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Summary

In Dutch historiography, the period of French suzerainty over Holland between 1795 and 1813 remained unpopular for quite a long time. In recent years, however, there is a growing interest in the historical significance of what is known as the 'Batavian-French period'. It appears that these eighteen years were of great importance for the transformation of the old federative Dutch Republic into a modern unitary state. Political and socio-economic developments tend to be the main object of this positive reassessment. Little attention is given to the foreign policy of the Batavian Republic and the Kingdom of Holland. The main accepted reason being that they were considered French satellite states and therefore would not pursue their own foreign policy.

It is true that the Batavian Republic's freedom to act independently in foreign relations was to a considerable extent decided by the French government. Nonetheless, there was a foreign policy indeed, the bilateral relations with France obviously taking priority.

Prominent in Batavian foreign policy were three principal objectives: recognition of the new Republic's right of existence, recognition of its independence and acceptance of its wish to remain neutral, and finally to obtain a comprehensive trade agreement with France. The latter was oddly enough always refused.

During these turbulent times, Dutch diplomacy was managed for a period of ten years by Maarten van der Goes van Dirxland (1751-1826). This book aims to provide an insight into the handling of Dutch foreign policy in 1797-1808 through the prism of the life and career of Van der Goes. In addition, the book intends to show how the traditional foreign policy objective of advancing the interests of a trading power was gradually substituted by a struggle for the naked survival of the state.

Van der Goes was born in a patrician family as the son of a Hague

burgomaster. In 1785 he was appointed envoy of the United Provinces to the court of Denmark. In Copenhagen, he befriended Andreas Peter Bernstorff, the Danish government leader. Van der Goes witnessed at first hand Bernstorff's juggling act to keep Denmark neutral in the conflicts between the regional powers Russia and Sweden, and at the same time trying to keep distance from other meddling European powers like Britain. The Danish years were an important training experience for Van der Goes. He was envoy to the court of Spain when he learned in February 1795 of the revolution in Holland that took place a month earlier.

Back in The Hague in 1796 after repatriation due to severe illness, Van der Goes was jobless for some time and almost forgotten, until the revolutionary government needed an experienced diplomat to back up a political delegation to the second round of peace negotiations between France and Britain in Lille in 1797. Soon Van der Goes was 'de facto' the leader of the delegation. Impressed by his resistance to the French minister Talleyrand, who wanted to buy peace from Britain by paying with Dutch colonies, the new regime appointed Van der Goes secretary of the politically highly influential Commission on Foreign Affairs of the newly elected National Convention.

The next year Van der Goes resigned after a radical coup d'état, but was summoned back after a moderate counter coup. He was then appointed Agent (minister) for Foreign Relations, a position he kept under different designations until 1808 and made him the actual founder of the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs.

At the same time, the moderate politician Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck was appointed ambassador of the Batavian Republic to France. This marked the beginning of a very fruitful working relationship between the two men. On numerous occasions Van der Goes and Schimmelpenninck managed to prevent the difficult bilateral relations with France turning sour beyond repair.

Although his political views were clearly rather moderate, Van der Goes never belonged to one of the many factions in contemporary Dutch politics. Some patriots thought he was a crypto-Orangist, some Orangists considered him a turncoat. His true loyalty was put into question in 1799 after the Anglo-Russian invasion of Northern Holland. Van der Goes organised highly controversial secret missions to Berlin and the Orangist camp to try and arrange an armistice and neutralisation of the country. In Paris, the Directory demanded his head, but Van der Goes was saved by Napoleon's 18 Brumaire coup when the political wind changed. The French praised his expertise, but always remained suspi-

cious of his influence and autonomy. Van der Goes was however, neither pro-French nor pro-English. The Reverend Daniël Delprat, long-time private secretary to Van der Goes, described his loyalty as: ‘ni parti, ni personnes, mais son pays’.

Van der Goes perfectly understood that the days of the great trading republic were over and that the new Batavian Republic lacked both military and economic power to make a stand in the highly volatile international politics of the day. Nonetheless, Van der Goes continued unremittingly his efforts to pursue the Batavian foreign policy objectives, were it in the lobbies of the peace congress at Rastatt or at the peace negotiations of Lunéville and Amiens. An important element in his argumentation was a tenacious appeal for neutralisation of the Batavian Republic, for which a form of ‘accommodated neutrality’ was designed; meaning that restoration of neutral trade and economic prosperity in the Republic would be to the benefit of the belligerents. It would enable the Republic to extend under guarantees some specific financial or material services to these powers.

France however, would not hear of any form of Dutch neutrality or talks on any other unresolved bilateral issue (like the sovereignty over Flushing, the financial contributions or the maintenance of 25.000 French troops) until after a ‘general peace’ was concluded. For a moment, the Batavian government thought that the Peace of Amiens (1802), for which the Republic sacrificed its colony of Ceylon, was the so wanted general peace. At Amiens, Napoleon had pledged to start negotiations about outstanding bilateral issues, but he never lived up to his promise.

The climax was reached in July 1803 when Napoleon, during an audience in Brussels confronted a Batavian delegation, of which Van der Goes was a member, with his conclusion that the Republic had to be simply considered as a satellite of a planet. All stipulations of the harsh Treaty of The Hague of 1795 had to be scrupulously implemented while extra sacrifices for the war effort against Britain were demanded. The First Consul ruled out any further talk of neutrality. If the Republic did not comply, the consequence would be outright annexation.

The effect on the Batavian government (the twelve-member strong ‘State Regency’) was increased stubbornness. Implementation was delayed in various ways or simply refused. To sell this policy of ‘state disobedience’ to the French, Van der Goes and Schimmelpenninck applied a tactic of ‘bending bamboo’: delaying as long as possible before obliging to the French demand, whilst at the same time trying to convince the State Regency of the inevitability of conceding to the demand.

Van der Goes was indispensable as a mediator between the Batavian body politic and the French hegemonist. There were the recurring violations of the sovereignty of the Republic to stand up to, but also the repeated personal conflicts between the members of the Directory or the State Regency and the French civil and military representatives in Holland. Quite often there were clashes between French hauteur and Dutch bluntness.

In 1804 Napoleon no longer accepted the Dutch obstinacy. He saw to it that strong single-headed leadership was introduced in Holland. Napoleon's choice was Schimmelpenninck of whom he was well disposed. Although not an advocate of a presidentship, Van der Goes supported Schimmelpenninck in convincing the State Regency that this solution was best for national interest. In 1805 Van der Goes became Grand Pensionary Schimmelpenninck's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The Schimmelpenninck government survived barely a year. Napoleon got disappointed in the ability of Schimmelpenninck to bring Holland into line. The emperor now favoured his younger brother Louis to become king of Holland. Although Van der Goes understood Schimmelpenninck's frustration well, he considered safeguarding the existence of the state of paramount national interest. A French king, a brother of the emperor even, could be advantageous for a better and more equal relationship with France. Therefore, Van der Goes reasoned that, notwithstanding his long cooperation with Schimmelpenninck, personal interest should not stand in the way of a transition of the Batavian Republic into a Kingdom of Holland.

Van der Goes was deceived. The relationship between emperor and king turned sour, not in the last place because King Louis started to behave 'Dutch', defending his country's squashed economic and military interests. Like other European monarchs, Louis considered foreign policy his personal domain. Although appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Van der Goes was treated merely as a messenger boy by his king. Little by little, the reins of Holland's foreign policy, already shrivelling under Napoleon's frequent intervention, slipped from the hands of Van der Goes. He began to realise that full annexation could not be avoided anymore. Moreover, he could not endure the young king's fitfulness and his incessant pouring down orders and counter orders anymore. In 1808 increasing mutual irritations caused the dismissal of Van der Goes.

After the incorporation of Holland into the French Empire in 1810, Van der Goes entered public life again as a member of the Corps Législatif and as High Treasurer of the Imperial Order of the Reunion, and

so he moved his family to Paris. It is remarkable that Van der Goes, as a Dutchman and not particularly a Francophile, was put forward as a candidate for the presidency of the Corps Législatif.

When Napoleon abdicated in the early spring of 1814, Van der Goes tendered his resignation and returned to The Hague. The new Dutch sovereign ruler Prince Willem Frederik of Orange (King William I) did not bear the 64 years old statesman any ill-will and appointed Van der Goes member of the First Chamber (Senate) of the resurrected States-General which he remained until his death in 1826.

During his long term of office Van der Goes survived politically eight upheavals of the constitutional order. His career had a tragic edge in a way. However much and whatever he tried, the outcome seemed inevitable already in an early stage. Under conditions of severe political instability, Van der Goes always kept one single objective in mind: to preserve the name of Holland on the map of Europe. The pursuit of trade interests, among which neutrality was foremost, was pushed aside by the immediate need to safeguard the plain existence of the Dutch state.

On the one hand the ‘bending bamboo’ policy to circumvent war effort demands could have given France a welcome pretext for annexation. On the other hand, by taking every opportunity to remind the warring European major powers of the right of existence of Holland, Van der Goes fed French doubt about the wisdom of the moment and the possible accompanying international consequences of annexation. France backed away several times until 1810.

When the moment eventually came, it meant the definitive end of the traditional Dutch trade inspired foreign policy. The rupture became clear in 1814. The yearning for neutrality went by the board. The Netherlands acceded, not as a loose trading republic anymore, but as a modern nation-state defending its security interests first, to the international alliance aimed at the containment of defeated France. It was also to the credit of the persistent efforts of Maarten van der Goes that the French did not succeed in destroying the Dutch state and that in 1814, after a relatively short period of ‘gallicizing’ annexation, Holland could resume its rightful place among the European powers.