



Between Deterrence and Societal Resilience

Joint response to the Dutch International Security Policy

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The recently published [International Security Strategy \(IVS\)](#), the [Foreign Affairs Policy Statement](#) and the [Defence White Paper](#) mark a fundamental shift in Dutch security policy. Whereas previous policy documents approached security from the perspective of the interconnection between military, economic and human security, the new strategy explicitly takes geopolitical competition, military deterrence and European strategic autonomy as its starting point.

This shift is understandable in itself. Russian aggression against Ukraine, the rise of hybrid threats on the European continent, the changed stance of the United States as an alliance partner and the deteriorating international security situation all call for a strengthening of European defence capabilities.

The aforementioned policy documents recognise that security is threatened not only by military conflicts, but also by polarisation, disinformation, the erosion of democracy, social fragmentation and declining trust. This is in line with analyses by, amongst others, the [Scientific Council for Government Policy \(WRR\)](#), the [Advisory Council on International Affairs \(AIV\)](#), the [European Commission](#) and [NATO](#). It is striking, however, that this broad threat analysis is scarcely translated in an equally broad policy agenda. Whilst the threats are increasingly directed at societies and democratic institutions at large, the proposed measures focus primarily on states, military capability and institutional resilience.

That is our main criticism of Dutch security policy.

Social aspects of security as an afterthought

The differences with the 2018 Integrated Foreign and Security Strategy (GBVS) are considerable. This mainly concerns the definition of the concept of security itself. The GBVS explicitly placed human security, conflict prevention and the strengthening of inclusive institutions alongside the focus on defence and diplomacy. Security was thus perceived as being more than just military protection: social cohesion, human rights and resilient societies were also regarded as prerequisites for sustainable security. The new strategic documents, by contrast, opt for a concept of security that is primarily defined by geopolitical threats and strategic competition. As a result, military capability and deterrence take centre stage. Human security is still mentioned implicitly, but shifts from being a core component of security policy to a more peripheral and supporting role within the strategy.

This shift is also evident in the interpretation of the concept of 'resilience'. The Dutch government regards resilience primarily as civil preparedness, crisis response, cyber security and the protection of critical infrastructure. These are important elements, but societal resilience encompasses much more. Trust between citizens and the government, social cohesion, strong local networks, independent media, active citizenship and well-functioning civil society organisations are key to a society's resilience. This social dimension receives relatively little attention in the strategy and is certainly not elaborated upon in any concrete terms. Indeed, the current massive investments in defence are coming at the expense of spending on social programmes that strengthen society.

The importance attached to conflict prevention is also diminishing compared with previous policy documents. Whilst diplomacy, mediation and peace-building are mentioned, these instruments are primarily assigned a supplementary role within a security architecture dominated by deterrence. This risks prevention losing its strategic significance, whilst authoritative studies actually show that timely investment in prevention is both more effective and more cost-efficient than long-term crisis management or military interventions.

In other respects, too, the policy documents fail to capitalise on opportunities. For instance, the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which was firmly embedded in previous strategies, has been reduced to a marginal reference. This means that not only is the focus on gender equality lost, but also the focus on the role of women as security actors, peace mediators and agents of social resilience. Issues such as climate change as a security risk, the role of religious communities and local authorities in peacebuilding, and the relationship between social cohesion and security also remain under-emphasised.

Risks overlooked

Both the IVS and the Defence White Paper emphasise the development of military capabilities and the expansion of the defence industry. At the same time, they devote little attention or resources to the risks associated with this. This also applies to the risks to the Netherlands' own security objectives when military developments take place without sufficient safeguards and without a robust dialogue on arms control and non-proliferation.

Furthermore, rapid investment in the military sector and the proposed simplification of regulations for the defence sector could put pressure on due diligence standards. This includes standards relating to human rights, arms exports and conflict sensitivity. It is precisely these standards that must be upheld. This will prevent European and Dutch security policy from fuelling conflicts elsewhere, for example through arms exports or by encouraging an arms race. Compliance with these agreements is not a mere administrative formality, but an essential prerequisite for effective, conflict-sensitive and gender-responsive security policy that supports the international legal order and European security.

Social resilience as a strategic starting point

Against this backdrop, it is encouraging that the IVS refers to a 'whole-of-society' approach. This offers opportunities to involve civil society organisations, local communities and citizens more actively in security policy. However, this requires more than mere cooperation. A truly comprehensive approach to security also requires recognition of the independent role of civil

society organisations as early warning mechanism, connectors, partners in identifying issues and enhancers of democratic resilience.

The IVS strategy and the Defence White Paper thus contain important building blocks for a broader approach to security, but fail to flesh these out further. If societal resilience is truly to be taken as a strategic starting point, this also requires concrete policy choices. These include a clear definition of societal resilience, structural investment in conflict prevention, a stronger focus on human security, greater attention to democratic institutions and social cohesion, and an explicit role for civil society organisations within the security policy.

The Netherlands faces real and complex security challenges. Strengthening defence is therefore essential. At the same time, it is precisely today's threats that demonstrate that security is not determined solely by military capability. Polarisation, disinformation, declining trust and the erosion of democracy undermine a society's resilience just as much. Ultimately, strong societies are not only a consequence of security, but also its most important prerequisite.

Our recommendations

To better embed these principles in policy, we make the following recommendations for the Netherlands' international security policy:

- Organise multi-stakeholder consultations to arrive at a broadly supported definition of societal resilience and translate this into concrete policy
- Explicitly enshrine human security as a policy principle within the Dutch security strategy
- Invest in and make a structural commitment to conflict prevention, diplomacy, mediation and peacebuilding as fully-fledged components of security policy
- Strengthen the position of independent civil society organisations and establish a clearer link between security, the democratic rule of law and social cohesion
- Explicitly integrate the Women, Peace and Security agenda into security policy, along with recognition of the role of women as security actors, peacebuilders and enhancers of societal resilience

CARE Netherlands, Cordaid, Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, Mensen met een Missie, PAX and WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform