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Thesis Conclusion

In the introductory chapter, I pointed to positions that I held to be either misleading or incomplete when characterising the nature of the Company’s diplomatic practice. In particular, I disagreed with the proposition that VOC overseas diplomacy was structurally fixed in typical European conceptualisations. The General Instructions—not only those of 1650—all bear witness to a sensitivity to the particulars of the overseas context, and the need to take these into account when interacting with local parties. The tenor in the general advice issued by the Directors in the Netherlands to the Company’s agents overseas was thus not that one should follow European standards automatically, but that one should negotiate and accommodate on the basis of pragmatic appraisals of the situation at hand.

The tripartite system of the Directors’ manual for the Company’s mode of interaction with Asian rulers built on a similar kind of pragmatism. It set up two general principles, first that the Company’s monopoly in the Moluccas had to be protected at all costs, which in effect excluded symmetrical diplomatic relations with the smaller Moluccan polities. They were either subservient defenders of the
Company monopoly, or enemies who had to be brought under control. But looking at the rest of the charter area, we find a second principle in which the choice of diplomatic mode was built on the Company’s relative strength in relation to its respective Asian partners. Where there was parity of strength, or where the Company remained the weaker part, a rule of pragmatism and accommodation reigned as long as this approach did not compromise the Company’s interests to an unacceptable degree.

My analysis of Batavia’s diplomatic interaction with Makassar in its various aspects reveals pragmatism as key to the Company’s diplomatic mode on site. Van Diemen got what he could get into the 1637 treaty not by dictating terms from the European legal canon but by bargaining with the Makassarese with the objective of setting down rules that would protect the Company’s interests. In that respect, the two treating parties shared some basic understanding of what they were doing. The 1637 negotiations represented a bargaining over specific contract clauses, a tug of war over shared issues.

The internal disagreement on whether to continue the war or conclude a peace in 1655 demonstrates that the Company was not a monolithic body as far as decisions over policy was concerned. Opinion
was split in Batavia, and opposing political positions were argued, but
the opposing positions in the Council of the Indies were both argued in
terms of practical cost-benefit calculations that sought to assess the
Company’s best interests. The ends and framework of reasoning were
shared; what the parties disagreed on was the means to achieve the
optimal outcome for the Company. It should also be noted that legal
aspects were considered secondary in these discussions.

This points towards principled pragmatism as the core
characteristic of the Company’s diplomatic practice. The break away
from “soft diplomacy” that occurred with the disillusionment over the
1655 treaty signified a shift to a consistent realist conceptualisation of
power politics that came to dominate Batavia’s approach towards
Makassar after 1655. All the same, there is an element of continuity
involved. Both before and after 1655, the determining factor in policy
decisions on Makassar lay in assessments of the Company’s contextual
opportunities and constraints. The shift after 1655 was determined by an
appreciation of context, not by a particular mode of thinking.

With the exception of the 1655 treaty, with its particular
background, the formulations and contents of the respective contracts
concluded with Makassar are all symptomatic of the pragmatic empirical approach: the clauses are consistently phrased in concrete and specific terms. The model of the form and contents of the treaties is more akin to a merchant contract than to a formal diplomatic treaty. It is also noteworthy that the treaties became increasingly detailed and specific after 1655. This serves to underline the fact that if the Company’s approach was empirical and pragmatic at the outset, it became increasingly more so as contact with Makassar intensified. It is thus simply wrong when Andaya, for one, argues that the treaties were unintelligible to the locals because of their abstract form; the reality was quite the opposite. The treaties were made concrete and specific so that the locals could not find loopholes or ambiguities to exploit.

With its compendious information on local affairs, political and non-political alike, which supplied the Company with useful information that could help it preserve its dominance, Speelman’s *Notitie* is an example of the Company’s reliance on empirical data in the service of diplomacy, but by its case-specific and bottom-up mode of exposition it is also typical of the Company’s empirical approach in general.

Another notable characteristic of the *Notitie* is Speelman’s focus on personality traits as factors in diplomatic interaction. This might
reflect an appreciation of a difference in the balance between the institutional and personal dimensions in Western and Asian diplomatic practice. If so, the emphasis on the personal dimension represents an accommodation of diplomatic strategy to the realities of the overseas context. Yet there are broader implications in Speelman’s mode of exposition and perception.

Speelman’s “diplomatic method” centres on his evaluation of the personal qualities of persons in power basically in order to know whom one should be on guard against or with whom one could form friendly ties. Sometimes, as in the case of Karunrun, both focuses applied. Considerations of context are subsidiary to an appreciation of personality traits, as his treatment of context focuses on which groups and dynamics in local hierarchies of power might be favoured or not. “Structure” understood as “political culture” or analyses of modes of power articulation in more generalised forms are nearly absent in Speelman’s text, which is dominated by concrete and specific descriptions at the local political level. Read as a manual of overseas diplomacy, the Notitie is thus basically a case-focused, bottom-up, and agency-centred deliberation on alternative routes of diplomatic action. It is to a large
degree a method I myself have applied in this thesis. How does it stand in relation to the historiography, and what is to be gained from it?

I started out by numbering five approaches to the understanding of the nature of seventeenth-century VOC diplomacy and the nature of the Company’s interactions in Asia: the classical approach of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, characterised by a bias towards the political and military dimension of overseas expansion; Alexandrowicz’s “system compatibility approach,” which focuses on structural similarities between systems of international law in early modern Asia and Europe; and Andaya’s opposing proposition of incompatibility advocated in his structural cultural approach, an idea that also popped up in Arasaratnam’s refutation of Paulusz. I also included Somers as a forth type, a “legalist-pragmatic approach” because of his stress on both legal and pragmatic considerations in the Company’s diplomacy. Finally, I included Van Ittersum because she represents a broadening of the perspective by consistently putting the Company’s diplomacy and treaty making in a wider historical and political context, and her proposition about the cynical nature of the Company’s diplomacy.
I have primarily concentrated on refuting Andaya’s propositions about the nature of VOC diplomacy as Eurocentric, and his propositions of structural misunderstanding in communications between Makassar and the Company. My counter-argument regarding the nature of the Company’s diplomacy rests on a demonstration of the pragmatic orientation found in both the *General Instructions* from the Heeren XVII and in the Company’s practice towards Makassar. As for the Makassarese, I have partly argued that Andaya’s proposition rests on the assumption that they would apply the same model and approach towards an outsider like the Company as they would to a local ruler or state. The illogical assumption of this proposition is that it implies that the Makassarese accepted the Company as an integral part of the South Sulawesian states system, and all evidence points to the contrary. Neither does the evidence point towards an interpretation of Company–Makassar communications as a structurally determined misunderstanding. Although their motives may have been different, the Company and Makassar were taking part in a communication in which they did understand each other’s positions. Functional communication did take place.
Having rejected Andaya’s structural approach and propositions, where does that leave me in relation to the other positions in the historiography? First of all, it almost goes without saying that I find the classical approach of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries too narrowly focused on the formal aspects of international law and the legal dimension of treaty making. This is a criticism that to my mind also partly applies to more modern scholars like Somers. In these cases, it is not so much the arguments advanced that I object to, but the restricted perspective of the analysis. I propose that the picture needs to be filled in with more reflection on the Company’s diplomatic practice in its extra-legal dimensions. One line of research that seems to offer itself from such an assumption is a complementary proposition to Alexandrowicz’s thesis about the increasing similarity of Asiatic and Western modes of diplomacy because of a tendency towards “westernisation” in Asia, namely that one should also look for incorporations of “Asian elements” or modes of accommodation to local Asiatic modes in the Company’s diplomatic practice. Within this line of research, one should specifically look for the Company’s mode and criteria of selection for the incorporation of local features.
As for propositions about the cynical nature of the Company’s diplomatic mode as formulated by Van Ittersum, I suggest that she overplays her hand. Her evaluation must be modified because it neither heeds nor covers the complex nature of the Company’s approach as a whole. For one, such elements as the role of emotional factors such as pride and prestige are neglected. Besides, if we claim that the Company acted cynically in the case of Makassar, it did so for a reason. Cynicism sprang from the High Government’s diminishing trust in Hasanuddin’s sincerity in honouring the terms of the treaty and in its observation that the king of Makassar continued to harbour aggressive plans for the Spice Islands. Perhaps “contextual cynicism” might be a more precise term for the High Government’s attitude after 1655. But the cynicism was not there from the beginning. The negotiations for a treaty in 1637 took place within a symmetrical framework, and, judged by the evidence, with serious intentions on both sides. As for Maetsuyker’s rationale for favouring negotiations instead of continuing the war in 1655, his attitude seems to have been more idealistic, understood as having “good faith in,” than cynical, given his sincere belief that the new treaty would guarantee stable relations with Makassar once and for all. Cynicism only increased
as this belief waned. And even then, to my mind, it was not cynicism pure and simple.

Batavia’s diminishing trust in Hasanuddin went hand in hand with a change in its appreciation of negotiation and war as instruments of diplomacy. Relative emphasis and preference were reversed and inverted. Negotiations were perceived in increasingly tactical terms, and treaty terms were formulated in increasingly practical detail. Possibly this move could be regarded as a general trend that paralleled the Company’s increased power in the seventeenth century. But there is one factor that should not be overlooked in this context, namely that there might have been an element of idealism, here understood as the “pursuit of higher goals and ideals” involved in this development, as well.

As we have seen, a sense of pride and concerns of prestige were already evident in the General Instructions. If there was a sense of self-confidence and pride in the Company and its achievements, pursuing the Company’s interest with uncompromising faith may also have contained the belief that it should be done by fair means, or be conducted according to certain moral standards. “Sticking to your promises” might well have been part of this “moral package,” and not just a tricky means of extortion. If so, we are close to a moral idealistic perception of
diplomacy. In such a perspective, the belief that *pacta sunt servanda* acquires moral-idealistic qualities.

Another weakness of Van Ittersum’s work is its limited relevance for generalisations about the Company’s mode of diplomacy. Van Ittersum’s case is the Moluccas, an area in which the Company held a special position and followed a special policy necessitated by its commitment to defend and protect its policy positions. She also focuses on the legal “child prodigy” Hugo Grotius, who actually was enlisted as a lawyer to defend the Company to the extent of setting even crooked affairs straight. He was the outstanding example of a legal nit-picker. But, as the Makassar case shows, in places where the Company neither could dictate nor manipulate outcomes, diplomatic interaction was a much more complex affair than could be conceived of in legal terms alone.

If this was true for Makassar up to 1667, it was all the more true for the larger mainland states outside the Indonesian archipelago. In fact, the area outside the Spice Islands proper, an entity that falls outside Van Ittersum’s selection of cases, forms the larger mass of the Company’s contact and interaction points. Here one-sided Company manipulation
and legal trickery did not offer itself as a viable option. Diplomacy had to be more complex by virtue of the context.

It follows from the above that I believe one does well to steer clear of absolute dichotomous propositions like Andaya’s regarding the Company’s and local modes of diplomacy. One does better in looking for where there seem to have been compatibilities and where there were contrasts at a lower level of analysis. Grand models have a tendency to reify themselves instead of offering historical explanation. On the other hand, analysis at the level of agency might offer more solid ground for constructing analytical models. Have I offered such a model here? If I have, I stand in debt to the historiography. If there hadn’t been Stapel’s thesis on the Company and Makassar, I could never have written this study. Likewise, if Andaya had not formulated his original propositions, I would not have been able to formulate my own angle of approach.

I even probably could not claim full originality to my tentative formulations about how to proceed with further research in the field, because my propositions to a large degree are in line with Speelman’s mode in the Notitie, namely to analyse the diplomatic interaction bottom-up from an agency perspective, and to point out how the actions were conditioned and modified by context. Only on this foundation will it be
sound to infer structural implications that Speelman himself admittedly avoids. I have only argued a middle ground proposition, namely that the Company’s mode of diplomatic interaction towards Makassar basically seems to have been determined by a principled pragmatism.

One fundamental question must be addressed at the end. Based as my discussion is on one particular case, Makassar, how can I argue that it also serves to tell us something about the general nature of the Company’s diplomacy? On the one hand it can be argued that to advance a general proposition I should point to a selection of cases, and not restrict myself to only one. On the other hand, general propositions can be, and are, supported by my one case. I shall demonstrate this by my proposition about principled pragmatism.

Pragmatism as the general key to diplomatic performance outside the Company’s possessions in the Moluccas is laid down in the General Instructions. As I have shown, it is also a common denominator in Batavia’s performance of diplomacy towards Makassar. Why may we assume that this was a general trait in the Company’s diplomatic practice towards Asian princes and rulers in the charter area? Simply because the Company’s pragmatism rested on the overseas context, or more
precisely, the realisation by the Company from the Directors to the Council of the Indies that they could not go about as they pleased regarding relations with the majority of Asian rulers. It would neither work nor pay, either politically or commercially. Practical considerations meant that the Company could not behave like an idiot abroad, as it knew it could not afford to. This logic worked for the Company’s approach towards Makassar until the Company realised that it could no longer afford not to intervene decisively. But when it did, it was because circumstances offered an opportunity to do so. The underlying logic of pragmatic considerations of opportunity as a guide to action was the same for the other states and rulers in the charter area. Mistakes and corrections were made within this general approach, as we have seen in the case of Makassar, but this does not alter the fact that the pragmatic approach constituted the general rule outside the Moluccas. Makassar constitutes a somewhat special case in that sample, but still a case.