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The Netherlands: The EU's "New Britain"?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Amsterdam would like to claim the role once played by London within the EU, but there are challenges in its path—and not all parties see it as a suitable candidate in the first place.

Few took note of a statement made not long ago by Dutch PM Mark Rutte about his country's role in Europe. Calling the Netherlands "mentally the most transatlantic country in Europe," Rutte stressed its willingness to become "the physical and political gateway" connecting the Biden administration to the continent following the departure of the UK from the EU.

Rutte did not manufacture this idea out of thin air. The American Declaration of Independence is said to have been influenced by the Plakkaat van Verlatinghe (Act of Abjuration), which declared the Netherlands' independence from Spain. A Dutch governor was the first to recognize the US, and Dutch settlers played a vital role in the American Revolution.

The Dutch and English languages also share a linguistic kinship. The term "Yankee," for example, a reference to Americans, is derived from a Dutch word once used as a nickname for Dutch Americans. America's most renowned city, New York, was once called New Amsterdam, and many of its neighborhoods still bear Dutch names that harken back to the early Dutch settlers. Four American presidents were of Dutch origin, including Franklin Roosevelt. Today there are more than 4.5 million Americans of Dutch descent.

With regard to commercial and political issues within the EU, the Dutch and the British have always been in one trench while the French and the Germans have been in another. As soon as Brexit became a reality awaiting implementation, Rutte began to set the stage for the Netherlands to take over the UK's role at the EU by taking positions at odds with his European counterparts on various decisions.

The Netherlands is increasingly seen as the EU's "new Britain" insofar as it has countered the European consensus on matters such as the Greek debt problem and the refugee crisis. Rutte has been referred to as "Mr. No," especially following his blocking of a deal on a huge European coronavirus recovery fund. At the same time, Amsterdam has become the largest financial market in the EU in terms of economic volume. More shares were traded in Amsterdam in January 2021 than on the respective stock exchanges of Paris, Frankfurt, Milan, and London, and 78 companies moved to the Netherlands last year for Brexit-related reasons.

Brexit has tempted many EU countries to strengthen their influence within the bloc and expand their presence worldwide. This trend is being boosted by the imminent departure of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who left her mark on the EU's strategic decisions for over a decade and a half and is leaving office in the fall. The absence of Europe's "Iron Lady" will leave a void, and her successor will need time to consolidate his or her continental and international presence.

It is no secret that French president Emmanuel Macron wants France to take over Britain's role in the EU. But Rutte's use of the word "mentally" could have been intended to imply that while there is a traditional linguistic rivalry between French and English and a history of lukewarm relations between France and the US, the Netherlands is a better fit. In addition, the majority of French people are Catholic while the majority of Dutch people are Protestant, another point of contact between the Netherlands and the US. Furthermore, France has not always been supportive of US policies, and the countries can even be considered foes on various issues in Africa, the Middle East, and Central America.

As for Italy, the third-largest EU economy, it is too preoccupied to step into Britain's shoes. It suffered the highest number of COVID-related deaths in the Union, is mired in a deep economic crisis, and is suffering political instability. It is unlikely that this Catholic country will be interested in playing a competitive and significant role at the EU for the foreseeable future.

The opportunity may indeed be ripe for Amsterdam with the advent of an American administration that believes in restrengthening transatlantic relations. The Netherlands is a member of NATO and has been a US ally from the Korean War through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the US-led fight against ISIS in Syria. It is the largest destination for US foreign direct investment and the third-largest foreign investor in America. Moreover, there is no historic or recent rivalry between the two countries, an advantage that might give it a privileged status that exceeds even that of Britain.

But to become the “new Britain” the Netherlands will have to take on Britain’s identity. That will mean engaging “London-style” with the US in hot spots around the world, be they in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific, or East Asia. This will have political, military, economic, security, and human consequences. The Dutch public will have to accept the costs of taking on such a role, which is without precedent in the country’s modern history.

The emergence of the Netherlands could spell trouble for Turkey, as Ankara does not have the same kind of warm ties with Amsterdam that it enjoys with London and Berlin. Amsterdam does not have the capacity to provide a European political umbrella for Turkey’s policies in the international arena, which may open the door to friction between the Germans and the Dutch. Rutte has also engaged in a verbal spat with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The Netherlands, which has a total population of 17 million, contains around two million Turks, and Erdoğan could decide to mobilize his loyalists to stir up unrest there if he sees that a prospective American-Dutch alliance could threaten his policies—especially as signs are pointing to a rocky path ahead between Biden and Erdoğan.

Most of the main Dutch parties, across the political spectrum, share Rutte’s desire for closer relations with the US. Thus, whatever the outcome of the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in March, Europe can expect the Dutch to play a larger role.

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