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Vanhoonacker, Sophie

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A Revival of the Benelux?

Seit Mitte der 1990er Jahre scheint die Benelux neuen Auftrieb erhalten zu haben, nicht als internationale Organisation, aber in Form einer engeren Zusammenarbeit ihrer Mitglieder im Rahmen der EU. Durch eine Reihe von Memoranda betreffend die zukünftige Entwicklung der EU und spezifische Themen, wie Justiz- und Innenpolitik, waren sie bemüht, den Prozess der europäischen Integration in Richtung einer Vertiefung voranzutreiben. Durch ihren Zusammenschluss versuchen sie, größeren Einfluss auszuüben und die Interessen kleinerer Staaten besser zu vertreten. Gute persönliche Beziehungen auf höchster politischer Ebene haben bei der Herstellung der Verbindungen eine große Rolle gespielt.

Die engeren Beziehungen bedeuten allerdings nicht den Beginn einer 'ménage à trois'. Die Kooperation findet in erster Linie auf höchster Ebene (zwischen den MinisterpräsidentInnen) statt und ist in sehr flexibler und pragmatischer Weise organisiert. Die Kooperation ist keineswegs allumfassend, und es bestehen weiterhin wichtige ökonomische, kulturelle und politische Unterschiede zwischen den drei Ländern. Sie ist auch keineswegs exklusiv, sondern Teil einer breiteren Strategie der Netzwerkbildung innerhalb der EU.

1. Introduction

The Benelux is by many still associated with the customs union set up in 1944 amongst Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. As its objectives have since long been realised in the much broader framework of the EU, the organisation has today a somewhat anachronistic and even moribund connotation. Since the mid-1990s, however, the Benelux seems to have received new impulses, not as an international organisation but as a form of closer cooperation amongst the three countries in the framework of the EU.¹ During the Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) leading to the Amsterdam and the Nice Treaty and in the Convention on the future of the EU, the Benelux countries have put forward joint memoranda outlining their views with regard to some of the major issues on the agenda.² In addition they have also issued two memoranda on cooperation in the field of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA).³ It is interesting to note that the Benelux organisation itself plays no role in this cooperation.

This article examines the cooperation between these three countries in the framework of the European Union in recent years. What are their motivations to try to speak with one voice on certain EU issues? Why does the co-ordination of positions occur at this moment in time? What could the possible impact of such cooperation be? What are the advantages or possible disadvantages for the countries in question? Is it just an *ad hoc* initiative or is it the beginning of a more structured relationship? Before addressing these questions, the cooperation will be placed in the broader context of a general trend in the EU to form cores and coalitions, and the relations between the Benelux countries will be situated in a historic context.

2. On Cores and Coalitions⁴

The attempt of a smaller group of EU member states of the same geographical area to closer co-operate or to form a privileged partnership is not an isolated event in the EU. Also the Nor-

dic countries co-ordinate positions in the framework of the EU and with the Visegrad group, we have an example of cooperation amongst prospective member states. Regional partnerships are, however, just one of the expressions of a general trend to closer cooperate amongst a limited group of member states. The debate on regional partnerships cannot be seen independently of the broader discussions on:

- flexibility or ‘closer cooperation’ (Title VII of the Treaty on European Union);
- the formation of an *avant-garde* or pioneer group;
- the formation of a directorate amongst the three biggest member states in the framework of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Since the launching of the so-called Schäuble-Lamers paper (September 1994)⁵, when two prominent members of the German Christian Democratic party first openly pleaded for the formation of a hard core of a small group of member states, the debate on closer cooperation in the EU has taken full swing. In the IGC leading to the Treaty of Amsterdam, agreement was reached on a new Title (Title VII) laying down the conditions under which a majority of member states⁶ can ‘establish closer cooperation between themselves’, making use of ‘the institutions, procedures and mechanisms’ laid down by the Treaties. The negotiations were difficult as cooperation amongst a smaller group inevitably implies the exclusion of some of the players.⁷ Especially the Euro-sceptic countries were afraid to be reduced to second-class members. To safeguard the position of the non-participating countries, the conditions for enhanced cooperation were defined very narrowly, to the extent even that the articles in question have until now not been applied. It remains to be seen whether this will change after the entering into force of the Treaty of Nice, which relaxed the conditions (Galloway 2001, 133, 142).

In the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the debate has been dominated by the discussions on the formation of a directorate amongst the three biggest member states France, Germany and the United Kingdom.⁸ One of the proposals suggests the formation of

a Security Council as in the United Nations whereby some of the big member states would be permanent members whereas membership for the others would be on the basis of rotation. A differentiation on the basis of size is an extremely sensitive matter and proposals in this direction have only made the smaller countries more determined in their fight to defend the principle of equality amongst the member states.

The debate on cores and coalitions also lingers on in the current discussion on the future of Europe. The German Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer, in his much debated speech at the Humboldt University (Fischer 2000), talks about a centre of gravity, composed of a group of states who would conclude ‘a new European framework Treaty’; Jacques Chirac pleads for the development of a pioneer group (Chirac 2000) and the former President of the European Commission Jacques Delors advocates the formation of an *avant garde* (Delors 2001). Although they don’t necessarily agree on the role and the institutional basis for such core, the fact that they all mention the issue in their blueprints on the future Europe shows that the last word about closer cooperation amongst a smaller group of countries has not been said yet. The imminent enlargement to a Union of 27 makes the discussion all the more topical.

This paper focuses on the Benelux, an example of closer cooperation amongst a group of countries in the same geographical area. Generally, regional partnerships are, however, based on more than just having common borders. Other elements such as size, relative power, a common history or a similar level of economic development may also play a role. Before looking at the recent attempts of the Benelux countries to co-operate, the relationship of the three countries in the framework of the EC/EU will be placed in a historical perspective.

3. The Benelux and the Early Years of European integration⁹

For most observers the Benelux is inextricably linked with the process of European integration itself.¹⁰ As a customs union between

Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, it is often seen as a precursor of the European Communities, promoting trade between neighbouring countries by abolishing tariff barriers and disposing of its own institutional framework including a Court of Justice. Furthermore, it was the Benelux memorandum presented at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers in Messina in June 1955 that re-launched the debate on European integration. A committee under the chairmanship of the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Henri Spaak prepared the report that ultimately led to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom. Another well-known European event on which the Benelux countries had a major impact were the Fouchet negotiations on Political Union. Belgium and the Netherlands vetoed de Gaulle's proposals to organise political cooperation on a purely intergovernmental basis.

Both episodes in these early years of European integration deserve some closer attention because they give us some concrete indications with regard to the cooperation between the three small founding member states. As a matter of fact, the denomination 'Benelux memorandum' (1955) is quite misleading. The text was not drafted in the framework of the Benelux organisation nor was it the result of a joint effort of the three countries elaborating a common initiative (Duchêne 1994, 262ff.). Following the crisis provoked by the rejection by the French national assembly of the draft treaty for a European Defence Community (EDC), the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Henri Spaak and his Dutch counterpart Johan Beyen, each separately had started to draft proposals for a relaunch. Spaak, in close consultation with Monnet, had elaborated proposals around the concept of sectoral integration; Beyen on the other hand favoured the idea of 'general economic integration' and the creation of a common market. Following his famous letter of 4 April 1955 to Spaak in which Beyen explained his ideas, the two combined their respective approaches in a joint proposal for a common market and a new Community for civil nuclear power. The Luxembourg Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Bech, who was informed after-

wards, was initially opposed to Beyen's proposal for an economic community. He feared that its organisation on a supranational basis would be detrimental for a small country like Luxembourg, but he was ultimately convinced to join forces (Brouwer/Pijpers 1999, 105; Trausch 1996, 122f.).

Also in the case of the Fouchet proposals there was initially no question of a joint position amongst the Benelux countries. Although they shared the Dutch concern about the intergovernmental character of de Gaulle's Political Union, first proposed at a press conference on 5 September 1960, Belgium and Luxembourg were much more positive towards the French proposals than were the Netherlands. From the first meeting onwards the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Luns made it clear that The Hague would radically oppose a Political Union of which the United Kingdom would be excluded. The British participation had to address a double concern: it had to prevent the domination of the Political Union by France and Germany; secondly it had to guarantee a close link with the Atlantic Alliance.¹¹ Belgium initially took a much more conciliatory stance, but hardened its position when in January 1962 the French presented the so-called Fouchet II proposal, which totally ignored their concerns with regard to the relationship of the Political Union with the European Communities and the Atlantic Alliance. When in April 1962 the British themselves asked to be associated with the talks on Political Union, Belgium joined the Dutch in their request for British EC membership as a precondition for the establishment of a Political Union, ultimately leading to a suspension of the negotiations on 17 April 1962 (Vanhoonacker 1989).

The two abovementioned episodes in the early history of European integration provide us with some first interesting insights. Contrary to the questions that were related to the subject matter of the Benelux treaty (trade, borders, regional cooperation), more political questions on the further development of the EC were not dealt with in the framework of the Benelux institutions but on a rather loose and *ad hoc* basis, with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs playing a key

role in the co-ordination of positions. This co-ordination task proved sometimes rather difficult. In the case of the Fouchet proposals for example, it is not until the negotiations have been going on for several months that the three finally agree on a memorandum that is to be the basis for their joint position. Even then they hardly succeed to hide their divergences (Vanhoonaeker 1989, 518).

In both cases the motivation for their cooperation differs. For the Benelux memorandum of 1955, it was in the first place the desire to give a new impetus to the European integration process which spurred a joint initiative. In the case of the Fouchet negotiations, it was primarily the fear for domination by the Franco-German axis that made Belgium and the Netherlands join forces. They hoped to prevent such predominance by guaranteeing British membership of the Political Union and by equipping the Union with a supranational and independent body such as the European Commission. The latter was seen as indispensable for the defence of the interests of the smaller member states.

The reticence of the small member states with regard to intergovernmental bodies would persist. When in the early 1970s France proposed regular meetings of the Heads of State and Government in the framework of the European Council, it was the Netherlands who insisted that its creation be counterbalanced by the introduction of direct elections for the European Parliament.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Benelux countries remain active participants in the European integration process through initiatives such as the Werner report on Economic and Monetary Union (Luxembourg), the Tindemans report (Belgium), and the Davignon report on European Political Cooperation (Belgium). Although the Benelux countries contributed in a significant way to initiatives such as the Single European Act and the Schengen agreement, most of the projects on which they had a major impact were unilateral rather than joint initiatives. Several factors may have played a role. With the realisation of the customs union in 1968, one of the central objectives of the Benelux had been attained within the framework of the Six and

the dynamism of the earlier years faded away. Although the Benelux countries are often mentioned as if they were one block, there are important differences amongst them. In the political field for example, the Netherlands took an Atlanticist line, while Belgium and Luxembourg tended to be more supportive of a Europeanist view. In the economic area, The Hague was generally much more liberal than Belgium and Luxembourg. The question arises whether the Luxembourg compromise and the accession of the United Kingdom are also explanatory factors for the reduced cooperation? One could argue that the smaller countries felt less threatened because London provided the long awaited counterbalance vis-à-vis France and Germany and because the Luxembourg compromise guaranteed that they could always invoke a veto when vital interests were at stake. Or perhaps there were simply few joint initiatives because the three countries felt rather comfortable in the European Communities and they didn't see a real need to join forces.

Although the absence of joint approaches '*à trois*' is partly compensated by the numerous bilateral contacts, it is not until the major changes brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall that the cooperation between the Benelux countries gets a new impetus.¹²

4. Common concerns and views

Since the mid-1990s the Benelux countries have again tried to cooperate on a number of questions. The most visible expression of this renewed attempt to coordinate positions are the joint memoranda that have been represented at the Intergovernmental Conferences leading to the Treaties of Amsterdam and Nice and the texts on the future of the EU.¹³ That these three founding countries again feel the need to present a common front has everything to do with the breath-taking developments on the European continent in 1989 and with their changing position in the EU as a result of these events. Also domestic factors have played a role.

Although history rarely knows real breaks, it cannot be denied that the fall of the Berlin Wall

constituted a major shock for the European Communities and that at this moment its member states are still digesting the consequences. While the Twelve were initially primarily thinking in terms of concluding association agreements with the former communist countries of Central Europe, it soon became clear that the latter aspired nothing less than EU membership. Conscious of its positive impact on the stability of the European continent, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands strongly support the expansion of the European Union. At the same time however, they realise that it will strongly change the nature of the EU and affect their own position. Having always been strong advocates of European integration, they fear that increasing diversity and divergence of interests will water down the process, reducing the EU to nothing more than a glorified free trade area.

Secondly, they are concerned that as small countries it will become increasingly difficult to be heard and to have an impact on the direction of the EU. In a Union of 27 they will only represent 8.4% of the votes compared to 13.7% in the EU15 (and to 29.5% in the Europe of Six) (Hösli 1995). Also in the European Commission, they will not always be represented since participation in a Union of 27 or more will take place on the basis of the principle of rotation. Even the future of the Presidency, one of the key symbols of equality amongst the member states is under pressure and might in the future be abandoned for a different type of set-up.

Thirdly, the three share a concern about the future position of the European Commission. The development of two new intergovernmental pillars (CFSP and JHA) in Maastricht and the lack of leadership since the departure of Jacques Delors has considerably weakened the position of this institution, traditionally seen as the defender of the small countries' interests. Also the trend whereby an intergovernmental body as the European Council plays an increasingly central role in steering the EU is considered to be primarily in the advantage of the big members.

The increasing concern about being dominated by the bigger countries has also been spurred by the discussions about a directorate

in the area of CFSP. The formation of a Contact Group for the former Yugoslavia, in which only the four larger EU member states were represented,¹⁴ was a slap in the face of the smaller ones. It is feared that this will be the beginning of a new trend whereby the big member states will increasingly act outside the EU framework in major international crises. The mini-summits amongst the big three during the Afghan crisis only reinforced these fears.

Besides concerns about their future power position, growing intergovernmentalism and the further direction of European integration, there are also domestic factors that have positively influenced the re-launching of the Benelux co-operation. Following the formation in 1994 of a coalition of liberals, socialists and the Democrats 66 (D66) in the Netherlands,¹⁵ fears were arising that pressure from the eurosceptic liberals would loosen the Dutch commitment to the European integration process. The socialists and D66 saw closer cooperation with their Belgian and Luxembourg partners as a possible way to counter such development (see also Bossaert/Vanhoonaeker 2000, 174).

Last but not least, one has to take into account that the smooth functioning of the rather *ad hoc* and informal cooperation between the three countries depends to a large extent on a good mutual understanding of the key political actors. The recent strengthening of Benelux could not have been realised without the excellent relations between the Prime Ministers Kok, Dehaene (and later Verhofstadt) and Juncker. Kok's successor, Jan Peter Balkenende, seems to want to continue the cooperation.

5. Concrete cases of cooperation

The most visible and concrete expressions of the renewed attempts of the Benelux to coordinate positions are the various joint memoranda that have been published since 1996. Six of them represent joint positions with regard to Intergovernmental Conferences and the further development of the Union;¹⁶ two are dedicated to the area of Justice and Home Affairs.¹⁷ The question that dominates the first group of memo-

randa is how to come to a more efficient, democratic and transparent Union. Themes receiving a central place are: the further deepening of European integration, the possible need for differentiation and the absolute necessity for a solid institutional underpinning of the EU.

The texts welcome the Union's enlargement but underline the need to counterbalance it with a further deepening. Priority areas are the completion of the internal market, external policy, justice and home affairs as well as employment.¹⁸ A recurrent topic is the need to become more prominent on the international scene. The Benelux countries plead for more consistency between the pillars, a strengthened role for the Commission in CFSP and decision-making by qualified majority. During the IGC leading to Amsterdam they advocated a gradual merger of the WEU into the EU and they supported the incorporation of the Petersberg tasks into the Treaty.

The three have also at several occasions expressed frustration with regard to the slow progress in the third pillar. In Amsterdam they defended the incorporation of asylum and migration into the Community pillar, and pleaded for the incorporation of Schengen into the Treaty framework. The Benelux countries have also dedicated two separate memoranda to the area of Justice and Home Affairs. Prior to the European Council of Tampere, they presented a joint contribution outlining the priority areas for action with regard to the realisation of a space of freedom, security and justice.¹⁹ In March 2001, they made a list of proposals on the table and indicated a deadline by which political agreement or adoption should be achieved. It is also stated that the Benelux will try to better coordinate its positions in these fields, although in practice this has proven to be difficult.²⁰

A second recurring theme is that of differentiation or what the Treaty of Amsterdam has called 'closer cooperation'. In the memorandum presented briefly after the start of the 1996–97 IGC, the Benelux countries argue that in an enlarged Union, differentiation will be 'unavoidable'. Cooperation amongst a core of countries in a certain policy area should, however, not undermine the *acquis communautaire*, provide

a central role for the European Commission and be organised within the Treaty framework. An *à la carte* Europe whereby countries just pick and chose from the menu on an *ad hoc* basis is rejected. Closer cooperation is also an important theme in the memorandum presented just before the European Council of Helsinki (10–11 December 1999). The three are of the opinion that the conditions for enhanced cooperation as defined in Amsterdam were too strict and they advocated their relaxation in the IGC 2000. They also favoured their extension to the second pillar. As we will see below, the Benelux played a key role in the debate on the relaxation of the flexibility conditions.

In the discussions on the institutional reform of the EU, the Benelux countries manifest themselves as strong defenders of the Community method according to which the European Commission has the exclusive right of initiative. The Commission is seen as the body that is best placed to serve the general EU interest and its position should therefore be further strengthened. In the memorandum to the Convention (December 2002), it is proposed that in the future the President of the Commission is elected by the European Parliament and confirmed by the European Council deciding by qualified majority.²¹ The Benelux countries also express their preference for a reduced-size Commission where seats rotate on the basis of equality.

The strengthened position of the European Parliament and its role as co-legislator in an increasing number of areas is very much welcomed and seen as a way to come to a more democratic Union. But also the national parliaments should become more active and follow Commission proposals more closely. The three don't want to create any new institutions involving national parliamentarians and they reject Giscard's idea for a Congress of peoples, composed of representatives of the EP and the national parliaments.

Briefly before the European Council of Seville, the three countries have also presented their views on the reform of the Council. They plead for a better preparation of the European Council, oppose the creation of a new Council

formation of Deputy Prime Ministers and they advocate a careful analysis of the pros and cons of the current Presidency system before giving it up for an alternative system.²² The future of the Presidency was one of the central themes of discussion during the preparations of the memorandum of December 2002. While the Netherlands strongly argued in favour of maintaining a system based on rotation, the Belgian Prime Minister Verhofstadt did not want to exclude an opening to the proposal of France, the UK and Spain to have an elected chair of the European Council. After some fierce discussions, this led to a compromise whereby the three advocated to maintain the principle of rotation, adding that a longer term Presidency of the Council is only acceptable if elected amongst the members of that body.

The co-ordination of positions and the attempts to present a common front through memoranda does not imply that the three speak with one voice on every single aspect of the further development of the EU. Each also presented national contributions to the various IGCs and to the Convention. By joining forces, the Benelux hopes to give more weight to issues they consider important and to contribute to the steering of the EU in their preferred direction. The abovementioned discussion on the future of the Presidency illustrates that it is not always easy to come up with common positions. Also, when it comes to highly sensitive questions such as the re-weighting of the votes, the national reflex is predominant and both in Amsterdam²³ as well as in Nice,²⁴ this led to a direct confrontation between Belgium and the Netherlands. While the latter (16 million inhabitants) advocated a differentiation in votes between the two countries, Belgium (10 million inhabitants) wanted to maintain parity. The incident illustrates that despite the willingness to support each other, national interests will always prevail.

The abovementioned discussions around the re-weighting of votes have caused some strain in the relations between the Netherlands and Belgium, but these internal squirms have not prevented the cooperation to continue and their joint efforts have not been without success. There are at least two examples where the Ben-

elux countries by joining forces have been able to seriously influence the EU debate. The Netherlands who held the Presidency during the final six months of the 1996–97 IGC played a key role in integrating Schengen into the Treaty. It very skilfully relied on the support of the other two countries to steer the negotiations in the preferred direction and ultimately managed to reach agreement on a protocol incorporating Schengen into the Treaty framework (see Schout/Vanhoonaeker, forthcoming).

A second and probably the most visible example of an impact of the Benelux countries on the European debate has been that of the expansion of the agenda of the IGC 2000 beyond the three leftovers of Amsterdam (composition of the European Commission, extension of qualified majority voting and re-weighting of the votes). At the European Council of Helsinki the Benelux countries pleaded for an ‘extended’ agenda including the relaxation of the conditions for ‘closer cooperation’. Initially they only had the support of Italy and the European Commission, but gradually they managed to convince others, including France, Germany and the Portuguese Presidency (first half of 2000). By the end of the Portuguese Presidency the Fifteen agreed to put ‘closer cooperation’ on the IGC agenda.

It would be a misrepresentation of reality and grossly exaggerated to accredit the above-mentioned achievements entirely to the efforts of the Benelux. Decisions in the EU are a process of give and take whereby it is key to have the support of as many member states as possible, especially that of the bigger ones. Nevertheless by joining forces and presenting strong arguments the Benelux could convince other countries to join them in their position and as a result they had more impact on the debate than if they would have been alone in defending a position.

6. No ‘*ménage a trois*’

The multiple joint memoranda that have been published over recent years seem to suggest that the cooperation amongst Belgium, Luxembourg

and the Netherlands is more than an isolated event. The question arises what the prospects for longer-term cooperation are. So far the attempts to speak with one voice have not been underpinned by an institutional framework and meetings take primarily place at the higher levels. Twice a year there is a summit meeting at the level of the Prime Ministers, accompanied by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ministers of European Affairs of the three countries. In addition there is also an exchange of views on the margins of European Councils. The advantage of the cooperation is that it is organised in a very flexible way and that there is little red tape. Undoubtedly this very pragmatic approach is one of the keys to the success of the cooperation. On the other hand it raises the question what will happen when the current Prime Ministers will be replaced by other players who have less affinity with each other. Experiences with the Franco-German axis have shown that especially in times of crisis, the presence of more permanent structures can be very important to sustain cooperation.

Nevertheless, even without a firm institutional underpinning, the circumstances for a continuing close relationship are rather favourable. The prospect of a Union of 27 or more member states will definitely change the position of these three founding member states and if they still want to have some weight, they will be forced to look for allies and form coalitions. Their geographical proximity and their common concern to prevent a watering down of the European integration process make them obvious partners. Successes such as their positive influence on extending the IGC 2000 agenda are encouraging to continue on the current road. The cooperation amongst Benelux countries is also open to other member states. During the Belgian Presidency (second half 2001), the three have also tried to develop a dialogue with the Visegrad group, another regional partnership. In December 2001 the Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the two groups held an informal meeting in Luxembourg during which they discussed the future of Europe. Considering the rather loose cooperation amongst the Visegrad group, it remains rather doubtful

whether the dialogue between the two groups will be long-lived.²⁵ It remains, however, that candidate countries such as the Baltic states and the Visegrad group see the Benelux as an inspiring example as how to co-operate more closely in the EU framework.

The cooperation between Benelux countries is far from all encompassing and there continue to exist important economic, political and cultural divergences amongst these three founding member states. The Netherlands is the most liberal of the three and in dossiers of liberalisation, its position is often more aligned with that of countries such as the United Kingdom. Belgium's blueprint of the EU is that of a European federation and when cooperating in the Benelux forum it has to milder its ambitions.²⁶ The French speaking Belgians are not so eager to cooperate in the Benelux because they see it as a Dutch speaking club.

Also the different size of the countries is sometimes an obstacle for cooperation. The Netherlands whose population and economy rank sixth in the EU has a different position than that of Luxembourg, which is the smallest EU member state. The Hague wears the double hat of being the biggest of the smallest and the smallest of the biggest member states. As smallest of the biggest it likes to manifest itself as the defender of the interests of the small. In the discussions on the future composition of the European Commission and the re-weighting of the votes during the IGC 2000, it defended a position that was in line with that of other small member states.²⁷ In other cases, however, – and foreign policy is a case in point – the Netherlands likes to see itself as the smallest of the big. When Prime Minister Kok was not invited to the mini-summit organised by Tony Blair in London in early November 2001 to discuss the results of his trip to the Middle East, he decided to invite himself.²⁸ He was the only of the smaller countries not accepting the proposal of Prime Minister Verhofstadt that the Belgian Presidency would represent them at the meeting. When it comes to military cooperation at the European level, the Netherlands has a preference to cooperate with countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany.

The Benelux coalition is far from being exclusive. The cooperation has to be seen in the framework of a broader strategy of the three countries to intensify their bilateral and multi-lateral relations with the objective of better defending their national positions and exert influence on the future direction of the EU. In the Netherlands for example, the closer cooperation with Belgium and Luxembourg is part of a so-called '*buurlandenbeleid*', aimed at developing closer links not only with the small but also with the big neighbours ('*buurlanden*') like France, Germany and the United Kingdom. In a speech at the Dutch Society for International Affairs the former Dutch State Secretary for European Affairs Dick Benschop has been pleading for a networking approach.²⁹ In an increasingly divergent and heterogeneous Europe where deals are more and more reached outside the formal meetings of Ministers or Heads of State and Government, The Hague wants to avoid becoming marginalised. As a middle-sized country, it aims to become an important partner in a broad European network comprising not only the EU member states but also the candidate countries.³⁰ In the area of the environment for example, the Netherlands is cooperating with the Scandinavian member states (see Bossaert/Vanhoonacker 2000, 182). The same trend of intensifying contacts with other EU member states, and not only with the traditional partners France and Germany, is also apparent in Luxembourg. With the goal of fostering the influence of the smallest Benelux member in the EU, the Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker stressed in the declaration of the new government in June 1999 that it is highly important for the Grand-Duchy to invest more in bilateral relations with its EU partners.³¹

Concluding, one could repeat the question put forward by Professor A.E. Kersten in a Benelux study (1982) and ask whether by closely cooperating the three equate the influence of one big member state? In our view the answer to that question is negative (Bossaert/Vanhoonacker 2000, 183). Firstly there is no political support in the respective countries to give the cooperation such a central place. Benelux cooperation is not an aim in itself but one of the

multiple instruments used to make sure that national interests are being heard and possibly taken into account. This also explains why no serious attempts have been made to further institutionalise the cooperation. The actors involved consider the flexible organisation and the pragmatic approach as a strength and not as a weakness. Furthermore, the Benelux countries don't want to be reduced to one block. The 'committee of wise men', a Benelux reflection group, acknowledged the risks for the three countries of acting too openly as a single bloc during the 1996–97 IGC, warning that the common position could be translated into one Benelux member in the Commission, or one Benelux Presidency of the Council. In this regard, too close cooperation could even be counterproductive (Pijpers/Vanhoonacker 1997, 137). In any case, even if the three countries would wish to give more priority to attuning their positions, it would be highly unlikely that this could be realised. The interests of the three do not necessarily always coincide and as we have seen in the dossier of the re-weighting of the votes, the first priority continues to be the defence of one's own position and interests. Thirdly it would certainly be an illusion to assume that close cooperation would add up to the same influence as that of France or Germany. The power base of the Benelux in terms of population, military force, is not strong enough to acquire big power status. Their ability to exert influence will therefore to a large extent continue to depend on their ability to rally other countries behind their position. By joining forces their chances to be heard will however be much bigger than when acting unilaterally.

NOTES

- 1 The Benelux organisation is not involved and plays no role in the cooperation between the three countries in the EU framework.
- 2 Benelux Memorandum on the Intergovernmental Conference, 5 May 1996.
Benelux Memorandum on the Intergovernmental Conference, 8 December 1999.
Benelux Memorandum on the IGC and on the Future of the European Union, 29 September 2000.

- Benelux Memorandum on the Future of Europe, 22 June 2001.
- Preparation of the European Council of Sevilla: Benelux Memorandum on the reform of the Council, 4 June 2002.
- Memorandum of the Benelux. A balanced institutional framework for an enlarged, more effective and more transparent Union, Brussels, 4 December 2002.
- 3 Mémorandum des pays Benelux pour le Conseil européen de Tampere, 6 October 1999.
 - Mémorandum Benelux en matière de Justice et Affaires Intérieures en vue du Sommet de Laeken, March 2001.
 - 4 Based on the title of a study by Pijpers (2000).
 - 5 The Schäuble-Lamers paper was not an official document of the German government but it is hard to imagine that it had not first been seen and ‘approved’ by Chancellor Kohl.
 - 6 In the Nice Treaty the minimum number has been reduced to 8 (currently still a majority of the member states but after enlargement this will be less than half).
 - 7 For an overview of the negotiations on flexibility both in Amsterdam and Nice, see Stubb (2002).
 - 8 On the discussions of a directorate, see Keukeleire (2000).
 - 9 This part of the article has been taken from Bossaert/Vanhoonaeker (2000, 170ff.).
 - 10 On the Benelux and the early years of European integration, see Bloemen (1992).
 - 11 On the Dutch position towards de Gaulle’s proposals for a Political Union, see Nijenhuis (1987).
 - 12 See the chapters ‘België’ by Schreurs (1999) and ‘Luxemburg’ by Brouwer/Pijpers (1999).
 - 13 See note 2.
 - 14 Besides Russia and the US, only France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom were members of the Contact Group.
 - 15 This coalition is also known as the ‘purple’ coalition.
 - 16 See note 2.
 - 17 Mémorandum des pays Benelux pour le Conseil européen de Tampere, 6 October 1999. Mémorandum Benelux en matière de Justice et Affaires Intérieures en vue du Sommet de Laeken, March 2001.
 - 18 Even though it is still primarily a national responsibility, it is argued that national employment policies should be better coordinated and that the provisions in the Treaty on the complementary role of the EU should be made more explicit.
 - 19 Mémorandum des pays Benelux pour le Conseil européen de Tampere, 6 October 1999.
 - 20 Mémorandum Benelux en matière de Justice et Affaires Intérieures en vue du Sommet de Laeken, March 2001.
 - 21 Memorandum of the Benelux. A balanced institutional framework for an enlarged, more effective and more transparent Union, Brussels, 4 December 2002.
 - 22 Preparation of the European Council of Sevilla: Benelux Memorandum on the reform of the Council, 4 June 2002.
 - 23 The Belgian Prime Minister Dehaene was furious in Amsterdam (June 1997) when at the very last moment the Dutch Presidency proposed a modification of the current weighting system in the Council favouring the big Member States, without consulting Belgium. This proposal would have meant an end to the parity between Belgium and the Netherlands, which at that moment each had 5 votes. According to the Dutch proposal in Amsterdam, the four big Member States would have 25 votes, Spain 20, the Netherlands 12, Belgium 10 and Luxembourg three.
 - 24 The position of Belgium in the IGC 2000 was that it would only accept a differentiation in votes between the Netherlands and Belgium if a distinction would also be made between France and Germany (which was unacceptable for France!). The Netherlands and Prime Minister Kok fiercely fought for an extra vote and in Nice The Hague finally received one more vote than Belgium. Relations between the two countries came under serious strain.
 - 25 Summit Meeting between Benelux and the Visegrad Group, Luxembourg, December 2001 (Press Statement).
 - 26 Even then the liberal members of the second chamber in The Hague found the Benelux memorandum on the Future of Europe too ambitious. In: *Kritiek VVD op Benelux-Memorandum*, in: @Europa 7, 1-2.
 - 27 The small member states defended the position that also in an enlarged Union each member state should have one Commissioner. Later on, some of them, including the Netherlands, supported a rotating membership at the condition that it would be based on the principle of equality.
 - 28 Initially only the French President Jacques Chirac and the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had been invited; the Spanish and Italian Prime Ministers had only been called at the last moment.
 - 29 For the text of his contribution, see Benschop (2000).
 - 30 On the Netherlands and the increasing importance of bilateralism in its foreign policy, see Pijpers (1999).
 - 31 Declaration of government of 12 August 1999, by Jean-Claude Juncker, 3. See also Bossaert and Vanhoonaeker (2000, 182f.).

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AUTORIN

Sophie VANHOONACKER is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, University of Maastricht and Director of a master programme European Public Affairs (EPA). She has a background in political science and history. Her main fields of research are EU institutions and decision-making (with a particular interest in the Presidency of the Council); CFSP; transatlantic relations.

Contact address: Faculty of Arts and Culture, P.O. Box 616, NL–6200 MD Maastricht; email: s.vanhoonacker@tss.unimaas.nl.