



# IOB Evaluation Newsletter

## # 1407

### A strategic approach?

#### Dutch coalition-building and the ‘multi-bi approach’ to influencing EU decision-making (2008-2012)

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With a view to promoting Dutch interests as effectively as possible in the decision-making process of the European Union (EU), the Netherlands joined coalitions with other member states and invested in bilateral relationships with them (the ‘multi-bi approach’). The Netherlands was active in forming coalitions, with partnerships of like-minded member states usually taking shape more or less automatically. In other cases, however, the Netherlands opted for other partners for tactical reasons. In general, coalition-building magnified the Netherlands’ influence when the issue under consideration offered a degree of latitude for persuading other member states. The position of Germany often proved crucial for the Netherlands’ success at the negotiating table.

A greater effort was also made to coordinate positions with the other Benelux countries. While this gave the Netherlands certain advantages in the negotiating process, it did not have any clear impact on the final result. Dutch embassies in the EU capitals were employed in an increasingly targeted way and played a significant role in the multi-bi approach. If the Netherlands is keen to operate more strategically, aspects of the multi-bi approach will have to be fleshed out further. The above are some of the main conclusions of the IOB report *A strategic approach? Dutch coalition-building and the ‘multi-bi approach’ to influencing EU decision-making (2008-2012)*.

## Background

Because of a number of interrelated developments over the past 10 years, the Netherlands' ability to influence European decision-making has come under pressure. With the accession of 12 new member states, the relative weight of the Netherlands declined, and negotiations became more complex. There are now more member states with which to form coalitions, but at the same time, for them, the Netherlands is simply 'one of many'. Because there is no longer time for lengthy discussions around the negotiating table, the centre of gravity of the decision-making process has shifted to the preliminary phases, handled by civil servants, and decisions are increasingly being hammered out ahead of time in informal consultations between European capitals. Moreover, in the case of major decisions, the big member states tend to bargain with one another. Germany has come to occupy a more central position in the Union and gives great weight to the interests of the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, the Netherlands has to work harder to be heard in Berlin.

The role of the European Council (heads of state or government) has been strengthened by the Treaty of Lisbon and the financial and economic crisis. With an increasing number of issues being deemed the responsibility of heads of government, contacts between the capitals at the highest political level have become more important. The crisis has also led to cutbacks at the Dutch embassies and the policymaking departments in The Hague in charge of promoting Dutch interests in Europe. Finally, the Netherlands' image and more critical stance in Europe sometimes made it more of a challenge to gain sympathy for the Dutch position on a given issue.

## Policy

The Dutch approach was to form shifting, issue-based coalitions in the Council of the European Union on the basis of shared positions. The Netherlands also made use of existing coalitions based on common interests. In addition, wherever possible, the Netherlands sought to act in concert with its Benelux partners ('Benelux political cooperation').

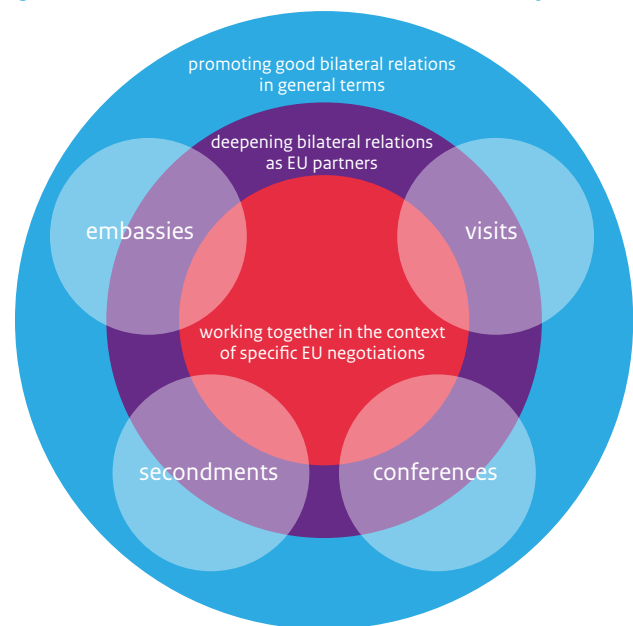
In response to the substantial increase in the number of member states, the government endeavoured to bolster the Netherlands' position in the Union by deepening its bilateral relations with the other member states. This was mainly done with the help of the following bilateral instruments: the Dutch embassies in the European capitals, visits by politicians and civil servants from both the Netherlands and prospective partners, annual conferences with a number of specific member states, and the secondment of diplomats to ministries in other member states. This notion of putting bilateral relations in the service of multilateral cooperation, in this case at EU level, is termed the 'multi-bi approach'. Although many Dutch EU diplomats recognised and endorsed the term 'multi-bi' as a concept, its practical significance and scope were not entirely clear.

IOB has identified three key dimensions of the multi-bi approach:

- 1) maintaining and furthering good relations with all member states, as a prerequisite for forming shifting, issue-based coalitions;
- 2) deepening bilateral relations with several large and like-minded smaller member states, with a view to enhancing cooperation at EU level;
- 3) amplifying the focus on bilateral relations in the various European capitals as a means of influencing specific EU decision-making processes.

The bilateral instruments mentioned above contribute to all three of these dimensions (see figure 1).

**Figure 1** *Bilateral instruments and the dimensions of the multi-bi approach*



## Findings

IOB concludes that the Netherlands was active in forming, mobilising and using coalitions. These coalitions would often crystallise more or less automatically between member states with shared positions. Often, these partners were largely the same across many specific policy areas.

The degree to which coalition-building boosted the Netherlands' influence depended on the situation. This influence was at its height in cases where the Netherlands sought support for one of its own proposals and when the nature of the issue gave the Netherlands the chance to persuade other member states through the force of its arguments. In cases where positions reflected hard and fast interests, the distribution of the various member states' positions and the degree of cohesiveness within the coalition were decisive. In the cases studied, the coalitions that gave the

Netherlands and its partners a blocking minority eventually fell apart because concessions were made to individual members or because a compromise was reached. Germany's position in relation to that of France was often a crucial factor in the Netherlands' success or failure in negotiations.

Increasingly from 2008, negotiators from the Benelux countries coordinated their positions more closely, though these efforts were limited to certain policy areas: General Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Justice and Home Affairs. Thanks to the exchange of viewpoints, information and knowledge, the Benelux countries had a greater appreciation for one another's positions and supported one another more frequently at European meetings. On occasion the Benelux countries adopted a joint position, and once or twice a year they drafted a joint Benelux paper or memorandum. Other member states were more likely to embrace Benelux positions than purely Dutch ones, due in part to Benelux's pro-European reputation. These positions did not, in the end, have a strong impact on the outcome of negotiations. Moreover, the expectation that Benelux positions could be models for broader European compromises has not been realised in practice.

The Netherlands invested the most in its bilateral relations with Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Poland and Belgium. These were not necessarily the most like-minded member states, but rather member states to which the Netherlands ascribed a key role in EU decision-making. The amount of coordination with the smaller, often like-minded member states Sweden, Denmark and Finland in EU decision-making was already so great that further investment in bilateral relations was unnecessary. The bilateral efforts directed towards Italy, Spain and smaller, less like-minded

member states were less substantial and more dependent on specific developments.

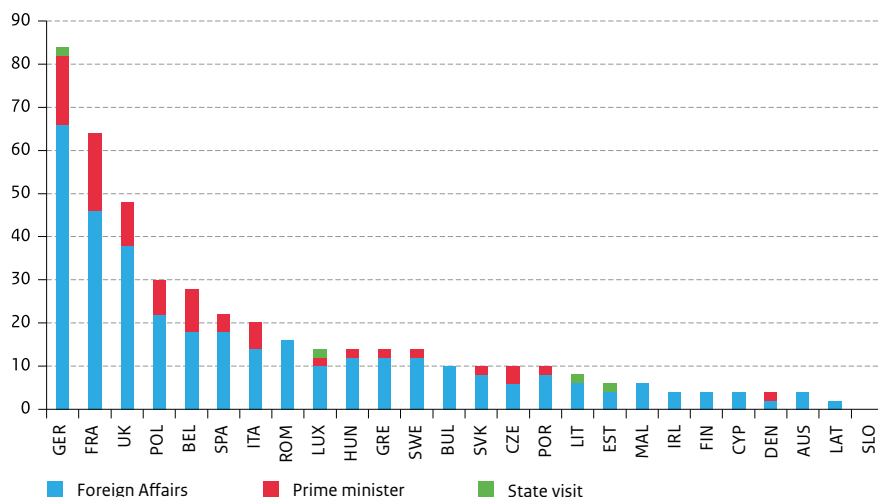
The embassies in the EU capitals played a visible role in providing relevant background information on developments in other member states, conveying Dutch policy and creating a context in which the Netherlands could exert its influence. The smaller embassies were used for this purpose in an increasingly selective way. The Netherlands invested in bilateral relationships by means of visits, joint conferences and secondments, stressing personal connections. The importance of good relations in a general sense was stressed by the negotiators, but it is difficult to directly establish their specific value for negotiations.

## Issues for consideration

IOB takes the view that negotiators should try not to automatically gravitate to the same sorts of coalitions and should be willing to consider less frequent partners which share the Netherlands' position on a given issue. In cases where positions reflect hard and fast interests, argumentation and persuasion are unlikely to be effective; instead, the Netherlands will have to seek out states with opposing views and reach a compromise with them. This requires Dutch negotiators to be flexible in defending their own position and to identify both core objectives and bargaining chips at the outset. Analyses of the distribution of member states' positions can be used more systematically as an instrument.

Exerting influence on Germany and the Franco-German dynamic remains a central challenge. The Netherlands' task in this

**Figure 2** Outgoing visits by the prime minister, other ministers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state visits by member state, 2008-2012



Sources: foreign service communication system, strategic travel agenda (2011-2012), embassies' annual reports, travel agenda for the European Integration Department, media sources.

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs carries out independent assessments of the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and consistency of Dutch foreign policy. It thus provides accountability concerning the results of policy, as well as information to enhance policy.

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IOB Evaluation # 395 (July 2014)

*Strategie bij benadering – Nederlandse coalitievorming en de multi-bi benadering in het kader van de EU-besluitvorming (2008-2012)*

*Summary, main findings and issues for consideration (English)*

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connection is often to keep Germany from abandoning its initial (Dutch-supported) position by making compromises with other countries. The Netherlands may want to involve other countries (Poland, the other Benelux countries, the Nordics) in these efforts, but finding enough like-minded partners with sufficient weight will not be easy. One of the few promising avenues in this regard is making creative and constructive proposals.

More strategic use of Benelux means focusing more on preparing political consultations and making a clear analysis of the pros and cons of joint action on a given issue. This may mean making more concessions to the other Benelux partners, if they are to support the Netherlands on other dossiers. Building on the contacts that have been made within the Benelux Union, the Benelux countries can also attempt to coordinate their EU positions in other policy areas. At the same time, it is important to keep expectations realistic.

Investing effectively and efficiently in bilateral relations requires a clarification of the significance, scope and premises of the multi-bi approach. This way, the parties concerned will have a clear sense of why and to what extent specific policy instruments can or should be used in relations with particular member states. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs can also involve other ministries more in reflecting

on and crafting this policy. Embassies could draft and submit reports more on the basis of specific requests from The Hague and Brussels, especially if they are furnished with information about the policy issue in question. Of course, the embassies must also retain the freedom to highlight developments they regard as important. The embassies' added value can increase further if they are given more feedback about the utility of the information they provide.

## Conclusion

IOB examined the role of the Netherlands in EU coalition-building, Benelux political cooperation and its investment in bilateral relations with other member states. It used four case studies to assess the Dutch role in negotiations about: 1) the new, post-Lisbon regime for comitology; 2) the third liberalisation package for energy; 3) the multi-annual policy framework for 2010-2014 for Justice and Home Affairs, and 4) the sixpack on economic governance.

As part of this policy review, IOB previously published an evaluation of the Benelux partnership entitled 'Relationships, results and benefits' (IOB Evaluation no. 372).