

## The mysterious linguist in The Hague

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There was recently an advertisement on the Dutch government's vacancy sites with a somewhat cryptic heading: 'Linguist in The Hague'. The text of the advertisement revealed that this was not just your average job grade 11 translation position: 'You will be working at the counter-espionage agency of the counter-intelligence and security department and helping protect Defence interests against internal and external threats in the short and long term'. The Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service (NLD DISS), which placed this advertisement, was not just looking for an all-round languages whiz; a translation degree in translation or university degree in Mandarin Chinese was listed as an explicit job requirement.

The fact that NLD DISS is specifically looking for Mandarin-speaking counter-intelligence experts points to one of the intelligence service's focal areas at the moment: the Far East. Although the service's activities almost always remain secret, the main areas of focus can be deduced from the service's public annual report: the first chapter of the annual report published in April 2022 touches on the Russian Federation, China and Afghanistan (with Afghanistan receiving far less attention than in previous years).<sup>1</sup>

Intelligence capabilities are scarce. Someone who watches too much James Bond may think that intelligence officers spend the bulk of their time in international cocktail bars, eavesdropping on secrets in between vodka martinis. The reality is that the real intelligence work is much less exciting and is hidden behind complex supply and demand management. After all, intelligence services work with clients, also

known as 'requisitioners'. At NLD DISS, these include the Central Staff and the four operational commands (army, navy, air force and Marechaussee), who are always at the ready to jump on intelligence from the service. All these interests sometimes conflict with each other. Since the invasion of Ukraine, for instance, demand for intelligence on the Russian Federation has dominated, while international security experts agree that the long-term focus may need to be more on China.

Paul Abels, Professor of Governance of Intelligence and Security Services at Leiden University, warned against this possible politically-guided short-term thinking in his farewell lecture last May. 'Requisitioners have a strong tendency to ask about yesterday's known threats, while the reality always goes beyond their imaginative capabilities,' Abels said. 'In theory, the services are given room for what is known as their "scanning task", to track down as-yet unknown threats, but the focus is mainly on keeping requisitioners happy and every effort in another new area will detract from this. Furthermore, the services are always overstretched, which is inevitably also at the expense of capabilities and focus in relation to recognising new threats.'

Intelligence work therefore means constantly making choices: let's imagine NLD DISS only has the budget for one linguist. Should they be looking for a Russian-speaker or a Chinese-speaker? Since the Russian invasion in Ukraine, it seems justified to focus all of the intelligence service's reserve capacity on the Russian Federation. But in early August, the Chinese People's



Liberation Army started a large-scale exercise in the waters around Taiwan. So should we be looking to the East (Russian Federation) or the Far East (China)? Quickly move some people from the Russian department to the China floor at NLD DISS, then? That's not how it works in the world of intelligence. Training staff takes time (you cannot just learn Mandarin in an afternoon) and networking, building knowledge and trust also take years.

You might ask yourself, why do we all need to be spending time and money on that? Why can't the Netherlands just rely on US information when it comes to Taiwan, for instance? In theory, that could be possible, but history teaches us that even the US sometimes has a nasty habit of not always telling the truth. Take the time when Colin Powell (who, incidentally, President Bush also shoved into the limelight to clean up the scandal) appeared at the UN Security Council in 2003 and told the world with a straight face that some tube or other of sandbox sand was actually Iraqi anthrax. This served as the basis for why the Netherlands also had to provide political and/or military support for an invasion of Iraq. NLD DISS (and to a lesser extent the Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service - NLD GISS) systematically raised doubts about claims of possible Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. In a response to Powell's presentation, for example, NLD DISS wrote in an internal memo in 2003: 'The smoking gun has still not been found!'<sup>2</sup>

If the first Dutch cabinet headed by Jan-Peter Balkenende had listened more to the nuanced intelligence officers and less to Powell, the Netherlands would not have had to provide political support for the 2003 invasion which was illegal under international law. In hindsight, the critical analyses by NLD DISS hit the nail on the head: after all, the weapons of the then Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein were never found. At the time, the Dutch intelligence reports differed from the British and American reports on important points, with the Davids investigative committee writing in 2010: 'These other conclusions did not seem to be based so much on other independently-acquired intelligence

## Should that linguist speak Chinese, or perhaps Russian?

sources, but instead on their own military technical analysis of the information provided.' This highlights the importance of well-informed, well-trained intelligence analysts, who studied information independently and made a series of sobering analyses on that basis. Unfortunately, the somewhat hawkish ministers in the Balkenende government ignored those recommendations.

All in all, those properly skilled intelligence analysts can come in handy. Especially if some US officer or other were to start crying out about some threat from Chinese armed forces that may or may not be unavoidable. Then it would be nice to know that NLD DISS had in any event hired that Chinese linguist in The Hague on time so that it could assess the situation for itself. We can only hope that future ministers will indeed listen to NLD DISS, unlike their counterparts in 2003 in relation to Iraq. ■

1 See: Defence Intelligence and Security Service, *Public Annual Report 2021* (The Hague, 28 April 2022).

2 Quoted in the *Davids Committee Report 2010* (The Hague, 2010) 307.