

## Low Lands, High Stakes: Addressing the Netherlands' Image Decline in China What Are the Causes, and How Can Public Diplomacy Improve It?

### Summary

The Netherlands has experienced a significant decline in public perception among the Chinese population, falling from 13th place in 2022 to 25th place in 2023 on the Anholt – Ipsos Nation Brand Index. This necessitates an analysis of the causes and targeted measures for the Dutch diplomatic network in China. This brief outlines the problem statement, methodological approach, preliminary findings, and next steps to undertake in the research. The goal is to identify the factors behind the declining perception of the Netherlands in China and to propose strategies for improving this perception through public diplomacy initiatives.

### 1. Problem Statement

*Core Question:* What causes the declining perception of the Netherlands in China, and which type of public diplomacy measures can the Dutch diplomatic network in China undertake to reverse this trend?

*Urgency:* A declining perception of the Netherlands in China could negatively impact the well-being of bilateral relations, trade ties, and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Analysing the drivers behind this perception and identifying how to improve it can enable the Dutch diplomatic network to effectively contribute to a more positive image and strengthen bilateral relations.

### 2. Methodology

The research combines a qualitative and quantitative approach. The qualitative approach gathers primary data through semi-structured interviews and is supported by a thorough analysis of relevant literature. The sample of interviewees covers respondents from industry, the public sector, academia, and young professionals such as Chinese students in the Netherlands.

The quantitative approach follows (1) a statistical analysis of the 2022 NBI; (2) a comparative analysis of the relationship between China and the

Netherlands, and between China and Russia, Scotland, Germany, and France; (3) a sentiment analysis of Sino-Dutch relations on Weibo, and (4) a survey distributed by the Dutch diplomatic network in China.

### 3. Preliminary Findings

*General Drivers:* Studies show that social media is the main source of information for Chinese people about other countries. Sentiment on Weibo, in particular, may have a strong influence on Chinese views of other regions in the world. In figure 1 the results of a sentiment analysis of tweets on Weibo are shown for the period 2015-2025. However, the Netherlands currently seems to occupy a limited presence on Chinese social media platforms. To improve this, it is crucial to consider various ideas, for example, the role of social media personalities in shaping public opinion.

#### Positive Drivers:

- Trade relations are stronger than ever in absolute terms
- The visit of Prime Minister Rutte sent a positive signal.

#### Negative Drivers:

- Increasing criticism of Chinese students in the Netherlands. Chinese students only account for a fraction of all Chinese students going abroad, however, as the Chinese saying goes, "good news never goes beyond the gate, while bad news easily spreads thousands of miles" (好事不出门坏事传千里).
- Hardening of the security narrative between NATO, China, and the EU.
- Dutch Parliament motion on genocide declaration.
- Decreasing mutual cultural exchanges and post-Covid investments.
- Negative effects on the development of the Chinese electronic industry due to the Dutch government's decision to restrict exports by ASML to China.

#### 4. Next Steps

- *Analyse Timing:* Investigate the timing of the measurement to assess the impact of recency bias.
- *Monitor Long-Term Trends:* Track perception in 2024 to determine whether this is a structural or temporary development.
- *Exploring Social Media Strategies:* Investigate how social media can be leveraged to shape and enhance Chinese perceptions.
- *Comparative Research:* Conduct literature reviews and NBI score comparisons with Russia, Scotland, Germany, and France to validate and contextualize findings.
- *Survey in China:* Find out the perception of the Netherlands and its drivers in China.
- *Interviews & Recommendations:* Conduct further interviews and test hypotheses with new respondents.

#### Conclusion

Improving the perception of the Netherlands in China requires a diplomatically and strategically thoughtful approach. While the timing of the measurement of the perception is important, factors such as Chinese social media platforms, security dialogues, student engagement, and business relations need to be further explored.

