Internship at the strategic advisory unit of the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs

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Introduction

“Do you read books?” they asked, I said yes. “Have you read The Better Angels of our Nature by Stephen Pinker?” I said I did and that I even used the book as an important source for my BA thesis. An interesting discussion then erupted in which Klaus and Rolf, the men that interviewed me for my internship application, seemed very pleased to have found a student that had read their favourite book and had an outspoken opinion about it. Then they asked me to tell a bit more about myself. One of the first things I told them was that I was a critical thinker that liked to play the devil’s advocate. Again the men asked a lot of questions on why I liked to play the devil’s advocate, what methods I use and on what grounds I judged that I was good at it. I told them about my roles as a devil’s advocate during the English proficiency classes and my active attendance when reviewing papers and presentations where I always try to argue from the opposites perspective (for example Russia). During the last part of the interview we talked about strategy and in what ways I had used that before. I told them about the strategy games I excelled at, the leads I took in strategizing at Model United Nations conferences, and that my parents and certain friends sometimes referred to me as the strategist.

Based on these three points the men hired me a week later for the strategic advisory unit, Eenheid Strategische Advisering (ESA) in Dutch, at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ). The internship period was from the first of September until the 30th of January with an additional introduction day in June and an extra extension day to the 31st of January to cover the gap with the new interns started on February 1st.

In the next couple of chapters I will give a description of BZ and ESA, explain my position as intern and my tasks and I will give an diary overview of the individual months and an evaluation of the placement at large.

In the separate documents one can find my internship evaluation, filled in by my internship supervisor Marjolein de Ridder (marjolein-de.ridder@minbuza.nl), and a document with tips, tricks and improvement points that I have also received on my last day.

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1 BZ: in Dutch the ministry of foreign affairs is called het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken and is abbreviated to BZ.
1. BZ

BZ, located in the Hague, is the main body of the Dutch government that deals with foreign relations. BZ was founded at the end of the 18th century. It had maintained a limited size until the end of the Second World War, after which it has evolved to fulfil many tasks in the international arena. In the next section I will explain which tasks BZ fulfils today and how the organization is structured, and what the working style is.

1.1 The Tasks and Organizational Structure of BZ

BZ has one Secretary General and two Ministers. The SG is Joke Brant, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is Bert Koenders, who we call “M”, and the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation is Liliane Ploumen, who we call “R”.

BZ has four main tasks, namely: to maintain relations with foreign countries, European Affairs, development cooperation and supporting the business community abroad. These four tasks are executed by the four Director-Generals (DG’s) and their staff. The four DG’s and their tasks are:

- Political Affairs (DGPZ): This DG focuses on the relations with foreign countries and promotes international law on behalf of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for example by supporting the International Court of Justice or by cooperating with the Ministry of Defence in the preparations for peace missions.

- European Cooperation (DGES): Participating in EU decision-making process and working on improving the relations with other EU member states.

- International Cooperation (DGIS): To promote sustainable economic development of developing countries via development cooperation that focuses on such topics as security and justice, water, food security, sexual and reproductive health and rights.

- Foreign Economic Relations (DGBEB): To support Dutch companies that want to do business abroad.

The Dutch foreign policy is mainly drafted in the Hague via a cooperation between BZ civil servants and the Dutch government. The execution of the policies is mainly done by the staff working at the Dutch embassies and consulates as well as by the people who BZ employs at the EU in Brussels and via the diverse range of IOs that it sponsors.

Apart from executing Dutch policies, the Dutch embassies and consulates also provide consular services such as travel advice, support in case of theft or loss of travel documents and care for Dutch detainees in foreign prisons.

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3 In Dutch: DG Politieke Zaken
4 In Dutch: DG Europese Samenwerking
5 In Dutch: DG Internationale Samenwerking
6 In Dutch: DG Buitenlandse Economische Betrekkingen
1.2. The Working Style

At the ministry they operate with ‘het nieuwe werken,’ the new way of working, which entails that you can arrive and leave work when ever you please and work where ever you want as long as you get the job done. Unfortunately this does not apply for interns. However, the asset that does apply to interns is that inside the ministry they got rid of most of the private offices, so no one has a fixed spot to work. This means that you can work anywhere you want and that workspace of people that have a free day can be used by others. The downside however is that you cannot leave your things at work for the next day and it also means that on order to get a spot near, for example, your colleagues you have to arrive rather early.
2. ESA

“It is hard to get a solid grasp on what ESA actually stands for and what it does,” our new deputy chief Joep kept saying in the first months that he worked for ESA. Nevertheless I will try to give an overview of the different tasks of ESA.

ESA has been founded by Jochem with the goal to identify, to advice and to facilitate. Officially ESA is part of DGES, but in practice ESA delivers strategic advice directly to the SG and all DGs. Because ESA delivers its advice directly to the top, it circumvents the standard chain of command and thus it can operate relatively independent and without censorship from section directors. Moreover, because ESA focuses solely on strategy, it does not have to focus on day-to-day events, thus freeing up a lot of capacity to work on more long-term projects. In order to keep in touch with the rest of the organization, ESA has shared ownership with the different directorates over the strategic policy advisors (SBAs)\(^8\). Every directorate has one SBA and every two weeks these SBAs meet with the ESA staff to discuss strategic advices, trends or new research during the so called ESA-SBA network meeting.

ESA covers all grounds of BZ policy and therefore focuses on a broad amount of topics. The topics that ESA worked on during my internship period were: scenario’s, 3D (development, diplomacy & defence), superforecasting, Brexit, The elections in the US, the (economic) security complex, eurogovernance, the effects of technological developments on policy, the future of development aid, religion & conflict, and how Dutch interests are best represented in a multi-polar world.

One of the most important tasks of ESA is identifying strategic trends and developments as well as putting new issues on the BZ agenda. To do this ESA maintains contact with strategic think tanks in the Netherlands and abroad, including the AIV, Clingendael and HCSS. Because it is often challenging to translate research into policy, ESA is always on the lookout for new methods to facilitate this in the best possible manner.

During my internship period ESA consisted of twelve members (Jochem, Natasja, Marjolein, Klaus, Hanne, Joost, Miguette, Jan, Rolf, Martine, Roel and Ceta) and three interns (Noha, Bas and myself). A quarter of these people where, just like me, new to the organization when I started on the first of September. In November our head and deputy head, Jochem and Natasja, were replaced by Rob and Joep and in December colleague Rolf was replaced by Saskia. During my internship period, Marjolein was my internship supervisor and Jochem was my mentor.

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\(^8\) SBA: in Dutch Strategisch Beleidsadviseurs
3. Position and Description of Tasks

In the next section I will explain for which position and tasked I was hired and what I ended up doing in terms of day to day tasks, standalone events and long-term projects. Moreover, I will tell with who I did the project and what we tried to achieve.

3.1 Position

For this internship I was mainly hired for my academic knowledge on IR and Russia, critical thinking skills, my interest in reading and my familiarity with strategy and playing the devil’s advocate. Unfortunately, in the first few months I was manly tasked with secretarial duties, only from November onwards I was fully employed for the duties I was initially hired for.

3.2 Day-to-day tasks

During my time as an intern I had been involved in a number of projects of varying length, and carried out several day-to-day tasks. My day-to-day tasks included: arranging lunch lectures, reserving meeting rooms, summarizing texts, planning events, contacting colleagues, helping out with computer software and hardware-related issues, approving reservations for the strategy lab, writing the minutes of meetings, summarizing lectures, picking up guests from the reception and tracking the news for relevant articles for ESA projects.

3.3 Single time events

There are a number of events that I participated in or in which I played a part. There where several conferences for which I had to welcome foreign diplomats to the Ministry and bring them to the various conference rooms. Moreover, I was asked to speak at a conference on nature rights and I was requested to come up with several critical questions during presentations of new books and research, for example during the War 2020 presentation of Ingo Piepers.

3.4 The Projects

Apart from the day-to-day tasks I was trying to get involved with substantial projects as much as I could. I decided to do this because that was the task I was hired for in the first place, those projects where in my eyes most interesting, would teach me the most and also offer me a way to prove my qualities. During my internship I took part in the following projects:

The ESA information market: To create more awareness for the tasks that ESA performed, Jochem asked me to organize an ESA information marked around a certain theme. Together with Miguette we came up with the idea to make it an event similar to wine tasting, but instead of wine people could learn about the different ESA tasks. I was put in charge of organizing the whole event with a little bit of back up from the BZ Academy of International
Relations. I designed a banner and flyers, promoted the event and arranged the location and the speakers. During the event itself I represented ESA’s task of devil’s advocate, for this role I dressed up as can be seen on the picture (also note the banner). Dressed like this I stopped people on their way to lunch to interest them to visit the ESA market before or after their lunch break.

**Alternative thinking methods:** during my internship I was asked by Klaus to specialize in “tegendenken,” alternative thinking methods. This included the devil’s advocate, red teaming, and the role-playing of certain world leaders. I played the role of devil’s advocate during the sessions on Brexit and during the Trump scenarios, while I also created a red teaming exercise on what the Dutch government could do if the Kurds would declare the independence of their proposed state Rojava.

**3D 2.0:** During the third week of my internship Miguette asked me if I wanted to do a project with her to find out, on behave of M, how to develop a 3D 2.0 method. Because Miguette was occupied with many other project I did most of the research in finding out what the current Dutch 3D method entailed and what its flaws where. After a month of working on this project our new colleague Joost joined the project, and based on my findings we started to develop a 3D 2.0 approach. The main changes that we made where the locations of Dutch interventions, we decided that the Dutch should only intervene in the ring of instability around Europe and that missions should not only have a reactive character but also a preventive one focussed on bringing stability. After our idea was put into a memo, we asked SBAs from the four DGs to read and comment on our ideas. Eventually they became co-writers and supporters of our new approach. In February 2017 our proposal will be discussed during the SG-DG meeting and by M and R.

**The US elections:** Miguette was in charge of tracking the US elections and would be visiting the Dutch embassy in Washington and several American think tanks in the US on and after the election day. For this visit she asked me to help her prepare. I was tasked with visiting and summarizing several lectures on the US and the Transatlantic relationship. Moreover, I arranged and digitalized special trend cards as a gift for the American think tanks.

**Trump scenarios:** On the morning Trump was elected president almost all the ESA staff members sat together under the leadership of Rob to come up with the first strategic analysis for M on the election of Trump. I was tasked with leading the interns in writing our vision on the Trump presidency. I set the interns to work, while I wrote a small analysis on voter behaviour and how Trump could have won. Both pieces where included in a memo which also included a proposal to organize four Trump scenario sessions on climate, security, the EU and trade based on the scenario’s that either Trump would be fully in charge of the US, Pence and the republicans would be fully in charge or that both sides would be stuck in some sort of paralysis. I participated in the scenario session on security and I also analyzed the results of the other 3 sessions. On the basis of the scenario results I made a matrix that showed all the possible correlations between the topics and possible policy implications for the Netherlands. Later on I presented my findings to the Trump scenario team who then used my findings as basis for the Trump session at the ambassadors conference that was held at the end of January.

**Geoeconomics:** Together with Natasja I ran a project on the economic security complex, for this project I had to familiarize myself with geoeconomics and I had several discussions with
the leading Dutch academic on the topic of making his presentation suitable for BZ. For this project I, unfortunately, mainly had an observing and organizing function.

De weekendmap: Four times I have written a review of a book or article for the weekendmap. The weekendmap is a set of reviews of relevant articles that civil servants of BZ have read and deem interesting for the Minister. At the end of the week ESA selects the best reviews and hands them over to the Minister for him to read during the weekend. Among my accepted pieces where a book review “The better Angels of Our Nature” by Stephen Pinker and review of John Mearsheimer’s latest article “Defining a New Security Architecture for Europe that brings Russia in from the Cold”.

The opinion piece on Dutch Foreign Policy: for the Ambassadors Conference Rob asked Noha, Bas and I to write a short opinion piece on the Dutch Foreign Policy in response to the latest study of HCSS on future policy trends and challenges facing the Netherlands. We wrote a four page review which put Dutch Foreign Policy into an historic perspective that showed that most trends were not new and offered two different options for the future. Namely, either an Transatlantic approach or an European-centric approach, explaining the costs and benefits of both as well as explaining why a combination of pursuing both approaches would prove difficult. My main role in the project was working on the future options, coordinating the cooperation and finalizing the entire document into one flowing piece.

Campaign Klaus: During the last week of my internship Klaus announced that he was running for a seat at the ondernemersraad, the entrepreneurs council of BZ. I offered to help him by designing a logo and a campaign slogan for him. On of the designs can be seen in the image on the right. The letters LBZ in the logo stand for Lijst Buitenlandse Zaken, List Foreign Affairs.

The Nudging project: I helped Hanne with his social and behavioural sciences project on nudging. I summarized several English texts, discussed the project content with him and went along to several lectures on the topic. This was a very nice way for me to put my BA minor in psychology into practice.
4. Monthly personal experiences

In this section I represent my monthly diary which I kept during my internship. At some points I later added new information that I learned about alter and removed other parts that seemed less relevant.

4.1 September

My first week as an intern at the Ministry was one of mixed feelings. On the first day Jochem and Marjolein divided the internship tasks among Noha and myself. I would focus on the alternative thinking methods with Klaus, take the minutes of the ESA-SBA meeting and would help Miguette with her project on the US. In general I was pretty happy with the tasks I got assigned compared to what Noha had to do. On day two the real work started but since Marjolein, my internship supervisor, was away on a seminar for a few days, I had no one to instruct me on my tasks. I was sitting together with Ceta, Natasha and Noha on the 7th floor, but since they were also new to ESA they could not help me much either. I was tasked to record the minutes at a discussion on the EU, this was a daunting task as I had never taken the minutes of an informal meeting and unfortunately there was no example available of the minute format that BZ uses; to make things worse I also had no access to the BZ computer network, so I could only work on a computer of a colleague. After finishing the minutes I send them to Marjolein and Jochem, with the request for feedback. I got the reply that they had no time to look at it, and only after a month I got the feedback saying that the way that I made the minutes was totally wrong.

At the start of the second week I had my first talk with Marjolein, she told me that it was more important to complete quickly and efficiently than to write the perfect piece. Personally, I found this approach questionable since I need a lot of time to write a piece without spelling mistakes as I am dyslectic. She also said that since I worked 36 hours a week I should be at work from Monday to Friday and that I could only leave early on Friday if all tasks were done. Working late or extra was part of the job. This was unfortunate and felt slightly unfair because Noha, my fellow intern, was permitted to take a day off every second week, instead of having to judge by herself when to leave early. The biggest challenge that I faced was that I was forced to start using a smartphone for work. I never had a smartphone, out of idealistic reasons I was and am against using one. Unfortunately there was no way debating alternatives, I should be able to check my mail and take up the phone from work 24/7, that was again part of the job, to give me the best impression how it was to work at BZ. My argument that other colleagues also didn't use a smartphone out of idealistic reasons, was brushed aside.

One of the fun things this week was a visit to Leiden with Klaus and Miguette to go to a lecture on realism. It was an interesting lecture and a good way to bond with these two friendly colleges. Since Marjolein was away for a training or in other ways occupied for the rest of the weeks, Natasja guided me around as much as she could and asked me to do a variety of secretarial tasks for her as well as helping her out with her geoeconomics project. Since I was hired on the basis of my academic skills, I often found it hard to execute Natasja's practical tasks which often required me to write texts in flawless Dutch which was, for a dyslectic person like me, a very daunting task. One of my successes of this week was when I organized the ESA information marked. I had a lot of fun designing the posters and banner and I had amazed all people involved when I came to the market fully dressed up like a Russian to attract visitors. The ESA market was a success and a picture of me was put on the front page of the BZ website. Additionally it gave me some good contacts with other BZ colleagues who where passionate about Russia.
On most days I was sitting on the 6th floor, this is the only floor at BZ where they still have individual offices. I like to work there as it is one of the few places where you can work without being distracted. Moreover, Klaus, Miguette, Hanne, Jan and Marjolein also sit on this floor, so that makes cooperation with them easier. Klaus even has managed to claim one office for himself on a permanent basis. I often visited him and we had interesting talks, mainly about books. Together with him I wrote my first piece for the weekendmap on the book of Stephen Pinker, “the Better Angels of our Nature”. Also we had a teambuilding day at the beach on which I shared good moments with Noha, Hanne, Jan, Roel, Saskia and Klaus.

During the first weeks of my internship I worked for 40 instead of 36 hours a week so I could learn as much as possible. Though in the fourth week of my internship I decided to leave earlier on Friday to visit a BZ debating course in another part of the building. During the debating course I was contacted by Natasja as she wanted my help finishing her memo, I told her that I was busy with something else, but that I could come help her later that day. This reply would later turn out to be a huge mistake…

### 4.2 October

The first day of this month started on a negative note. On this day Jochem and Marjolein marched in to my office on the 6th floor to have a word with me. They asked me how I experienced the internship so far, and I said it was a challenge but in general it went quite well. They said that they found that things didn’t go well, as they had little idea what I did as they hardly saw me on the 7th floor, the work I delivered was full of grammar mistakes and that I had chosen to follow a debating class over helping Natasja which they saw as very bad decision making on my part. They felt that I should make very rapid improvements or else… Also they let me know that Marjolein was away on holidays the next few weeks and that Natasja would be my supervisor during that time.

This month was the most stressful for me as I could be fired if I did not improve in the way they wanted me to improve. With Marjolein away to Iran, I tried the best I could to perform all task well for Natasja, to communicate everything I did, ask everyone if they needed my assistance and to be present at the 7th floor every day at an early hour. Moreover, I didn’t leave early on any day so that I could use the extra hours to double check my spelling and grammar. I forced myself to have plenty of talks with Natasja to find out my weak points and to improve on them. The main response I got was that she found that I was strong on substance matter, but that I did not have the skills required to become a civil servant. She asked me how it would be for me if I should quit, I told her that I did not want to quit, that I wanted to improve my skills, learn. I also explained that I could not easily quit because then I would miss the ECTS required to complete my master. Only that she told me that she wanted to have me fired, but that she could stretch that period up to 10 weeks, the minimum amount of weeks for a RUG MA internship, so that I at least would get the required ECTS. The talk with her left me with little happy feelings. I went to talk to Klaus and Miguette about it to explain my situation. Klaus said that he liked working with me and that he didn’t want to see me go, he gave me some good tips on how to behave more like a civil servant, by taking a more serving attitude. Also talking to Miguette created some goodwill from her side. Unexpected support came from Roel and Jan who both came up to me during lunches. Jan said that I should not accept the way that they treated me and that I should demand better guidance. Jan always debated that the current youth was exploited by the system, and his words helped me. Roel told me to not take Natasja’s words too seriously, as she was not the only one to make decisions in ESA.

Progress with Klaus on making the alternative thinking methods work was slow and far apart. He is busy with many other projects so I was on my own on this one. An opportunity arises when Jochem wanted to use red teaming and the devil’s advocate for the
Entrepreneurs Conference. I offered my services and started working on compiling several workshops for devil’s advocate and a red teaming scenario based on the possible independence of the Kurdish state of Rojava. Work for Miguette goes also slow, she gives me many tasks and assignments for the 3D project and I make a lot of progress, however she has little time to discuss my findings and contributes little written pieces of her own. Luckily this month a new colleague, Joost, has joined ESA he was going to work with me on 3D. I also had a meeting with Natasja and the expert on geoconimics. I am very sceptical about the paper that he wrote on economic security and the critique that I gave him and the points of improvement were not well received by him. Natasja agreed with my points, though she disliked my outspoken tone.

This week I had a very personal talk with Noha, she had a bad start too and feels like quitting. She received much negative feedback, while positive points where overlooked. I felt bad for her, though it was comforting to know that I am not the only person who is struggling. We talked about the issues and I managed to change her mind about quitting the internship for the moment. At home I talked about my issues at work, and the support I got gave me the strength to go on.

A bright point on the following week was the arrival of the third intern Bas to join our team. In my eyes he is the perfect intern, good at the secretary duties and decent at the more academic tasks, a well balanced mix. After two weeks Marjolein returned from her holiday in Iran. She seemed more rested and vibrant. Our weekly talks went better though she still only gave me improvement points. I tried to be very open to her suggestions and I asked her to give me even harsher critique as I want to learn and do everything as good as possible. I felt that Marjolein liked my open stance, and hoped that she also saw my improvements. I also offered to help her on her project on EU politics. I noticed that I make less spelling mistakes as I am well rested and take my time to reread my work several times. With much effort I wrote a flawless piece for her on the EU political parties. She was surprised that the text doesn’t include any spelling mistakes. That was the first step for me in showing that I am improving my skills.

During one of our lunch lectures I come into contact with a water expert, I told him about my volunteer work for a water project in Western-Africa and he invited me to discuss my work there. I showed him the work and asked him if he could spread the knowhow of the water project so that more Africans can profit from the cheap water collection systems that the project which I was part of had developed. He accepted and with that my first networking meeting in BZ turned out to be a success.

4.3 November
This week Miguette went to the US for the elections, I managed to help her arrange some important last minute tasks. The biggest task was to track down a person who a few years ago designed certain trend cards that Miguette needed for her visit to the US think tanks. The person is on maternity leave and the stock of cards is depleted, but after many phone calls I found a person who has a spare set that she is willing to give to us. Miguette was very happy with my determination to get the job done and contacts Marjolein about it. This positive comment would later strengthen Marjolein in her decision to not terminate my internship prematurely. Together with Joost I worked on 3D 2.0, our cooperation went well. He took the time to discuss 3D thoroughly and we both had a mentality that we would like to see results and do things sooner rather than later. We came up with a new alternative for 3D namely 4S: sustainability, security, stability and safety. The idea was that stability is key and that we no longer look at the regime type of a country, moreover we decided that it is important that we use development aid as a way to prevent conflicts in countries in the first place. A lunch lecture on this topic by an academic strengthened us in our believes that
prevention is the way forwards. I asked Joost and Miguette to provide me with the data of all countries that the Dutch government is currently involved in either for development aid, security, climate, security sector reform or trade. With this data I made an overview of all the Dutch efforts, which has shown that the efforts of the Netherlands are very much spread out across many different countries. To make Dutch efforts more effective we decided that the Netherlands should apply foreign interventions, being it via aid or the military, only to countries in the ring around Europe. So that development aid is no longer altruistic, but rather serves a direct purpose for the Netherlands and the EU at large. This not only makes Dutch aid more credible, but it also gives development aid an important role in Dutch and EU security, and therefore make it less likely that the new Dutch government will terminate its funds for development aid all together after the March elections.

Jochem had been tasked to come up with scenarios for a hard Brexit and he asked me to take the minutes and to invite several SBAs and experts for a meeting on this topic. During the inviting process I came up with the idea that the Brexit meeting could be a perfect opportunity to use the devil’s advocate method. I asked Jochem and he found it an excellent idea. The Brexit scenario meeting became a success and also the devil’s advocate method was liked by the other participants. After this meeting Jochem was asked to quit ESA to lead the Brexit taskforce, something that he accepted.

At the middle of the month both Jochem and Natasja left ESA and were replaced by Rob and Joep. I could get along with both of them very well and it felt like a fresh start for me. The first cooperation with both gentlemen came on the morning after the election of Trump. We sat together with most of the team and Rob asked us for the implications that the Trump election will have on the Netherlands and the world. As I had stayed up all night to follow the elections and had extensively discussed all aspects of it with other IR graduates, I had many ideas. Rob was very pleased with my initiatives and asked me to write down my ideas and also guide the other interns to give “the vision of the youth” on the issue. The day was very exiting, for the first time everyone worked together as a team. I felt happy and energetic, the troubles of the complicated start felt washed away. We wrote a memo on the Trump election that include d my pieces and Joost came up with the idea to do scenario s. The memo we wrote got accepted by M and ESA has been put on the map as the knowledge body on handling Trump.

In the last week of this month I helped Hanne by summarizing several chapters of his English book on nudging. Hanne was happy with my assistance and shared many of his ideas with me. He invited me to several events on social and behaviour science and even asked me to help him campaign for his political party.

During this month I had a lot of fun encounters with fellow interns, I met fellow RUG students and also made new friends. They asked me to help them with practical task on several conferences that they organized in the evening, to which I happily agreed to help.

Friends, politics.

At the end of this month I received some disappointing news, with Natasja on maternity leave, the geoconomics project was slowed down and also the role that ESA would play in organizing the alternative thinking technique courses as part on diplomats conference was terminated. Also there was doubt whether we can continue with 3D project as Miguette had no time for it. The projects that I was involved in and enjoyed seemed to be disappearing, an uncertain time is ahead.

4.4 December

This month started out great with a complement from Rob to me for speaking out during the meetings. He was pleased that I was not afraid to state my opinion in front of people in senior positions. He encouraged me to do this more often and to practice on
different forms of argumentation. Another pleasant development was my interaction with Joep, he asked me to help him to get to know ESA and every morning he came along to have a chat with me. He was also pleased with the minutes I had made on the ESA-SBA meeting on the presentation on the economic security complex.

In the second week of December we had a Christmas dinner/goodbye party for Rolf at Rob’s house. Because I often worked well with Rolf I proposed to the other interns that we would buy him an goodbye gift. During the dinner I gave a short speech and handed him the gift. Rolf was happy with the gift and also the other colleagues very much appreciated that the interns felt so much part of the ESA team that they also put in effort in finding Rolf a gift. I noticed that small gestures like this created a lot of goodwill among colleagues that would other ways be very hard to obtain on the work floor. During my weekly chat with Marjolein, she for the first time gave me a compliment on my work and said she was happy with my progress over the weeks. She also asked me if I could help the other interns become more assertive in sharing with them my experiences that made me more assertive.

I helped Rob and Joost with their Trump scenarios and they let me participate as a full member during the discussion with the defence experts during the scenario meetings. I felt I was finally a full member of the ESA team, an equal to the other colleagues. For me December was an amazing month.

4.5 January

The greatest achievement of Rob and Joep in leading ESA is that they were able to turn ESA into a team. Beforehand everyone was busy and scattered around spots on different flours, but now they have managed to get everyone to work in the 6C hallway and they also seemingly slowed people down, so that they have more time to discuss things as a team. This was a development that for me contributed a lot to the joy of working.

As January was my last month, I worked hard to either finish projects or to prepare them in such a way that they could be handed over easily to the new interns. I felt that I finally know how everything works and that I was involved in many enjoyable projects, I felt sad that the internship was going to be over soon. Though almost at the end Joep came up with a new project, namely taking over the organization and reservation system of the strategy lab. It was a task that others had troubles with because it involved solving some IT issues. I managed to finish the job and Joep was very happy. Additionally Rob asked Bas, Noha and I to write a piece on the Dutch Foreign Policy for the Ambassadors Conference. In the little time we had left we put together a piece that was in the end presented to the ambassadors.

One morning Joost walked in to have a talk about our 3D 2.0 project as he said that he feared that he could not continue the project without me, as I was the expert on the topic and Miguette hardly had any time to contribute to the project. I was quite sad to hear this news as the 3D 2.0 project had been my favourite project in which I had invested most of my time. I asked Joost to give it one more go and together we made a plan to involve the SBAs from the other DGs to help out with the project. During the meeting three of the four SBAs supported our idea of the comprehensive approach, though one was hesitant as she felt that she could not support an ESA-SBA project without full agreement from her boss. For me this was a make or brake point for the success of the project, so I fanatically started to explain to her how important it was for a comprehensive 3D 2.0 to be supported by the four main SBAs of the DGs and that her position as SBAs is created to give her exactly that freedom to support projects that would normally not be supported by the DG. The other SBAs supported my view and a discussion erupted over the exact role and rights of the SBAs. Unfortunately the hesitating SBA could not be convinced, but luckily Joost had an idea. After the meeting he went to Rob and asked him to talk to the DGs about the exact role of the SBAs and to ask them to tell their SBAs that they had to freedom to support projects that where not in line with
the DG. This plan worked out brilliantly and resulted in all SBAs supporting the 3D 2.0 project and pledging to help Joost to continue the project in my absence. Naturally, I was overjoyed with happiness over this result.

During the last weeks of the internship I was involved in several meetings with Ingo Piepers, an ex-marine and academic who, based on physics models, predicted a large scale war in 2020. ESA was very interested in his prediction and in the way that he used beta science models to explain phenomena in the social sciences based on IR theory. Due to my background in IR and the beta sciences, I was the right person for the job to ask him many critical questions, which I did. Thanks to my involvement with his work, I was later asked to be present at a scenario meeting of leaders of the top sectors (private and public) in the Netherlands to discuss how the Netherlands should respond if the prediction of Piepers would come true. It was a great experience to sit together with these leaders and to hear their visions on the future of the Netherlands in this grim scenario.

During the last week of the internship Noha and I treated everyone with pie. And on the second last day I had my evaluation talk with Marjolein. She had contacted all ESA colleagues to ask them about my performance and collected their answers in a list of strongpoint’s, tips and points of improvement. It was very touching for me to see that she had put such effort into the evaluation and that almost all comments were spot on. Additionally, we discussed the evaluation form and she told me she had been very strict with giving points as she knew that I preferred to receive strong critique. Though she also offered to write a new version that was less critical but perhaps more fair to give to the university, but I refused because the critical evaluation best represents the way I have been evaluated over the last four months and that helped me to improve so much. On our last day Marjolein organized goodbye drinks for us. Rob, Marjolein and Klaus gave speeches and told us that they hoped that we would inspire other youth to voice their opinions in the face of seniors and that we could always contact ESA if we needed help or advice. After this I also gave a speech and thanked everyone. We had a nice evening with the team and even some other interns that I invited came visit our drinks to say goodbye. In the end we left exhausted but with many warm feelings and a lot of new skills.
5. Evaluation of the placement

The first few weeks of my internship were dissatisfying because of the lack of guidance given by Marjolein as she was often unavailable. The additional guidance I received from Natasja was often frustrating because she still had to figure out for herself how things worked with ESA and therefore could be of little help and in the end I had to figure out most of the things myself. Additionally, the tasks that I received from her where not in line with the skills for which I was hired nor with the task set I previously had concluded with Jochem, Marjolein and to some extend Klaus. On this basis the request to terminate my contract that ultimately came from Natasja felt very unjust to me. As well as the fact that she didn’t gave me any clue that she disliked my work, I only heard about her dissatisfaction from other colleagues after she was on maternity leave. That felt very unsettling. Luckily I could talk about my situation with Klaus, Miguette and Noha as well as at home, which helped me a lot. Although Jochem officially was also available as a mentor to discuss work related issues, I never made use of this because I felt more at ease with my other colleagues.

From my side, my performance during the first two months was also hampered by the fact that the house owner from which I rented a room in the Hague decided to move out two weeks after I moved in. He gave me the option to rent the whole apartment which I accepted, but which left me with many extra organizing tasks, figuring out renting laws, costs, getting a housemate, cleaning up the place and so on. This quick turn of events costed a lot of energy that I could other ways have spent at work. This made me feel tired at work during the first few months of the internship and was not beneficial to my performance.

After Marjolein return from holidays she was far more relaxed and she took far more time to guide me, showing the positive effects that holiday breaks can have. Although Marjolein was very strict and sparse with positive compliments, she in the end did put a lot of effort in teaching me how to perform better and from November onwards I felt that I could trust her enough to discuss any issue I found I had difficulties with. Additionally, I opened myself up to all possible feedback and with her strong critique and strict rules I managed to become better at all tasks and the opinions of all colleagues, except perhaps Natasja’s, took a very positive turn. From November onwards the main critique I received time and again was my lack of flawless Dutch spelling and grammar due to my dyslexia. Although at times, if I was well rested, had sufficient time and put much effort checking for mistakes I was able to write a flawless piece that happily surprised my colleagues. However, at frequent occasions I did not have the time for this and I ended up receiving the same feedback repeatedly that I should improve my writing skills. Luckily people like Rob, Joost and Miguette saw my strengths as a critical thinker and a knowledge powerhouse. They gave me tasks where I could show my qualities and this was very pleasant and good for my self esteem. It taught me that doing things that you like and excel at give you energy and that is for me a key thing to look for in a future job.

During the last few months of my internship I felt that I was treated more and more as an equal to my fellow colleagues, no longer was I the interns, no I was the expert on several things, such as Russia, 3D, and alternative thinking methods. I was asked to write several pieces that where presented to diplomats and senior policy makers, and even the Minister (M)! Moreover, the 3D 2.0 project might, if finally successful, shape the whole scope of BZ and other ministries action abroad. It could refocus most Dutch foreign efforts to only the ring of instability around Europe where the Netherlands or the EU at large will try to bring stability in a more preventive way. Prevention could best be done via sustainable development (aid). By linking development aid with security, development aid could keep its relevance and funding even when right wing parties might be elected into power in March, thus safeguarding all the good work that is done by the Dutch development workers and the
sustainable development/climate teams all around the world. Although process on projects like these was slow and sometimes frustrating, it was an honour to be granted the possibility and trust to be at times the main driving force behind this project that perhaps shapes much of the future of BZ.

Apart from how to perform tasks I also learned people skills and how important it is to get along with your colleagues, being able to trust them and to be able to see each others qualities. Whenever possible, I always strived to do the tasks that I found most interesting or which could teach me most. This was a satisfying approach, although sometimes this left the other interns with less fun tasks as they where less good in stating their preferences. The tasks that I was good at where often very similar to the things that I learned at university such as doing research on a certain topic, debating the next step for policies based on news events, critically analysing current policy and presenting an argument. For example my critical thinking skills where very useful for performing the role of the devil’s advocate. Additionally the knowledge that I obtained during my bachelors on international conflicts and IR theory proved very useful during the 3D 2.0 project as many topics that we discussed where very familiar to me. Moreover, during my research into 3D I spoke with many people that where guest lecturers during my specialisation course Vrede en Veiligheid, Peace and Security. And even my colleague Roel was one of these guest lecturers.

The change of leadership in ESA was a blessing for me, it made me enjoy the work and gave me the opportunity to excel at the tasks that I am good at. The biggest compliment I received during my evaluation with Marjolein, but also during personal evaluations with other colleagues is that they called me courageous. Without courage, I would have given up, would not have spoken out or pushed for tasks that would enable me to show my knowledge and skill. Although I feel that during the internship itself I have learned little new skills bases solely on working, my interpersonal skills and how to deal with other people have strongly improved and I feel I have grown a lot as a person. For example, I have learned how to deal with negative feedback, how to deal with colleagues that don’t like your work or maybe even dislike you. To deal with this is not always easy, but with confidence in myself and some support from colleagues, friends and family, these things can be easily overcome and they will make you a stronger person.

I think that in the end this was a very challenging internship that let me experience a lot of things that you do not learn at the university and therefore this experience was invaluable. And in the end I feel that I was also a challenging intern for Marjolein to guide around and that she grew with me in her supervision tasks, while I grew as an intern.
Conclusion

The internship at ESA was one that has taught me a lot. It proved to me that all the things I had learned during my IRIO BA, and my security master, as well as my minor in psychology, my specialization in peace and security and my secondary education in the beta sciences all came in useful during this internship. A very comforting thought.

Klaus and Rolf, the men that hired me, choose the right person for the more specialized tasks they had in mind, though they forgot to ask about a basic skill, flawless writing in Dutch. On the one hand this was a blessing as my dyslexia might have other ways prevented me from being hired for the internship in the first place, but on the other hand it did create some frustration for all parties involved. Luckily, due to some good and strict feedback from Marjolein and other colleagues as well as thanks to my determination I managed to find a way to overcome this hurdle as long as I spent enough time and effort on to it.

These five months made me aware that writing in my native language will always be a handicap for me, but it also showed my that other qualities can make up for it, such as good oral skills, critical thinking and, interestingly, decent writing skills in English. Therefore, in the future I will look for more practical jobs or employment at an organization that has English as its main means of communications.

Aside from how to handle tasks during this internship, I learned a lot about how to handle people. How to support people with their project and how to let them use my qualities, instead of putting me on tasks that I, due to a dyslexia handicap, am not sufficiently skilled for to complete properly. I learned about how to handle negative feedback and how to improve myself day by day while keeping positive contact with my colleagues. And in the end I learned that, this is what matters: improving your weaknesses and employing your strengths in the most positive way. Although I noticed that I might not be the most suitable employee for BZ, due to my lack of Dutch writing skills and sometimes the impatience to jump through all the hoops before one can see results, I did find out that compared to all the different sections of BZ where I could have been hired, ESA was, thanks to the freedom of thinking and the substantial issues, definitely the best place!
Bibliography