



*BREUKLIJN 1989. Continuïteit en verandering in het Nederlandse
defensiebeleid 1989-1993*

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SUMMARY

FAULTLINE 1989

Continuity and change in the Dutch defence policy 1989-1993

The foundations of today's armed forces were laid in the early 1990s: a period that can justifiably be referred to as a fault line in the history of the Dutch military. The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), German reunification (1990) and the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991) dramatically changed the international security situation in a short space of time. The political and military leadership were forced to bid farewell to the familiar and relatively stable framework of the Cold War and orient themselves on an uncertain, constantly changing future without a concrete military threat to the Netherlands. For the first time in the history of the Dutch armed forces, the link between the duty of the armed forces and the defence of the national territory was broken. Between 1989 and 1993, the top of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) offered their initial answers to these fundamental changes by publishing the Defence White Paper 1991 and the Defence Priorities Review of 1993. This book focuses on how they conducted themselves under these circumstances.

Three underlying central questions are at the heart of this research. To what extent was the MoD leadership capable of comprehending the nature and scale of the crisis, and which alternatives did they identify? The second question is to what extent political and military leaders held on to the familiar, existing paradigm of the Cold War. The members of the military themselves were also strongly influenced by the paradigm of their military branch (navy, army or air force), each of which had a well-developed organisational culture. The third and final question builds on previous research into the realisation of defence policy, which suggests that the military can have a major or even resolute influence there. To what extent was this the case in the period under consideration here? This book draws on these questions to offer an in-depth analysis of the realisation of Dutch defence policy in a period of sweeping changes and uncertainty. As a case study, it offers insight into the process and dynamics that normally remain concealed behind the doors of the MoD.

Fault line 1989 consists of two parts. The first part lays the groundwork for the analysis of the realisation of defence policy in the 1989-1993 period. It outlines how the Cold War could develop into a policy paradigm, an almost matter-of-course consensus within a group of policymakers regarding the nature of the problem that they were to solve and regarding the objectives and instruments required to do so. For nearly four decades, the consensus was that advancing communism and its most prominent national representative – the Soviet Union – represented an existential threat to the Netherlands and its allies. Only by becoming a member of a credible military alliance headed by the United States could the Netherlands defend itself against this threat. The

Netherlands contributed three fully-equipped military branches to this alliance. Throughout the Cold War, these basic principles and instruments enjoyed widespread public support.

A basic assumption of this study is that each section of the armed forces has a unique organisational culture based on its primary field of action: land, sea or air. The analysis of defence policy during the Cold War reveals that the composition of the armed forces was a result of the dynamics between external circumstances such as the international security situation and available budget on the one hand, and the attempts of military branches to organise themselves in line with their idealised image on the other. With regard to the navy, this ideal was the harmonious fleet and its global application, for the army, a corps that was suitable for armed combat, and for the air force, the possession of modern fighter aircraft to ensure superiority in the air and successful tactical support.

The first part of this book concludes with further consideration of the state of the armed forces in the final years of the Cold War. On paper, the armed forces were stronger than ever in the late 1980s, with a harmonious fleet of twenty-two frigates at its core, an army corps with more than nine hundred tanks, and nearly two hundred F-16 fighter aircraft. However, archival research reveals that the situation was far less auspicious in reality. The military branches were, in fact, operating beyond their means. There was a constant imbalance between the ambitions and the financial possibilities. Political and military leaders were aware of this problem, but were not prepared to seek structural solutions. Instead, the military branches ate into their available training possibilities, ammunition stocks, fuel and spare parts, while postponing investment. It was an alarming situation, also because the defence leaders did not believe that the Cold War would end any time soon.

The West were surprised by events in Eastern Europe. Nobody assumed, and rightly so, that the Soviet leader Gorbachev was set on dismantling the Communist Bloc, let alone the Soviet Union. Knowing what we know now, it is striking how little consideration was given to alternative future scenarios. While the signals and trends were certainly recognised, hardly anyone anticipated a possible end to the Cold War. The most positive scenario considered was that tension between East and West would subside in the years ahead, but that this tension would continue to dominate the international security situation in the decades to follow. The MoD primarily anticipated a reduction of the defence budget. The fall of the Wall therefore came as a total surprise to most people.

The second part of this book focuses on the case study examining the realisation of the Defence White Paper 1991 and the Defence Priorities Review of 1993. The Minister of Defence, Relus ter Beek (PvdA, Dutch Labour Party), announced the arrival of a new Defence White Paper when he took office on 8 November 1989. When one day later the Berlin Wall fell, this initiative was placed in an entirely different light. The Minister appointed a steering committee comprising the top of the

MoD, but not the service chiefs. In line with recommendations from the General Policy Directorate (Directie Algemene Beleidszaken, DAB), he decided not to invite the chiefs in light of concerns that they would chiefly slow down the process.

The scant minutes from the meetings of the steering group reveal that they quickly recognised the nature and magnitude of the situation. There were few taboos. The only topic not up for discussion with the Minister was the abolishment of compulsory military service. Only a few months after the fall of the Wall, the steering committee concluded that the Cold War was over. In order to justify the existence of the armed forces in a period of reduced threat, the steering committee suggested that they required an alternative core responsibility. Crisis management and peacetime operations were deemed to be the most appropriate options. The Minister was prepared to invest heavily in this area. He thereby attempted to offer the armed forces perspective in times of cutbacks and increase support for the changes. It should be noted that these decisions entailed a political risk for Ter Beek. Early in 1990, the new primary responsibility was plausible, but certainly not an alternative that was a matter of course. Up until then, his own party – including the Minister himself during his time as an MP – had been critical of the participation of the Dutch armed forces in peacekeeping operations. It also remained to be seen whether the House of Representatives would be prepared to invest millions of guilders in the armed forces. In this period, the majority of politicians appeared to be focused on cashing in on the peace dividend. Parliament could also reach the conclusion that more cutbacks were possible, which would leave the department empty-handed. Ter Beek can be commended for being prepared to take these risks and part ways with the existing paradigms.

Both the navy and the air force had few problems with the new primary responsibility and quickly said farewell to the Cold War. It was to their advantage that they were able to conduct their new tasks using existing organisations and means. The same did not apply to the army. Instead of a large, heavily-mechanised army corps, the new responsibility required smaller, independent units that could be deployed quickly and flexibly. In addition, the army was heavily dependent on conscripts, who could only be deployed outside the NATO-area for crisis management tasks on a voluntary base. In practice, the majority of the army was unsuitable for the new crisis management and peacetime operations. These were dramatic changes that could not be easily reversed if the security situation took a turn for the worse. Army leaders therefore responded cautiously. However, the tight timeline and the political obligation to publish a white paper forced army leaders to accept the new main task and start a dramatic restructuring of the organisation sooner than they would have liked. The Defence White Paper 1991 was therefore vitally important to the process of change within the army. The time pressure caused a quandary for army leaders. The consensus within the

Army Council was that the focus on crisis management and peacetime operations could not come at the expense of the army corps and the capacity to deal with a major conflict. Lieutenant-General M. J. Wilmink, the commander of the army, did not succeed in finding a solution to this antithesis, except for continuing to emphasise the importance of both responsibilities and attempting to play for time. Incidentally, his cautious attitude did not mean that the commanders of the navy and air force, Vice-Admiral H. van Foreest and Lieutenant-General W.C. Louwense, were much more open-minded. For them, preserving the existing structures and resources was also the primary objective.

The service chiefs ultimately succeeded in convincing the Minister to limit cutbacks due to the considerable risk of compulsory redundancies. It is no coincidence that this was one of the Minister's political markers. Ter Beek thereby ignored the warning of one of his main advisors, J.H.M. de Winter (DAB), who was of the opinion that the restructuring would fall flat if the Minister failed to put sufficient pressure on the services. De Winter was proven right. The tried-and-tested recipe of linear cuts and postponing investment yielded sufficient funds. Thanks to Ter Beek's proposal, the military branches even received additional capacities, such as an amphibious transport ship and an Airborne Brigade with helicopters and new transport aircraft. These plans stemmed from the Cold War, but met the requirements because they improved the expeditionary capabilities of the armed forces.

On 8 March 1991, Ter Beek presented the Defence White Paper 1991. It was greeted with disappointment by many commentators. Apart from the cutbacks, the armed forces remained essentially unchanged. This was the paradox of the Defence White Paper 1991. The white paper did not radically change the armed forces, it came too early to do so. Its true significance was that it allowed the MoD – in any case, the members of the armed forces, civil servants and politicians directly involved with the white paper – to become accustomed to a new security situation, a shrinking budget and a new task for the armed forces. The Minister gained valuable experience while realising the white paper. It turned out that the military branches, which had put up heavy resistance to all too far-reaching cutbacks, were able to deal with them with relative ease. Indeed, it was not long before the Minister could put the lessons to good use, as a majority of the House of Representatives soon called for a new white paper. The MPs believed that the Defence White Paper 1991 left too many questions unanswered, including the issue of the future of compulsory military service. The Minister could have done without his white paper being evaluated, but when the Soviet Union collapsed on 25 December 1992, he also realised that it was unavoidable.

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the definitive end to the Cold War. The Defence White Paper 1991 now proved its worth. At the MoD, this event therefore didn't cause a major shock. It also confirmed that the decision to shift the focus of the armed forces from large-scale

conflict to crisis management and peacetime operations was correct. Following the Gulf War, it became clear that the new task could count on wide social and political support, incidentally without a new policy consensus being on the table. The contribution of the Dutch armed forces to upholding international rule of law was too much of a political choice, and therefore strongly subject to political inconstancy. Surprisingly enough, the military branches did not view the developments outlined above as a reason to adjust their plans. The existing operational and institutional concepts of military branches, inherited from the Cold War, were not up for discussion. It was as if they were immune to the state of the international security situation. The commanders therefore took the risk of losing influence on the future of their organisation. After all, the world in which the military branches functioned had certainly changed. This risk was the most pressing for the army in light of the issue of compulsory military service, but it also threatened the navy and air force in the long term. Criticism of the continuation of the submarine service and doubts regarding the long-term affordability of the air force were warnings that the existing structure and resources were not a matter of course.

The cautious attitude adopted by the military branches meant that it fell to the Minister to take the initiative during the realisation of the Defence Priorities Review. During the realisation of the Defence White Paper 1991, Ter Beek monitored rather than controlled the process, but he was now experienced enough to actually change the armed forces and make them future-proof. He was faced with a divided and slimmed-down military that had no alternative plan. In a lecture at the Netherlands Society for International Affairs (Nederlands Genootschap voor Internationale Zaken, NGIZ) in March 1992, Ter Beek outlined his vision of the future of the armed forces. He believed that the Netherlands required radically different armed forces now that a period without concrete military threat had dawned. From then on, the entire armed forces were to be available for crisis management and peacetime operations. And in light of the fact that missions such as these were always of an international nature, the armed forces no longer needed to be fully fledged. Furthermore, the shrinking defence budget meant that all-encompassing armed forces could no longer be funded.

Ter Beek thereby positioned himself directly opposite the military leadership. In their eyes, the lack of threat did not mean that the chance of large-scale conflict (which can never be completely ruled out) could now simply be ignored. The commanders also argued that the existing structures and resources that were suitable for operations involving the highest level of violence were also suitable for less violent operations, such as peacetime missions, while that was not the case the other way around. After all, a lightly-armed unit could not hold its ground in an escalating situation. The military leaders were not wrong, and the political leaders did not contend their standpoint. Their stance was that the armed forces desired by the military leaders were no longer affordable and could

no longer count on wide support – certainly not in relation to compulsory military service. Military leaders had difficulty accepting the new political reality. They focused on limiting the damage in the hope of better times to come. The solutions were focused on the short term and in some cases were simply opportunistic. Experienced by now, Ter Beek had little difficulty seeing what they were up to and setting his own course. It was primarily the army who felt the impact when Ter Beek – completely against their will – decided to bring an end to compulsory military service. For the Minister, the deciding factor was the limited possibilities for deploying conscripts for crisis management operations and peacetime missions. This problem had already become reality mid-1992 when the army reached its deployment limit with simultaneous peacetime missions in both the Balkans and Cambodia.

Following the decision, the entire army was available for the new primary task within scarcely four years. It was quite a feat from the Minister, but abolishing compulsory military service was also the only priority that he outlined in the Defence Priorities Review. He failed to actually introduce his vision (that for future-proof armed forces priorities needed to be set between and within the various branches) in practice. The Netherlands had a smaller, but still all-encompassing armed forces at its disposal. In essence, the armed forces had even become more complete following the addition of new capacities. Ter Beek never explicitly answered the question of why he failed to set priorities, although he did later state that as a politician, he always had to take feasibility and support for his plans into account. A statement such as this fits with the image of Ter Beek as a minister who preferred to avoid conflict and to carefully manoeuvre to seek a feasible compromise, before subsequently making a decision. Ter Beek was pragmatic, as revealed by letting down his own conviction that compulsory military service was important for the relationship between society and the army. From this perspective, it would have been more appealing for Ter Beek to comply with the wishes of the military leaders and thereby secure support for his plans. The decision to abolish compulsory military service was already sufficiently complex.

The military branches therefore once again succeeded in preserving the existing structure, despite the fact that the framework within which they functioned had changed dramatically since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This research reveals that the driving force behind the attitude of the armed forces was the organisational culture of their branches. As an almost self-evident continuity, this gave direction to the military leaders' line of thought regarding the essence of their military branch. The plans of the branches were primarily institutionally motivated, just as they were during the Cold War. In itself, falling back on existing, familiar paradigms is an understandable response in times of change. The issue that military leaders were required to solve was not straightforward. The future is unpredictable, the consequences of decisions are difficult to calculate and the fallout from poor

decisions can be tremendous. This struggle is typified by the oft-recurring question of whether a large-scale conflict could be ruled out and emphasising that the loss of capacities could not be easily reversed. In addition, the political focus on cashing in on the peace dividend left military leaders with little faith that well-considered choices were being made. Nevertheless, it fell precisely to the military leaders, as military advisors to the political leaders and the guardians of the armed forces to find an answer to this complex dilemma. As previously mentioned, none of the military branches fundamentally reconsidered their objectives. Under the guise of modernisation, they stuck to the existing paradigms wherever possible, and accepted that the margins for the armed forces remained extremely tight.

With the Defence Priorities Review, the MoD brought an end to a period in which the armed forces adjusted to the new security situation. It was an unequivocal transformation in Dutch defence policy. While it would take years for the armed forces to actually change, the Netherlands led the way within NATO. This strikingly rapid farewell to the paradigm of the Cold War, which had determined the ins and outs of the armed forces for nearly four decades, raises the question of its significance for the armed forces. The fact is that the response from military leaders was conflicting. While they accepted the irreversibility of the changes in Eastern Europe, the disappearance of the military threat and the new primary responsibility, the existing organisation and structures – referred to using terms such as ‘the core’, ‘the essence’ and ‘backbone’ of the military branches – remained the self-evident starting point moving forward. The conflict that had determined the weal and woe of the armed forces for forty years ultimately had less impact on its self-image than the much longer continuity of the culture of the branches. This did not mean that the reorganisations were less radical, but they did not result in different armed forces. The Minister was in the position to set priorities, but he failed to do so. In order to maintain support for the reorganisations, he accepted that the commanders relied on linear cutbacks and postponing investment to preserve the armed forces in line with their ideal image. As a result, the Netherlands still had ‘complete’ armed forces at its disposal that it could hardly afford. This was also continuity. In light of the declining defence budget, this problem had even intensified. This contrast between change – recognising the fundamental character of the changes and determining a new course – and continuity – retaining existing operational and institutional concepts – forms the paradox of the two white papers.

This leads to the conclusion that in this period, the structure and composition of the organisation had more impact on the policy of the military branches than the threat or the international security situation. This does not mean that the military branches did not take their responsibilities seriously, but it does mean that they tried to carry out their tasks in accordance with their ideal image whenever they could: a factor that appears unlikely to change. A commander will

always bear large-scale conflict (which can never be completely ruled out) in mind, after all, that is the most dangerous situation that can face the military. There may be peace at the moment, but the situation could be completely different in a couple of years' time. In anticipation of such a development, a member of the military will want access to all means available to defend themselves, is never ready and has never enough of these resources.

When considering what a military branch requires, a commander will primarily be guided by the culture within their organisation, the collective memory of the service. The constant struggle with the other commanders regarding the defence budget, the favour of the Minister and proving their right to exist intensified this situation. This results in a prisoner's dilemma. On the one hand, this hampers the services in critically examining their own organisation, and e.g. divesting responsibilities. There is too great a risk that others assume the responsibilities and fail to deliver. On the other hand, this discourages the military branches from taking the initiative and presenting the Minister with a joint proposal that he cannot refuse. The consequence is that the military leaders relinquish the initiative and push the problem back to the Minister.

Ter Beek recognised that there was a fundamental problem with the armed forces, a problem that could only be solved by setting priorities. Only then would the armed forces remain affordable. And yet he ultimately did not set these priorities. From the perspective of the Minister, this choice is understandable. It would probably result in a fierce confrontation with the military branches, which was not necessary at that point in time and could come at the expense of support for the changes. He therefore passed up on the opportunity to give the armed forces future-proof foundations. The upshot was that in the subsequent years, the armed forces were free to continue to syphon off the defence budget and the scene was set for the gradual erosion of the armed forces.