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From pacifist neutrality to measured leadership: the case of Dutch foreign policy in the Ukraine war

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From pacifist neutrality to measured leadership
The case of Dutch foreign policy in the Ukraine war



Dutch ministers meet with President Zelensky in Eindhoven to agree on providing F-16s to Ukraine.

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Abstract

This thesis provides a constructivist interpretivist analysis of the Dutch government's foreign policy narrative over the course of the now nearly two-year-old war in Ukraine from February 2022 to the present. This thesis applies the study of situated agency by looking at how key decision-makers within the Rutte IV coalition government constructed a narrative about the steadily increasing military aid campaign to Ukraine. In line with the interpretivist approach, the study will unpack Dutch foreign policy themes and traditions from the existing literature in the context of this contemporary case study. Three main discursive themes emerge: 'NATO as the guarantor of Dutch and European security with or without the United States;' 'Supporting a stronger and more state like Europe as a link to the world stage,' and 'Taking a leading role in defending the international legal order and human rights.' This study finds that the four situated agents studied draw extensively on these themes in order to justify increasing military aid to Ukraine with a view to taking a leading role in regional security within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). To that end it appears that Dutch foreign policy has taken a more hawkish turn, shifting away from its conventional neutralist stance in international affairs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction & Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The Netherlands is a small power located between the Atlantic and European powers. Through its historical tradition of neutrally abstaining from conflicts in international affairs, it has pursued a foreign policy which seeks to balance these two major power blocs. Its commercial interests always being the main driver of its foreign policy agenda: this is referred to as its maritime commercialism tradition. Though traditional neutralism failed during the Second World War, after the war the country's membership to NATO and the then-nascent European institutions caused the second major Dutch tradition of neutralist abstentionism not to fail but rather to evolve, such that "membership in a Western bloc, dominated by one superpower has permitted a continuation of traditional Dutch neutrality within a new framework and has relieved them of the need to develop an ambitious foreign policy of their own" (Bodenheimer 1978, 251). This is otherwise known as *afzijdigheid in afhankelijkheid*, or aloofness in dependence (Andeweg, Irwin & Louwse 2020, 226). The cornerstone of Dutch foreign policy has always been Atlanticism, despite occasional pivots towards Europe in the 1980s and 1990s during renewed efforts for a European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). (Ibid, 227) Moreover, with the Netherlands having deep historical roots in Calvinism, Dutch foreign policy also has a moralist component under the broader tradition of internationalist idealism.

Dutch foreign policy making has always been a closed-off practice of a small group of decision-makers. However, from the late 1970s onwards, Dutch foreign policy underwent a period of democratization and domesticization, wherein foreign policy became a "battleground of internal political strife, as it turned into a main issue area in inter-party coalition bargaining" (Van Staden 1989, 105). Foreign policy came to play a more important role in domestic politics and even, as Joris Voorhoeve points out, "offered a field for struggle and new identity." (Voorhoeve 1978, 63) As such, Dutch foreign policy practice came to increasingly define how the Netherlands sees itself in the world for both citizens and elites alike.

1.2 Case Study

This study focuses on the Dutch foreign policy response in the war in Ukraine. Since the outbreak of the war, the Netherlands has pursued an escalating military aid campaign to support Ukraine. By June 2023, it was the eighth largest contributor of total military aid to

Ukraine; today, it is the fifth largest.¹ As Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte explained in an interview with *New Atlanticist*: “The Netherlands is punching above its weight in terms of overall military aid to Ukraine ... The Netherlands is only surpassed in Europe by three countries several times its size by population: Germany, the United Kingdom, and Poland.”² This is epitomized by the decision in August 2023 to commit the entire Dutch fleet of 42 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine. The Dutch joined a coalition of other NATO members in spearheading a training program for Ukrainian pilots to operate the jets at a military base in Romania, which began in December 2023³. Yet a poll conducted in June 2023 found that only 23% of respondents in the Netherlands were in favor of a policy of increasing military aid to Ukraine.⁴ Conversely, in a parliamentary motion requesting the Dutch government not to commit Dutch F-16s to Ukraine on 25 May 2023, only 38 of 150 MPs voted in favor⁵. While only a minority of Dutch citizens are in favor of increasing military aid to Ukraine, the majority of Dutch politicians are in favor, showing a deep disconnect between the foreign policy preferences of Dutch citizens and the foreign policy goals of Dutch politicians.

The Dutch military aid campaign to Ukraine has been brought forth by two recent dilemmas in Dutch foreign policy, which rendered the traditional practices of Dutch foreign policy inadequate (Ter Haar 2017). The first was the downing of flight MH-17 by a Russian Buk missile in Ukraine in 2014, killing 198 Dutch among the passengers. This confronted the Netherlands with the first direct threat to its own security since the German occupation during the Second World War. With a majority of Dutch citizens placing the blame on Russia for the disaster, a neutralist response based on ‘aloofness in dependence’ centered on deferring to the leadership of its larger allies was not a sufficient option. Under pressure from public opinion, the Dutch government had no choice but to pursue a more assertive foreign policy response,

¹ Kiel Institute, Ukraine Support Tracker. October 2023. Accessed February 23 2024.
<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

² Rutte, Mark. Interview by *New Atlanticist*. 18 January 2023. Accessed on 27 January 2024.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-netherlands-prime-minister-on-the-weapons-and-accountability-coming-to-russias-war-in-ukraine/>

³ Ministry of Defense. 2023. “Dutch F-16s at training center in Romania.” 7 November 2023.
<https://english.defensie.nl/latest/news/2023/11/07/dutch-f-16s-at-training-centre-in-romania>

⁴ I&O Research. “12e flitspeiling Oekraïne – 2/3 mei 2023.” Accessed 27 February 2024.
www.ioresearch.com

⁵ Tweede Kamer. “Motie van de leden Maeijer en Wilders over geen F-16 vliegtuigen aan Oekraïne leveren.” 25 May 2023. Accessed on 27 February 2024
<https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2023Z09371&did=2023D22472>

which condemned Russia without blaming Russia directly, successfully ensuring that Dutch commercial ties with Russia remained strong. The second dilemma was the Dutch rejection in a consultative referendum in 2016 of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, which focused on closer cooperation between the EU and Ukraine and included closer political and economic ties to support Ukraine against increased Russian aggression after the annexation of Crimea in 2014⁶. Sixty-one percent of Dutch citizens voted against, while around 80% of Dutch MPs voted for (Ter Haar 2017, 91). The deep divide on the issue of Dutch support for Ukraine between Dutch voters and politicians finds its origins in this referendum. The Dutch government ignored the referendum and allowed the agreement to be signed with only minor modifications. In addition, the Council of State, an influential advisory body on legal and executive matters to the Dutch parliament, published a report on how referendums were a threat to Dutch democracy in 2017⁷. Under the leadership of then-Interior Minister Kasja Ollongren, this led to parliament passing a bill to abolish the Netherlands' referendum law in 2018. This showed the Dutch government's clear intention to pursue its own foreign policy goals of strengthening ties between the EU and Ukraine, even if it did not enjoy broad popular support.

1.3 Research question

Though there are innumerable actors who play a role in influencing foreign policy, the executive cabinet has the greatest influence in the Netherlands, with the three most important positions being the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Defense. As the Netherlands is infamous for its multi-party coalitions these cabinet positions are almost always occupied by members of different political parties. This research project focuses on the role of such key foreign policy decision-makers in shaping Dutch foreign policy in the case of the war in Ukraine between February 2022 and February 2024.

The specific question is:

⁶European External Action Service. "EU-Ukraine Association Agreement". No date. Accessed on 27 February 2024.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/071215_eu-ukraine_association_agreement.pdf

⁷BNNVARA. "Raad van State: referenda ondermijnen de democratie." 6 April 2017.

<https://www.bnnvara.nl/joop/artikelen/raad-state-referenda-ondermijnen-democratie>

How have key decision makers used the military aid campaign to Ukraine to construct an assertive narrative for Dutch foreign policy?

Answering this question will contribute to the literature focusing on the shift in Dutch foreign policy since the downing of MH-17 in 2014 and the referendum on the EU Association Agreement in 2016, after which Dutch foreign policy took a more assertive trajectory. At present, there are no studies on Dutch foreign policy in the war in Ukraine and this study may prove useful for policy practitioners both in and outside of the Netherlands seeking to understand recent trends in Dutch foreign policy practice. It will also more generally contribute to the literature on the role of key decision-making elites in foreign policy. Before introducing the research design, we will first cover the most relevant literature pertaining to the research question of this study.

1.4 Literature review

There is very limited literature that has emerged in recent years on the topic, particularly academic literature which includes the events following the referendum on the Association Agreement in 2016. However, there are a number of seminal studies on Dutch foreign policy which, when combined with more recent work, paint a reasonably clear picture of the study of contemporary Dutch foreign policy.

In a pioneering study, Alfred Van Staden characterized Dutch foreign policy as “reactive rather than active” where Dutch governments were happy to sit on the fence and react only to external impulses. (Van Staden 1974, 300) Barend Ter Haar notes in a 2017 essay that this still proved to be an accurate description forty years later. Perhaps the most seminal work on Dutch foreign policy is the 1978 book *Peace, Profits and Principles* by scholar and one-time Dutch Defense minister Joris Voorhoeve. Voorhoeve identified the three main Dutch diplomatic traditions originating before the Second World War as discussed earlier, in addition to twelve foreign policy themes in the post-war period (Voorhoeve 1978, 297). He explains how Dutch foreign policy traditions and themes have evolved over time as they have been interpreted by the Dutch government in light of domestic and international challenges. Voorhoeve also pays attention to how key decision-makers interpreted events, citing in particular the role of Foreign Minister Luns who served from 1952 to 1971 and was one of the most popular and influential figures in Dutch foreign policy history.

The most recent study on Dutch foreign policy by Andeweg, Irwin and Louwense in 2020 explains that Voorhoeve's classification of Dutch foreign policy traditions and themes has been a subject of debate among scholars but still remains generally applicable today. Some scholars have amended or enlarged Voorhoeve's list, but the authors point out that "on closer inspection, the themes mentioned by the other authors remain closely related to the clusters of attitudes mentioned by Voorhoeve. There is also very little disagreement concerning the origins of such tendencies or traditions." (Andeweg, Irwin and Louwense 2020, 225) The authors do analyze the 2017 referendum on the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine but do not go into detail on the Dutch government's ignoring of the referendum result and what this tells us about the construction of Dutch foreign policy going forward.

A pivotal and influential study on Dutch foreign policy by Knapen et al. in 2011 argues that in a rapidly changing world characterized by new rising powers, the traditional reflex of 'aloofness in dependence' within the NATO and EU security framework is over. Simply following larger powers "would amount to venturing on an expedition without a compass." (Knapen et al. 2011, 8) As a consequence, they believe that the Netherlands should "develop and sharpen an agenda of our own, reorient ourselves on Europe and embrace the contemporary players in international relations... express[ing] what the Netherlands is: attached to the rest of the world." (Ibid, 118) The study is prescient in that it urges Dutch foreign policy to become more assertive even before the downing of MH-17. It traces the origins of the sentiment for the Netherlands to play a more leading role in international affairs as rooted in the 2007 Balkenende IV coalition agreement which noted that to remain introverted would no longer serve the Dutch national interest. (Ibid, 43-5). The study does not focus to any significant degree on the role of key foreign policy elites in shaping foreign policy.

Juliet Kaarbo's 2012 study focuses on the role of coalition politics in four key Dutch foreign policy cases. She finds that coalition politics had a significant constraining impact on Dutch foreign policy decision-making, with two cases leading to the fall of Dutch cabinets (the Dutch stationing of a battalion in Srebrenica in 1995 and the decision to send troops to Afghanistan in 2007), and in all four the wishes of the Dutch public being ignored (Kaarbo 2012, 121). Kaarbo focuses only to a lesser extent the role of key foreign policy actors, occasionally focusing on the roles of cabinet ministers in decision-making. This demonstrates a focus on agents to a degree, but pressures from the international level are also given central attention. Unfortunately, Kaarbo's book was written before MH-17 and the 2016 referendum on the Association Agreement.

An essay written after these events in 2017 by Barend ter Haar on Dutch foreign policy narratives about Russia makes clear that the Netherlands does not have a tradition of independent strategic thinking; when problems arise, the Netherlands usually follows the lead of its larger allies. Yet Ter Haar is one of the first to note that the downing of MH-17 and the Dutch referendum that rejected the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine are two main cases which the Netherlands had to address itself instead of deferring to the preferences of larger allies. (Ter Haar 2017, 89) In line with Kaarbo, he places the lack of a government-wide strategic foreign policy on the constraining role of coalition politics and constant wrangling among ministers from different political parties. (Ibid, 92) While arguing that Dutch foreign policy strategy is facing the need to be more independent, he does not cover how key foreign policy elites construct foreign policy narratives and there is very little attention paid to discourse.

From the literature covered in this review, it is clear that recent studies on Dutch foreign policy point to the need for the Netherlands to take a more assertive role in foreign policy. The lack of a comprehensive vision is also mentioned. However, such studies rarely take an actor-centered approach, preferring instead a focus on how the Netherlands can adjust its foreign policy in response to structural changes at both the domestic and international levels. Kaarbo's study on the role of coalition politics in Dutch foreign policy decision-making is the most useful for this thesis, as it places some emphasis on the role of key cabinet ministers. It has been decided not to focus on coalition politics more generally because the influence of opposition parties and coalition factions on the opposing side of the military aid to Ukraine debate has been minimal. None of the studies of Dutch foreign policy take a constructivist perspective. This is a gap in the literature this thesis aims to fill as it could lead to novel insights and contribute to the academic debate in a different light. In particular, this study aims to further the debate on Dutch foreign policy by taking a more actor-centered approach. In order to explain how I will do this, I turn now to the theoretical framework which will guide the analysis of this study.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework & Research Design

2.1 Foreign Policy and Theory

In order to study the role of key foreign policy decision-makers in the shaping of Dutch foreign policy, it is necessary to establish an appropriate theoretical framework. Foreign policy is a complex field of study, especially seeing as it is located “at the hinge of domestic and international politics” (Hill 2003, 23). Furthermore, Walter Carlsnaes warns that the inclusion of both domestic and international politics in addition to the omnipresence of both actors and structures – two sets of factors which are also intimately and reciprocally linked – makes it “essential to have some form of analytical framework or approach as a starting point” (Carlsnaes 2012, 114).

A realist approach, however, lacks explanatory power on the role of actors – who are constrained by domestic politics – because it argues that domestic politics does not play a significant role in determining foreign policy outcomes. As Kenneth Waltz has argued, “it is the structure of the system that determines the way states interact.” (Waltz 1979, 117) A sub-school of realism, neo-classical realism (NCR) has more potential because, as the pioneer of the theory Gideon Rose points out: it “explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought.” (Rose 1998, 146) The main problem with this approach is that the core tenets of realism ultimately remain central. Even though internal domestic political factors are accounted for, they are viewed as “intervening variables” which play only a secondary role in foreign policy. Furthermore, as the renowned liberal Moravcsik explains: “the incorporation of variation in underlying domestic preferences ... undermines (if not eliminates) the theoretical distinctiveness of NCR as a form of realism by rendering it indistinguishable from non-realist theories about domestic institutions, ideas, and interests.” (Legro & Moravcsik 1999, 28)

Liberal institutionalism is considered an alternative approach to realist theory in foreign policy analysis (Baldwin 1993). Mearsheimer notes that liberal institutionalism “focuses on rules of behavior, established by states, which stipulate how they should interact with each other. Because following these rules is in their best interests, states are strongly inclined to obey them, which is to say cooperate with each other.” (Mearsheimer 2023, 51-2) Liberal institutionalism has more explanatory power for this study than realism because it helps to situate the role of Dutch foreign policy in the Netherlands’ multilateral commitments, particularly to NATO and the EU. However, as Trine Flockhart explains, it is “structural, systemic, and ‘top-down’” in its approach to foreign policy analysis, in a similar vein to neo-realism. Placing such a premium on structure is theoretically unhelpful for this study which focuses far more on the role of actors in shaping foreign policy. Indeed, although agents must respond to the structural influences of the domestic and international environments, foreign policy is “by definition an agent-level activity.” (Flockhart 2012, 88)

To this end, Anthony Giddens’ work on “structuration” is helpful. Structuration holds that while structures certainly influence agents, agents are also able to influence structures – agents and structures are mutually constitutive. (Flockhart 2012, 86). This brings us to social constructivism. The constructivist approach emphasizes that it is through the practice of foreign policy “that a stable cognitive environment is ensured, which ... provides agents with confidence that their cognitive world will be reproduced.” (Flockhart 2012, 86) In other words, if we are to analyze how agents’ shape and construct foreign policy, we must study foreign policy practice. But foreign policy can be made in two main ways. First, much of foreign policy is “clearly pre-intentional practice based on taken-for-granted routines.” However, the second is concerned with instances when agents’ behaviour is linked to *intention* and directed at a specific goal. The former has little ability to shape foreign policy in any meaningful way, while the latter does. In this way, Flockhart explains that when utilizing constructivism for the analysis of foreign policy, it is necessary to distinguish between foreign policy as routine practice and foreign policy as intentional action (Flockhart 2-12, 88).

As the literature on Dutch foreign policy makes clear, the Dutch foreign policy response to the war is an extension of the re-orientation of Dutch foreign policy in the aftermath of MH-17 and the Dutch public’s rejection of the EU Association Agreement in the 2016 referendum. This is not mere routine foreign policy practice. Therefore, this thesis views the Dutch military aid campaign to Ukraine as an intentional and goal-driven foreign policy undertaking.

2.2 Identity, Logics of Action, and Situated Agency

In order to analyze intentional foreign policy action, constructivism reminds that states tend to follow a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequentiality. The latter views states as utility-maximizing actors. The former stresses that states will rather follow a course of action that is most aligned with its sense of identity, wherein state identity is defined as “the shared representations of the collective self.” (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009) Such representations can be accessed through a variety of sources which are revealed by social practices and political attitudes. These practices and attitudes are in turn shaped by social structures and national contexts, in addition to inherited traditions handed down through history. (Bevir and Daddow 2015, 274) To have a particular identity implies that actors follow norms that are associated with the state’s identity, implying that some actions are more appropriate than others. (Flockhart 2012, 86) Norms are defined as “shared expectations about appropriate behaviour held by a collectivity of actors.” (Check 1999b).

Viewing the foreign policy actions of key actors with respect to a logic of appropriateness, which is driven by their view of the state’s identity, is more suited to answering the question of how key foreign policy agents shape foreign policy. This is because identities strongly imply a certain set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action (Flockhart 2012, 85, citing Hopf 1998, 175). This is highly relevant because, as discussed in chapter 1, foreign policy has become a battleground for the formation of a new identity for the Netherlands. Based on the observation that agents have the ability to shape a state’s foreign policy through the exertion of their agency, I will draw on Bevir and Daddow’s ‘situated agency’ framework, wherein:

[A]gents are positioned within ideational and institutional traditions but they are capable of modifying these traditions through their agency, such that agency occurs against a particular historical background that influences it without determining it. The situated-ness of agency draws attention to the inherited practices and social relationships that influence individual decisions (Bevir and Daddow 2015, 280)

The study of situated agency is based on a constructivist-interpretivist approach which is critical of methodological positivism. The latter has been hugely influential in FPA by focusing on how structures mold national foreign policy choices, but often removing or sidelining the human element from explanations of state behaviour. An agent-centered approach is more suited to making sense of the stories foreign policy-makers tell themselves and the publics they govern about their nation and its role in the world. Such an approach should first identify the meanings embedded in agents' practices, and second, should explain such meanings by locating them in their social, cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. (Bevir and Daddow 2015, 276-7) Christopher Hill explains that a significant way of accessing information about such foreign policy mind-sets and actions is through a close study of language of foreign policy, which helps unpack the beliefs on which foreign policy practices are based, or in other words, through the study of discourse (Hill 2002, 9).

2.3 Research Design and data collection

The method I will use is qualitative discourse analysis. Discourse refers to “linguistic systems through which meaning is generated.” (Foucault 1974, 38) Although this study is concerned with explaining foreign policy practice, language is, as Shapiro argues, not a transparent medium that simply conveys the empirical world but is also a *kind of practice*. Discourse analysis does not ask whether statements are true or false, but seeks to uncover the values, norms and identities that are being created in the use of language. (Shapiro 1988, 11)

This thesis follows a single case study design. It will interpret and analyze the discourse of situated agents – key foreign policy decision-makers at the apex of decision-making bodies – to discover how they construct narratives about the military aid campaign to Ukraine by drawing on historical Dutch foreign policy themes and traditions. This study will analyze discourse which is available in the public domain comprising of parliamentary records, speeches, diplomatic statements, policy papers as well as media debates, interviews, and articles. I use a qualitative methodology using mixed sources to explore as many different perspectives as possible so as to avoid selection bias. The primary data sources for the analysis of such foreign policy actions such as meeting notes, journals of key decision makers and so on are restricted to ‘closed’ foreign policy environments and are currently not available given the very recent nature of the topic in question. Similarly, interviews with foreign policy actors or their subordinates on such a sensitive theme would have been unrealistic and are also outside

of the scope of this study. Lacking these more detailed insights into the discourse of key Dutch foreign policy elites means that it is impossible to cross-reference whether what these elites say in public versus in private matches up. This would require more comprehensive research. As such, this research should be considered an exploratory study investigating a novel case that would benefit from supplementary work.

2.4 Choice of situated agents

Before turning to the analysis, it is first worth discussing which key foreign policy decision makers, or situated agents, will be focused on. I will focus on those agents who wield the most influence in foreign policy in the Netherlands. The foreign minister is the key figure in Dutch foreign relations. (Voorhoeve 1978; Kaarbo 2012) Foreign ministers have a strong position because they can refuse to answer parliamentary questions on the basis of national security. Moreover, because they often are the leader of the second largest political party in the coalition, a vote of no confidence would likely cause the dissolution of parliament, which the cabinet would want to avoid. As head of the cabinet, the prime minister, as the leader of what is normally the largest party in the government, also plays a central role in foreign policy, for example by establishing the cabinet's agenda and in forging compromise across competing departments and parties. (Kaarbo 2012, 77) Being in charge of military affairs, the minister of defense also plays a central role in the foreign policy. It is regarded as the third most important position next to the prime minister and foreign minister. Dutch foreign policy in the Ukraine war involves a huge amount of military aid, including the supplying of F-16 fighter jets, and a Dutch-led training program for Ukrainian pilots. As such, the current minister of defense has played a central role in Dutch foreign policy in the war in Ukraine.

The discourse data will be drawn from speeches and other public pronouncements made by those who in my view were the key architects of the military aid campaign to Ukraine in the fourth Rutte cabinet: Mark Rutte (Prime Minister from 15 October 2010 to 7 July 2023 and currently acting Prime Minister), Wopke Hoekstra (Minister of Foreign Affairs since 10 January 2022 to 1 September 2023), Hanke Bruins Slot, (current Minister of Foreign Affairs since 5 September 2023) and Kaja Ollongren (current Minister of Defense since 10 January 2022). Although such a decision will have invariably involved a range of other actors, these four agents have been able to dominate the discourse around the military aid campaign to Ukraine given the overwhelming consensus on this matter within the Dutch parliament, thereby

rendering the opposition from Geert Wilders (leader of the Freedom Party, PVV) and Thierry Baudet (leader of Forum for Democracy, FVD) ineffective.

Before proceeding with the analysis, I will first conceptualize the discursive themes to be studied by drawing on Voorhoeve's themes of Dutch foreign policy.

2.5 Conceptualization of discursive themes

Voorhoeve's foreign policy themes provide us with the constitutive elements of the Dutch foreign policy tradition which have endured over time (Andeweg, Irwin and Louwense 2020, 225). Voorhoeve's themes are the primary source from which discursive themes most relevant to the topic at hand will be selected by examining them in light of more contemporary documents, in particular the Rutte-IV coalition agreement. It is important to note the foreign policy positions within each discursive theme will have changed over time. I have therefore updated the latest foreign policy positions in accordance with recent literature on Dutch foreign policy discussed earlier. The foreign policy positions taken by the Rutte-IV coalition agreement provides a contemporary source from which to draw out the discursive themes and patterns which existed just before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. These pre-war foreign policy positions are further elaborated upon in a recent letter updating parliament on the situation in Ukraine by the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and foreign trade and development cooperation.⁸

The coalition agreement states that, due to the position of Russia and China, in addition to the US's pivot towards Asia, the Netherlands must "protect its freedom, security and welfare in a more active manner." With the international order under pressure, this requires the Netherlands to play a "leading role" by focusing on "large global challenges." Furthermore, the agreement mandates a stronger and more decisive EU, because the EU, viewed as a community of shared values, plays a central role in ensuring the peace, security and welfare which the Netherlands seeks to protect within its own borders. The EU must "be a player instead of a playing field for other powers." Finally, on the subject of defense, the agreement states that a "powerful" NATO

⁸ Letter to Parliament Nr. 166. "Situatie in Oekraïne." 20 August 2023. Accessed on 27 February 2024

https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2023Z14154&did=2023D33944

remains the “cornerstone of our collective defense”, and to this end the Netherlands will increase spending on defense and will “deepen cooperation with bordering European countries.”⁹ From the above strategic vision I now will now select the most relevant of Voorhoeve’s themes and conceptualize them as discursive themes which will be used to analyze the various pronouncements of the four situated agents. This is based on Voorhoeve’s classification of Dutch foreign policy traditions and themes, which for convenience I provide here:

Diplomatic Traditions from before the Second World War:

1. Maritime commercialism
2. Neutralist abstentionism
3. Internationalist idealism

Foreign Policy Themes after the Second World War

A. Security Policy

1. Give priority to NATO interests
2. Support U.S. leadership
3. Tie West Germany to NATO
4. Concentrate on strategic deterrence

B. Regional Policy

5. Open the Community
6. Check the big members
7. Build a supranational democracy
8. Keep Europe out of power politics

C. Mundial Policy

9. Promote the international legal order
10. Encourage functional integration
11. Fight poverty abroad
12. Defend human rights

Taken from Table XI-1: Traditions and Themes in Dutch Foreign Policy (Voorhoeve 1978, 297)

⁹ Coalition Agreement “Omzien naar elkaar, vooruitkijken naar de toekomst.” 15 December 2021. Accessed on 27 February 2024.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/01/10/coalitieakkoord-omzien-naar-elkaar-vooruitkijken-naar-de-toekomst>

I have chosen the most relevant themes from Voorhoeve's classification from which I conceptualized three discursive themes by which the case study will be analyzed, as follows:

Security policy

“Give priority to NATO interests”: The Dutch commitment to NATO has always been the cornerstone of its security and defense. (Voorhoeve 1978, 146). The leading role of NATO remains unchanged in the coalition agreement.

“Support US Leadership”: The Dutch have consistently followed a policy of entrusting the defense of Europe to the US, a principle which ensured Europe's dependence on the US. (Voorhoeve 1978, 147) The Rutte IV coalition agreement however plans for a more active role for the Netherlands in its own defense including higher defense spending, recognizing that a full US security guarantee is unlikely.

Taken together, these two themes on Dutch national security policy are conceptualized as ‘NATO as the guarantor of Dutch and European security with or without the United States.’ This is the first discursive theme.

Regional policy

“Open the Community”: the Dutch role as international trader guided the Netherlands to advocate as large a membership of the EEC and later the EU as possible to avoid the threat of the EEC or EU trending towards self-sufficiency and protectionism (Voorhoeve 1978, 187). Over time some exceptions to this principle were made, for example when the EEC became the more overtly political EU, the Netherlands became far more skeptical about enlargements which would reduce its clout and voting power at the EU level. In the coalition agreement, however, the Netherlands has taken a highly supportive position on EU enlargement.

“Keep Europe out of power politics”: after the Second World War, the Netherlands sought to prevent Western Europe from turning into a strong and independent force in the world. Instead, it saw Europe's role in great power politics as primarily based on its Atlantic ties. (Voorhoeve 1978, 191). In light of the coalition agreement which envisions instead a greater role for Europe in great power politics, this theme is no longer relevant and must be reformulated. To do so, I use the 2011 study of Ben Knapen and his co-authors who argue that a stronger and more united Europe that can act in a more state-like manner is in the Netherlands' best interests (Knapen et al. 2011, 70). The coalition agreement also strongly supports the EU becoming a more powerful actor in global affairs.

Taken together, these two themes on Dutch regional policy are conceptualized as ‘Supporting a stronger and more stately Europe as a link to the world stage.’ This is the second discursive theme.

Mundial security policy

“Promote the international legal order”: this theme stems from the observation that Dutch mundialism, as Voorhoeve explains, is largely driven by the search for a new role in world affairs (Voorhoeve 1978, 248). This was found in promoting the Netherlands’ role as a paragon of international law, which is rooted in the founding work of Hugo Grotius. Today The Hague is the global capital of international law. The 2021 coalition accord mentions threats to the international legal order as an opportunity for the Dutch to take a leading role in international affairs.

“Defend human rights”: The Netherlands is the fifth largest contributor of development aid annually and actively partakes in EU, UN, and NATO-led peacekeeping initiatives. The Netherlands is one of the few countries with a roving Ambassador for Human Rights. (Andeweg, Irwin and Louwerse, 239-40) Threats to human rights and oppressed groups are mentioned in the first paragraph of the 2021 coalition agreement.

Taken together, these two themes of Dutch mundial policy will be referred to as ‘Taking a leading role in defending the international legal order and human rights.’ This is the third discursive theme.

Now that the discursive themes have been identified, in the next chapter we will turn to the discourse analysis. The discursive themes identified will be analyzed and interpreted with respect to how the meanings embedded in agents’ discursive practices relate to the escalating military aid campaign to Ukraine between February 2022 and February 2024, with respect to the goal of constructing a more assertive Dutch foreign policy.

Chapter 3: Interpreting the discursive themes through the language of situated agents

3.1 ‘NATO as the guarantor of Dutch and European security with or without the United States’

Then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra (CDA) explained during a speech at the College of Europe in Bruges on February 20th 2023 that “NATO is, and will remain, the cornerstone of our European security” and that “It is our job to strengthen the alliance, and to make sure NATO and the EU work hand-in glove with one another.”¹⁰ Though the Dutch stance on the role of the NATO as a whole is made abundantly clear here, what role the US should play remains unclear, probably because he is addressing a European audience. However, in a speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. on 14th April 2022, Hoekstra explains that Dutch and US ties “have only grown closer. We are very much united by our shared values and convictions” and that “US leadership [is] crucial in fortifying the West’s resolve.”¹¹ While these words are influenced by his American audience, back at home in a Dutch parliamentary debate on aid to Ukraine on 21st February 2023, Hoekstra emphasized: “If I’m honest, the weight of one [the US] stands up against the other 29 [NATO members]. ... It shows that America is currently indispensable for the European security architecture.”¹² Irrespective of the audience he is addressing, Hoekstra’s message is the same: US leadership and Dutch-US ties are of central importance to Dutch national security. Current foreign minister Hanke Bruins Slot, who took over the reins in September 2023, likewise stated

¹⁰ Hoekstra, Wopke, “Building a secure European future.” 20 February 2023. Accessed on 27 February 2024. <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2023/02/20/speech-wopke-hoekstra-building-a-secure-european-future>

¹¹ Hoekstra, Wopke. “Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra on Transatlantic Security after Ukraine.” 14 April 2022. Accessed on 27 February 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/dutch-foreign-minister-wopke-hoekstra-transatlantic-security-after-ukraine>

¹² Parliament Debate. “Nederlandse steun aan Oekraïne.” 21 February 2023. Accessed on 23 February 2024.

https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/kamer_in_het_kort/nederlandse-steun-aan-oekraïne

in an interview on Dutch political show *Buitenhof* that Europe does not have the capacity to defend itself independently and that the role of the NATO alliance is therefore crucial.¹³

Minister of Defense Kasja Ollongren explained in a parliamentary debate on aid to Ukraine on 2 February 2023 that “The Netherlands has learned from the past that we cannot do it alone ... The transatlantic relationship and NATO are still the cornerstone of our collective defense. This does not alter the fact that Europe must take more responsibility for its own security and the protection of European security interests” (Parliament debate Aid Ukraine, 21 February 2023) Ollongren does make clear that it is not enough to rely on the United States entirely: individual countries and European collective security initiatives must also play their part.

Prime Minister Mark Rutte explained in an interview with *New Atlanticist* on 18 January 2023 that the war “has only reinforced the importance of the Alliance to the United States.”¹⁴ Rutte’s language should also be understood against the backdrop of his party’s historically strong support of the NATO alliance and his candidacy for the position of NATO secretary-general. In an article by Dutch media outlet RTL News, diplomacy expert Robert van de Roer argued that the Rutte’s international reputation is exceptional, even arguing that he has been a more effective prime minister in Europe than in the Netherlands itself and that he has made more progress in the international realm than his predecessors such as Balkenende, Lubbers, and Kok. In the same article, political commentator Fons Lambie noted that at the NATO summit in Lithuania in July 2023, Rutte was described by a top diplomat as “the most well-behaved girl in the class”, who “has a great chance to become NATO’s next secretary-general.”¹⁵ President Joe Biden, while endorsing PM Rutte's candidacy to be the next Secretary General of NATO, said: “Prime Minister Rutte has a deep understanding of the importance of the Alliance, is a natural leader and communicator, and his leadership would serve the Alliance well at this critical time.”¹⁶

¹³ Bruins Slot, Hanke. *Buitenhof*. “Europa kan militair de broek niet ophouden.” 26th February 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCxPevn07_A

¹⁴ Rutte, Mark. Interview by *New Atlanticist*. 18 January 2023.

¹⁵ RTL News. “Rutte in 2023 veel vaker in het buitenland: ‘IN Europa effectievere premier.’” 26 December 2023. <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/artikel/5426038/premier-rutte-buitenland-navo-eu-europa-internationale-politiek>

¹⁶ Reuters. “Dutch PM Rutte in strong position to lead NATO with US, UK, French and German backing.” February 22 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk-backs-dutch-pm-rutte-become-next-nato-chief-2024-02-22/>

The statements of all the key foreign policy elites cited in this section shows that the construction of an identity narrative of NATO as the cornerstone of Dutch security policy and the importance of US leadership within the Alliance remains at the center-stage in the discourse on Dutch foreign policy. The role of the United States is still given top priority, and the US is still seen as the most important player in NATO for European defense. However, Europe must be prepared to stand on its own two feet. To look into this further, we will now turn to the second discursive theme of this analysis focused on regional security and the role of the EU as a stronger and more state-like actor in global affairs.

3.2 ‘Supporting a stronger and more state-like EU as a link to the world stage’

In the previous section, we already saw that emphasis was placed on closer cooperation between EU and NATO. Before continuing, it is worth mentioning that these two organizations are institutionally already closely linked. NATO essentially serves as the security and military arm of the EU for countries that are members of both organizations. Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the Union “shall respect the obligations of certain member states, which see their common defense realized in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), under the North Atlantic Treaty and be compatible with the common security and defense policy established within that framework.” (Schütze 2018, 22) The EU also signed the European Peace Facility fund in March 2021 as part of its CFSP. From an initial fund of EUR 5 billion, successive agreements to increase the fund mean its commitments now stand at EUR 12 billion.¹⁷

Hoekstra explained in his 2023 speech in Bruges that Ukraine is “fighting for a better future. A European future.”¹⁸ In line with this, in an appearance with the media after a meeting of foreign ministers at the EU Council of Ministers, current Dutch foreign minister Bruins Slot explained the importance of militarily supporting Ukrainian soldiers because they “also fight for the freedom of Europe. It’s not only the war of Ukrainians but also the war of Europe as a

¹⁷ European Council. “European Peace Facility: Council agrees on second top-up of the overall financial ceiling by EUR 3.5 billion.” 26 June 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/06/26/european-peace-facility-council-agrees-on-second-top-up-of-the-overall-financial-ceiling-by-3-5-billion/>

¹⁸ Hoekstra, Wopke, “Building a secure European future.” 20 February 2023.

continent. I feel that deeply.”¹⁹ Ollongren also explained in a media appearance on Dutch radio BNR that “While we are not fighting in this war it really feels like our war, and in certain respects I think that it really is because it’s also about freedom, democracy and our European values.”²⁰ Rutte echoed this stance even further in his speech to the Ukrainian parliament on May 12th 2022: “Before this war started, Ukraine was already a valued member of the European family. And of course, since 2017 it has a formal agreement with the European Union.”²¹ This narrative is in line with the theme of keeping the EU community open and that Ukraine will be welcomed with open arms into the European community of nations. He also mentions the EU-Ukraine association agreement playing a central role in justifying ongoing military aid to Ukraine, but he does not mention the Dutch rejection of said agreement in the 2016 referendum. In an interview with BNR radio, Ollongren, however, went into more detail:

Dutch people remember that we once had a referendum on the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine. Then, the Netherlands was against, and so they did not necessarily have the feeling that we should be so pro-Ukraine. But in fact, we are. And this is also because we see that because a country is attacked and invaded, that triggers something that is also deep in our own genes – having been attacked and occupied in the Second World War.²²

This is one of the few instances where an agent addresses the rejection of the EU Association Agreement by the Dutch. Ollongren aims to re-construct the narrative for a Dutch population that not so long ago showed it was unenthusiastic about support to Ukraine. To do so, she draws on the shared experience of the two countries as having both been occupied by a foreign aggressor state. This draws on a shared collective memory in war and peace, perhaps to instill a sense of shared experience in the people of the Netherlands to feel more of a personal

¹⁹ EU Debates. “Dutch FM Hanke Bruins Slot: Really important to show our solidarity with Ukraine.” 3 October 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqGIA2XCGpc>

²⁰ BNR. “Minister van Defensie: ‘Oorlog in Oekraïne voelt als onze oorlog.’” 28 August 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZ5PQXIrz4Q&t=392s>

²¹ Rutte, Mark. “Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands to the members of the Ukrainian Parliament.” 12 May 2022. Accessed on 27 February 2024. <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2022/05/12/speech-mp-rutte-ukrainian-parliament>

²² BNR. “Minister van Defensie: ‘Oorlog in Oekraïne voelt als onze oorlog.’” 28 August 2023.

connection to the people of Ukraine in order to sooth their doubts about continued support to the country.

Regarding what role the EU should play in collective defense, Hoekstra explained in his 2022 speech in Washington D.C. that “This war has also accelerated the EU’s progress to geopolitical maturity ... The EU is also a security project, a project that can only be successful if the EU and NATO work together.”²³ Furthermore, during his speech in Bruges Hoekstra said he was “convinced that the EU has to add a much more significant security angle to its whole repertoire”, which should be done by means of a “more assertive and coordinated diplomacy, a larger global presence” and “translat[ing] our economic capacity into geopolitical leverage.” He further mentions: “That is why the Netherlands is so convinced we need to qualified majority voting in the areas of sanctions, human rights, and civilian EU missions.”²⁴

Based on the analysis in this section, I find that the language of all of the situated agents contributes to the construction of a strong identity narrative which affirms the EU as an open community which needs to become a more central player on the world stage in order to safeguard European security, helping Europe to stand on its own two feet. The discourse is clear and aligned between the agents. However, Ollongren was the only one to address the Dutch referendum on the association agreement, which remains an impediment to achieving public support for long-term military aid to Ukraine. It is surprising that neither Bruins Slot, Rutte nor Hoekstra addressed the issue of public support for military aid to Ukraine in great detail. This shows that the agents are reasonably content to pursue their foreign policy agenda without addressing the lack of public support. I now turn to the final discursive theme which addresses what the Netherlands sees as an area to take a leading role in international affairs: taking a leading role in defending the international legal order and human rights.

3.3 ‘Taking a leading role in defending the international legal order and human rights’

Slot participated in a meeting of foreign ministers in Kyiv in October 2023. She explained to the media that the Netherlands is “the lead nation on accountability. We need to hold Russia accountable for the war crimes, for their aggression. [...] the Netherlands is committed to support[ing] Ukraine as long as it takes, whatever it takes ... for the freedom of the people of

²³ Hoekstra, Wopke. Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra on Transatlantic Security after Ukraine.” 14 April 2022.

²⁴ Hoekstra, Wopke. “Building a secure European future.” 20 February 2023.

Ukraine. We do that with our F16 coalition.”²⁵ Bruins Slot goes so far as justifying the F-16 aid under the banner of standing for infringements against international law. Hoekstra’s language during his speech in Washington DC was hardline, explaining that, regarding the prosecution of Russian war crimes: “Fortunately, The Hague has plenty of experience in dealing with war criminals. The Hague government is doing all it can to support institutions like the International Criminal Court in their prosecutions.”²⁶

At a parliamentary debate on Dutch aid to Ukraine on 21st February 2023, Rutte described the war as “A battle between democracy and tyranny.”²⁷ At a UN General Assembly Speech on 23rd September 2022, Rutte went on to explain that the war “is bigger than Ukraine itself. It’s about upholding the international rule of law... We must uphold the fundamental principles of the UN Charter.”²⁸ In a speech at the Fourth Council of the Europe Summit “United for Ukraine” in Reykjavik on 16th May 2023, Rutte explained that the Dutch commitment to assist Ukraine would go beyond military aid: “[supporting Ukraine] every inch of the way also means helping you after the war, on the road to recovery, reconstruction and justice”. Rutte also mentioned the “horrific human rights violations and war crimes” committed by Russia and expressed how “we in the Netherlands ... with the Hague as the legal capital of the world, feel a special responsibility in this regard.”²⁹

In her letter to the Dutch parliament regarding the update on the F-16 training coalition, Defense Minister Ollongren noted that “[c]ivilian infrastructure is protected under international humanitarian law and its destruction leads to great suffering for the Ukrainian population”.³⁰ In this way, Ollongren also justifies further military support to Ukraine on the grounds of

²⁵ EU Debates. “Dutch FM Hanke Bruins Slot: Really important to show our solidarity with Ukraine.” 3 October 2023.

²⁶ Hoekstra, Wopke. Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra on Transatlantic Security after Ukraine.” 14 April 2022.

²⁷ Parliament Debate. “Nederlandse steun aan Oekraïne.” 21 February 2023.

²⁸ Rutte, Mark. Speech at the United Nations General Assembly. 23 September 2022. Accessed on 27 February 2024. <https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/web/pr-un-new-york/documents/speeches/2022/09/29>

²⁹ Rutte, Mark. Statement at the General Debate of the Fourth Council of Europe Summit. 17 May 2023. Accessed on 27 February 2024. <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2023/05/17/statement-by-prime-minister-mark-rutte-at-the-general-debate-of-the-fourth-council-of-europe-summit>

³⁰ Ollongren, Kasja. Letter from the Ministry of Defense to Parliament. “Aanvullende Nederlandse bijdrage aan Oekraïense luchtverdediging.” 14 June 2023. Accessed on 27 February 2024. <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/79eb6049-3196-470d-bb2d-871530cb13e2/file>

international humanitarian law and standing up for the infringements against human rights. In her interview with BNR radio, she also explained that the Netherlands is “a country that stands for international law ... we therefore do feel connected with Ukraine”³¹, indicating that infringements on the human rights of Ukrainians should connect Ukraine and the Netherlands on a moral basis.

This section finds that the situated agents give central importance to this discursive theme. All agents mention the need for the Netherlands to take a leading role in upholding international law and defending human rights. Rutte and Hoekstra both mentioned that the Netherlands would play a central role in supporting Ukraine in a legal battle after the military battle has ended through prosecutions at the international tribunals in The Hague. It is clear that the Netherlands’ foreign policy tradition of internationalist idealism plays a central role here. Specifically, the language of all the situated agents constructs a narrative about continued military aid to Ukraine primarily in idealistic and moral terms.

³¹ BNR. “Minister van Defensie: ‘Oorlog in Oekraïne voelt als onze oorlog.’” 28 August 2023.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

4.1 Answering the research question

I now turn to answering the main research question, which is:

How have key decision makers used the military aid campaign to Ukraine to construct an assertive narrative for Dutch foreign policy?

This study has taken a constructivist approach focused on foreign policy action, wherein foreign policy practices are studied as intentional actions rather than mere ritualized practice, recognizing that in constructivism only the former has the ability to shape foreign policy in a meaningful way. A constructivist lens argues that foreign policy actions primarily follow a logic of appropriateness, wherein states will follow the courses of action deemed to be most appropriate to a state's identity. To this end, the discourse analysis aims to tap directly into the identity-foreign policy nexus that lies at the heart of the constructivist-interpretivist approach to foreign policy analysis. Elite discourse of four situated agents were used as analytical prisms for unpacking such identity issues in order to interpret how Dutch foreign policy has been constructed in the light of the escalating military aid campaign to Ukraine. The agents were Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD), former Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra (CDA), current Foreign Minister Hanke Bruins Slot (CDA) and Defense Minister Kasja Ollongren (D66).

The situated agents strongly embody the role of the Netherlands in the conflict in Ukraine by following a logic of appropriateness. Dutch state identity is interpreted and articulated by these agents as maintaining the rules and norms which stem from its membership of the EU and NATO while positioning the Netherlands as a leader in defending the international legal order and pushing for a more state-like EU. The Netherlands has shed much of the Dutch traditional "aloofness in dependence" as per the neutralist abstentionist tradition. Old foreign policy themes and traditions are still invoked by the agents, but the identity narratives constructed are more hardline and serve a different purpose. The old purpose of neutrality has been replaced by a strong commitment to supporting Ukraine, even if this means throwing Dutch domestic and commercial interests by the wayside. The Netherlands' pivotal commercial ties with Russia, which were at least maintained in the response to MH-17, have been abandoned. Foreign policy elites aim to position the Netherlands as a one of the strongest allies of Ukraine using moral justification to overcome public skepticism towards Ukraine from the 2016

referendum “No” vote. Moreover, while the US is still seen as a key player, Europe is increasingly pushed to the forefront in regional security to be able to stand on its own two feet. To this end, deeper EU security integration to become a more powerful actor is encouraged, as is working more closely in unison with NATO at institutional level.

One of the most interesting findings is selected agents’ reference to the war as “our war,” which was particularly highlighted by Ollongren and Bruins Slot. This construction is a powerful and rather novel narrative which closely ties the identity of the Netherlands with the past, present and future of Ukraine. This feeds directly into justifying why continued military aid to Ukraine is appropriate. This in turn demonstrates how Dutch foreign policy themes, tendencies and traditions are constructed and adapted to a new geopolitical reality, and by extension, to the more assertive self-image the Netherlands is creating for itself in the international arena.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this study finds that the key foreign policy elites are determined to create a leading role for the Netherlands by strongly invoking its tradition of internationalist idealism. This is in part a continuation of an assertive foreign policy stemming from MH-17. However, in contrast with MH-17, this study finds that Dutch foreign policy is no longer based on the historical Dutch self-image of dovish pacifism, once diagnosed as “Hollanditis” in the 1980s, with commercial interests as the driving force of foreign policy decision-making. Rather, a more radical hawkishness – if necessary, at the expense of economic interests – hitherto unseen in the Netherlands has become the more dominant discourse, which nevertheless still operates under the guise of a morally-infused Dutch idealism.

Ultimately, when it comes to foreign policy, it is still a small group of key decision-makers who call the shots and who are willing to ignore unfavorable public opinion in the pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. Intentional foreign policy actions certainly have the power to mold foreign policy themes and shift foreign policy trajectory. However, the volatile nature of Dutch coalition politics cannot be ignored. This is especially so given the October 2023 general election which featured a landslide victory for Geert Wilders’ nationalist Freedom Party (PVV), which is against military aid to Ukraine. The election also featured huge losses for the strongly internationalist-leaning incumbent coalition parties VVD, CDA and D66.

4.3 Relevance for future research

The relevance of this thesis has an academic and a societal component. Firstly, the insights of this study feed into the wider societal debate on the Dutch “Dominee” (Pastor) vs “Koopman” (Merchant) role. With a novel focus on the war in Ukraine, this study will also be of relevance to the academic debate on the changing nature of Dutch foreign policy since MH-17. I suggest that studies focusing more centrally on the role of prime minister Rutte in Dutch foreign policy (for example, by analyzing his leadership style) would prove insightful. Additionally, the findings should be helpful in feeding into the recent increase in academic interest on the question of rationality in foreign policy, owing to the publication of John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato’s 2023 book *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy* which has reinvigorated interest in the topic. However, in-depth studies on the rationality of foreign policy responses war in Ukraine will only be available once state documents and other relevant data will be made public.

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