

Military and Strategy (The Netherlands)

By [Wim Klinkert](#)

Summary

Since the middle of the 19th century, armed neutrality had been the pillar of Dutch military strategy. From 1900, this was implemented not only by the purely defensive concept of "Fortress Holland" on the country's western borders, but also by a German-style mobile field army that would protect the eastern or southern borders. Strategic complications emanated from the almost indefensible eccentric areas in the southwest (where possible British actions could be directed towards Antwerp) and southeast (the German passage to France). Any obvious one-sided preparation to defend against only one potential enemy was considered unacceptable by the government because it meant choosing sides. This conflict was never properly discussed, let alone resolved and created severe military-political tension, which culminated in 1918.

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Introduction

In early December 1913 the Dutch General Staff held its yearly strategic map exercise. After a sudden rise in international tensions, resulting from a [Balkan-crisis](#), so the scenario went, Europe was set ablaze by a war between the Triple Entente and the Central Powers. [The Netherlands](#) chose to implement its well-prepared armed [neutrality](#) to safeguard its territory and refused a British request to station warships in the Dutch North Sea port of Flushing. History would quickly prove the Dutch General Staff right. The exercise was the third in a row. Earlier exercises had analysed the Dutch reaction to a German march through the southern Maastricht appendix as part of a Franco-German war (1912) and a war between the Anglo-French entente and [Germany](#), with the Dutch choosing the German side (1912-1913).

These exercises were part of the Dutch General Staff's efforts to keep its Strategic Instructions (*Strategische Aanwijzingen*) for military and civilian authorities in case of war, or the threat of war, up to date. This was one of the cornerstones of the chief-of-staff Lieutenant General [Cornelis Jacobus Snijders \(1852-1939\)](#) policy.

Strategic Outlines

Snijders was appointed chief-of-staff in June 1910. He was convinced that the Netherlands needed both a strong, modern, and sizable field army that could be positioned in the northern, eastern or southern provinces, responding to where danger was most imminent, and, alongside it, a modern, defensive fortress system around the "heart of the country," making a protracted defensive war possible, and securing a safe line of communications via the North Sea. Advanced engineering works, water level regulation, and carefully prepared inundations made "Fortress Holland" a formidable barrier. Although this system of military defence, aimed at upholding neutrality, made good sense, as the Dutch had no territorial ambitions in Europe, it did not give any guarantee against a violation of Dutch territory. In case of an enemy attack, the field army would resist, but not fight to the last man as it would subsequently have to assist in repelling an attack on the fortified lines for at least a few months. This scenario would make the country a credible ally if a major power came to its rescue and would increase the Dutch chance for a seat at the negotiating table in a future peace conference. However, complicating factors existed, mainly related to two eccentrically located areas: Limburg and Zeeland. The field army could not be positioned there in any strength as the risk of its destruction was substantial and it would no longer be able to man the fortified line against an invading army. But it was exactly Zeeland and Limburg that attracted the most interest from the neighbouring powers.

Limburg in the southeast was important for the German army in planning a quick and easy route towards [France](#) through [Belgium](#) as the Dutch military authorities were well aware.

They had observed the large railway yards built in German border towns in the 1880s.¹ Zeeland controlled the Scheldt, the waterway to Antwerp, with its large and modern fortress ring planned as the *reduite nationale* of neutral Belgium and presumably the location for British military assistance if Belgian [neutrality](#) was violated. International interest in these questions partly explains the appointment of foreign military and naval attachés to The Hague. Until 1907 only the British army and navy were represented here, but were joined thereafter by the French and, in 1910, the Germans. Moreover, the French became the most frequent visitors to Dutch military exercises, as the Dutch might well be the first to confront a German advance towards France.

On sea another danger loomed: a conflict between Germany and Britain. Such an eventuality

would make the Dutch coast of extreme strategic value to the belligerents. In a British-German war, the Dutch expected the British to [blockade](#) the German coast, possibly including the Dutch coast as well. Most Dutch experts agreed that such a blockade, even outside Dutch territorial waters, was in fact a violation of Dutch neutrality and thus a possible *casus belli*. The question of a blockade was dealt with in the 1909 London Declaration concerning the Laws of Naval War that did indeed protect neutral rights, but as it was never ratified, the Dutch were rather doubtful about its validity in wartime. These international developments were reflected in Dutch war planning. In September 1907, for the first time in several decades, large military exercises were held along the coast, in which not only the army and navy participated, but also a new organization, the military coastguard, founded in 1906 to increase readiness in case of an undeclared invasion by hostile naval forces.²

Formative Years, 1910-1911

That international events could take a potentially dangerous turn became apparent in 1910-1911, formative years for Snijders' military strategic policy. First, the Dutch plan to fortify Flushing and the mouth of the Scheldt turned into a European affair, which was unprecedented for any Dutch defence initiative. In 1909 the Dutch government had announced it would strengthen its coastal defences in order to deter any violation of neutral Dutch territory. It was the most expensive Dutch military proposal ever made and led to fierce polemics all through 1910 and 1911, as the government and the military revealed the plans in more detail. It was the [French press](#) that made the plans into a European issue. [Roland de Marès \(1874-1955\)](#), a francophone Flemish journalist, published articles from October 1910 onwards to stir up French and Belgian public opinion against the Dutch plans, calling them pro-German and accusing the Dutch of hindering the British in assisting Belgium in case of a German attack. On 16 January 1911, the Dutch plans were discussed in the French parliament. Foreign Minister [Stéphen Pichon \(1857-1933\)](#) even toyed with the idea of making the issue the subject of an international conference, but support for this suggestion outside France was low.

In [Great Britain](#), *The Times* stated that German strategic interests probably inspired the Dutch plan, but with the exception of some French and Francophone Belgian sources, most comments stressed Dutch freedom of choice in the defence of their neutrality, while also pointing out that the question of the Scheldt could aggravate a European crisis. Speculations involving different war scenarios were put forward, as was the widely-circulating idea that criticizing the Dutch would only make them more stubborn.

The question kept political and military commentators, journalists, lawyers, and diplomats busy for several months, but in the end, the Dutch themselves reduced the tension by

postponing the final decision and scaling down their expensive plans: the defence works at the mouth of the Scheldt were to protect the harbour of Flushing against a *coup de main*, not to close off the Scheldt effectively. Flushing was important for the Dutch Navy as an additional base for submarines and torpedo boats. This meant, according to the government, that it was a purely national affair and not related to the ambitions of any foreign country. When Great Britain joined the war on 4 August 1914, the Dutch declared the Scheldt closed to all belligerent ships, a declaration Britain accepted. The fortress was never built.

The second confrontation with sudden European developments came in the summer of 1911 when the second Moroccan crisis reached its peak. The Dutch army increased vigilance on the [borders](#) and in the coastal fortresses. Two officers left for Germany incognito to gather intelligence, alertness on the Meuse bridges was increased, and the garrisons close to the bridges were strengthened. Conscripts who were about to be demobilized were retained, the activation of inundations was prepared, and [Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands \(1880-1962\)](#) informed foreign representatives involved that the Netherlands was prepared for an armed defence of its neutrality. [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#), Home Secretary at the time, toyed with the idea of British military support for Belgium via the Scheldt River, and appeared prepared to block the Dutch coast if the Dutch resisted. This idea never became formal British policy, but in general the parallels in the Dutch reaction to the [Moroccan](#) and the [July 1914 crisis](#) are striking.³

Third, in 1910 Snijders pointed out that the country's defence preparations would benefit substantially if the government indicated which major power would be a potential ally. The government, however, argued that military preparations that were patently one-sided would endanger neutrality. Snijders, in return, frequently and publicly expressed his dismay at Dutch politicians' ignorance of the strategic implications of their strict, legal interpretation of neutrality. From 1914 those two opinions proved to be incompatible and led to serious tensions between the government and military leadership. The military point of view was that preparations, including informal talks with foreign powers, were essential in times of danger and were the only way to defend the country after neutrality had been violated.

Finally, in 1910-1911 Snijders whole-heartedly supported legislation which gave the Netherlands a Prussian-style army organisation, enlarging the army to 200,000 men in case of a mobilisation, with the potential to grow to almost half a million out of a population of 6.5 million. Parliament also approved substantial improvements in field [artillery](#) and logistic support. The first major division-size manoeuvres, also following the German example, were held in 1911 shortly after Snijders had begun compiling his *Strategische aanwijzingen* in order to smoothen the call up and dislocation of the army in times of crisis. The

aforementioned exercises on the map were part of this effort.⁴

Snijders' Preparations put to the Test: August 1914

The smooth and timely call-up of the Dutch army on 1 August 1914, the first general mobilisation in Western Europe, proved the quality of Dutch military staff work. Within three days, the field army consisting of 200,000 men was positioned in a dispersed way throughout the country in order to protect neutral Dutch territory "on all sides." Both Germany and Britain declared to respect Dutch neutrality and did so. The Dutch army closed off the Scheldt, but Britain no longer used Antwerp as its main port on the continent. The German army meticulously respected the [Dutch-Belgian land border](#) in Limburg. When the fighting in Belgium took place, Snijders ordered the field army to concentrate more than half its strength in the southern provinces, to fulfil its role as a deterrent force.

Snijders led an extensive general headquarters in The Hague and considered himself the sole authority to decide on military operational and strategic matters. As commander-in-chief, he resisted any government interference when military affairs were involved. Although both he and the government agreed fully on the Dutch course to stay neutral, Snijders' opinion could deviate notably from the government's on how this was to be achieved. For instance, Snijders stressed the need to keep the whole army mobilised at full strength. Demobilisation of substantial parts of the army after the stabilization of the [Western Front](#), as [Switzerland](#) and the Scandinavian neutrals had done, he considered out of the question. He emphasized the dangerous geographical position of the Netherlands, the speed with which foreign armies could reach the country *en masse*, and considered time the most precious commodity the Netherlands had to prepare its defences. The army had to be permanently at full strength to be effective when the strategic situation around the Netherlands changed. This point of view also meant Snijders did not consider the repression of smuggling, practiced in large scale in all border areas, to be a task for the army as it diminished its operational value, especially in the case of a quickly developing crisis situation. Furthermore, he pleaded repeatedly for the declaration of a state of siege in the entire country, enhancing military powers in combatting [espionage](#), practising [censorship](#), and controlling both the [press](#) and local government.

Snijders managed to convince the government to keep the army at full strength but it was heavily contested in parliament, as demobilisation obviously was an attractive option for social and economic reasons. He failed to get a state of siege declared in the western provinces but he did get the government to have the Ministry of Finance assist the army in fighting smugglers. Snijders focused primarily on strictly military matters, and stressed operational readiness, level of training and quality of Dutch weaponry as his professional domain in which he did not take interference kindly.⁵

Furthermore, in case tensions around the Netherlands increased, Snijders, as he had said in 1910, wanted complete liberty to prepare for possible violations of neutrality and to anticipate future allies. The country would not be able to react adequately to possible war scenarios if it lacked preparation time. The government, however, felt that Dutch military preparations favouring one of the belligerents were incompatible with neutrality. As it was unlikely to remain a secret, Snijders was explicitly forbidden to anticipate or secretly prepare any form of military cooperation or to concentrate the Dutch army against one of the belligerent states. Snijders' military logic was completely contrary to what he called the government's *neutralité par outrance*, which gave the army no time to prepare adequately and, in the most extreme case, would have it face *both* belligerent blocks. The first time this conflict came into the open was during the [Easter](#) Alarm of 1916.⁶ It reached dangerous proportions two years later.

1918

In December 1917, [Edward Carson \(1854-1935\)](#), a member of the British War Cabinet, instructed [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#), as representative of the Committee of Northern Neutrals, to open communications between the British military attaché in The Hague and the Dutch General Staff.⁷ The Committee pointed out that the Dutch needed more modern military equipment, as they were essential for Britain in case of a German attack on Zeeland.⁸

In March 1918, three developments coincided: first, the long-standing issue of German transport of sand and gravel via Dutch territory on the river Rhine to Belgium, allegedly for road repair, but actually (also) for the construction of pill boxes and other improvements to the German trench system, escalated; second, the shortage of options for the transport of US troops and military materiel to Europe became imminent; and third, [Erich Ludendorff's \(1865-1937\)](#) preparations for the major [German Spring offensive](#) in the West dominated German planning. All of these affected Dutch neutrality. On 16 March, the Entente requested that the Dutch make their merchant navy available for transatlantic transports. As a neutral power, the Dutch government could not possibly accede to this request. Snijders sounded the alarm, because he felt that this request would give the Germans the pretext they needed to invade Dutch territory, either for military transports or for troop movement. On 18 March, he asked the government's permission to cancel all leaves. His request was turned down. The American and British governments decided to claim the Dutch ships lying in Entente ports and to compensate the owners. In the unlikely event that this would lead to war, the British War Cabinet decided to assist the Dutch army, as Germany had to be prevented from acquiring control over the Dutch coast. With British troops in the Netherlands, the Ruhr area would come within reach of British bombers, something Smuts regularly emphasized.⁹

On 20 March, the Entente actually took possession of the Dutch ships, ignoring Dutch protests. Within days Ludendorff in turn demanded permission to use Dutch territory for military transports to compensate for the breach of neutrality in favour of the Allies. But as the massive German offensive in the west began, the German army now lacked the means to make credible threats to annex the Netherlands by force. At the most an invasion of the Scheldt estuary might remain an option, an operation that had been prepared by the German navy and army since September 1916.¹⁰ Ludendorff kept demanding the use of Dutch territory for military transports and the British kept fearing a German attack on Zeeland. As fighting raged in France, all they could do was to advise the Dutch to give in somewhat to German demands in order to ease tensions.¹¹

The Dutch foreign minister was stubborn, pointing out to the German minister in The Hague that Dutch concessions to Germany were not compatible with Dutch neutrality. Because he feared an ultimatum from Ludendorff, the German minister in The Hague approached the Dutch prime minister and pointed out how serious the situation was. Next, the prime minister contacted Snijders, who feared war might actually spill over onto Dutch territory, finding the Dutch army unprepared. Despite the rising tensions, the government clung to neutrality and refused to choose sides. Snijders' worst case scenario seemed on the verge of coming true: the fear of being dragged into the war prevented him from taking measures he deemed necessary to mount a credible defence in case of invasion. A near-complete breakdown of Dutch civil-military relations was the result.

Luckily, on 29 April a compromise was found, probably because the German political leadership did not back Ludendorff's most extreme demand, military [transport](#) through Limburg. Dutch-German negotiations came to an end on 30 May, when Dutch officers were assigned to check German train transports through Limburg. They were only to include, apart from gravel and sand, goods like timber, straw, and oats. [Transports over water](#) also continued and the Entente followed Dutch controls closely.¹²

This crisis made the [British government](#) decide to bring the question of how to defend the Netherlands against possible German offensives before the [Supreme War Council](#) in Versailles. This body discussed Dutch neutrality on 25 and 27 April, and concluded it was a major Allied interest. The threat of German control over the coastline, their use of Antwerp as naval base, and access to the abundance of agricultural produce the Netherlands possessed all made it so. However, the Entente lacked the means to come to the assistance of the Dutch in case of a German attack. It might deliver some [\(machine\) guns](#), [airplanes](#), and munitions, but could contribute hardly any troops.¹³ The Dutch had to play their part too, and this was problematic.

While the generals in Versailles discussed the strategic importance of the Netherlands, Snijders had put himself in a major predicament by telling the Dutch government on 22 April that the Dutch army would not be able to defend the country against a major German attack. Snijders did not really think an attack was imminent; he suspected, based on information from his intelligence department, that the Germans were only attempting to intimidate both the Dutch and the Entente. The government was not pleased by the seemingly defeatist attitude of the general. While the minister of war held extensive talks with prominent Dutch officers, Snijders quietly strengthened the maritime defence of Zeeland. The British and French naval attachés were secretly informed about the military preparations in Zeeland and reported them in detail.

Meanwhile, the French War Office prepared a study on the Dutch army. It concluded that a quick collapse of Dutch defences would reflect badly on the Entente and recommended a joint British-French plan to defend Zeeland and the northern Dutch waters around the Den Helder naval base. France would be able to contribute two divisions and they proposed talks with the Dutch General Staff. The French General Staff concurred with these observations.¹⁴

On 11 May, the Supreme War Council discussed the French proposition, supported by a message from “a well-informed pro-Entente Dutchman,” who reported that the Germans were indeed planning to seize Zeeland and that the Dutch would defend the Scheldt estuary, but lacked the military means to do so successfully. The session in Versailles ended on 18 May with a statement to start negotiations with the Dutch, but in absolute secrecy, as it was obviously essential that the Germans remain totally in the dark. Possible British support in case of a German attack was discussed further with the Dutch military attaché in London.¹⁵ On 5 June, Snijders sent a “Guideline for British support in case of a German attack” to the Dutch attaché, pointing out that Dutch neutrality forbade military preparations with one of the warring states but also observing that a German attack required such a speedy and strong answer, that time and a wide array of preparations were essential. The “Guideline” was to speed up that process the moment the Dutch government gave the commander-in-chief the authority to negotiate. The Dutch attaché in London was ordered in that eventuality to contact the Allied authorities. In fact, these contacts had already existed since December 1917, which might explain the operational detail of the following paragraphs of the “Guideline.” It stated that the Dutch army would protect “Fortress Holland” against a German attack while the British would quickly send troops, guns, airplanes, and other equipment to strengthen and defend Holland from the sea. It ended with a detailed operational plan for how “Fortress Holland” and the entire Dutch coast was to become the responsibility of the British army. These operational guidelines had been further elaborated on during talks between the Dutch attaché and high-ranking British military planners in August 1918. The

attaché clarified Dutch operational plans and possibilities as well as material shortcomings. He was even prepared to adjust Dutch defensive measures to accommodate the British. The talks did not lead to any practical results however as the war ended shortly after.

Snijders' exact role in the British-Dutch contacts remains unclear. Did the staff intentionally undermine the government's neutrality? Snijders categorically denied that any of his military preparations were a violation of the neutrality policy. The commander-in-chief had had no intention to prepare cooperation with the allies in Britain as he formally told the minister of war during the summer of 1918. This could only be a topic of discussion after war with Germany had been declared. But on the other hand, the contacts do correspond with Snijders' ideas about the role of the Dutch military, which can be traced back to before 1914. Similar contacts with German military planners are not known.

Conclusion

Both the government and the General Staff remained fervent believers in upholding neutrality, but they differed in their methods. The governmental approach was very legalistic, with faith in [international law](#), while the General Staff approached the issue more pragmatically, emphasising over and over again that the military had to prepare specific defensive measures against well-defined threats, or the country was doomed. Therefore, the Dutch military had many and very extensive informal contacts with belligerent military authorities, in all probability without the government's knowledge. This underlines both the complexity of Dutch neutrality and the independence of the General Staff and illustrates clearly how military logic and legal reasoning, the two pillars of Dutch neutrality, in fact did not align.

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