee, which should examine the feasibility of Streit's proposals. Van Lidth's suggestion was followed and in October 1951 the NREB and VIRO instituted what was called the "Atlantic commission". This Atlantic commission was chaired by Van Lidth himself and consisted of members of both NREB and VIRO. After a few months of study the members of this commission issued a report, in which it was argued that NATO had indeed laid the foundation for the institution of a genuine Atlantic federation. The European members of NATO should combine forces and begin to work toward the creation of a United States of Europe, which could serve as the European pillar of this future transatlantic federal state. Moreover, the Atlantic commission recommended that NREB and VIRO form a permanent committee to promote the idea of Atlantic federation. Both associations decided to follow this advice, and on February 13 1952 the investigatory Atlantic commission was given a permanent status and the "Atlantische Commissie" came into being.

The Netherlands Atlantic Association in the 1950s

Initially, the Netherlands Atlantic Association consisted of a Board of fifteen people, twelve of whom were appointed by NREB and VIRO. These twelve Board members were entitled to co-opt three additional members. As from 1954, the Association received a small grant from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in exchange for which the Ministry was entitled to delegate an observer. Some members of the Netherlands Atlantic Association held a seat in the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament; others belonged to either the civil service or the military. Both the employers' unions as well as the trade unions were also represented in the Association. Van Lidth died in February 1952, only a few days before the Netherlands Atlantic Association was officially instituted. Prof. Roelof Kranenburg, a former Speaker of the Dutch Senate, succeeded him as Chairman. As from 1955, Jan Kortenhorst, a professional administrator, held the secretariat. As Secretary of the Association, Kortenhorst managed its administrative and financial matters.

The first years of the Association were rather busy ones. In February 1953 it organized its first major conference in The Hague on the subject of "The Atlantic Community and its Objectives." The Netherlands Atlantic Association also played an active part in setting up the Atlantic Treaty Association (ATA), the international federation of private Atlantic associations. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Netherlands Atlantic Association was mainly engaged in organizing lectures and conferences and distributing books, brochures, and other written material published by NATO. The Dutch themselves also produced a host of written material. During the late 1950s the Netherlands Atlantic Association began to organize visits to NATO headquarters in Paris. In 1963 an Atlantic Education Committee was formed, which concentrated on developing projects for academy and university students. However, only a few years after its institution the Association ran into serious trouble. Some of its problems were of a financial nature. The Association, which in fact only consisted of the aforementioned Board, did not have any regular source of income, except for the annual grant provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, until 1962 this grant amounted to a mere 6,000 guilders, and soon after its institution the Association had to deal with severe budgetary deficits.

Another difficulty facing the Association was that its ideal of creating a genuine "United States of the North Atlantic" never really did catch on, neither with the various NATO members nor with the Atlantic associations abroad. Therefore, from the mid-1950s the Association concentrated on educating the Dutch public about the military and political objectives of NATO, the most prominent of which was to defend Western democracy against the threat posed by the Soviets and their satellites. However, in those early days members of the Dutch foreign policy elite hardly needed to be convinced of the urgency of Alliance cooperation against the communist peril, whereas the general public was not deeply interested in foreign and defense policy. As a result, the Association remained a rather small and marginal organization, which was not very well known with the general public.

The Netherlands Atlantic Association and the Shift to the Left, 1965-1973

The second half of the 1960s saw some sea changes in Dutch society. In the course of only a few years both the societal structure of the Netherlands as well as its political order broke down completely. The same could be said of the postwar consensus on foreign policy issues. Adolescents in particular began to embrace images of the world in general and the United States in particular that were quite different from those of their parents. The escalation of the Vietnam War of the late 1960s led to outbursts of indignation directed against the United States. In the view of the extreme left, the Americans were "capitalist" and "imperialist" oppressors of the Vietnamese and other Third World nations. Many adolescents regarded NATO as an instrument wielded by the United States to perpetuate its hegemony over Western Europe and the Third World. Furthermore, the extreme left claimed that NATO could not be regarded as the protector of European liberties and democracy, given the fact that the Alliance allowed

dictatorial and colonial powers such as Greece and Portugal among its membership. In the late 1960s the emergence of détente induced many in the Netherlands to believe that the Soviet Union could no longer be seen as a potential threat to the West. The extreme left even argued that the Soviets had never posed such a threat in the first place.

In the course of only a few years the backdrop against which the Netherlands Atlantic Association had to operate changed dramatically, both at home as well as abroad. However, the Association was slow to adjust to this new situation. Up until the early 1970s the Association stuck to the positions it had held for almost twenty years. It still argued that the Soviet Union posed a threat to the security of Western Europe and that, therefore, the Dutch had no alternative but to remain loyal allies of the United States. However, such notions no longer went unchallenged in Dutch society. The extreme left regarded the Association as an instrument wielded by NATO and the conservative element in Dutch society, whose main purpose was to indoctrinate the Dutch public with a “militarist and imperialist NATO ideology.” Some extremists resorted to bitter agitation and even destructiveness. In 1970 the Association had to cancel one of its youth conferences after it had become clear that most youngsters who had registered were in fact left-wing infiltrators, whose only objective was to create mayhem.

One could safely argue that in the early 1970s the Netherlands Atlantic Association found itself in a deadlock. Most of its members could not in the least relate to the ideas of the restless youth and the Association was in danger of becoming increasingly irrelevant. In 1973, however, the Association made a surprising move when it asked S.L. Mansholt, a former European Commissioner for Agriculture and a left-of-centre member of the PvdA (the Dutch Labour Party), to assume the chairmanship of the Board. This was done with a view to the process of European integration, which in the early 1970s appeared to have gone into top gear. However, in retrospect Mansholt’s appointment as Chairman of the Board was not such a good idea as it had seemed at the time. In the years leading up to his appointment Mansholt had developed a profound interest in subjects such as environmental protection, overseas development, and the depletion of raw materials. He believed that the Netherlands Atlantic Association should also occupy itself with such matters. Moreover, Mansholt agreed with at least some of the accusations hurled at NATO by its left-wing critics. For instance, as Chairman he would argue that the Association should urge the Dutch government to raise the matter of the Greek and Portuguese membership of NATO in Brussels. Most members of the Association did not share these notions. It was therefore decided that the Association would not adopt Mansholt’s far-reaching schemes. In 1974, only a year into his term as Chairman, Mansholt announced that he had to give up his chair because of health problems. The real reason behind this decision was probably that Mansholt felt out of place in a body that was mainly preoccupied with political and military matters.

The Mid-1970s: Ruin and Recovery

In 1974 Barend Biesheuvel, a Christian Democrat who from 1971 to 1973 had served as Prime Minister, agreed to succeed Mansholt as Chairman of the Board. However, it would not be until October 1975 that Biesheuvel could take up his duties. This delay was the result of the fact that between fall 1974 and winter 1975 the Netherlands Atlantic Association went through a period of severe crisis. In 1973 the Netherlands European Movement and VIRO had decided to reorganize the Association. Until then it had more or less been a joint sub-committee of the two aforementioned organizations. In 1973, however, the Association was given the status of a foundation under Dutch law. In the preceding years some doubts had risen concerning the manner in which Jan Kortenhorst, who since 1955 had run the administrative and financial affairs of the Association, had performed his duties. The reorganization of the Association prompted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which still provided the Association with an annual grant, to institute a commission consisting of the Ministry’s financial experts. These experts were given the task of examining the Association’s books; in the meantime payment of its annual grant was suspended.

The findings of the Ministry's financial experts were rather devastating. They concluded that the administration and the books of the Association were in a deplorable state. For instance, it was not in the least clear how the Association had spent the annual government grants; some of the money seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Moreover, the experts had discovered that as from 1968 Kortenhorst had privately tried to raise money with Dutch trade and industry, without informing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or even the other members of the Association of his activities.

The findings of the investigatory commission caused a scandal, which even led to some headlines in the national press. The Association's reputation, which in some circles of Dutch society left much to be desired anyway, now seemed to be damaged beyond repair. However, in retrospect this incident turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for it prompted the remodelled Association to deal with its affairs in a more serious and professional manner. Kortenhorst was relieved of his duties as Secretary and the Association set up its own office in The Hague. Moreover, it also appointed one of its members, C.C. van den Heuvel, to the position of Information Officer. Van den Heuvel was a staunch supporter of détente. He frequently travelled to East European countries in order to engage in discussions with various communist government officials. Van den Heuvel believed that the rejuvenated Netherlands Atlantic Association should cover much more ground than it had done previously. In his view, the Association should not restrict itself to providing information on NATO, but it should also deal with subjects such as East-West relations, détente, and arms control. Moreover, van den Heuvel felt that the Association should shift the main focus of its attention from the foreign policy elite to the general public.

The other members of the Association decided to adopt van den Heuvel's proposals. In the second half of the 1970s the Association's activities were drastically updated. For instance, its rather primitive mimeographed newsletter was turned into a genuine periodical named *Atlantische Tijdingen*, which in later years would develop into the current *Atlantisch Perspectief*. The Association also distanced itself somewhat from its fierce anticommunist rhetoric of the past and embraced détente, albeit with some reservations. The Association's change of course was appreciated by the ruling left-wing government of the time, which was dominated by the PvdA. However, the Atlantic associations abroad, some of which accused the Dutch of having become soft on communism, did not universally hail its new policies.

The Association and the Dual-Track Decision of 1979

In December 1979 NATO produced its so-called dual-track decision. This meant that its arsenal of long-range theater nuclear forces (LRTNF) would be modernized. Five countries were designated to host new LRTNF, including the Netherlands, which was asked to deploy 48 cruise missiles. At the same time NATO called upon the Soviet Union to begin arms control negotiations with the United States as soon as possible, in order to establish mutual limitations on their LRTNF. In the Netherlands as well as in many other countries of Western Europe, this dual-track decision would lead to fierce and emotional protests. The Dutch peace movement was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of anxious or even frightened people against deployment of cruise missiles. In October 1983 it organized a mass rally in The Hague, which drew a crowd of over 550,000 people. These and other activities by the peace movement deeply affected the policies of the Dutch government. Only in November 1985 the right-of-centre Cabinet of the day managed to reach a final decision to deploy the new nuclear weapons.

The Netherlands Atlantic Association was deeply involved in the battle on the deployment issue. During this period there were some important changes in personnel. In 1978 Rio Praaning, a twenty-six-year-old former law student, was appointed Director of the Association, a function that combined the duties of Head of the Secretariat and Information Officer. The following year

Hannie van Leeuwen, a former MP for the Christian Democrats, assumed the presidency of the Association. Under the auspices of Hannie van Leeuwen and Praaning, the Association tried to meet the public's growing need for information on international security issues by publishing reports, books, and brochures. It also came up with some new and fresh initiatives. As from 1979 the Association organized foreign trips for the benefit of Dutch journalists. The main objective of these trips was to arrange meetings between the journalists and various foreign dignitaries, MPs, members of the civil service, and specialists in international politics. It would be safe to argue that, thanks to the Netherlands Atlantic Association, many Dutch journalists - most of whom were astonishingly ignorant of foreign policy affairs - were able to complete a "crash course" in international relations. In 1982 the Netherlands Atlantic Association held its first Round Table Conference (RTC), a gathering of Dutch and foreign specialists in international relations. Like the foreign trips for journalists, the RTC was organized to bring it home to the Dutch that they should keep in mind the international aspects of their decision on cruise missile deployment. The first RTC was a moderate success and in 1985 the Association organized a second edition. The fact that Lord Carrington, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski had agreed to act as keynote speakers added considerable lustre to this second conference. As from 1979 the Association organized opinion polls to gauge the views of the Dutch on issues of international security, the most prominent of which was cruise missile deployment.

However, the early 1980s also saw some considerable difficulties for the Netherlands Atlantic Association, most of which were familiar. For instance, the Association was still haunted by financial problems. Since the issue of cruise missile deployment had come up, public demand for the Association's publications had grown explosively. However, in spite of frequent pleas, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to cover the expenses necessary to print additional books, leaflets, and brochures. On the contrary, the Ministry even suggested that the Association scale down its activities. Fortunately, in 1980 the Defense Ministry offered to subsidize the Association with an annual grant. The Association also managed to find some other sponsors and by the mid-1980s, its worst financial troubles were mainly a thing of the past.

In the first half of the 1980s the Association again had to deal with fierce agitation from the extreme left. In 1979 it had assembled an exhibition to commemorate NATO's thirtieth anniversary. The general idea was that this exhibition would be set up in locations accessible to the general public, such as train stations and town halls. However, a considerable number of municipalities would not permit the Association to display its exhibition. Frequently, the left-wing parties represented in the local councils exercised strong pressure on the authorities to deny the Association access to town halls. In some cities left-wing militants sprayed the exhibition with paint, whereas in other towns displays were even stolen by so-called "antimilitarist" activists. In 1984 the exhibition was damaged beyond repair after it had been sprayed with some chemical substance.

The issue of cruise missile deployment also led to some fierce discussion within the Netherlands Atlantic Association itself. Most of its members were in favor of deployment, believing that Alliance solidarity would be harmed if the Dutch were to dissociate from the double-track decision. Some members argued that it was the Association's duty to declare itself publicly in favor of deployment. Over the years the Netherlands Atlantic Association had developed into a kind of consultative body that brought together all the major political parties, including the left-wing PvdA. However, in 1981 this party had declared itself flatly against deployment of cruise missiles in the Netherlands. Therefore, Harry van den Bergh, an MP for the PvdA who represented his party in the Executive Committee of the Association, refused to endorse any public statement made by the Association that favored deployment. Van den Bergh even made it clear that he would resign from the Association if it were to publish such a statement. Subsequently Hannie van Leeuwen - whose Christian Democratic party was hopelessly divided on the deployment issue - threatened to do the same. If van Leeuwen and van den Bergh had left, this would have had serious repercussions for the Association. To name

one: the Association would probably have lost its appeal with the moderate Socialist and left-of-centre Christian element in Dutch society. Most Association members were well aware of these repercussions and it was therefore decided that the Association would not publicly take a position on the deployment issue. With this decision the Association had solved the most severe crisis in its fifty-year history. Ironically, this crisis took place at a time when the Association was more successful than ever in supplying information on NATO and transatlantic relations to the general public.

The End of the Cold War

In the second half of the 1980s the turmoil over the deployment issue, which had plagued Dutch society for well over five years, slowly dissipated. The Netherlands Atlantic Association was now able to focus on different matters. During this period it again had to deal with all kinds of reorganizations and changes in personnel. In 1985 the Association completely severed its ties with the European Movement and VIRO and became fully independent. In 1987 Hannie van Leeuwen left the chair of the Association and was succeeded by Piet Dankert, a Socialist MEP. Dankert was to remain in office for three years. In 1990 Frits Bolkestein, an MP for the Conservative Liberals, was appointed Chairman of the Association. However, the following year Bolkestein became leader of the parliamentary faction of the Conservative Liberals, who at that time were the main party in opposition. At the request of the Socialist members of the Board, whose party was represented in the Cabinet, Bolkestein stepped down as Chairman. His fellow Conservative Liberal Gijs de Vries, another MEP, succeeded him. In 1990 Praaning resigned as Director of the Association. He was succeeded by Lily Sprangers, a former employee of the Defense Ministry.

During the second half of the 1980s the Association intensified its international contacts. It established connections with both the British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) as well as the American Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (IFPA). In 1987 and 1989 the Association and the IFPA together organized two Round Table Conferences, the latter being convened in Washington. A host of prominent Americans, including Frank Carlucci, Al Gore, Colin Powell, and Brent Scowcroft, agreed to act as keynote speakers. The Association also established excellent contacts with Dutch trade and industry as well as the scientific field. It instituted a Strategic Studies Foundation, which took care of the scientific activities of the Association. In 1987 the Strategic Studies Foundation established a chair at Leiden University. However, an attempt to establish another chair at the Catholic University of Nijmegen failed miserably due to agitation initiated by left-wing students, who fiercely opposed the appointment of what they called a "Professor of NATO Studies."

In 1989 NATO celebrated its fortieth anniversary. This event prompted the Netherlands Atlantic Association to initiate some interesting new activities. After some lobbying by the Association, the Dutch Post Office issued a special postage stamp to commemorate NATO's anniversary. The Association also asked a German nursery to rename one of its roses the "NATO Rose." Subsequently, the Association distributed thousands of posters and stickers that bore a representation of this rose. The Association also organized its fifth RTC, which was attended by Queen Beatrix. All in all, 1989 was a very good year for the Association. Its efforts were even praised by none other than NATO's Secretary-General Manfred Wörner, and deservedly so.

NATO's fortieth anniversary more or less coincided with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Thus, the Cold War, which had spawned both NATO as well as various private Atlantic associations in North America and Western Europe, came to an unexpected end. Not unlike NATO itself, the Netherlands Atlantic Association had to ask itself whether it still needed to continue its activities. In both cases the obvious answer was affirmative.

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